
Russia And The Remaking Of The 'Near Abroad'

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The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has conformed to the Russian view that the conflict in South Ossetia is tantamount to shaking, if not entirely changing, the global balance of power that has orbited around US supremacy since the end of the Cold War.

So the SCO has seen the unipolar mentality of the US as a source of conflict rather than a cure for the world's common challenges. Stressing the necessity of a multipolar world for the sake of international security, the SCO has supported the maintenance of a strategic balance of power. The SCO has thus warned that the US endeavor to create a global missile defense system, as in Poland and the Czech Republic, is a futile attempt, as such efforts will neither help uphold the strategic balance nor prevent the spread of weapons of every kind, including nuclear.

So, along with demanding a multipolar international order, the SCO reiterated that Russia has an exclusive right to shape the "near abroad."

Rising value of the CSTO

Not surprisingly, Russia has received substantial political backing from certain countries within the borders of the "near abroad." Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan already announced their endorsement of Russia within the context of the SCO. More support has also come from members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) -- an organization established in 2002 that grew out of the Russian-led Collective Security Organization of 1993 and was meant to improve security relations between Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Like the SCO, the heads of state of the CSTO at their summit on Sept. 5 in Moscow endorsed Russia's role in the conflict region and condemned Georgia's military action against South Ossetia and "double standards" being pursued by the West on the issue. So, as well as showing that it is not and cannot be isolated, Russia made a comparison between the cases of Kosovo and South Ossetia by putting the term "double standard" in the resolution of the CSTO summit.

Here again, Russia conveyed that diplomatic recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is a matter that should be decided by each member of the CSTO in line with their own national interests. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has already announced his willingness to recognize them as soon as parliament returns from summer break at the end of September. After evaluating the changing political and military dynamics in the region, and of course, seeing a green light from Russia, Armenia may also prefer to recognize not only South Ossetia and Abkhazia but also Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. In fact, perhaps encouraged by the Russian stance on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan pointed out at the summit that all members of the CSTO should adopt a unified position on foreign policy, military and other issues. Certainly, Sargsyan had in mind a united front in the CSTO toward the Armenian-populated breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, including possible diplomatic recognition of it. True, Armenia and other CSTO members have still not recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia. However, it will be very interesting to see what the same states do when Abkhazia soon applies -- as Sergei Bagapsh, the Abkhazian leader, has already announced he will do -- for membership in the CSTO and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Energy pipelines for control over the 'near abroad'

Russia's success in challenging the West or exerting its control over the "near abroad" is greatly dependent on where future Caspian oil and gas pipelines are built: passing through Russian territory or not.

Energy pipelines are in fact equally important for both sides. The EU and the US want to reduce their energy dependence on single and/or unreliable sources (the Middle East and Russia). On the other hand, Moscow strongly desires to preserve and increase the huge benefits it is getting from energy exports as Russia is now earning nearly two-thirds of its export revenues from oil and natural gas sales. Most importantly, Russia is spending 30-40 percent of its budget on the defense and security sectors. With all of this in mind, Putin made a verbal deal with Islom Karimov, the Uzbek president, on Sept. 2 on another pipeline to carry around 30 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas per year from Uzbekistan to Russia with a link to Turkmenistan. Russia has already transported a significant amount of natural gas from the region via its pipeline system and made another gas transportation deal (up to 80 bcm per year for 25 years) with Turkmenistan in May 2007. On the other side, Washington, Brussels and Ankara have also intensified their efforts to realize the trans-Caspian pipeline from energy rich Turkmenistan, with possible inclusion of Uzbek and Kazakh reserves, to Europe via the Caspian seabed, South Caucasus and Turkey. The trans-Caspian pipeline, which is currently seen as the most important component of the Nabucco project -- a proposed pipeline to carry the Caspian, Iraqi and other available natural gas yields to Central Europe via Turkey -- has been under discussion since the mid-1990s. There is no way that China will be left out of the pipeline equation in the "near abroad." Of its various other energy projects in the region, Beijing struck a gas agreement with Turkmenistan in April 2006 for a Sino-Turkmen pipeline to be completed by 2009 to transport up to 30 bcm of natural gas annually for a 30-year period.

In the final analysis, in the "near abroad" theater, many actors are still in the energy and security games that now have to be played under the new power balances created by the conflict in Georgia. Surely, any verbal political and security guarantees given by the US and the EU to the vulnerable regional leaderships in the "near abroad" come nowhere near to matching the military actions of the Russian army. It is likely that international private investors and politically unstable leaderships of the region have already begun to think twice before making up their minds on the paths of future energy lines and on establishing security and political relationships with the external world. Naturally, political leaderships in the "near abroad" have to lean toward the direction(s) posing little or no threat to their rules. Even if some of them show a certain level of resistance to Russia's pressure, it is unlikely they will turn their faces to the West, but rather to the East, China and other alternatives in that direction.

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