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# The Battle for Azerbaijan

By Karl Rahder

Washington Post - Guest Voice - 19/10/2007

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Vladimir Putin's statement at this week's Caspian Sea summit that no country in the region "should offer its territory to third powers for use of force or military aggression" has been widely and correctly seen as aimed to deter U.S. military intervention in Iran.

But this warning was directed not only at the U.S., but at Azerbaijan, the smallest of the Caspian countries and America's chief ally in the region - and at any plans to establish a permanent U.S. base in Azerbaijan.

Oil-rich Azerbaijan sits on the Caspian Sea's western shore, wedged uncomfortably between Russia to the north and Iran to the south, and close to the two other Caspian states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. That makes it prime real estate for a U.S. military base, and the U.S. has made no secret of such desires. An Azerbaijani base could serve as a staging area if Washington decides to strike Iran's nuclear assets, including the Bushehr atomic reactor, which Russia sold to Iran and which is due to come online late this year despite a billing dispute between the two countries.

The Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev, has deftly balanced Russian and U.S. interests in his foreign policy, but Iran continues to present a thorny problem for Azerbaijan. Iranian naval vessels and military aircraft have incurred into Azerbaijani territory on a number of occasions, and a sensational trial continues this month in Baku, the Azerbaijani capital, where sixteen men have been charged with plotting to overthrow the secular Azerbaijani government and impose an Islamic regime with the assistance of a shadowy unit of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.

Azerbaijan's geographic location, Shi'ite Muslim population, and close ties to the US make it vulnerable to internal destabilization sponsored by its southern neighbor, and the past several years have seen the breakup of alleged sleeper cells whose purpose is to disrupt the government when the time is ripe and whom Azerbaijani authorities say are supported by Iran. Even a minimal American military presence in Azerbaijan would therefore be a political powder keg and lead to much more vigorous efforts by Tehran to undermine Azerbaijan's security.

President Putin's message about non-interference on Tuesday, along with his pledge to bring the Bushehr reactor online, thus had implications for both Washington and Baku. Iran is a huge market for Russian infrastructure investment and arms. In 2005, Russia sold Iran a \$700 million surface-to-air missile system, which could be used to protect the Bushehr reactor in the same way that dozens of anti-aircraft batteries already surround Iran's Arak heavy water plant. Arak is particularly troubling, giving Iran a potential source of weapons-grade plutonium to complement the uranium enrichment potential at the Natanz plant.

So far, Azerbaijan is resisting American pressure to establish a base on its territory, wary of angering Iran and souring relations with Russia after a spat earlier this year over energy resources. Russia is by far the strongest naval power in the Caspian, the world's largest inland sea, and it conducted war games in the Caspian as recently as 2002, shortly after the failure of a previous Caspian Summit. Smaller states, such as Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, cannot hope to match Russia's or even Iran's naval presence.

Russian efforts at the summit - thwarted by Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan - to obtain veto power over any new undersea Caspian pipeline are part of a larger agenda of establishing a virtual energy cartel with Iran for nearly all of Eurasia's gas and oil. A Russian-Iranian pipeline monopoly would have disturbing implications for Europe, and particularly energy consuming nations with tempestuous ties to Moscow. Countries such as Ukraine and Georgia remember all too well their own difficulties last winter when gas supplies were cut off >From Russia, leading to heating crises in both countries.

At his White House news conference on Wednesday, U.S. President George W. Bush warned that a nuclear-armed Iran could lead to a third world war, and expressed hope that Russian President Vladimir Putin would soon brief him on his trip to Tehran, where Putin met with the four other leaders of the Caspian Sea countries the day before. That should prove to be an interesting conversation, since Putin made it clear while in Tehran that the United States should severely limit its role Caspian affairs.

For now, the Caspian Summit has both failed to settle the legal issues between the littoral states but succeeded in serving as a stage for larger, global issues. And nowhere are these issues more pronounced than in the Caspian region, where America competes with Russia over influence in Eurasia. A vast region of mostly Muslim former Soviet states - nearly all authoritarian and struggling with occasional wars and revolutions, economic stagnation, and internal unrest - Eurasia straddles the west and east, Christendom and Islam, Europe and Asia. Both Putin and Bush are well aware that it is here where Russian and U.S. interests clash most conspicuously, and Putin, while not completely comfortable with the clerical regime in Tehran, has very publicly taken sides.

Karl Rahder has taught US foreign policy and international history at colleges and universities in the U.S. and Azerbaijan. In 2004, he was a Visiting Faculty Fellow in Azerbaijan with the Civic Education Project, an academic program funded by the Soros Foundations and the U.S. Department of State. He is currently based in Chicago.

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Posted by Karl Rahder on October 19, 2007 9:59 AM  
Comments (15)  
Andreas:

While this article is, for a US mass media publication, not so extremely unbalanced (it managed to avoid calling Ahmadinejad Hitler, congrats!), I will take issue with a repeat of another of these anti-Russian canards: "Countries such as Ukraine and Georgia remember all too well their own difficulties last winter when gas supplies were cut off from Russia, leading to heating crises in both countries."

The fact is Ukraine and Georgia wanted to steal Russian gas without paying for it. All Russia asked was for them to pay the market value for the gas - even they could have asked any price they wanted, since it is their gas. Please stop your constant anti-Iranian, anti-Russian, etc. propaganda. People are sick and tired of you spewing your hate, discord and lies about Iran, Russia or anyone else that stands up to Western or Zionist imperialism and domination.

