

NATO “Fun and Games”

Bringing the threat of war to Russia’s borders

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Global Research, May 13, 2009

Al Ahram Weekly 13 May 2009

Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

As Russian troops marched to celebrate the victory over Nazi Germany 8 May, NATO troops — 1,300 of them from 10 member countries and six “partners” — were beginning their month-long Cooperative Longbow/Lancer war “games” on Russia’s southern border. In deference to Moscow, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Moldova and Serbia decided not to participate in the NATO exercises, preferring to send their diplomats to Red Square in homage to the untold Russian sacrifice in pursuit of world peace. According to Russian MP Sergei Abeltsev, the NATO decision to hold the drills in Georgia during the WWII Victory Day celebrations was a “total revision of the history of the Great Patriotic War”.

The games were greeted by Georgian troops with a coup attempt against their beleaguered President Mikheil Saakashvili, though there is speculation that this was something dreamed up by the Georgian president himself (he has done stranger things, like declaring war on Russia). This latest bizarre twist, the argument goes, gives him ammunition in his battle with protesters — they have been demanding his resignation for over a month and vow to keep protesting till he’s gone. Lucky for Saak, riot police are still loyal to him and broke up an anti-NATO rally by thousands converging on parliament on the eve of the games.

According to Russian Ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin, Saakashvili “has long been aiming to bring Georgia’s domestic conflict to the international level. It’s for this reason that he shot down our military — to draw us into the August war. It’s for this reason that he wanted American marines to come to Georgia, to draw Americans into that war. This man is dangerous for the world,” Rogozin said. In support of the US darling, Democratic Senator John Kerry and Republican Congressman David Dreier (note the bipartisan unity) are calling for a free trade agreement with Georgia.

NATO is busy as a bee these days. Apart from its centrepiece, Afghanistan, where deaths of both Afghans and occupiers are increasing daily, and practising for God-knows-what in Georgia, it was recently flexing its naval muscle in neighbouring Turkey, where delegates from 27 countries just wrapped up NATO’s annual Maritime Commanders Meeting (MARCOMET 2009). Its theme this year was “The Future Security Environment - Implications for Navies” and was focused on terrorism, piracy and conflicts deriving from energy and resources issues. No doubt it will be deploying forces on the Horn of Africa soon pursuing those pesky pirates.

Prague is also a hive of activity these days. It hosted a meeting of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova) 7 May, followed by a summit dubbed “Southern Corridor — New Silk Road of European and Central Asian countries”, seeking a non-Russian route for gas imports from Central Asia. The summit participants included Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Iraq and

Turkey. The Czech EU official said that after years of wavering, Europe had no time to lose in securing alternatives to Russian gas.

If the intent in all this is to make Russia mad, it is working. On the first day of the Georgian military exercise, Russia expelled two NATO envoys. Rogozin stated that his country would not attend a NATO military meeting planned for this week. Russian lawmaker Sergei Abeltsev has floated the idea of a response to the NATO move that would entail Cuba and Venezuela taking part in “large-scale drills” in the Caribbean Sea on 2 July. Nicaragua intends to buy Russian aircraft and helicopters for its armed forces, and will be sure to join in.

The battleground between East and West these days thus includes not only Georgia, but the Czech Republic, Poland and the Baltics. Not only is US President Barack Obama continuing Bush’s policy of provoking Russia in Georgia, but he made no indication in his first 100 days that he would reverse the planned Star Wars missile bases in the Czech Republic and Poland. Fortunately grassroots Czech opposition to the proposed base resulted in the defeat of the conservative government and it looks like the Czech base will not go ahead. Strong opposition in Poland has so far not managed to make a similar political inroad.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused the US of using the Iran issue as a pretext to set up its missile shield in Russia’s backyard. “The way it is designed has nothing to do with Iran’s nuclear programme. It is aimed at Russian strategic forces, deployed in the European part of the Russian Federation,” Lavrov told Euronews. “We are being very frank about this with our American colleagues and hope that our arguments are heard. Iran’s nuclear programme is a separate issue. We approach it according to a key principal — preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction.”

