
Azerbaijan at crosswinds of a new cold war

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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Azerbaijan's presidential elections are a few weeks away and while most experts agree it is a sure bet that the current president, Ilham Aliyev, will easily win re-election, there is less certainty about the future orientation of the country, increasingly caught in the crosswind of a new US-Russia power struggle.

In his tour of the region last week, US Vice President Dick Cheney shot many salvos against Russians, accusing them of posing a "threat of tyranny, economic blackmail and military invasion" to its neighbors. In his meeting with Aliyev, Cheney was comparatively more reserved and put the emphasis instead on "energy security".

Coinciding with Cheney's trip has been a new report by the European Union's energy commissioner, Andris Piebglas, calling on the EU to redouble its efforts to build the US\$12 billion Nabucco gas pipeline [1] and reduce its dependence on imports from Russia in the wake of the Georgian crisis that, per a report in the British newspaper The Guardian, has led many experts to dismiss the planned 3,300 kilometer Nabucco pipeline from Azerbaijan to Europe via Georgia and Turkey.

Not only that, both Russia and Iran have opposed the construction of a trans-Caspian pipeline that would allow the shipment of gas from the Caspian section of Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and then to Europe. Last week, at a meeting of the Caspian littoral states on the legal status of Caspian Sea, held in Baku, Iran's point man on the Caspian Sea, Mehdi Safari, stated, "We object to the trans-Caspian pipeline because of the possible negative impact on sea ecology ... there are Iranian and Russian energy routes and it is unnecessary to jeopardize Caspian ecology."

Although there is real concern about the Caspian ecology, both Tehran and Moscow are equally if not more concerned about the geopolitical ramifications of so-called "pipeline politics" in the Caspian basin and the adjacent regions, particularly now that the US and Europe seem determined to lessen the West's energy dependency on both Iran and Russia by cultivating alternative sources.

The crisis in Georgia is, however, a powerful wake-up call to Baku concerning "roads not taken". On the one hand, Baku is interested in cultivating closer military ties with the West, in light of the Azeri parliament's recent ratification of an action plan for greater military cooperation with the US. A top US State Department official has recently called for a strategic, trilateral cooperation between US, Azerbaijan and Turkey. And yet, on the other hand, this is precisely the kind of initiative that Baku would be wise to stay away from, unless it is prepared to embrace serious backlashes from its powerful neighbors, Iran and Russia.

One such backlash could conceivably come in the form of Russia's support for the independence of the Azeri breakaway region of Gharabagh, given that the leaders of Upper Gharabagh have welcomed Moscow's decision to recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia. For now, Moscow is disinclined to back this scenario and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov indicated last week that the situation in Gharabagh is "different". That may be small music to Baku's ears, yet few leaders or pundits in Azerbaijan can afford to miss the sobering lesson from the crisis in Georgia, that is, the exorbitant price paid for ignoring Russia's national security concerns.

This means that, contrary to some hasty conclusions about "Russia's colossal blunder", to paraphrase Newsweek's Fareed Zakaria, Russia's military gambit in Georgia has not thrown Russia's neighbors in the bosom of the West, but rather, as in the case of Azerbaijan, prompted them to adopt a more cautious foreign policy approach that is geared to maintaining a balance in foreign relations, partly for the sake of protecting fragile borders and territorial integrity. Instead of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, countries such as Georgia and Azerbaijan have the theoretical option of cooperating and or even joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is dominated by Russia and China. At the moment, this may seem not to be in the cards, yet it makes sense from the prism of regional stability.

In the Caspian Sea, Iran and Russia rely on the existing legal convention for the Caspian that refers to it as a "common sea". That is why both countries are opposed to the division of the Caspian's surface water. The various bilateral and trilateral agreements for the division of the Caspian's underwater resources do not trump the "shared sea" condominium status of the sea that acts as a hinge shutting the door to a foreign presence in the Caspian.

The above means that for the foreseeable future, despite marathon meetings of the five Caspian littoral states, there will most likely not be any new convention, thus guaranteeing the exclusion of NATO or US forces from the important energy hub of the Caspian.

As for Baku's geopolitical orientation, its cordial, business-like relations with Tehran, as well as its pragmatic approach toward the Russia-led geopolitical realities in the region, are prudent courses of action that Baku would be ill-advised to forsake in favor of closer ties with the West. After all, the West has been rather helpless in terms of pulling Tbilisi out of the grave mess that its adventurist leadership carved for itself.

Concerning the latter, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has accused the US of providing military assistance to Georgia under the guise of humanitarian assistance. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, on the other hand, has tried damage-control in US-Russia relations by not putting the kiss of death on the US-Russia nuclear cooperation agreement and, more importantly, not echoing Cheney's blistering verbal volleys.

While we await the results of elections in both the US and Azerbaijan, the latter is likely to thread a cautious middle path that would steer it clear of the headaches gripping the South Caucasus. Needless to say, the pain of such headaches would be much alleviated if Democratic Senator Barack Obama wins in November and somehow succeeds in introducing real change in the hitherto hegemonic orientation of US foreign policy. In that case, the first priority of a president Obama should be to throw water on the new cold war logs fired up by Cheney.

Note

1. For more on the Nabucco pipeline, [click here](#), and for more on trans-Caspian pipeliness, [click here](#).

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