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# Can The US Walk And Chew Gum At The Same Time?

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“I think that the United States can walk and chew gum at the same time”, said Hillary Clinton <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/07/143972.htm>> in Tbilisi on July 5 (State.gov, July 5). She was referring to fears in Georgia – and elsewhere on her trip, which also included Poland, Ukraine , Azerbaijan and Armenia – that Washington has abandoned them in its pursuit of a better relationship with Moscow .

European security is no longer a zero-sum game, insists the State Department, and there is therefore no need for regional states to choose between the US and Russia. True enough – states such as Azerbaijan are adept at balancing between them. But even if the former Soviet bloc does not have to make a choice, there are areas in the former Soviet space where Washington does.

Mrs Clinton’s visits to Azerbaijan and Armenia showed that US diplomacy in the region can be agreeable to the point of near-irrelevance. She sought to reaffirm the US ’s commitment to a peaceful solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, where progress towards a settlement remains agonisingly slow.

She also aimed to repair ties with Azerbaijan following a series of public arguments since April 2009, mainly due to Washington’s support of a deal between Turkey and Armenia which appeared to exclude Azerbaijan’s interests. Defence Secretary Robert Gates preceded Mrs Clinton’s visit with a June visit to Baku , where he delivered a letter <[http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/wSa0TrM\\_p94ZA6oQ2rBnjw/President\\_Obama\\_3s\\_Letter\\_to\\_President\\_Ilham\\_Aliyev\\_En.pdf](http://azerbaijan.usembassy.gov/uploads/images/wSa0TrM_p94ZA6oQ2rBnjw/President_Obama_3s_Letter_to_President_Ilham_Aliyev_En.pdf)> from President Obama reiterating the US ’s commitment to its ally (US Embassy in Azerbaijan , June 3).

Maintaining a good relationship with Baku is essential for the proper functioning of a vital supply route to Afghanistan. The recent turmoil in Kyrgyzstan was a clear demonstration that Washington needs as many potential supply lines as possible, and it is anxious not to aggravate transit states.

Mrs Clinton’s trip served to mend fences and demonstrate to Azerbaijan that it is a key state for many reasons – Afghanistan first and foremost but also energy transit to the West and containing the threat from Iran. In this regard finally confirming Matthew Bryza, a diplomat with extensive Caucasus experience, as US ambassador to Baku will help, at least partially, to assuage Azerbaijan’s suspicions of being undervalued: the ambassadorial post has been empty for a year.

Pushing for a peaceful settlement to Nagorno-Karabakh has rarely been a priority for the US, although it serves as one of the three co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group which oversees peace talks. In truth the negotiations are now so focused on precise technical issues – the wording of the preamble to the settlement document; the exact timing of Armenian troop withdrawals from occupied territories- that high-level diplomacy rarely produces any developments of note.

Mrs Clinton was no different. In both Baku and Yerevan, her message was the same: violent solutions are unacceptable; international principles of territorial integrity and self-determination must be adhered to; peace is in the interests of all regional states. This is standard fare, and no light was shed on the tangled, secret negotiations of the Minsk Process except vague references to 'progress'.

The lack of results in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not surprising <<http://www.todayszaman.com/tz-web/news-215215-102-news-analysis-clintons-south-caucasus-trip-no-catalyst.html>> , and nor is it a result of the reset (Today's Zaman, July 6). Indeed this is one area where Moscow and Washington tend to read from the same page: Mrs Clinton's measured and low-key comments reflect this reality.

Georgia is different. Tbilisi has been increasingly concerned that the Obama Administration is distancing itself from President Mikheil Saakashvili's government as it continues the reset. The anti-Saakashvili rhetoric from Moscow has cooled in recent months, but the Kremlin still loathes President Saakashvili for the 2008 war. Any bold moves by Washington to support Tbilisi would risk damaging the reset, which explains an apparent de facto (though denied) arms embargo <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61458>> on Tbilisi by the US government (Eurasianet, July 4).

Despite its irritation, Moscow can live with nominal support for Georgia's territorial integrity and Mrs Clinton's denunciations <<http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100707/159724862.html>> of its "occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (RIA Novosti, July 7). This was a semantic coup - senior US diplomats had previously shied away from the term - but nothing more substantial was expected <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61454>> , and nothing more substantial was announced (Eurasianet, July 2). Russia is understandably confident that the reset outweighs the value of America's relationship with President Saakashvili. Washington may not play by zero-sum rules, but Moscow does.

The authorities in Tbilisi know this, which explains President Saakashvili's increasing willingness to normalise relations with Moscow. The US also knows this, which explains Mrs Clinton's eagerness to intensify the 'Geneva process' which attempts to settle security issues between Russia, Georgia, and the two breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The process is moribund, dominated by procedural wrangling and disrupted by walkouts from the rebel sides. Attempting to revive it, rather than engage Moscow directly over its occupation of Georgian territory, suggests that Washington is keeping the delicate matter of Georgia's security in a bland and non-controversial format. This hardly suggests a willingness to try walking and chewing gum at the same time.

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