

Eurasian Crossroads: The Caucasus In US-NATO War Plans

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The South Caucasus is rapidly becoming a critical strategic crossroads in 21st century geopolitics, encompassing the most ambitious energy transit projects in history and the consolidation of a military corridor reaching from Western Europe to East Asia, one whose command centers are in Washington and Brussels.

The culmination of eighteen years of post-Cold War Western designs is on the near horizon as oil and gas are intended to be moved from the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea to Central Europe and beyond and US and NATO troops and equipment are scheduled to be deployed from Europe and the Persian Gulf to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Nothing less is at stake than control of world energy resources and their transportation routes on one hand and the establishment of a global army under NATO auspices fanning out in South and Central Asia and ultimately Eurasia as a whole on the other.

The three nations of the South Caucasus - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia - are increasingly becoming the pivot upon which that strategy turns. With the Black Sea and the Balkans to its west, Russia to its north, Iran and the Arab world to the south and southeast and the Caspian Sea and Central Asia to the east, the South Caucasus is uniquely situated to become the nucleus of an international geostrategic campaign by the major Western powers to achieve domination of Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa and as such the world.

The overarching plan for the employment and exploitation of this region for the aforementioned purposes is and has long been an American one, but it also takes in the US's European allies and in addition to unilateral and bilateral initiatives by Washington includes a critically vital NATO component.

With the nearly simultaneous breakup of the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1991 - one a cataclysmic and instantaneous and the other a prolonged process - prospects were renewed for the West to engage in a modern, expanded version of the Great Game for control of Central and South Asia and for that vast stretch of land that was formerly the socialist world excluding Far East Asia.

Since 1991 a 20th and now 21st century Silk Route has been opened up to the West, one beginning at the northeast corner of Italy and ranging to the northwest border of China and taking in at least seventeen new political entities, some little more than diminutive mono-ethnic statelets sovereign in name only. They are the former Yugoslav republics of Bosnia, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia and the international no man's land of Kosovo in the Balkans; Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the South Caucasus; and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Central Asia, with

Moldova and Ukraine representing the northern wing of this vast redrawing of historical borders and redefining of geopolitical space.

As previously noted, the South Caucasus lies at the very center of this new configuration. As in the days of empire, both ancient and modern, armies seeking plunder and states replenishing their treasuries with it must now pass through this region.

Pass through it, that is, if their intent is a hostile, confrontational and exclusionary one, a policy of containing Russia and Iran and effectively blockading both in their respective and shared neighborhoods, for example the Caucasus, the Caspian Sea Basin and Central Asia.

On the energy front American, British, French, Norwegian and other Western nations, sometimes individually but most always as consortia, are the prime movers; on the military one the task has been assigned to NATO.

Of the seventeen new nations listed above, all except for the aborted Kosovo entity, aptly described by a leading Serbian political figure as a NATO pseudo-state, have Partnership for Peace and in many cases Individual Partnership Action Programs with NATO and two former Yugoslav republics, Slovenia and as of three days ago Croatia, are now full Alliance members.

Of the seventeen only Serbia, Kosovo (so far), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have not been dragooned into providing troops for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The way stations on NATO's 21st century caravan route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Chinese frontier progressively reveal the pathetic - and tragic - status of what awaits much of the world in this not so grand plan. The West's two latest mini-states, Montenegro which became the latest member of the United Nations in 2006 and Kosovo which was torn from Serbia a little more than a year ago, are both underworld enclaves, gangland smugglers' coves carved out of broader states, Yugoslavia and Serbia, for the sole purpose of serving as military and black market transit points.

NATO's latest additions, Albania and Croatia, belie in every particular NATO's and the United States' claims of the Alliance epitomizing alleged Euro-Atlantic values and a new international "union of democracies." Croatia, still beset by fascist nostalgia and risorgimento, is guilty of the worst permanent ethnic cleansing in post-World War II Europe, that of the US-directed Operation Storm of 1995 which drove hundreds of thousands of Serbs and other ethnic minorities out of the country. Albania is another crime-ridden failed state which played a key role in assisting the second worst irreversible ethnic cleansing in modern Europe, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Serbs, Roma, Gorans, Turks and other non-Albanians from Kosovo since June of 1999. (At the recently concluded NATO 60th anniversary summit Croatian President Stjepan Mesic boasted that his nation would contribute to NATO operations with its "war experience.")

