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US-NATO versus Russia: Towards a Regional War in the Caucasus?

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Georgia is eager for another war, but there are other fires there which refuse to die -- Russia's battles with terrorism and separatists and Azerbaijan's bleeding wound in ethnic Armenian Nagorno Karabakh.

The Russian Federation republics of Chechnya, Dagestan, North Ossetia and Ingushetia have experienced a sharp increase in assassinations and terrorist bombings in the past few years which have reached into the heart of Russia itself, most spectacularly with the bombing of the Moscow-Leningrad express train in January that killed 26.

Last week police killed at least six suspected militants in Ingushetia. Dagestan has especially suffered in the past two years, notably with the assassination of its interior minister in last June and the police chief last month. The number of armed attacks more than doubled last year. In February, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev replaced Dagestan president Mukhu Aliyev with Magomedsalam Magomedov, whose father Magomedali led Dagestan from 1987-2006. Aliyev was genuinely popular, praised for his honesty and fight against corruption, but was seen as too soft on terror.

President Magomedov has vowed to put the violence-ridden region in order and pardon rebels who turn in weapons."I have no illusion that it will be easy. Escalating terrorist activity in the North Caucasus, including in Dagestan, urges us to revise all our methods of fighting terror and extremism." He vowed to attack unemployment, organised crime, clan rivalry and corruption.

Violence continues to plague Chechnya as well. Russian forces have fought two wars against separatists in Chechnya since 1994, leaving more than 100,000 dead and the region in ruins, inspiring terrorist attacks throughout the region. Five Russian soldiers and as many rebels were killed there at the beginning of February. According to the Long War Journal, in February, Russia's Federal Security Bureau (FSB) killed a key Al-Qaeda fighter based in Chechnya, Mokhammad Shabban, an Egyptian known as Saif Islam (Sword of Islam), the mastermind behind the 6 January suicide bombing that killed seven Russian policemen in Dagestan's capital Makhachkala. He was wanted for attacks against infrastructure and Russian soldiers throughout Chechnya and neighbouring republics.

Since the early 1990s, militants such as Shabban have operated from camps in Georgia's Pansiki Gorge, and used the region as a safe haven to launch attacks inside Chechnya and the greater Caucasus. The FSB said Shabban "masterminded acts of sabotage to blast railway tracks, transmission lines, and gas and oil pipelines at instructions by Georgian secret services."

This is impossible to prove, but Georgia was the only state to recognise the Republic of Ichkeria when Chechens unilaterally declared independence in 1991 and his widow Alla has a talk show on First Caucasus TV, a station located in Georgia and beamed into Chechnya. Interestingly, from 2002-2007, more than 200 US Special Forces troops were training Georgian troops in Pansiki, though neither the Americans nor the Georgians were able to end the attacks on Russia.

Medvedev said last month that violence in the North Caucasus remains Russia's biggest domestic problem, arguing that it will only end once the acute poverty in the region and the corruption and lawlessness within the security organs themselves is addressed. He has undertaken an ambitious reform of security organs and the police throughout Russia with this in mind.

Sceptics may point to the parallel between the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and Russian policy in the north Caucasus. Yes, there is a Russian geopolitical context, but the comparison is specious. These regions have been closely tied both economically and politically to Russia for two centuries, which Abkhazian President Sergei Bagpash shrewdly decided to celebrate last month in order to ensure Moscow's support.

The patchwork quilt of nationalities of the Caucasus has survived under Russian sponsorship and now has the prospect of prospering if left in peace. Politicians like Bagpash make the best of the situation, as do sensible politicians throughout Russia's "near abroad". To alienate or try to subvert a powerful neighbour and potential friend as does Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is plain bad politics.

The other Caucasian conflict is the long running tragedy of Nagorno Karabakh, which unlike the other conflicts pits two supposed NATO hopefuls against each other. The war occurred from 1988-94, dating from the dying days of the Soviet Union, when Armenia invaded Azerbaijan, carving out a corridor through the country to seize the mountain region populated for over a millennium largely by ethnic Armenians. A ceasefire was finally achieved leaving Armenia in

possession of the enclave and a corridor, together consisting of almost 20 per cent of Azerbaijani territory. As many as 40,000 died, and 230,000 Armenians and a million Azeris were displaced.

