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## West traps Russia in its own backyard

By M K Bhadrakumar  
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In the normal case, pushing the reset button should not be a difficult thing to do. Yet, it is almost two months since United States Vice President Joseph Biden offered to do just that.

When he addressed the [Munich](#) security conference in February, Biden offered to reset the button in US-[Russia](#) relations. However, despite many positive signals and an overall lowering of rhetoric, the moves so far have been by and large symbolic. Across Eurasia, the signs are to the contrary. [The Great Game is picking up momentum. The sharp fall in oil prices has complicated Russia's economic recovery, which in turn would disrupt the dynamics of the integration processes under Moscow's leadership - political, military and economic - in the post-Soviet space.](#)

US diplomats are scouring the region for chance to drive wedges in the ties between Moscow and the regional capitals. Tajikistan, one of Russia's staunchest allies, has distinctly warmed up to the US. Uzbekistan is once again ducking, which suggests it is open to the highest bidder. But Turkmenistan could be the jewel in the crown of the US's regional diplomacy.

[A concerted US effort has begun to somehow detach Ashgabat from the Russian sphere of influence and thereby kill the prospects of Russia's plans for laying new gas pipelines for the European market. Alongside, there is also a determined bid to develop a northern supply route to Afghanistan via the Caucasus and the Caspian that would bypass Russia. While Russian cooperation is welcome, the US will not want its vulnerability in Afghanistan to be exploited for a reciprocal accommodation of Russian interests in Europe.](#)

As of now, Moscow is keeping cool. Any excitement would only play into the hands of

the hardliners in [Washington](#). It reacted calmly in early April in the face of the attempt to stage a "color revolution" in Moldova to replace the democratically elected government friendly toward Moscow. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov cautioned that the US and Russia should not "force" former Soviet republics to choose between an alliance with Washington or Moscow, nor should there be any "hidden agendas" in US-Russia relations. "It is inadmissible to try to place a false choice before them [former Soviet republics], either you are with us or against us. Otherwise, this will lead to a whole struggle for spheres of influence," Lavrov pointed out.

Attention at the moment is on the so-called Cooperative Longbow 09/Cooperative Lancer military exercise that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) proposes to hold from May 6 through June 1 in Georgia. The drill aims to improve "interoperability" between NATO and its partner countries. But, clearly, the US choreographed the initiative as a reiteration of the West's security commitments to the Georgian regime. In the event, the US had a hard time persuading its NATO partners to participate. Germany and [France](#), which are opposed to NATO needlessly provoking Russia, declined.

A NATO military exercise in the highly combustible security environment in the Caucasus is indeed controversial. Russia sees it as a "back-door" attempt by Washington to involve NATO with Georgia's security and as a creeping expansion by the alliance into the Caucasus. Indeed, the geopolitical consequences of the conflict last August are yet to be assimilated.

Moscow reacted by calling off a meeting of Russian and NATO chiefs of the general staff, scheduled for May 7. The mild reaction disappointed hardliners in the US. Russian analysts have underscored that the military exercise constitutes a deliberate attempt to vitiate the atmosphere ahead of the expected visit by US President Barack Obama to Moscow in June.

President Dmitry Medvedev gave a measured reaction. He said, "This is a mistaken and dangerous decision ... [which] creates the danger of all sorts of complications arising ... because these sorts of actions are clearly about muscle-flexing and military build-up, and with the situation in the Caucasus tense as it is, this decision looks short-sighted ... We will follow developments closely and make decisions if necessary."

Moscow's preference, therefore, will be to keep the matter strictly at the level of Russia-NATO ties. Whether Lavrov will choose to discuss the subject with his US counterpart Hillary Clinton when they meet on May 7 to prepare the agenda of Obama's visit to Moscow is an open question.

Meanwhile, Russia's ambassador to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, has gone on record that Moscow's response will not affect the transit of supplies to NATO troops in Afghanistan via Russian territory. "I do not believe it will be among any possible retaliatory measures. We have never questioned the importance of [NATO cargo] transits, even during the war [in the Caucasus last August]. It is an issue of strategic interests in which we share a common enemy," Rogozin said.

Moscow's stance takes care that Washington has no excuse to complain about Russian cooperation over Afghanistan. This comes at a time when the US is making a determined bid to firm up a transit route to Afghanistan from the Black Sea via Georgia and Azerbaijan to Turkmenistan, which bypasses Russia. Cargo arriving in Turkmenistan can be sent across the border to western Afghanistan or can be trans-shipped to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which also enjoy a border with Afghanistan. Thus, US diplomacy has been focusing on the three Central Asian countries - Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan - which can be accessed from the Black Sea, bypassing Russia altogether.

The US signed a transit agreement with Tajikistan this week. A similar agreement was signed with Uzbekistan last month while consultations are going on with Turkmenistan. US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher discussed the possibility of overland cargo transit and overflights at a meeting with Turkmen President Gurbanguli Berdimukhamedov in Ashgabat on April 15.