After the US and NATO brought what they triumphantly designate as peace and stability to the former Yugoslavia, they moved the battleground eastward toward the Black Sea and the Caucasus. Bulgaria and Romania were ushered into NATO in 2004 and Ukraine and Georgia were placed on the fast track to follow them.

With Turkey already a long-standing member of the Alliance, Russia is the only non-NATO and non-NATO candidate nation on the Black Sea.

Georgia is the major objective in this drive east as its western flank is the Black Sea and its eastern is Azerbaijan, whose eastern border is the Caspian Sea.

The South Caucasus is the land route from Europe to Asia in the east and to Iran and its neighbors – Iraq, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan – to the south.

It is at the center of a strategy that alone ties together the three major wars of the past decade – Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) – and that aims at preventing regional economic, security and infrastructural development cooperation between Russia, Iran, China, India and Turkey in the same Balkans-to-Asia Silk Route area.

As it was insightfully described by a Pakistani analyst recently, the current century is witnessing the final act in a drama that could be called the West versus the rest. The South Caucasus is the linchpin and the battleground of this geopolitical and historical denouement.

Yesterday the American warship the USS Klakring, docked in the Georgian Black Sea port of Batumi (capital of Ajaria, subjugated in 2004 by the US-formed new Georgian army), welcomed aboard former US-based President Mikheil Saakashvili to him “a chance to visit with the crew and discuss the importance of a strong United States-Georgia relationship.”

The Klakring was “hosting visits and participating in theater security cooperation activities which develop both nations’ abilities to operate against common threats....” (1)

What “common threat” was meant is not hard to discern. Its capital is Moscow.

The Georgian Defense Minister appointed to that role after last August’s war with Russia, David Sikharulidze, said on the occasion that the arrival of the US warship – fresh from taunting Russia with a visit to Sevastopol where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is based – represented “a guarantee for stability in the NATO space.” (2)

Sikharulidze let a cat out of a bag that the Pentagon and the White House would have preferred remain there. The two latter hide their military expansion into the Black Sea and the Caucasus under the masks of “guaranteeing maritime security” and “protecting a new democracy from its hostile northern neighbor,” but in fact Georgia is NATO’s beachhead and bridge for penetration of a tri-continental expanse of territory the West has set its sights on.

The Georgian Defense Minister was well-groomed for his current role. Prior to being appointed to his post last December Sikharulidze attended advance courses at the US Navy’s Justice School, the NATO SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe) School at Oberammergau, and the NATO Defense College.

In a news column he wrote for a Georgian newspaper in early March Sikharulidze asserted “We will develop well-equipped, properly trained and rapidly deployable forces to defend Georgia and to meet our international obligations. Our capabilities and tactics will be designed to meet a considerably superior force.”

The considerably superior force in question doesn’t need to be named.

To assist Georgia in preparing for a – larger, more decisive – showdown with Russia, he said, “To enhance this effort, we look forward to the arrival of an expert team from NATO’s Allied Command Transformation.”

Just as importantly, he added that “as NATO seeks alternative routes to Afghanistan, we understand our strategic responsibility as gateway to the East-West corridor. Georgia will provide logistical support to NATO, opening its territory, ports, airfields, roads and railroads to the alliance.”(3)

Georgia’s appointed role in providing the US and NATO with land, sea and air routes for the dangerously expanding war in South Asia will be taken up in more detail later. As to its defense minister’s allusion to NATO’s Norfolk, Virginia-based Allied Command Transformation (ACT) being tasked to assist the Pentagon in preparing the nation’s armed forces for a confrontation with a “considerably superior force,” on the very day Sikharulidze’s article appeared, the Commander of the U.S. Joint Forces Command and Supreme Allied Commander Transformation for NATO, Gen. James Mattis, met with him and his commander in chief Saakashvili to plot “prospects for Georgia’s stronger cooperation with NATO” shortly after the release of a “document entitled The Defence Minister’s Vision 2009 that was made public on February 17 [and which stated that] one of the defence ministry’s priorities is to ‘adjust the Georgian armed forces with NATO standards.’”(4)

The day before the release of the Defence Minister’s Vision 2009, the Georgian defense chief welcomed the NATO Secretary General’s Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia Robert Simmons to “discuss” it. Whether Simmons bothered to have the document translated into Georgian beforehand was not mentioned.