A Russian-brokered ceasefire has been followed by intermittent peace talks mediated by the OSCE Minsk Group, co-chaired by the United States, France and Russia. But it is clear that Azerbaijan will not rest until its territory is returned. "If the Armenian occupier does not liberate our lands, the start of a great war in the south Caucasus is inevitable," warned Azerbaijan Defence Minister Safar Abiyev in February. "Armenians must unconditionally withdraw from our lands. And only after that should cooperation and peace be established," said Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev last week. Armenian and Azerbaijani forces are spread across a ceasefire line in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, often facing each other at close range, with shootings reported as common. Last week an Armenian soldier was killed.

Russia, culturally closer to Armenia, is resented by Azerbaijan as biased, and indeed there has been no commitment by any of the peacemakers or Armenia to return the territory. But the playing field changed dramatically after Georgia's defeat in its war against Russia in 2008, setting in motion unforeseen regional realignments throughout the region.

First was rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia, which at first set off alarm bells in Baku, relying as it does internationally on the support of Turkey, which closed its borders with Armenia in 1993 in response to the Armenian occupation. Turkey established diplomatic relations with Armenia last year in keeping with the Justice and Development Party's "zero problems with neighbours", but says ratification by parliament and a full border opening will not happen until Armenia makes some concessions to Azerbaijan.

Moscow has also been pursuing a charm offensive with neighbours in recent years, and was successful in getting both Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents to sign the Moscow Declaration in November 2008, though the warring sides subsequently have managed only to agree on procedural matters.

Key to all further developments throughout the region is the role of the US and NATO. Until recently, it looked like NATO would succeed in expanding into Ukraine and Georgia. It is also eager to have Azerbaijan and Armenia join. Not surprisingly, these moves are seen as hostile by Russia. If the unlikely happens, this would mean the US has important influence in all the conflicts in the Caucasus. But would pushing Armenia and Azerbaijan, two warring nations, into the fold help resolve their intractable differences?

Though both have sent a few troops to Afghanistan, the very idea of warring nations joining the military bloc is nonsense, and noises about it can only be interpreted as attempts to curry favour with the world's superpower. Azerbaijan has much-coveted Caspian Sea oil and gas, but Armenia is Christian and Azerbaijan Muslim, and Armenia has a strong US domestic lobby which will not go quietly into the night. Any move by Washington to meddle in the dispute without close coordination with Moscow is fraught with danger for all concerned -- except, of course, the US.

As an ally to both countries, and with important historical and cultural traditions, Russia remains the main actor in the search for a solution. Including Turkey in negotiations can only improve the

chances of finding a regional solution which is acceptable to both sides. Such a solution requires demilitarising the conflict, hardly something NATO is expert at. As both countries improve their economies, and as long as ongoing tensions do not erupt into military conflict, they can -- must -- move towards a realistic resolution that takes the concerns of both sides into consideration.

Since 1991 a new Silk Road has been opened to the West, stretching as it did a millennium ago from Italy to China and taking in at least seventeen new political entities. All roads, in this case, lead to the Caucasus, and US-NATO interest in this vital crossroads should surprise no one. US control there -- and in the Central Asian "stans" -- would mean containing Russia and Iran, the dream for American strategists since WWII.

The three major wars of the past decade -- Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) -- all lie on this Silk Road. The US and the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance had no business invading any of these countries and have no business in the region today. Rather it is Russia, Iran, Afghanistan, China, India, Turkey et al that must come together to promote their regional economic well being and security.

War breaking out in any one of the Caucasus disputes would be a tragedy for all concerned, for the West (at least in the long run) as much as for Russia or any of the participants. But the forces abetting war are not rational in any meaningful sense of the word. After all, it was perfectly "rational" in Robert Gates's mind to help finance and arm Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan in 1979. The planners in the Pentagon or NATO HQs argue "rationally" today that their current surge in Afghanistan will bring peace to the region.

And if it fails, at least the chaos is far away. Such thinking could lead them to try to unleash chaos in any of the smoldering and intractable disputes in the Caucasus out of spite or a la General Jack Ripper in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 "Doctor Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb", a film which unfortunately has lost none of its bite in the past four decades.