
How to prevent another war in the Southern Caucasus

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After Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's recent visit, the Obama administration wants to prove it has a strategy to deepen ties with allies such as Poland while it pursues a reset with Russia, so it has sent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on a whirlwind tour of Central and Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. The trip also seeks to blunt conservative criticism that Washington is sacrificing allies for the sake of reconciliation with Moscow.

The administration has tried to pursue a twin-track strategy: reengaging Russia while upholding the core principle that these countries have the right to choose their own foreign policies and reject Moscow's claims of a sphere of influence. The real question, however, is not about the administration's rhetoric but whether its words are backed up with policies that produce meaningful engagement. So far, those policies are not in place. That is one deficit that Clinton's trip will hopefully start to change.

The administration has already put relations with Central and Eastern Europe back on track on key issues such as missile defense. Negotiations over a new strategic concept offer an opportunity to provide reassurance and to make good on American and NATO promises to engage in defense planning and exercises and create infrastructure. Dealing with the South Caucasus is trickier. Two years ago, the West was caught by surprise when war broke out between Russia and Georgia and threatened to destabilize the region. The risk of future conflict cannot be ruled out. The administration needs to confront three very real dangers:

The first is the deteriorating relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia and the conflict in the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Recent shootings and casualties underscore the rising tensions. The collapse -- hopefully temporary -- of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement has also elevated tensions. Absent greater international and Western engagement, these tit-for-tat shootings could spin out of control and turn into a real war over the summer.

Second, we should not be deluded into thinking that the Russia-Georgia conflict is over. Moscow is determined to break Tbilisi's will to align with the West. It may opt to wait out Mikheil Saakashvili's Georgian presidency before making its next move, but its goals are unchanged. While Georgia has weathered the war and the global economic crisis better than expected, the unresolved status of the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the presence there of Russian forces -- effectively an occupation -- are a drag on attempts to stabilize and reform Georgia. The border regime managed by unarmed European Union monitors is weak. It is doubtful that mission would be adequate if real instability or tension arose.

But the biggest danger, and the wild card, in the region may be the North Caucasus, where a nasty brew of radicalization, destabilization and insurgent activity continues. The 2014 Olympic Games to be held in Sochi -- a prestige project for Moscow -- threaten to play into this dynamic. The Russian government may feel the need, in Vladimir Putin's words, to "clean up" the region by eliminating the dangers that insurgents may stage terrorist attacks at the Olympics. In other words, Moscow may crack down so that the worst violence is over well before Western journalists start to

pay attention or the first international athlete arrives in 2014. But that kind of preemptive action may make the situation worse.

The kind of blowback Moscow faces today for having encouraged separatist forces in the region for many years is a nightmare not only for Russian leaders but also for the West. Imagine if jihadists in the region thicken their ties to the similarly named groups we are nettling in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even if the contagion does not spread that far, it could destabilize the South Caucasus. Historically, Russia has often sought to use the South Caucasus to control the North. Should it do so today by demanding the right of hot pursuit, the use of airspace or Georgian territory, we could quickly find ourselves on the precipice of another unwanted conflict.

What should the United States and the West do more generally? The administration's foreign policy plate is full, but this is a classic case in which a modest investment now can help prevent or contain bigger problems later. Washington must try to engage Moscow on the North Caucasus. We are likely to have little leverage in influencing Russia's policies there, but we might be able to limit the collateral damage and potential spillover from such policies in the South Caucasus. That sort of long-term payoff would require efforts now to put in place more effective border management mechanisms, involving the international community; stepped-up efforts to build political and economic stability; and the kind of reassurance that would enable these countries to weather such a storm.

Modest investments now could help prevent much greater problems down the road. Hopefully Secretary Clinton is finding consensus on this around the region.

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