Simmons also briefed Sikharulidze on the Annual National Program NATO had bestowed on Georgia on December 2, 2009 (a parallel arrangement was made with Ukraine), less than three months after Georgia’s attack on South Ossetia and war with Russia and following the launching of the NATO-Georgia Commission on September 15, barely a month after the war ended. (Washington signed a US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership on January 9, 2009.)

The same month, February of this year, the Joint Staff of the Georgian Armed Forces announced that it was “conducting a formal process to derive Lessons Learned from the August 2008 war,” which would confirm that “one of the main priorities of Georgia’s foreign and security policy is integration into NATO....From this standpoint, improving NATO interoperability and compatibility with a view to developing NATO-standard deployable forces is an important GAF priority” and that “A team from NATO’s Allied Command Transformation will advise on this effort,” as it later did.(5)

On March 30, the day before the USS Klakring arrived in Georgia, so did the Pentagon’s second major commander, General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He met with President Saakashvili and Defense Minister Davit Sikharulidze and inspected the “town of Gori, according to the Georgian MoD [Ministry of Defence], and visit[ed] the Gori-based first infantry brigade and the first artillery brigade.”(6)

Gori was occupied by Russian forces at the end of last August’s war and Cartwright’s tour of inspection was a blunt message to Moscow. And to Saakashvili and his defense minister. One of confrontation with the first and uncritical support to the other.

During Cartwright’s visit Saakashvili reminded him – and Russia and the world – that “Recently, I have met with General Petraeus [Commander of US Central Command] who also spoke highly of the Georgian army’s prospects....Earlier, we trained our army for police and

peacekeeping operations and not for large-scale military actions.”(7)

What the Georgian strongman was alluding to was that the US was transitioning its American-made army from war and occupation zone training in NATO interoperability to preparations for “homeland defense” aimed at Russia.

During the meeting with the Pentagon’s number two commander he reminded listeners and readers that “Since 2001, Georgia [has performed] peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. However, in August last year during the Russian aggression there were withdrawn the last 2,000 Georgian soldiers from Iraq.

“Earlier, Georgia declared its readiness to send 300 soldiers to Afghanistan.”(8)

And: ““Earlier we were preparing the army for police peacekeeping operations, but not for large-scale military action,” Saakashvili stressed, expressing confidence that the Georgian army “will continue to grow both quantitatively and qualitatively and will be equipped with all necessary weapons.”(9)

At the time of Georgia’s attempt on August 7, 2008 to advance its armored columns to the Roki Tunnel which connects South Ossetia to the Russian Republic of North Ossetia, thereby blocking off Russian reinforcements and capturing some 1,000 Russian peacekeepers – a humiliation for Russia in the eyes of the world had it succeeded – the US flew the 2,000 Georgian troops in Iraq (near the Iranian border, the third largest foreign contingent) on American military transport planes back to Georgia, a move that were the situation reversed, say in a hypothetical conflict between the US and Mexico, would have been treated as an act of war by Washington.

That airlift began the process of shifting battle-ready Georgian troops from supporting US and NATO operations abroad to what six years of the US Train and Equip Program and comparable NATO assistance had intended them for: War with Russia.

“Cartwright said that the United States will train the Georgian armed forces, with the main focus of the training being ‘the defence of Georgia.’”(10)

What the “defense of Georgia” entailed was spelled out by Saakashvili, while Cartwright nodded approbation:

“Our struggle continues and it will end after the complete de-occupation of Georgia’s territory and expelling the last soldier of the enemy from our country. I am absolutely sure of that.”(11)

Cartwright added, “I want to say that you have a very good army and we know what they have done.

“We are glad that we will continue to cooperate with them in the future as well. Our strategic partnership is very important.”

He also “highlighted that after the August war it became easier to understand the Georgian armed forces’s training priorities and what new types of equipment were needed for defending the homeland.”(12)

The point wasn’t, could not be, missed in Moscow and “Russia sent a strong warning to the

United States Thursday [April 2] about supporting Georgia in the U.S. ally's efforts to rebuild its military following last year's war.