As if the Czech government’s anti-Russian conferences and the war games aren’t enough, the Czech air force are now “protecting” the airspace of the three Baltic NATO members, the first time that the Czech military’s tactical air force has been deployed in a foreign operation since the end of WWII. The Czech aircraft will be ready to take action in case of a military threat to the Baltic countries and to provide them with help.

But what “threat” is there in the Baltics, other than one invented by trigger-happy NATO planners playing yet more war “games” with Russia ?

This scheming has not gone unnoticed by Moscow. “We are not afraid of anything, including the prospect of a new Cold War, but we don’t want one,” Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said recently. In *The Grand Chessboard* (1997) Zbigniew Brzezinski predicted that the only countries Russia could convince to join a defence pact might be Belarus and Tajikistan. But the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) founded in 2002 in reaction to NATO expansion eastward now includes not only Belarus and Tajikistan, but Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

It, along with the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Russia-Belarus Union State and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) are natural developments by countries concerned about what the US and NATO are really up to. Russian General Leonid Ivashov, vice-president of the Academy of Geopolitical Science, says there is a need “to neutralise the spread of NATO’s influence not only to Central Asia but also to East and Southeast Asia,” adding that this “won’t be of an aggressive or offensive nature; it will be a deterrent.”

Relations with the SCO are developing, and just a few months ago, it was reported that the CSTO will have its own Joint Rapid Reaction Force which could be used to protect its members from military aggression, defend critical infrastructure and fight terrorism and organised crime. Russia and Kazakhstan are the key movers in the CSTO and managed to obtain a 25 per cent growth in this year's budget.

There are problems. First, the stand-off between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the latter inching towards NATO membership in reaction to Russian support for the former. And then there's Uzbekistan. President Islam Karimov was initially very pro-US and anti-Russian, but after being spurned by the West over the brutal suppression of demonstrations in 2005, he quickly made up with Russia and even joined the CSTO in 2006. However, human rights have never interfered with US strategic thinking in the past, and there are signs that Karimov is flirting with the West once again. He has also signed a military cooperation agreement with Azerbaijan, and is withdrawing from EurAsEC, adding to the confusion.

What Moscow would really like is for Ukraine to join the CSTO. And why not? If such pacts are truly defensive, then this makes perfect sense. What conceivable role does NATO play so far from the Atlantic, except as a forward base for the US ? Ukraine in the CSTO would give it clout where it counts — with its big and vital neighbour. Ukraine in NATO can only be a serious cause of tension with Russia. As Egyptians say, "Your neighbour is closer than your mother."

While things look grim these days from Moscow , the EU/NATO machinations are far from yielding results. Euro "partners" Armenia and Azerbaijan are in a state of war; Belarus and Moldova leaders have no illusions about Euro intentions and did not attend the EP fest in Prague, despite the 600 million euros being thrown around. And signs of reaction to NATO's nosiness are setting in. In a poll by the US government funded International Republican Institute (IRI) only 63 per cent of Georgian respondents back NATO accession, down from the 87 per cent the IRI recorded last September. Keep in mind the bias of an organisation like the IRI and imagine likely statistics if such a poll were carried out by a real NGO like, say, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament or StopNATO. What is telling in the IRI poll is the massive shift away from NATO membership in the past six months.

And then there's Ukraine . The district council of its second largest city, Kharkov , has just called for a ban on all NATO-related organisations and activities pending a nationwide referendum on Kiev's membership in the alliance. A statement circulated by the council last week denounced any violations of Ukraine's bloc-free status. The protest by the deputies followed the opening in April this year of a Euro-Atlantic cooperation (read: NATO) centre at Economics and Law University in Kharkov .

Obama has yet to make any of the hard choices he faces. He caved in to the bankers, and his health plan is being vetted by the health insurance industry to prevent the single-payer system, by far the cheapest and most comprehensive. He appears to be letting the Bush torturers off the hook and continuing their wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But he can't finesse Russia so easily. Russia will not cooperate on Afghanistan or arms treaties if he continues the foolish and dangerous meddling in Eastern Europe under the pretense of supporting "democracy and freedom". The current games can only be interpreted by Moscow as a replay — hopefully farcical — of the Nazis in Georgia in WWII, which will strengthen their resolve to keep the enemy at bay.

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