

The US-NATO “Arc of War” Stretches From Afghanistan to the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus

By [Rick Rozoff](#)

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U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates arrived in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, on June 6, meeting with President Ilham Aliyev on that day and on the following with Defense Minister Colonel General Safar Abiyev.

Gates was the first cabinet-level American official to visit the strategically positioned nation – located in the South Caucasus with Russia to its north, Iran to its south and the Caspian Sea to its east – in five years and the first U.S. defense chief to visit since Donald Rumsfeld did in 2005.

When Gates’ predecessor was last in Azerbaijan his mission centered on “the transportation of Caspian oil and the security of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline” as the chief element of U.S. trans-Eurasian oil and natural gas plans “which [are] directly connected with Mr Rumsfeld’s department” [1] to bring Caspian Sea hydrocarbons into Europe while bypassing Russia and Iran, both of which adjoin Azerbaijan.

Rumsfeld’s visit of five years ago also focused on a related initiative, the Caspian Guard project the Pentagon launched in 2003. “Guaranteeing security to the pipeline...will be the prime goal of the Caspian Guard. The Caspian Guard will represent a network of police detachments and special military units in the Caspian region.” [2]

At the time Rumsfeld’s Defense Department planned to allot over \$100 million for the Caspian Guard to operate at both ends of the inland sea – Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan – and to be based in Stuttgart, Germany where the Pentagon’s new Africa Command is now based. In fact U.S. European Command was simultaneously elaborating plans for the Caspian Guard and a complementary Gulf of Guinea Guard in oil-rich western Africa to secure control over the 21st century’s main new sources of energy supplies. [3]

Gates arrived in Azerbaijan the day after the ninth annual Asian security summit organized by the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore and before his attendance at the NATO defense chiefs meeting in Brussels on the 10th and 11th.

He had intended to visit Beijing following the conference in Singapore, but his overtures in that direction were rebuffed by the Chinese government, presumably because of Washington’s confirmation this January of plans to complete a \$6.5 billion arms transaction with Taiwan, one whose latest installment includes 200 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 anti-ballistic missiles.

That Baku replaced Beijing on the Pentagon chief’s way to the NATO meeting indicates the importance that the comparatively small nation – with a population of under nine million

while China's is over 1.3 billion - has in American global geostrategic plans.

U.S. media reports highlighted efforts to mend fences with Azerbaijan after joint military exercises scheduled in the nation for last month were abruptly cancelled - evidently by the host country as a sign of dissatisfaction with Washington's moves to take a more balanced approach toward Azerbaijan's regional rival Armenia in a bid to lure all the nations of the South Caucasus into the U.S. and NATO orbit. Last December the Armenian government approved the deployment of troops to serve under NATO command in the Afghan war theater along with those of their Caucasus neighbors Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Received opinion has it that the U.S. intends to incorporate all three nations into NATO simultaneously. Armenia and Azerbaijan have NATO Individual Partnership Action Plans and Georgia a special, even more advanced, Annual National Programme.

The cancelled exercises were to have built upon last year's Regional Response 2009 in Azerbaijan, a NATO Partnership for Peace operation to advance the North Atlantic military bloc's Individual Partnership Action Plan with the nation.

To demonstrate that Rumsfeld's Caspian Guard plans are still alive, during his visit to Azerbaijan Secretary Gates discussed bilateral military ties, particularly "further U.S. help with maritime security in the Caspian Sea."

In his own words, "We already help them there with several tens of millions of dollars, boats, radars and capabilities." [4]

According to the Pentagon's website, "More military exercises and intelligence sharing also came up during the meetings," Gates added, "and the discussions also touched on Iran and Russia," with the American defense secretary saying of his hosts, "These guys clearly live in a rough neighborhood." [5]

Georgia borders Russia and Armenia borders Iran, but Azerbaijan alone abuts both. The same defense minister Gates met with on June 7, Colonel General Safar Abiyev, not long ago addressed the head of state Gates met with the day before and said: "Our armed forces are able to annihilate targets in all the territory of Armenia. Mr. President, I notify you that the Azerbaijani Armed Forces are able to hit any target in the territory of Armenia." [6]

Gates' main concentration - or at least that of most immediate importance - was on the expanding war in South Asia, where he will soon have 100,000 U.S. troops serving with another 50,000 NATO forces.