"The Foreign Ministry said helping arm Georgia would be 'extremely dangerous' and would amount to 'nothing but the encouragement of the aggressor.'"(13)

A Russian news source reported "Turkey provided the Georgian Army, Air Force and Special Forces with unspecified military equipment, shortly after Georgia was visited by a high-ranking US General on Monday" in addition to having previously provided "60 armoured troop-carriers, 2 helicopters, firearms with ammunition, telecommunication and navigation systems and military vehicles worth \$730,000," and that "more armour, Pakistan-manufactured missiles, speedboats and other ammunition is planned for delivery in the near future."(14)

Days later at the NATO Summit in Strasbourg the Alliance complemented the Pentagon's enhanced support of Georgia.

NATO reiterated its intention to absorb Georgia - and Ukraine - "when the countries fall in line with the alliance's standards." (15)

Among the bloc's "standards" are two preconditions for full membership worth recalling: The absence of territorial conflicts and of foreign (non-NATO) military forces in candidate countries. Abkhazia and South Ossetia qualify doubly as "problems that must be resolved" as does the Crimea in general and the Russian Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol in particular with the Ukraine.

Hence Saakashvili, flanked and coached by the Pentagon's second-in-command, fulminating about the "complete de-occupation of Georgia's territory and expelling the last soldier of the enemy from our country."

In line with this plan, the Strasbourg summit issued a statement that "NATO will continue supporting the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of the South Caucasus countries and Moldova," and "NATO declares its deep concerns over the unsettled conflicts in the South Caucasus countries [Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh] and Moldova [Transdniestar]." (16)

NATO Spokesman James Appathurai, in issuing the mind-boggling declaration that the Alliance wouldn't tolerate "spheres of influence" in post-Soviet space, stated: "We consider that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are integral part of Georgia. The issue of the territorial integrity is a very serious problem. NATO always supports the territorial integrity of countries." (As to the last sentence, see references to Kosovo and Montenegro above.) (17)

Georgia returned the favor by vowing to turn the Sachkhere Mountain Training School into a Partnership for Peace [NATO] Training Center and by hosting the annual NATO South Caucasus Cooperative Longbow/ Cooperative Lancer exercises beginning on May 3 with troops from twenty three nations.

The importance of Georgia, and of its neighbor Azerbaijan, is assuming heightened, indeed urgent, value for two not unrelated reasons: The activation of trans-Eurasian energy projects intended to knock Russia out of petrochemical sales and transit to Europe and the escalation of the war in South Asia.

At the 60th anniversary Summit, within the general framework of Secretary General Jaap de

Hoop Scheffer's demand that "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, now more than ever, must hold together to solve some of the world's most pressing problems," was a renewed pledge to "protect Europe's energy security."

The main focus of the summit, however, was to formalize plans for the large-scale escalation of the war in Afghanistan and now in neighboring Pakistan.

Plans for unprecedented Western-dominated oil and gas pipelines from the eastern end of the Caspian Sea through the South Caucasus and the Black Sea north to the Baltic Sea and further on to all of Europe – and for the hub of that nexus, Turkey and the South Caucasus, to connect with more pipelines emanating from the Middle East, North Africa and eventually the Gulf of Guinea – have been addressed in some detail in an earlier article, *Global Energy War: Washington's New Kissinger's African Plans*.(18)

But a brief overview may be in order.

In October of 1998 United States Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson officiated over a meeting with the heads of state of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to launch the Ankara Declaration, a formalization of plans for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline to run for 1,768 kilometers from the Caspian to the Mediterranean.

It was planned to be the world's longest fully functioning oil pipeline as the Soviet and Comecon era Friendship Pipeline (4,000 kilometers) was already in decline and moreover was to be supplanted by extension of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan project through Ukraine to Poland and the Baltic Sea, the Odessa-Brody-Plock-Gdansk route.

The last-named was agreed upon in May 11, 2007 by the presidents of Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Georgia and Azerbaijan and a special envoy of the president of Kazakhstan.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline was brought on line two years earlier in an inauguration attended by then US Energy Secretary Samuel Brodman and the presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine and Kazakhstan.