These developments are unfolding against the backdrop of an overall weakening of the Russian position lately in Central Asia. The fall in oil prices and the overall economic crisis in Russia arguably hamper Moscow's capacity to assert its leadership role in the region.

US diplomacy has succeeded to some extent in loosening Russia's ties with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan did not participate in two important regional meetings which were important events for Russia's integration processes: last week's foreign ministers meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Yerevan and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization conference on Afghanistan last month in Moscow.

Indeed, if Tashkent "defects", that will be a prize catch for Washington and it will resurrect the "Great Central Asia" strategy that aims at whittling down Russian (and Chinese) influence in the region.

At the moment, however, US diplomacy is pinning great hopes on Turkmenistan. Washington sees a window of opportunity insofar as Russian-Turkmen energy cooperation, which forms the backbone of the relationship between the two countries, has run into difficulties. Essentially, the US hopes to break Russia's control over Turkmen gas exports and to somehow scuttle Russian plans to feed its planned South Stream pipeline to southern Europe with Turkmen gas supplies. The US seeks to cajole Ashgabat to come on board the rival the Nabucco gas pipeline project that bypasses Russia and will help diversify Europe's energy supplies.

Whether the Turkmen leadership will heed the US's entreaties is another matter. Turkmen people have sharp bazaar instincts and they must be relishing the accelerating US-Russia rivalry, which they will unfailingly exploit to extract the most favorable terms from Russia (and China). All the same, the relentless US hammering is eroding Russia's position.

Only a year ago, Russia offered to pay European prices for Central Asia's gas-producing

countries. These purchase contracts are hardly affordable for Gazprom today, given a combination of factors, such as the decline in European energy demand due to the economic recession and the drop in energy prices.

Gazprom is caught in a bind. With demand dropping in Europe, import of Turkmen gas begins not to make sense. But Russia cannot halt Turkmen supplies either. When demand picks up eventually - as it will - Russia will badly need Turkmen gas all over again. Kommersant newspaper commented, "In a mid-term perspective, Ashgabat has no alternate buyer or transiter to Gazprom ... Obviously, some kind of compromise will be reached to find a way out. But whatever the outcome, Moscow-Ashgabat relations will never be the same again."

United States diplomats are doing all they can to portray that it is unwise for Central Asian energy producers to place faith in Russia and that gaining direct access to the international market without the Russian middle man would be the right thing to do. The argument seems to increasingly carry weight in Ashgabat. The signing of a memorandum of understanding on April 16 between Turkmenistan and Germany's Rheinisch-Westfaelische Elektrizitaetswerk (RWE) energy holding on the transportation of Turkmen gas to Europe and the development of the Caspian shelf shows a new vector in Turkmen thinking.

RWE is Germany's largest energy producer and supplier and the second-largest gas supplier. It is a partner in the international consortium hoping to build the Nabucco pipeline, which will bypass Russia by transporting gas from Azerbaijan via Turkey to Europe. The agreement with RWE is Turkmenistan's first ever with a major Western energy company. Under the agreement, RWE will be a consultant for identifying the options for export of Turkmen gas to Germany and Europe. Besides, RWE will also explore and develop gas resources on Turkmenistan's continental shelf in the Caspian Sea.

From the Western perspective, the timing of the RWE-Turkmen agreement couldn't have come at a better time. The Turkmen decision doubtless enhances the prospects for Nabucco, which Russia has been rubbishing as a mere pipedream. The European Union summit meeting in [Prague](#) on May 7 is expected to take a conclusive view on the implementation of the Nabucco project. With the emerging possibility of Turkmen gas supplies for Nabucco, if the EU summit formalizes the project, Europe will have taken a big step towards diversifying its energy sources and reducing its energy dependence on Russia. Therefore, Nabucco holds far-reaching significance for Russia's relations with the West.

The May 7 EU meeting is expected to transform the geopolitics of Eurasia in certain other directions as well. The summit will launch the EU's new "Eastern partnership" policy involving six former Soviet republics - Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia - with the barely disguised intention to increase Brussels' influence in these countries at the expense of Moscow. The EU has no plans to offer the former Soviet republics membership, but at the same time would like to take them under

its wings politically.

The "Eastern partnership" policy is crafted most ingeniously in such a way that through trade, [travel](#) and aid, the EU will work for greater integration of the former Soviet republics without having to actually accept them as full-fledged members.

The EU remains confident that the former Soviet republics will find Brussels' overtures decisively more attractive than the integration processes conceived in Moscow. In strategic terms, the raison d'etre of the EU's "Eastern partnership" policy is to counter Russia's influence in its "near abroad" and, therefore, it effectively works in tandem with NATO's eastward expansion.