

Clash in the Caucasus: Rolling Back The “Unipolar” World

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For the past week, Dick Cheney has been traveling through the Caucasus trying to drum up support for punitive action against Russia for its role in the recent fighting in South Ossetia. The Vice President vowed that the Moscow’s action “will not go unanswered”. Cheney is determined to establish the United States as the regional “cop on the beat”, taking charge of all security operations through it’s cat’s paw, Nato. Neither the Kremlin nor the EU are paying much attention to Cheney’s fulminations. The negotiations for the security arrangements and the withdrawal of Russian troops are being conducted without US involvement.

On September 9, under the revolving leadership of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, the EU hammered out a deal with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev to replace Russian soldiers in South Ossetia with 200 EU observers who are scheduled to arrive by October 1. In exchange, Georgia agreed to Russia’s demands not to use force against the two breakaway republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Medvedev’s unilateral announcement that Russia would recognize both republics as “independent”, did not derail the EU peace process. Rather, both sides focused on the withdrawal of Russia troops and seem reasonably satisfied with the 6-point agreement.

Russia has not only scored an important diplomatic victory; it has driven a wedge between Europe and the United States. The reckless behavior of Georgia’s President Mikhail Saakashvili has given the Bush administration a black eye and put Nato membership out of reach for the foreseeable future. Saakashvili invaded South Ossetia last month; destroyed much of the capital, Tskhinvali, and killed an estimated 1,500 civilians before his troops were routed by the Russian army. Among the dead were Russian citizens and peacekeepers. Moscow has cut off all relations with Tblisi and President Medvedev has called Saakashvili a “political corpse”. The Kremlin now regards its neighbor to the south as an enemy.

Cheney’s week-long trip to the Caucasus was organized with two objectives in mind; to isolate Russia from its allies in Europe and speed up Nato membership for Georgia and Ukraine. He has failed on both counts. The ashen-faced Veep flew from Baku to Kiev, from Kiev to Tblisi, from Tblisi to Cernobbio; rattling his saber and railing in typical Cold War style to anyone who would listen, but his efforts amounted to nothing. No one in Europe wants a confrontation with Russia or another decades-long year nuclear standoff. Besides, Putin has spent the last eight years building partnerships and creating an expansive energy network that provides vast amounts of oil and natural gas to European homes and industries. Europe depends on Russia now and wants to maintain friendly relations.

It's different for Cheney who has been seething on the sidelines—bogged down in the Iraqi quagmire—while Moscow has gotten stronger and more independent from its massive energy windfall. Now Russia can fend for itself and has no interest in becoming just another cog in America's imperial machine. When Putin articulated Russia's determination to defend its national sovereignty in Munich nearly two years ago, saying that he rejected the idea of a "unipolar" world, the Council on Foreign Relations and other elite think tanks put Russia on the America's "enemies list" more or less acknowledging that the Kremlin would resist further integration into the so called "international community". (aka-American-led, dollar-based system)

Last week, newly-elected Russian President Dmitry Medvedev reiterated the Putin Doctrine word for word as it was originally stated in Munich:

"The world must be multi-polar. Single polarity is unacceptable. Russia cannot accept a world order, in which any decisions will be made by a sole nation, even such a serious one as the United States. Such a world order will be unstable and fraught with conflicts."

Medvedev has drawn a line in the sand posing a direct challenge to the America's continued dominance in global security. The advancing Russian army has delivered a stinging defeat to the neocon's imperial ambitions in Eurasia. It is possible that the fighting in South Ossetia will eventually be seen as a tipping point for US adventurism in the region.

Russia's ties with Europe threaten to shatter the increasingly fragile Atlantic Alliance which is lashed together by G-7 banking cartel. If Europe sees a continuation of the same belligerent Bush unilateralism under the next US president, the popular backlash in Europe is likely to sever the Alliance once and for all plunging the United States into forced isolation. Reasonable people should want to avoid that possibility.

Cheney's Caucasus gambit is a desperate attempt to stir up trouble while making a last ditch effort for the oil and natural gas of the resource-rich Caspian Basin. So far, he and his colleagues in Big Oil have nothing to show for their 20 years of labor except a few under-performing puppets in Ukraine and Georgia. The whole plan has flopped leaving Cheney with another failure on his resume. Just this week, there was more news of Russia's progress in the Central Asia energy sweepstakes in an article by Paul Goble titled "Moscow Wins a Major Victory on Pipelines":

"With Iran's declaration that it opposes the construction of any undersea pipelines in the Caspian on "ecological grounds" and thus will block any delimitation of the seabed that allows for them and Baku's decision not to back the West's push NABUCCO project, Moscow can claim its first major political victory from its invasion of Georgia.

