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# Is it Georgia or more?

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After trying to mediate between contending sides regarding the conflicts in the surrounding regions, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan flew to Moscow to have talks with Russian authorities -- President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov -- and then to Tbilisi to speak with President Mikhail Saakashvili about a proposition for a possible Caucasus Alliance deal. My expectation is that Russia will say yes and proceed with an agenda of establishing its authority in the region and over Georgia, while Georgians will grope for any possible way out of the quagmire they have fallen into. Mr. Putin has always been very disturbed by Mr. Saakashvili's passion for potential NATO membership for his country. The Russian leadership sees potential NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine as a serious block on its influence in the Caucasus and Black Sea regions. On the other hand, most European countries were never keen on Georgia's membership in the alliance, at least under the existing circumstances. Outside Poland and the Baltic states that have experienced Soviet (read this as Russian) domination, the United States is the only country that has enthusiastically supported Georgia's NATO membership.

This overall reluctance was confirmed during Russia's punishment of Georgia. Following an early statement condemning Russia's aggression, the North Atlantic Council met and called on Russia to respect Georgia's territorial integrity. But there was little support beyond words, demonstrating the members' reluctance to deepening ties with Georgia for the time being. Given the current circumstances, Mr. Saakashvili will not receive substantial help from his Western friends either in holding onto his presidential seat or in NATO membership for his country. The invasion and devastation of his country as well as loss of control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia will soon be billed to his leadership. It is dubious that he will be able to pay the price. When the anxiety and awe of Russian occupation dissipates, the Georgians -- who seem united now -- will begin asking how and why they were driven into such a mess. The foresight of their leader will be seriously questioned.

Alternative energy routes?

For a long time Western and especially American policymakers hoped that diverting oil around Russia would help them assert control over Central Asia and its enormous oil and gas wealth and would provide a safer alternative to Moscow's control over export routes. This would also help prevent Russia's resurgence as a post-Soviet empire based on its control of energy sources and lines. Isn't this what the so-called "Great Game" was about, anyway? It was a game of establishing dominance over the enormous natural resources of Central Asia and the Caucasus. After the Cold War, the matter turned into an economic and diplomatic tug-of-war, occasionally backed by military might. Chechnya has been crushed and Georgia has been subdued. So now that the two regional states that challenged post-Soviet Russian power and dominance have been checked, multinational energy conglomerates and Central Asian and Caucasian/Caspian governments will be forced to build new lines through this unstable corridor. They may even reconsider transporting existing volumes of oil and gas, given the reliability of existing conditions and degree of safety in this corridor. One thing is certain: Russia, encouraged by its military clout and empowered in recent years by petro dollars, will be much more assertive in shaping the region's energy future.

Much has changed since before the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC) was built. The Western powers tried their best to find routes that would avoid potential trouble spots. They failed because there was no "safe and stable spot" in the Caucasus. One thing was obvious, though: The United States did not want energy lines to pass through Iran. Turkey suffered much from this insistence, but it had limited options other than trying to convince its foremost ally of its dire need for energy.

In the final analysis the US government and other private investors, together with British Petroleum - which operates the BTC pipeline -- decided on the present route that passes through Georgia, the ardent pro-Western country of the Caucasus. However, the BTC is far from being a safe route. Turkey is still struggling with separatist Kurdish elements. These elements recently delivered a blow to the pipeline, just before the Russian invasion of Georgia, driving the point home that the line is not safe enough for the West and for Turkey. It will not be safe as long as there are forces in the region that do not want it to be safe.

Georgia was also struggling with its separatist forces that ignited the recent war. Azerbaijan is always in a state of alert for a possible showdown over its territories occupied by Armenia. Hence, even before the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Georgia, the BTC pipeline was pretty precarious to be called the "safest energy route" connecting the East and the West.

Is there an alternative? Not in sight yet!

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