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# Russia, Georgia...And Iran

By Howard Schweber  
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Yesterday, Dmitry Medvedev said Russia will provide military aid to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This is significant for several reasons, but the most important may be that a continued Russian presence means a continued threat to the operation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Russian forces did not take over the pipeline in their operations in Georgia, but they certainly demonstrated that they can close it down at will and that the U.S. has no military capacity to stop them -- particularly so long as our forces are tied up in Iraq.

The obvious target of all this is Europe. Russia has established its willingness to use its control over oil to gain leverage over European nations, and the Europeans are very rightly afraid of the consequences of Russian control of the pipelines in Georgia and especially the pipeline in Ukraine. But it's worth taking a moment to look East: what does Russia's presence in Georgia do to its relationship with Iran?

First, a little review is in order. First, let's recall the U.S. moves over the past seven years that have left Russia feeling threatened. The Bush administration cut off participation in U.S.-Russian actions that stretched back through the Clinton and G.H.W. Bush administrations, abrogated the anti-ABM treaty, pushed for the expansion of NATO right up Russia's borders and have made noises about including Ukraine and Georgia in the alliance, built an oil and gas pipeline through Southern Georgia explicitly in order to ensure that it would be outside Russia's control, armed and trained the Georgian military and brought the Israelis in to do the same, and reached an agreement to station missiles and U.S. forces in Poland and Czechoslovakia on the laughable premise that these nations need to be protected against Iran. In the last month that pretense has been dropped completely: Polish government representatives, in particular, are quite explicit about their desire to have Americans standing in the way of any Russian incursion to guarantee an American military response.

The point is that Russia is not just feeling unfriendly toward us; Putin and Medvedev view the U.S. as something close to an outright enemy. On August 27th Russia's envoy to NATO stated that U.S. assistance to Georgia would be a "declaration of war"; on August 29th Putin suggested that the U.S. had deliberately encouraged Georgia to attack South Ossetia in order to help McCain's presidential campaign and that U.S. military advisors had helped the Georgian forces during the conflict; today (Sept. 1) Russian sources are claiming that U.S. ships carrying humanitarian aid have also been supplying the Georgians with weapons..

Second, a quick review of the background with respect to oil and gas pipelines. Since 2005 Russia has coveted control over the oil and natural gas pipelines that run through Georgia, particularly since the opening of an oil pipeline running from Azerbaijan through Georgia and into Turkey. Control that pipeline and you control the spigot on the flow of fuel into Armenia and points South, and into Turkey and points West. Russia wants control over the pipelines running through Ukraine for the same reason, which would give Russia total control over the flow of oil and gas into Europe from the East.

But! Control over the Georgian pipelines also limits the flow of oil from Iran West and North. In 2006, around the same time Russia was cutting off fuel supplies to various other nations to demonstrate its muscle, Gazprom imposed a huge price increase on Georgia in an effort to coerce it to accept

an offer to purchase the Georgian pipelines. Georgia refused and went looking for suppliers elsewhere. One source was Azerbaijan; the other was Iran. Russian control over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline gives it the ability to limit Iran's (and Azerbaijan's) ability to sell its own oil and deprives Georgia of their previous security against a Russian fuel embargo.

All of this also provokes the U.S. and Israel, which from Russia's perspective is also all to the good. Which brings us to the other news of the day: a positive flurry of reports predicting imminent military action against Iran. The Dutch newspaper De Telegraaf reports that Dutch military intelligence has suspended an operation aimed at sabotaging Iran's weapons industry based on their expectation of a U.S. attack in the coming weeks, a story that is being pushed by Israeli sources. Then there is a report in the Sunday Telegraph about a proposed deal in which Russia would sell sophisticated S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran. A Pentagon official is quoted as saying "Purchase of S-300 missiles would change the game." Unnamed U.S. intelligence "operatives" are quoted as saying that Russia plans to use the proposed sale to create a foreign policy crisis as a way to test the incoming administration president. In response, the Israelis reportedly have stopped providing weapons to Georgia, and have sent representatives to Moscow to try to persuade Russia not to sell the missiles to Iran.

>From the Russian perspective, all of this is close to ideal: they have everybody running scared. Having demonstrated their ability to threaten the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, they have shown Iran that they can cut off their land route for exports - the only route that would be available if the Straits of Hormuz were to be closed. (From the Russian perspective, how great would it be if the U.S. were to shut down the Straits by a blockade? True, experts have cast doubt on the feasibility of closing the Straits completely, but no one really knows what would happen in the event of military action.) If Russia is really, really lucky the U.S. could remain in an expanded Iraq-Iran quagmire for a decade or more, absorbing the brunt of the reactions, increasing resentments throughout the Muslim world, ensuring a steady stream of terrorist attacks, pushing the Americans to continue bellicose support for the Israeli Right and its expansionist strategies -- all of which makes the Russians look positively benign by comparison. Alternatively, if the U.S., its domestic political will exhausted, pulls out altogether, to whom can the Arab states turn for help in containing a potentially expansionist Iran?

Or, well, what is the endgame for Iraq? Five years from now, would an independent or quasi-independent Kurdish state be interested in hearing from new allies? The reference to a potential Kurdish state takes us back to the days of the Great Game. During WW II both the USSR and UK invaded Iran militarily, followed by a treaty in 1942 that was supposed to put an end to interference, but didn't. The Soviets stirred up separatist movements -- notably among the Kurds - in an attempt to destabilize the country. At the end of the war Stalin proposed that Russia and the U.S. simply split Iran between them. We were horrified, of course, and began our 40 years of intervention in Iranian politics (remember the Twin Pillars of Stability back in the 1970s?) There are currently 4 million Kurds in Iran, concentrated in the western part of the country.

So try this scenario. Israel launches preemptive strikes against Iran with U.S. support. Iran strikes back in various ways (missiles, terrorist operations, etc.) The U.S. moves aggressively to dislodge the current Iranian administration by force. Joining us in our war against terror -- "we have our differences but Islamic terrorism is a threat to us all" -- Russia moves forces into northern Iran after using its control of the Georgian pipeline to compel the Azerbaijanis to permit them to cross their territory. One has to go pretty far South to get to major oil fields, but even in the Northwest there is plenty of strategically interesting territory: there is a gas

pipeline into Turkey, a refinery at Tabriz. Now declare a Kurdish puppet state, with Russian peacekeepers in place just to be sure the Turks do not launch aggressive military action the way those evil Georgians tried to do way back in 2008.

No matter what happens, Russia's establishment of a strategic presence to the South gives it tremendous indirect leverage over the Middle East, and the missile deal announcement suggests that they want to continue in that direction. And what opened up the possibility for all this mischief? Our invasion of Iraq.

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