These actions mean that the Russian government will now have full and uncontested control over pipelines between the Caspian basin and the West which pass through Russian territory and will be able either directly or through its clients like the PKK to disrupt the only routes such as Baku-Tbilisi-Ceylon that bypass the Russian Federation."

If Cheney is serious about catching-up to Russia, he'll have to act fast. Unfortunately, Cheney is more disliked in Central Asia than he is in the USA where his public approval ratings have been well below sea-level for the last 4 years. In fact, when Cheney arrived in Azerbaijan, neither President Ilkham Aliyev nor Prime Minister, Artur Rasizade, even bothered to meet him at the airport. Politicians everywhere know that its is political suicide

to even be seen with him.

Aleksandr Pikaev, an analyst from the Institute for World Economy and International Relations, noted that Cheney's unpopularity makes diplomacy virtually impossible. Pikaev said, "If the Bush Administration really wanted to consolidate the international community behind the U.S. in criticizing Russia, I think they should have found somebody else, not Mr Cheney." But then, no one in the Bush administration cares what anyone else thinks anyway; so the point is moot.

Cheney's trip had nothing to do with resolving differences between Tbilisi and Moscow. His real goal was to secure a larger share of the region's dwindling oil supplies before he leaves office. As Linda Heard points out in her article "Driving Russia into Enemy's Arms", the petrocarbon war is being lost in stunning fashion:

"Moscow has clinched a new pipeline that will carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Russia and signed a contract that will give it virtual control over Turkmenistan's gas exports...Russia has also put out feelers for the establishment of a global gas cartel, an idea that it has discussed with Venezuela, and which is certain to put cartel members on a collision course with the White House. Venezuela has also invited three prominent Russian companies to take over from their American counterparts, ExxonMobil and Conoco Phillips. Further, according to China Daily, it has agreed with Beijing on an energy initiative that would involve Russian oil and gas heading away from Europe toward Asia."

Washington has been out maneuvered on every front by Russian businessmen who have learned to use the free market more effectively than their teachers in the US.

Bad Blood in Azerbaijan

According to Russia Today: "The Kommersant newspaper reports that Cheney was very annoyed by the results of the meeting with President Aliyev and even refused to attend a ceremonial supper in his own honor." President Aliyev has suggested "that Baku is going to play a waiting game concerning the Nabucco gas pipeline," which is designed to bypass Russia. Aliyev wisely wants to avoid any confrontation with the Kremlin.

Indeed, who can blame Aliyev? Anyone can see that Washington's star is waning. Political leaders everywhere are simply nodding politely and waiting to see whether November's presidential election will restore a bit of sanity to the White House. Until then, everyone is laying low. It is unlikely that anyone will answer Cheney's call to pick a fight with Moscow.

The Vice President has dropped all pretense that his trip has anything to do with the fictional "war on terror". He said that his aim is to "develop additional routes for energy exports to promote energy security, which is becoming an 'increasingly urgent' issue. We seek greater stability and security and cooperation in this vital region of the world," Cheney told reporters in Baku. He also met with representatives from BP and Chevron, two oil giants involved in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that pumps 1 million barrels of crude per day to world markets from the Caspian. It's all about oil.

In the second leg of his trip, Cheney headed off for Georgia where the Regnum web site reports:

"Kommersant cites sources in the State Chancellery of Georgia who said that closed negotiations between Mikhail Saakashvili and Dick Cheney in Tbilisi also had not gone

smoothly. The sides mainly discussed security of existing pipelines laid through the Georgian territory round Russia, and the Nabucco pipeline project. Dick Cheney made it clear that the USA were ready to maintain security of these pipelines, however, by merely political means, so Georgia would not receive US military aid at the moment.”

Trouble in Kiev

Cheney’s trip was plagued by gaffes and miscues; one-part political kabuki, one-part Vaudeville. He arrived in Kiev just hours after Ukraine’s pro-west coalition collapsed, plunging the country into political chaos that could foreshadow an end to US-Ukraine alliance. The political progress the Bush administration felt they had made by fomenting the so called “Orange Revolution”, now hangs by a thread. Popular sentiment is increasingly supportive of Moscow over Washington.