October 19, 2007 3:10 PM | Report Offensive Comments  
Posted on October 19, 2007 15:10  
Eric:

Caspian Sea summit in Tehran was decidedly the Vladimir Putin show, but the ostensible common front oddly enough seems to have revealed an opening for a spoiler. The West ought to climb through:

<http://oilandglory.com/2007/10/putins-show-opening-on-caspian.html>

Also: That is Vladimir Putin's challenge. His best chance of securing that much-craved legitimacy is to pull off a diplomatic miracle. One such as resolving the Iranian crisis. What is the mysterious "message" he gave to Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei?:

<http://oilandglory.com/2007/10/putins-churchillian-aspirations.html>

October 19, 2007 3:32 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 15:32

MichaelSchn:

The whole text looks more like a Government press release, than an analytical article.

It's full with half-trues meant to mis-inform the reader. I like the best the following phrase: "Caspian Summit has both failed to settle the legal issues between the littoral states but succeeded in serving as a stage for larger, global issues." What a creative abuse of "both"!

About Azerbaijan the author tries to avoid discussing that Azeris are both ethnic Turks but Shiite muslims. That creates the main dilemma: being Secular, Azerbaijan has to be an ally of Turkey, including staying in perpetual war with Armenia. Also their secular government are dictators. The only way for them to fix both problem is: to turn more like a Muslim state and to get closer with Iran. BTW, IMO it's not in the best interests of Russia either, but Russia has no choice, it's clear USA is much more dangerous to it than Iran.

This is the main issue. In 15 years since the collapse of Soviet Union USA " has both failed " to destroy Russia as a world power, " but succeeded " in restarting the Cold War.

Year over year USA worked in both directions: stirring the civil war in Yugoslavia, moving NATO to East Europe, unconditionally supporting chovist Baltic states (especially Latvia) with thier NAZI sentiments, instigating "colorfull" revolutions in former Soviet republics, now placing missiles in Eastern Europe - all these finally provoked Russian response.

What's interesting is: considering both military and political failures in Iraq, failed education at home, failing economy, \$US and financial system based on it - may be it's time to reevaluate our preferences.

This applies to both US government and Mr. Soros.

October 19, 2007 3:59 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 15:59

roll'en on two:

It's about time we tell the world we are done dieing and spending to win the hearts of your nation's. Like Bush said, you'r with us or your not with us. If your not with us and you want to get stupid with us or our friends, will send you some air mail from a corn field in the midwest. Games over were finished playing. If Azerbaijan chooses to side with us then Putin; shut up and go home before you find your self on the HISTORY CH.

Posted on October 19, 2007 16:05

MichaelSchn:

Eric, there is no "Iranian crisis" outside Washington, DC, and may be Tel-Aviv/Jerusalem.

Even if Iran creates some nukes, they only may be used as defensive weapons.

As of the probability of Iran giving it to terrorists, it's obvious that Bush, Musharaff, or Israel are much more likely to do this.

The whole crisis is made up partially to appease Israel, but mostly to bail out the falling \$US bubble.

October 19, 2007 4:12 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 16:12

Anonymous:

Wow, roll'en on two, You sound soooo strong, Yea.  
But don't be so hysterical, You only need to post Your bush-it 6 times, the 7th was one too many.

October 19, 2007 4:31 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 16:31

Kapioghly:

As one of 20 million Iranian Azari, I can assure you that if Republic of Azarbayejon with her western backed oil thieves in anyway harm Iran, it shall be a shortest lived republic in course of history, after all they're 100 Kilometer from my place as oppose to 10000 Kilometer from US and we will out stay Americans with vengeance, that is no threat, period

October 19, 2007 7:48 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 19:48

POF:

I sometimes have doubts as to whether I'm right or wrong about in my support for America. Fortunately, pro-Russian and Islamofascist dialog like the one displayed here always reaffirms my political beliefs. Of course, Russia is always fighting western corruption and is always on the defensive. And of course, Georgia and Ukraine want to "steal" Russian gas, that's why Russia cut off its gas supplies to Georgia after Georgia claimed Russian sabotage of gas-pipes in the Caucasus.

If you really want to know what's going on, open your eyes. It's no coincidence that the Russian-backed opposition movement in Georgia is growing at the same time tensions between Russia and the United States are increasing. It's not by chance that the Armenian genocide resolution controversy began weeks after PKK attacks in Turkey. And it's certainly not by chance that Russia is allying itself with Iran.

Yes, the United States have motives similar to Russia in that they want to extend influence throughout Eurasia and the Middle East. However, as anyone that's lived the nightmare of Russian domination can confirm, an American presence in the region would be far greater and more beneficial to peace and tranquility than the despotic regimes of Iran and Russia.

October 19, 2007 8:35 PM | Report Offensive Comments

Posted on October 19, 2007 20:35

Nicolas Makrides, New York:

Imagine where Russia would be if the biggest theft in the history of man kind did NOT happen during the Yeltzin era. I hope the nations in the Caspian would not act like another Georgia or Ukraine with some kind of fruity revolution.

[http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/needtoknow/2007/10/the\\_battle\\_f\\_or\\_azerbaijan.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/needtoknow/2007/10/the_battle_f_or_azerbaijan.html)

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