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## North-South Energy Routes More Attractive than East-West Ones

By Paul Goble

Window on Eurasia

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Vienna, January 24 ` Many Western analysts have suggested that one reason Russian aviators dropped a bomb only 50 meters from the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline during Moscow's invasion of Georgia in August was to highlight how insecure that link between the Caspian and the West which bypasses Russian territory has become.

But without acknowledging that sending such a message was among the Kremlin's war aims, Moscow commentator Aleksandr Shustov argues that "one of the important consequences of the war" has been growing recognition by all parties of just how "insecure" all pipelines and other transportation arteries through Georgia are.

And that forceful demonstration has renewed interest in the north-south route despite American opposition to any pipeline across Iran and the desire of both the US and the EU that Moscow not be in a position to control all hydrocarbon exports from the region and thus use gas and oil as a political weapon against both exporters and importers.

In his article, Shustov traces the history of TRACECA, the group of countries committed to the transit of gas and oil and other goods over what some have called a revived "Great Silk Road," the key role that Georgia and Azerbaijan have played as transit states for these hydrocarbons, and the way in which Armenia and Iran have been largely excluded this project.

Shustov acknowledges that "despite the technical, geographic and legal complexities" of the east-west route, its backers and participants "have been able to achieve [some] definite successes," including the development of a network of logistical centers, the training of support personnel, and the construction of the pipelines themselves.

But not even all these very real achievements were able to transcend geography or bring stability to Georgia, the Moscow analyst continues, and that reality, one that many supporters of the east-west route typically have been unwilling to acknowledge, was brought home to them as a most unpleasant "surprise" by the five-day way between Moscow and Tbilisi.

Not only did the conflict force several exporting countries to suspend shipments during the war, but earlier this month, Azerbaijani officials announced that they were putting off until March the construction of their part of the railroad that was to supplement the work of the pipelines.

Baku blamed "complex weather conditions in winter and the need to conduct additional geological studies of the route," but Shustov suggests that its decision reflected a growing awareness in the Azerbaijan capital that no transit route across Georgia is going to be entirely secure for the foreseeable future.

Meanwhile, the Moscow analyst argues, plans to establish a North-South transportation corridor "received a new impulse" after the war. This corridor has a long history. In September 2000, Russia, India and Iran signed an agreement to promote it, an agreement later acceded to by Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Oman and Syria.

The agreement calls for the development of three major north-south routes that would link Russia with Iran, Shustov notes: via the Caspian Sea, via a railroad through Azerbaijan, and via pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The chief economic attraction of this corridor is that it is only half as long as the traditional sea route via the Suez Canal between the producing and exporting countries of the Caspian Basin and the Persian Gulf, on the one hand, and the importing and consuming countries of Western Europe, on the other.

But its political attractions not only to Moscow but also to Tehran and Yerevan are almost certainly an even greater selling point. For Moscow, it would mean that much of the Caspian Basin oil and gas would flow across its territory and at the very least would not flow through pipelines sponsored by the United States.

That would enhance Moscow's influence not only in the countries directly benefiting from exports and transit of oil and gas via this route but also in other countries, such as Azerbaijan, which would likely conclude that coming to terms with Russian preferences is a better strategy than waiting for the West to back them up.

For Tehran, it would help it project power into the region and represent a serious end run around American efforts to isolate it economically and politically. And for Yerevan, it would represent not only a major source of income from transit fees but reduce pressure on Armenia to settle the Karabakh dispute on terms it does not find acceptable.

Armenia, Shustov continues, hoped to benefit from a rail line crossing its territory from Russia to Iran. But because such a route would pass through and thus require approval from Georgia and Abkhazia, it is probably "impossible," at least at present. But the north-south corridor would give Armenia another route out ` via Iran to the Persian Gulf.

The Russian invasion of Georgia did not end interest in the east-west corridor, but the conflict made the problems of this route more obvious. And consequently, while this outcome may not have been a Russian war aim, it is, as Shustov's article makes clear, very much one that the Russian government is pleased with.

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