According to the Financial Times:

“President Viktor Yushchenko threatened to dissolve parliament and call snap elections unless a new coalition can be formed, blaming the crisis on supporters of Yulia Tymoshenko, his firebrand prime minister....While Mr Yushchenko and Ms Tymoshenko... have engaged in a bitter personal power struggle that has persistently handicapped the government. ...Mr Yushchenko accused Ms Tymoshenko’s followers of plotting an “anticonstitutional coup” by voting in tandem with the opposition Communist and Moscow-leaning Regions parties in favor of legislation to cut the president’s authority.” (Financial Times)

Russia’s friends in Ukraine have thrown a spanner in Cheney’s plans for Nato membership and further integration into the EU. This is a major setback for Cheney and his friends at the far-right Washington think tanks who believed they were well on their way to encircling Russia and achieving their territorial ambitions. Ukraine will not be joining Nato anytime soon.

The Bush administration’s aggressive lobbying hasn’t persuaded any of the main players in the EU to support punitive measures or sanctions against Russia. The EU prefers diplomacy over belligerence. As a result, Cheney has become increasingly irrelevant; a blustery sideshow that everyone ignores except the western media. As for the EU, there’s simply no interest in provoking Russia and risking the cutting off cutting off vital resources to energy-dependent European countries. Common sense has prevailed over Bush’s “freedom agenda”.

Cheney delivered his most pointed remarks about the recent conflict in South Ossetia at a global security conference in Cernobbio, Italy where he ended his trip. He said:

“Our principles are being tested anew. We must meet those tests with candor and resolve and, above all, with unity. Russia has a choice to make, and we in the trans-Atlantic alliance have responsibilities. They (Russia) cannot presume to gather up all the benefits of commerce, consultation and global prestige, while engaging in brute force, threats or other forms of intimidation against sovereign countries...No part of this continent should leave itself vulnerable to a single country’s efforts to corner supplies or control the distribution system.”

It is understandable that Cheney would be upset over Moscow’s success in securing crucial hydrocarbons and pipeline corridors via the free market while the US has languished in Iraq

and Afghanistan with nothing to show for its efforts except one million dead Iraqis, 4 million refugees, and a legacy of disgrace. But, in truth, Cheney's frustration can be summarized in two words: Sour grapes. He's just a poor loser.

THE MEDVEDEV DOCTRINE?

US foreign policy elites have long dreamed of integrating Central Asia into the western economic and security paradigm. Geopolitical strategist and former national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, summarized it like this in an article in *Foreign Affairs* more than a decade ago:

"Eurasia is the world's axial supercontinent. A power that dominated Eurasia would exercise decisive influence over two of the world's three most economically productive regions, Western Europe and East Asia. A glance at the map also suggests that a country dominant in Eurasia would almost automatically control the Middle East and Africa . . . What happens with the distribution of power on the Eurasian landmass will be of decisive importance to America's global primacy and historical legacy."

A resurgent Russia-flush with the wealth derived from its vast oil and natural gas supplies-has become a stumbling block for US regional aspirations. Last month's clash with Washington's "proxy" army in Georgia dispelled any illusion among Kremlin powerbrokers that the Bush administration can be dealt with rationally or via normal diplomatic channels. Cheney's incendiary rhetoric just further underscores this point. That's why Russia is preparing for the worst. Medvedev is strengthening ties with the EU, the Central Asian countries (SCO), the BRIC countries (Brazil, India, China) and has also deployed the Russian fleet to the Mediterranean and off the coast of Venezuela for joint-maneuvers.

In a recent press conference, President Medvedev announced the five fundamental principles to which his government would strictly adhere. Third on the list was "the protection of life and dignity of Russian citizens no matter where they live".

"There isn't a single country in the world that would tolerate its citizens and peacekeepers being killed," Medvedev said.

Russian citizens and peacekeepers were killed by a proxy army that was trained and advised by "US special forces commandos". So far, no one has been held accountable, but Medvedev and Putin know who is to blame. Putin even suggested that the invasion was planned as a way to improve the chances of one of the presidential candidates to win the election.(McCain) Regardless of the reason, when one country demonstrates that it is willing to kill the citizens and soldiers of another country to achieve its geopolitical objectives; that's when friendship ends and attitudes harden.

The events in South Ossetia will play a central role in shaping Russian foreign policy for years to come. The battle-lines have been drawn, the fleet has been deployed, and the armies are being moved into place. Russia does not want war, but it will be ready if one breaks out.

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