The presence of Kazakh officials at the two above events is significant because although the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline commences in Azerbaijan at the western end of the Caspian and ends at Turkey's Mediterranean coast, the successor to the 1994 "Contract of the Century" signed by major American and British government and oil company officials with Azerbaijan envisioned since its inception that oil from fellow Caspian nations Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan would be run under the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and be shipped further west and north.

As early as 1996 the US planned to import natural gas to Europe from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan through a submarine pipeline in order to circumvent Russia and Iran. The trans-Caspian gas pipeline would parallel its oil counterpart as the current Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum land natural gas pipeline does the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil one and would link up with the trans-Caspian submarine gas pipeline described at the beginning of this paragraph.

Part of this vast trans-continental corridor is the proposed Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railway, the foundation of a much-touted "China to Great Britain" line.

The major NATO states, the US and EU members, are also working on the Nabucco pipeline, which is planned to transport natural gas from Turkey to Austria, via Bulgaria, Romania, and

Hungary. It will run from Erzurum in Turkey where the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipeline ends. Again the strategy is to circumvent Russia and Iran.

Furthermore, the West is pursuing a “strategic view to see the Arab Gas Pipeline, which links Syria to Egypt via Jordan, extended to Turkey and Iraq by some time this year. This, in turn, would link to the 30bcm-per year Nabucco pipeline, connecting the EU to new gas sources in the Caspian Sea and Middle East.”

(19)

Last year “EU Energy Commissioner Andris Piebalgs and External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner met representatives of the Mashreq countries (Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria), Iraq and Turkey on May 5 in Brussels to discuss the finalisation of the Trans-Arab gas pipeline, promote its role as a future supplier of the EU backed Nabucco project and encourage the full participation of Iraq in regional energy activities, including as a partner in the Trans-Arab project.

“The Trans-Arab pipeline, which currently runs from Egypt through Jordan to Syria, has a capacity of 10 bn cm per year. The pipeline, which will be interconnected with Turkey and Iraq by 2009, will provide a new transport route for gas resources from the Mashreq region to the EU.” (20)

Recent discussions have included not only Egypt but Algeria as intended partners in this arrangement, which would extend the web of pipelines from the eastern extreme of the Caspian Sea to a nation that borders Morocco, on the Atlantic Ocean.

Wherever the oil and gas may originate - from the Western border of China to a few hundred kilometers distance from the Atlantic Ocean - they are to converge in Turkey and the South Caucasus. Though however indispensable a role Turkey plays, it is entirely dependent on Caspian Sea oil and gas being shipped through the Caucasus for its importance in grander schemes.

As a Greek analyst commented this past February, this elaborate energy nexus is anything other than a merely economic proposition:

“Making inroads into Central Asia to access the oil and natural gas resources in this region would give the US a strategic advantage in the Eurasian Corridor, and if Middle East oil was added to this mix, control of the direction of the world economy....The success of Washington’s East European and Balkan-Caucasus-Central Asia strategies would have led to the encirclement of Russia, with a chain of military and economic links with countries stretching from the Baltic States and the former [Soviet Union] satellites in East Europe, via the Balkans, Caucasus, and Central Asia, to the borders of China.”(21)

This confirms revelatory admissions by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs (and former Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy) Matthew Bryza last June that “Our goal is to develop a ‘Southern Corridor’ of energy infrastructure to transport Caspian and Iraqi oil and gas to Turkey and Europe” and, to transition to the war in South Asia, “The East-West Corridor we had been building from Turkey and the Black Sea through Georgia and Azerbaijan and across the Caspian became the strategic air corridor, and the lifeline into Afghanistan allowing the United States and our coalition partners to conduct Operation Enduring Freedom.” (22)

If the inextricable connection between the fifteen-year development of energy and transportation corridors by NATO states from Europe to Central Asia and the current “reverse flow” (the expression used for the short-lived transit of Russia oil through the Odessa-Brody pipeline before Kiev’s ever-obedient Western clients put a halt to it) of NATO men and materiel to Central Asia and to the Afghan-Pakistani war front still appears unsubstantiated, US Navy Captain Kevin Aandahl, spokesman for the US Transportation Command, in speaking of the new American administration’s plans for the massive escalation of the greater Afghan war, has put doubts to rest in saying, “[O]ne route...could involve shipping supplies to a port in Georgia on the Black Sea. Supplies would then be moved overland through Georgia to Azerbaijan, by ship across the Caspian to Kazakhstan and then south through other Central Asian countries to Afghanistan.

