
Crunch Time in the Caucasus : Fast-Lane Geopolitics May Prompt Reversal of Allegiances in the Region

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Political processes in the Caucasus never developed so fast in the last decade. And in this case we deal not with some frozen or sluggish processes but with a fundamental change of the layout of regional forces and priorities. Against the background of new geopolitical realities, even such serious issues as a Karabakh settlement, or the presidential election in Azerbaijan are engulfed in the whirlpool of fresher concepts of regional repartition.

Still at the beginning of summer few could expect that a visit to Baku of such a serious political player as US Vice-President Dick Cheney could have such a lamentable result. Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev did not even find it necessary to personally meet the high-ranking guest at the airport. Cheney was not even received at the level of Azerbaijan's prime minister.

So, he first headed for a meeting with BP-Azerbaijan Company President Bill Schreder and top managers of the Azerbaijani affiliate of Chevron and then visited the United States embassy in Baku and talked with Ambassador Ann Dersy. Cheney got to the Azerbaijani president's residence only closer to the evening. He was so vexed that he even refused to take part in a dinner in his honor and left Baku for Tbilisi.

It seems particularly strange given Cheney's role in establishing political relations between the United States and Azerbaijan as Defense Secretary in the George Bush Senior's administration. In November 1998 when Ilham Aliyev paid a visit to the US as first vice-president of the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijani Republic, Cheney was one of the organizers of an official reception in his honor at the Foundation of American-Azerbaijani Partnership and the Institute of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

The then US defense secretary said in his speech that the US Government must take decisive steps to repeal Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act that restricted certain types of direct U.S. aid to the government of Azerbaijan until the latter lifted its blockades of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh. "Of course, some neighbors in the region would not want such a development," said Cheney implying Armenia. "Moreover, they would not want to see an independent and strong Azerbaijan."

It is no wonder that the decision of George W. Bush named Cheney as his vice-presidential running mate caused indignation in the Armenian Diaspora in the United States. Michael Mahdesian, a Diaspora-Armenian leader said: "Armenians throughout the country - Republicans or Democrats - are very worried. In all posts that Dick Cheney has occupied he not only served the interests of big oil business, but also aggressively advanced Azerbaijani interests to the detriment of the interests of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh."

Cheney has always opposed the proposals of the Armenian lobby. Thus, in 1985 and 1987 he voted against the recognition of the fact of the Genocide of Armenians. Becoming defense secretary Cheney promoted large-scale deliveries of military hardware to Turkey. While in the post of head of Halliburton, the current vice-president made much to achieve the repeal of Section 907 [against Azerbaijan]. For his efforts, as the Armenian community in the United States noticed, Cheney was rewarded with a "Prize for Supporting Freedom" by the American-Azerbaijani Chamber of Commerce in 1997.

Nevertheless, his most recent visit to Baku became a failed visit. All this shows that realities are indeed changing in the region.

Cheney told Aliyev that the United States would firmly support their allies in the region and were going to further push for a Trans-Caspian gas pipeline bypassing Russia. However, Aliyev made it clear that while he values relations with Washington, he was not going to betray Moscow. In fact, it meant that under current conditions Baku decided to assume a wait-and-see position and not press ahead with the Nabucco project, a pipeline planned for pumping natural gas to Europe.

Aliyev had a telephone conversation with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev the day before Cheney's arrival in Baku. During that conversation "the leaders of the two states exchanged opinions on urgent matters of the agenda of bilateral and international relations and also discussed the schedule of the upcoming political contacts." But much is hidden between the lines of this strictly protocol language. Last summer Russia's gas monopoly Gazprom offered to purchase Azeri gas in any volumes at "European prices". It is difficult to resist such an offer and if Azerbaijan accepts it, it will no longer need Nabucco.

Another thing is of no less importance. Late last week Moscow saw a meeting of the foreign ministers of the countries participating in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that embraces Russia, Belarus, Armenia and four Central Asian republics except Turkmenistan. The participants of the meeting discussed the possibility of recognizing the independence of the separatist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the context of their accession to the CSTO. A preliminary mutual understanding was achieved on this issue, but with one exception. Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan is known to have said before: "Armenia cannot recognize another unit in a similar situation until it recognizes the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. It is for this reason that Armenia once did not recognize the independence of Kosovo."

Yerevan made it clear to its CSTO allies that it recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia only in exchange for the recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh. And Russia cannot do this, as it has major energy interests in Azerbaijan and most likely some arrangements with the Azerbaijani leadership on this account. One should think that Moscow offered a dilemma to Baku: a) either Azerbaijan's participation in Nabucco and other Western projects to Russia's detriment; b) or Gazprom's purchases of Azerbaijani gas at world prices and Moscow's not recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh's independence.

It is not difficult to understand what pragmatic choice Aliyev, whose reelection as Azerbaijan's president this week has not been contested by anyone from the outset, is to make. By recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia received a powerful Nagorno-Karabakh leverage for a long-term influence on this country. And those in Baku understood it adequately. Hence the chilly reception of Cheney and problems that the Nabucco project are likely to face. And in reverse: Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan met with Dick Cheney at the White House as part of his recent visit to the U.S. The two discussed bilateral relations between the United States and Armenia, prospects of their development, exchanged views on regional security matters. In particular, they addressed the subject of the damage inflicted on Armenia's economy during the Georgian-Ossetian conflict, the visit of Turkish President Abdullah Gul to Yerevan, the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the implementation of the Millennium Challenges program, the global financial crisis and others.

Premier Sargsyan reaffirmed Armenia's position that the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict must be achieved by means of negotiations within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group. He called 'dangerous' the statements

that refer only to Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and ignore other accepted principles, which, he said, forms erroneous ideas and expectations of the conflict solution.

It is possible that very soon official Washington will allow itself a good gesture in respect of Armenia. However, it is impossible to guess what they gesture will be...

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