
Georgia And The Renewed US-Russian Rivalry

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One of the major premises of American foreign policy has been that, with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a policy of "containment" of a weakened, impoverished and dispirited Russia could succeed, by an aggressive expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) alliance to Russia's borders, accompanied by domination of the oil and gas resources not only of Russia, but also of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia and the Caucasian regions, by American and western oil companies. The aim was to integrate the Caucasian Republics - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - into NATO and construct pipelines bypassing Russia, to carry oil and gas from countries such as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan to ports like Ceyhan in Turkey, for onward shipment to America's NATO partners in Europe.

Strategic objectives. The American strategy for access to Caucasian energy resources was spelt out by Ariel Cohen, a leading analyst of the Washington-based neo-conservative think-tank, the Heritage Foundation in 1999. Cohen then proclaimed: "US interests in the Caucasus boil down to providing guarantees of greater independence to Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan; controlling Iran; ensuring access to energy resources and precluding the possible revival of Russian imperial ambitions in the region".

To achieve these objectives, Cohen urged more political support for an oil pipeline project bypassing the Russian pipeline networks, from Azerbaijan to the Turkish port of Ceyhan. He argued that if this was not done, Russia and Iran would control access to and investment in a major part of the Caucasian energy resources, making the West dependent on Russia and Iran. As the pipeline was to be constructed through Georgia, Cohen urged the promotion of "security collaboration with Georgia" and expanding ties with Azerbaijan and Armenia as a "signal" to Moscow that its support for separatism in South Caucasus would lead to an end of US economic assistance. Worse still, Cohen urged that for the US to achieve its strategic objectives, it should open talks with leaders of North Caucasian ethnic groups - a euphemism for promoting Muslim separatism in Russia's Chechen and Dagestan Regions.

Russia's power potential What Cohen and US policymakers failed to anticipate was that under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia would stage a remarkable economic recovery. In less than a decade, Russia emerged as a global player, shrewdly using its position as holding the world's largest resources of natural gas, the second largest resources of coal and as the world's second biggest producer of oil, to effectively make America's European allies look to it with respect and realism. Under Putin's leadership, Russia's economy has grown at over 7 per cent annually since the year 2000.

Russia has wielded diplomatic clout as a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council and its participation in groupings like the G-8, The Middle East Quartet, the Six Power initiative on North Korea's nuclear programme, APEC, OSCE and in the Russia-NATO Council. Russia has also expanded its power potential in crucial areas such as its Defence and space industries. Moreover, with significant Russian minorities in former Soviet Republics such as Kazakhstan and Ukraine, Moscow has signalled that it will not remain unconcerned about how ethnic Russians are treated in these countries.

Unmindful of these changes in power equations, the Americans have attempted to virtually encircle Russia by proposing missile defences in former Warsaw Pact members and by encouraging Russia's neighbours such as Ukraine and Georgia to join NATO. On the eve of the last NATO Summit in Bucharest in

April 2008, President Bush commended the "bold decision" of the Ukrainian President, Viktor Yuschenko, to apply for NATO membership and dispatching Ukrainian troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush added: "In Bucharest this week I will continue to make our position clear about our support for MAP (NATO membership) for Ukraine and Georgia".

Recognition of Georgia The Kremlin strongly opposed NATO expansion and warned that it could lead to Moscow's recognition of the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia which had asserted their independence and were protected by Russian peacekeepers. While the US and the European Union were opposed to independence for these regions, Russia's Parliament proclaimed that if the western powers could recognise the independence of Kosovo after military intervention, there was no reason Russia could not do likewise in Georgia.

Georgia's immature US educated President, Mikhail Sakashvili, gave the Russians the opening they seized when, bolstered by arms supplies from Ukraine and expectations of full-scale American support, he mounted a military operation to establish control over South Ossetia on August 8. Within days, the Georgians were humiliatingly defeated by the Russians and forced to accept EU mediation by French President, Nicholas Sarkozy. The proposals agreed to between Sarkozy and Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev, include a provision for "international talks on the future status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and ways to provide for their security".

Russia views this as EU acceptance of the impossibility of return to the pre-war status quo. With Chancellor Merkel of Germany and the French Prime Minister, Francois Fallon, having opposed NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, the US now finds that apart from support from the ever-loyal British, its other major partners in NATO such as Germany, France and Italy, which are increasingly dependent on Russian oil and natural gas, have no desire to embark on another Cold war against Russia.

Global implications. These developments are going to have profound implications on global politics in coming years. The Americans are not going to give up their attempts to encircle Russia. The Russians, in turn, could make American diplomacy on issues like the nuclear programmes of North Korea and Iran very difficult, should the Americans become confrontational.

Former Soviet Republics like Kazakhstan, which have huge energy resources, will now become more cautious in their dealings with the US out of fear of Russian reaction. In the face of such rivalry from Russia, the Americans will now seek closer ties with Beijing - a development of some importance for India and the balance of power in Asia. Like in the Nixon and Clinton years, China will seek to prove that it is a useful partner to the US and endeavour to isolate India diplomatically, skilfully using our Communist Parties to undermine India-US relations, as they have done in recent times.

India has traditionally had close relations with Russia. Even today, Russian supply of enriched uranium keeps the Tarapur Nuclear Power Plant functioning in the face of an American embargo, and crucial areas of Defence requirements like the acquisition of cruise missiles and futuristic fifth generation fighter aircraft are based on joint collaboration and development with the Russians. New Delhi would be well advised to ensure that on energy-related issues such as the proposed pipelines with Iran and Turkmenistan and developments in Central Asia, it pays greater attention to Russian policies. Moreover, Indian diplomacy should seek to promote a dialogue between the US, on the one hand, and Russia and Iran, on the other, on issues like the resurgence of the Taliban in Afghanistan, where US policy has been to exclude these countries, as far as possible. Even though the Americans were inclined to show accommodation of Chechen separatism earlier, they now have a better understanding of Russian imperatives, after the terrorist strikes of 9/11.