“The routes already exist. The facilities already exist. What we’re talking about is tapping into existing networks and using a variety of military and contractor commercial enterprises to facilitate the movement of materiel supply, non-lethal supplies and everything else that is needed in Afghanistan through these existing commercial routes.” (23)

The routes are about to be tested on a scale not previously used. In 2003, two years after the “lightning victory” of October of 2001, there were 10,000 US and allied NATO troops in Afghanistan. The following year there were 12,000. At the beginning of this year there were as many as 55,000 troops serving with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) – 23,000 US soldiers and the rest from NATO, Partnership for Peace, Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and “Asian NATO” states – and 28,000 American forces attached to Operation Enduring Freedom. (The exact figures are difficult to arrive at. Some sources list 38,000 US and 32,000 NATO troops without specifying how many US servicemen are assigned to which command.)

The White House has pledged another 30,000 combat troops and an additional 4,000 trainers for this year (with more to join them in 2010 already being mentioned) and NATO offered 5,000 more at its summit three days ago. If all the numbers are accurate, there may soon be 122,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan later this year. A tenfold increase in five years.

Ongoing attacks on NATO supply lines and depots in Western Pakistan and the closing of the Kyrgyz airbase at Manas to US and NATO forces will complicate the planned Iraq-style surge in Afghanistan and against targets in Pakistan.

On March 31 US Central Command chief General David Petraeus met at the Pentagon with the defense ministers of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to plan the logistics for his attempt to replicate the Iraq “surge” in Afghanistan, only this time with hostilities also raging in neighboring Pakistan, a country with a population almost three times that of Iraq and Afghanistan combined and with nuclear weapons.

The war theater is ever widening and the vortex is pulling in more and more regional and extra-regional actors. In addition to enmeshing the five Central Asian states, initially through transit and overflight commitments, NATO with ISAF has troops from some 45 nations serving under its command.

Never before have armed units from so many nations been deployed for a war in one country. Even Hannibal’s motley contingents in the second Punic War were not as diverse

nor was their composite provenance anywhere near as far-ranging.

The troops come from four continents and the Middle East. And the South Caucasus. After a visit from NATO's Caucasus and Central Asia representative Robert Simmons last June Azerbaijan announced it was doubling its troop deployment to Afghanistan. Georgia's Saakashvili recently boasted of writing US President Barack Obama to offer him more forces for the war.

"I have already stated this to General Cartwright, as before to the U.S. political leadership. I wrote about this to President Obama and we are ready to develop our relations in this direction." (24)

A year earlier "Georgia had filed an application with NATO, making a proposal to send its contingent to Afghanistan, considering that "to settle the situation in Afghanistan is one of the main issues for the whole world".(25)

Azerbaijan, like Georgia, is being built up as a forward operating base for action in the Caspian and into Afghanistan.

"NATO is going to ship supplies to Afghanistan via Poti-Baku-Aktau container trains through TRACECA [Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia] corridor, Azerbaijan, said Arif Asgarov, Chairman of Azerbaijan State Railways Company." (26)

In less than two weeks Azerbaijan is going to host the NATO Regional Reply - 2009 eight-day command and field exercises with troops from the US, Bulgaria, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Poland, Romania, Turkey and Ukraine.

Yesterday it was announced that US officials would arrive in the capital of Azerbaijan and that "maritime security, the results of US assistance, as well as work done within the Caspian Security Program added to the Working Plan of Military Cooperation are to be focused on at the meeting until April 10." (27)

Later this month a delegation from the Pentagon's European Command will visit Azerbaijan and "will hold meetings with the leadership of Azerbaijani armed forces and will attend the Bilateral Cooperation Planning Conference" and "discuss reports on the work done within the military cooperation program and details of working plan for US-Azerbaijani military cooperation in 2009-2010." (28)

Azerbaijani troops are participating in the NATO Cooperative Marlin/Mako 2009 exercises starting today. The Marlin drills are maritime Command Post Exercises focused on the NATO Response Force concept; the Mako drills are planned and conducted by Joint Force Command Naples, Italy.