Western and local reports have recently divulged that 25 percent of U.S. and NATO supplies and equipment for the Afghan war pass through what is referred to as the Caucasus Spur - Azerbaijan and Georgia - and that "100,000 troops have flown through Azerbaijani airspace in the past year en route to Afghanistan." [7]

More specifically, "Tens of thousands of cargo aircraft have flown over Azerbaijan for the Afghan war, with planes ferrying 100,000 US and allied troops and personnel through the country's airspace last year, Pentagon officials said." [8]

With the recent turmoil in Kyrgyzstan hampering the transit of troops and equipment through the Central Asian country where hundreds of thousands of U.S. and NATO forces

have passed directly to Afghanistan, Azerbaijan (in addition to Kazakhstan [9]) will play an even more pivotal role as the battle for Afghanistan's Kandahar Province begins.

While in Baku, Gates delivered a personal letter from President Barack Obama to his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev. As the local press described it, "Gates, the most senior U.S. official to visit Azerbaijan since Obama took office last year, hand delivered the letter to Aliyev to make clear 'we have a relationship going forward,' a senior defense official said...." [10]

Obama commended his opposite number for doubling the amount of troops deployed to Afghanistan and providing the use of his nation's land (for supply trucks) and air space, especially ahead of the next surge of 30,000 U.S. troops.

An Azeri news agency reminded its readers that "Azerbaijan is also a major oil producer and a key hub on a route for Central Asia and Caspian Sea energy to Europe bypassing Russia to the north and Iran to the south," while quoting the following from Obama's letter: "Azerbaijan's leadership in the development for a Southern Corridor for energy has also increased regional prosperity and enhanced global energy security." [11]

Gates told Azerbaijan's defense minister that U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton would also be visiting the nation shortly.

Last month an Azerbaijani delegation visited Afghanistan to meet with the nation's defense minister and NATO International Security Assistance Force commanders, during which "the education of Afghan national policemen, soldiers and officers in Azerbaijan" was discussed. [12] In early May U.S. military officers arrived in Baku to "hold seminars related to the tasks of operational officers at the battalion and brigade [levels]. [13] The month before Azerbaijani troops began "a communication course in San Antonio, USA from April 21 to December 15." [14]

In April Robert Simmons, the NATO Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia and NATO Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Security Cooperation and Partnership [15], was in Baku to promote Azerbaijan's Individual Partnership Action Plan. In the same month it was announced that the bloc's chief, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, is to visit this summer.

Since January of 2009 Romania has been the NATO Contact Point Embassy in Azerbaijan and its ambassador to the country, Nicolae Ureche, the Brussels-based military bloc's main liaison there. In early May he opened a conference in Baku titled NATO's Role in Ensuring Security and Stability in Europe and in the Strategic Arena, dedicated to NATO 61st anniversary and the 16th of Azerbaijan joining the bloc's Partnership for Peace program.

The preceding month the Romanian envoy gave a speech in Baku in which he stated that "In connection with the 61st anniversary of NATO, the NATO Institute of Cooperation and embassies of the NATO member-states accredited in Azerbaijan have declared April NATO Month in Azerbaijan." [16] During his presentation Ureche "especially emphasized NATO's attention to energy security." [17] A week before he said, "We...welcome Azerbaijan's role in ensuring global energy security." [18]

That sentiment was echoed last week when Special Envoy of the United States Secretary of State for Eurasian Energy Richard Morningstar spoke at the 17th International Caspian Oil

and Gas Exhibition and Conference held in the capital of Azerbaijan and confirmed that Washington “support[s] the diversification of energy exports from the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia” and – American that he is – presumed to speak on behalf of Europe’s energy security, endorsing the anti-Russian Southern Corridor to transport natural gas and oil from the Caspian Sea Basin and the Middle East to Europe. [19]

The preceding month Morningstar’s fellow Foggy Bottom denizen, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Tina Kaidanow, was in Azerbaijan. While there her message to the nation’s leaders was: “The United States considers Azerbaijan an essential partner. Our interests overlap in many areas, from collaborating on strengthening energy security via the Southern Corridor gas and oil projects to our work together countering terrorism and extremism. We appreciate Azerbaijan’s contributions to regional and global security, from Kosovo to Iraq to Afghanistan.” [20] Kaidanow took over her current post last August from Matthew Bryza, arguably a contender for Washington’s main point man in the former Soviet Union over the past two decades. His resume includes:

