
West And Russia Vying For Allies And Energy In Caucasus And Central Asia

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NATO continues its approach to Georgia. Moscow talks about a "Cold war" climate as it strengthens its ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan try to find a difficult balance between the two rival camps. China takes advantage of the situation to gain important energy deals.

Tbilisi (AsiaNews/Agencies) - Georgia's march towards NATO membership continues but Georgian authorities must "push ahead with reform and improve further its democratic institutions and practices," said NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer who just ended a two-day visit to the Caucasian country.

In a press conference Mr Hoop Scheffer said that the recent war with Russia did not change the Georgia-NATO relationship and that no-one can prevent the Alliance from accepting new members.

He did none the less say that he hoped that there would be no more reports from international observers saying that Georgia's elections were "tainted." Current President Mikhail Saakashvili won a recent election by a slim margin which the opposition said was full of irregularities.

Anxious of finding support after his bitter military defeat President Saakashvili agreed with the NATO chief. But in the country itself his domestic opposition is growing, demanding fresh elections for next spring.

The Kremlin slammed the "Cold War" visit, calling it anti-Russian. For Moscow a stronger NATO-Georgia link is "not timely and does not help stabilisation in the region."

Whilst Hoop Scheffer was in Tbilisi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on Monday flew to Sokhumi in Abkhazia, the most senior Russian official to visit the territory since 1993. And today Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed "friendship treaties" with the presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In Moscow yesterday Medvedev met Azeri President Ilham Aliyev.

Russia is pushing Azerbaijan to sell its gas to Russian state-owned Gazprom, but no agreement came out of the meetings in the Russian capital. The Azeri leader is still trying to play a balancing act between Russia and the West and intends to sell to both.

For the European Union Aliyev remains a crucial ally because of his country's energy resources as well as the transit role the latter could play for Central Asian gas, bypassing Russia.

On Georgia Aliyev was careful to stress the "need to consolidate efforts in order to provide peace" and "diminish tension." Indeed Baku too has to deal with its own separatist enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. Medvedev insisted that there was no connection between Karabakh and the situation in Georgia, expressing Russia's support for the "continuation of direct talks between Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents".

In light of the Russia-EU rivalry, the vice president of Azerbaijan's State Oil Company (SOCAR) Elshad Nasirov said on 12 September that "All

destinations [of gas export] are equally possible and we will mostly consider the net profit for SOCAR," adding that that exporting gas to India or China via Turkmenistan could be another option.

In the game Russia and the West are playing for friendly ties and energy in the Caucasus and Central Asia, China is not standing idle.

On 29 August Turkmenistan and China signed a framework agreement to increase planned gas supplies to China by 10 billion m3 to 40 billion m3 a year with deliveries starting at the end of 2009, once a gas pipeline via Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is completed.

The deal was signed right after the Russian deputy Prime Minister Viktor Zubkov visited Turkmenistan, a sign that Turkmen leaders want to counterbalance Moscow's influence.

Similarly, at the 28 August summit of the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO) in Dushanbe China opposed any declaration of support for Russia in its war against Georgia as Moscow had requested. Instead the SCO group, which includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, urged the parties to solve the conflict in a "peaceful manner."

Kazakhstan is also trying to strike a balance between Russia and the European Union. It has rejected a Russian offer to buy all its gas, but in Brussels yesterday at its annual summit with the EU, the Central Asian nation did not endorse the EU's Nabucco project—a planned gas pipeline from Azerbaijan to Austria--saying it was still in a preliminary phase. (PB)

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