The combined exercise is aimed at providing "familiarisation with NATO organisation, Command and Control structures and clear understanding of NATO doctrine and to enhance the mutual interoperability between NATO and Partnership for Peace (PfP) /Mediterranean Dialogue Countries (MD) and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) nations, focusing on the NATO led operations with partners." (29)

Lastly, high-ranking Azerbaijani officers are to attend the NATO Partnership for Peace Silk Road General/Admiral workshop in Turkey in June, one which featured 104 generals and admirals from 49 countries last year and whose purpose this is to "discuss the security,

military-political situation in the world, security of the transportation infrastructure, energy security and expected threats.” (30)

Azerbaijan offers the US and NATO direct access to the Caspian Sea and to transport routes from the west for the deployment of troops, armor and warplanes and for the transfer of the same from Iraq to Afghanistan.

It borders northwest Iran on the Caspian and like Georgia can be used for attacks on that nation whenever the West orders it to permit the use of its territory and airbases for that purpose.

Last September Russian envoy to NATO Dmitry Rogozin said that “Russian intelligence had obtained information indicating that the Georgian military infrastructure could be used for logistical support of U.S. troops if they launched an attack on Iran.

“‘This is another reason why Washington values Saakashvili’s regime so highly,’ Rogozin said, adding that the United States had already started ‘active military preparations on Georgia’s territory’ for an invasion of Iran.”(31)

Other Russian sources affirmed that Russia’s defeat of Georgia last August preempted a planned attack on Iran, and commentators in the Caucasus have speculated that had Saakashvili succeeded in South Ossetia not only would he have immediately turned on Abkhazia but Azerbaijan would have launched a similar assault on Nagorno-Karabakh which would have led to Armenia certainly, Turkey probably and Iran possibly being dragged into a regional conflagration.

As to Western plans for Armenia, NATO has made incremental progress in integrating it through the Partnership for Peace and its own Individual Partnership Action Plan, but the nation remains a member of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization and would first have to be weaned from the latter to be a likely candidate for an Alliance Membership Action Plan or an equivalent of Georgia’s and Ukraine’s Annual National Program.

The European Union’s Eastern Partnership program, however, may be designed as a way of cutting through this Gordian knot, as with two fellow former Soviet republics “there are serious hopes in Ukraine and Georgia that the EPP will be one more step towards their integration with NATO and the EU as it requires that partner countries coming closer to adopting the mutual values of NATO and the EU.”(32)

Early this year the former Indian diplomat and journalist M K Bhadrakumar synopsized the role the US intends for its South Caucasus surrogates to play:

“The US is working on the idea of ferrying cargo for Afghanistan via the Black Sea to the port of Poti in Georgia and then dispatching it through the territories of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. A branch line could also go from Georgia via Azerbaijan to the Turkmen-Afghan border.

“The project, if it materializes, will be a geopolitical coup – the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. At one stroke, the US will be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

“Furthermore, the US will be effectively drawing these countries closer into NATO’s partnership programs.”(33)

Just as the intensified and interminable war in Afghanistan and its extension into Pakistan provide the testing ground and training camp for a NATO global army, so the US and its allies are employing it to achieve military and political and economic objectives far broader than their limited stated goals. In the middle of the far-reaching swathe of Eurasia the West plans on thus acquiring lies the South Caucasus.

Notes

- (1) United States European Command, April 6, 2009
- (2) Trend News Agency, April 3, 2009
- (3) Georgian Daily, March 10, 2009
- (4) Itar-Tass, March 10, 2009
- (5) Georgian Daily, February 24, 2009
- (6) Civil Georgia, March 30, 2009
- (7) Interfax, March 30, 2009
- (8) Trend News Agency, March 30, 2009
- (9) Trend News Agency, March 30, 2009
- (10) The Messenger (Georgia), April 1, 2009
- (11) Civil Georgia, March 31, 2009
- (12) The Messenger, April 1, 2009
- (13) Associated Press, April 2, 2009
- (14) Russia Today, April 1, 2009
- (15) Russian Information Agency Novosti, April 4, 2009
- (16) Trend News Agency, April 4, 2009
- (17) Azeri Press Agency, April 3, 2009
- (18) Stop NATO, January 2009 <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/stopnato/message/36874>
- (19) Russian and Eurasian Security, March 30, 2009
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