- Being attached to the U.S. embassy in Poland from 1989-1991 as contact person for Solidarnosc
- Serving at the U.S. embassy in Russia during the equally key transitional years of 1995-1997 with his main assignments being the Russian parliament, the Communist Party of the Russian Federation and the North Caucasus, especially then tense Dagestan
- Special advisor to Richard Morningstar (the current Special Envoy of the United States Secretary of State for Eurasian Energy) from 1997-1998, who at the time was Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Assistance to the New Independent States of the Former Soviet Union
- Deputy to the Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State on Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy from July 1998 to March 2001
- In 2001 he occupied the post of the National Security Council’s Director for Europe and Eurasia with emphasis on the Caucasus, Central Asia and Caspian Sea energy
- Became Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs in 2005

Last month the White House nominated Bryza as U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan.

His appointment indicates the importance Washington assigns to the nation.

In March of this year Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg spoke of U.S.-Azerbaijan cooperation, mentioning in particular the “involvement of Azerbaijan in NATO’s Partnership for Peace program, bilateral military ties in the context of Caspian energy and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline security, and the participation of Azerbaijan in the US-led military missions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq.” [21]

A Russian report on his comments added, “US companies are actively involved in the development of Caspian hydrocarbons in offshore Azerbaijani oilfields, and the US government actively supported the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline as the primary route of transportation for Caspian oil.” [22]

In the same month the Congressional Azerbaijan Caucus in Washington sent a letter to

President Obama “reflecting the importance of Azerbaijan-US relations.”

It included these items:

“Azerbaijan has opened Caspian energy resources to development by U.S companies and has emerged as a key player for global energy security. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project, supported by both the Clinton and George W. Bush Administrations...has become the main artery delivering Caspian Sea hydrocarbons to the US and our partners in Europe.”

“Notably, in 2009 Azerbaijan provided nearly one quarter of all crude oil supplies to Israel and is considered a leading potential natural gas provider for the U.S supported Nabucco pipeline.”

“Azerbaijan was among the first to offer strong support and assistance to the United States. Azerbaijan participated in operations in Kosovo and Iraq and is actively engaged in Afghanistan, having recently doubled its military presence there.”

“Azerbaijan has extended important over-flight clearances for US and NATO flights to support ISAF and has regularly provided landing and refueling operations at its airports for US and NATO forces.” [23]

With Turkey increasingly adopting an independent foreign policy orientation not to Washington’s liking; with the nearly nine-year-old war in Afghanistan reaching its apex; with the U.S. and its NATO allies ramping up pressure on Iran in Azerbaijan’s “rough neighborhood”; and with the U.S. pursuing global interceptor missile plans that may include evicting the Russian military from the Gabala radar station in the north of the country, Azerbaijan is assuming a greater strategic significance with each passing day.

That is why U.S. Defense Secretary Gates was there on June 6 and 7. It will not be his last visit.

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Notes

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2) Ibid

3) Global Energy War: Washington’s New Kissinger’s African Plans

Stop NATO, January 22, 2009

<http://rickrozoff.wordpress.com/2009/08/26/global-energy-war-washingtons-new-kissingers-african-plans>

4) U.S. Department of Defense

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June 7, 2010

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6) Azeri Press Agency, April 24, 2010

7) Trend News Agency, June 7, 2010

8) Agence France-Presse, June 6, 2010

9) Kazakhstan: U.S., NATO Seek Military Outpost Between Russia And China

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13) ANS News, May 3, 2010

14) Azeri Press Agency, April 19, 2010

15) Mr. Simmons' Mission: NATO Bases From Balkans To Chinese Border

Stop NATO, March 4, 2009

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16) Trend News Agency, April 8, 2010

17) Azeri Press Agency, April 8, 2010

18) Interfax-Azerbaijan, Azeri Press Agency, April 1, 2010

19) Trend News Agency, June 2, 2010

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21) Itar-Tass, March 30, 2010

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