

The Pentagon Settles In Azerbaijan.

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US military aid to Baku will amount to \$38 million this year

AZERBAIJAN PROCLAIMED A ZONE OF ITS INTERESTS, WASHINGTON IS BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE THERE TO DEFEND THESE INTERESTS; The United States is building military infrastructure in Azerbaijan to promote its national interests in the region.

American and NATO element is gaining weight in Azerbaijani military potential. The process did not begin yesterday but it became certainly more energetic of late. Baku-based media outlets report that the United States is about to make a present to the Azerbaijani Navy - new locators and three patrol boats. Radars of the Azerbaijani naval bases, mostly Russian and Polish at this point, will be upgraded. In fact, they are to be replaced with radars made in NATO countries and particularly in the United States.

The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry is taciturn on the subject. Ilgar Verdiyev of the Defense Ministry's Press Service did tell reporters the other day that US "technical assistance" to the Azerbaijani Navy, Air Force, and Antiaircraft Forces is provided under bilateral accords. This assistance will be provided in 2006 too, he said.

Navy Commander Captain 1st Class Fuad Yusifov revealed some details of this patronage. According to Yusifov, "the radars located in Azerbaijan can and do keep track of all vessels in the southern and northern areas of the Caspian Sea, their movement and cargo." "Small submarines will be delivered to Azerbaijan soon for protection of the oil fields," he added.

American interests in Azerbaijan are not restricted to the Caspian Sea alone. In 2005, US Ambassador, Reno Harnish, officially announced the beginning of construction of two TRML-3D mobile radars with a range of between 200 and 300 kilometers. One of them is being built in Astara on the Iranian border, the other near Khyzy, on the southern slopes of the Big Caucasus Range. The diplomat said that the agreement on the radars was reached in January 2004.

A source in the Azerbaijani diplomatic sources says that the military cooperation between Washington and Baku is developing in three spheres: improvement of Azerbaijan's capacity to protect peace; strengthening of the national Navy; and improvement of command of the national Air Force so as to bring it up to NATO standards. The US military aid is made available to Azerbaijan every year on the condition that it will not be used to renew hostilities with Armenia in the name of liberation of the occupied territories. US military aid to Baku in 2006, will amount to \$38 million (including \$5 million on military development and \$0.75 million on military education and exercises).

Only the naive will believe that Washington is being entirely selfless. Observers believe that once it proclaimed Azerbaijan a zone of its interests, Washington set out to build infrastructure there to promote these interests and these latter are centered at this point around the Caspian oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Dzheikhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines. The former is expected to be turned on this March or April, simultaneously with the planned increase of military aid to Azerbaijan which is hardly surprising. It does not

take a genius to guess that radars in Azerbaijan are being modernized to enable Washington to promptly react to whatever may be happening with the pipelines in question. Even the news on the forthcoming appearance of a submarine in the Azerbaijani Navy fits the picture.

It will be needed to prevent attacks of Iranian submarines on oil fields in the Azerbaijani part of the Caspian Sea where foreign consortiums operate.

The Iranian factor is one of the major reasons compelling the United States to boost military aid to Azerbaijan. Numerous and regular denials from Washington and Baku notwithstanding, the media constantly speculates on the United States' intention to use the territory of Azerbaijan for a military attack on Iran. Given the regular threats of Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad to Israel and his determination to proceed with the national nuclear program, the prospect of hostilities between Washington and its NATO allies on the one hand and Tehran on the other is not abstract at all.

It is clear as well that Russia and Iran, Azerbaijan's neighbors, view its active military interaction with the United States and NATO with undisguised apprehension. The Tehran Times pointed out not long ago that Azerbaijan cooperates with Iran only in economic matters and with the United States both in economic and military spheres.

According to the newspaper, this is why official Tehran plans to sign several military treaties with Baku. It thinks that they will balance things out.

Sergei Ivanov's recent visit to Baku shows that neither does Russia intend to remain a disinterested observer. Militarization of the Caspian region and Americans' activeness in Azerbaijan upset the Kremlin. Prospects of the Russian-Azerbaijani military and military-technical cooperation and war on international terrorism were officially proclaimed the central subjects on the agenda of Ivanov's talks with the Azerbaijani leadership. Military experts say, however, that a broader range of issues was discussed at Ivanov's talks with his opposite number and with President Ilham Aliyev.

Practically nothing is known about what was actually discussed, and precisely that leads observers to the conclusion that Russia is about to try and seize the initiative from the Americans in Azerbaijan.

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