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## Backing into the Next Balkans? U.S. Involvement in the Caspian Sea Region

by John Kreul

On November 18, 1999, President Clinton was in Istanbul, Turkey, attending a summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Russia's renewed war in Chechnya dominated the agenda. Yet the President and other senior administration officials also were on hand that day to observe the signing ceremony for a deal among Turkey, Azerbaijan and Georgia authorizing the construction of a pipeline to transport oil from the Caspian Sea to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean. Energy Secretary Bill Richardson explained the reason for the high-level U.S. presence: "This is not just another oil and gas deal. It is a strategic framework that advances America's national security interests."<sup>1</sup>

To the west of the Caspian Sea is the Caucasus: Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, as well as Chechnya and other Russian territories. To the east are the Central Asian "stans": Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region was the prize of the Anglo-Russian colonial competition referred to as the "Great Game," and in both world wars Germany launched costly campaigns to secure its legendary oilfields.

Today, the weak states comprising the region host a volatile mix of profitable energy resources, overlapping ethnic and religious groups, narcotics smuggling routes, and dilapidated Soviet-era nuclear facilities. Poor economic growth, high birthrates, high unemployment, urbanization, rampant corruption, inadequate public services and deplorable health conditions are commonplace. This environment makes for a highly destabilized region, prone to violence. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, conflicts have flared up across the entire region, and many have the potential to escalate by drawing in neighbors. Such troublesome powers as Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan border this area, as does NATO member Turkey.

For these reasons, President Clinton stated that "what happens to these lands on the ancient Silk Road will have an impact on everything from the future of Russia, to the security of Europe, to the relationship between the West and the Muslim world, to the strength of the global economy and the continued growth of the American economy."<sup>2</sup> Former national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski has called it the "Eurasian Balkans."

### A Strategic Framework—or a Slippery Slope?

The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is a primary element of U.S. policy in the region, but there is reason to believe it may not live up to the administration's hopes. A major reason for U.S. interest in developing the region's energy resources is the belief that there are enormous energy reserves that could alleviate dependence on Persian Gulf oil. Estimates of *potentially* recoverable reserves range from the U.S. government's figure of 160 billion barrels<sup>3</sup> (down from 200 billion),

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to more widely-accepted figures in the area of 65 billion barrels.<sup>4</sup> Neither estimate remotely compares to the 600 billion barrels of *proven* reserves in the Gulf. The U.S. government estimates the region will be producing around 4.5 million barrels per day by 2010. A more realistic estimate is 2.4 million barrels per day, amounting to less than 3 percent of world supply (compared to the Gulf's current 55 percent share).<sup>5</sup>

The relevancy of these figures is dependent on smooth development of the oil fields and timely construction of the pipeline—risky assumptions given the political and financial challenges involved. It is quite possible that construction on the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline may not even be underway by the U.S. government's projected completion date in 2004.

The chief characteristic of the proposed Baku-Ceyhan route is that it would prevent Russia and Iran from controlling the supply of oil from the Caspian fields. Though a route through Iran would be far shorter and cheaper, U.S. opposition to commercial investment in Iran is long-standing. Russia's repeated use of its existing pipeline monopoly to blackmail Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan played a role in the decision to promote the Baku-Ceyhan route, as did Russia's inability to ensure the supply of oil through the existing "northern" route. This pipeline runs to Novorossiysk on the Black Sea through Chechnya and has been shut down by the Chechens, who have stolen the oil to help finance their rebellion. Russian attempts to construct a bypass through Dagestan have been frustrated by rebels, which contributed to Moscow's decision to renew its offensive last year.

If completed, the 1,080-mile pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan would be the first in the region to avoid Russia and Iran. The pipeline is intended to bring greater stability, sovereignty, cooperation and prosperity to the region while tying it more closely to the West and reducing Western energy dependence on the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, the United States and NATO have been expanding military ties with local governments. The ongoing violence in Chechnya serves both as a reminder of why the administration is working so hard to make the pipeline a reality and as a warning of the dangers that could await deeper U.S. involvement in the greater Caspian Sea basin.

### **Political Instability**

The Baku-Ceyhan route, however, will not be immune to Russian influence or the threat of disruption by insurgents. This route passes through Azerbaijan, barely skirting Nagorno-Karabakh, the ethnic-Armenian enclave. Fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of that territory has abated for now and a peace settlement is being sought, but this unresolved conflict continues to destabilize the region. The Armenians behind last October's coup attempt that claimed the life of their prime minister are believed to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with the government's policy on the enclave. In addition, Armenia in 1997 signed a 25-year basing agreement with Russia and reportedly has received secret shipments of 32 Scud missiles and scores of T-72 tanks. The dispute has the potential to draw in NATO members due to Turkey's historical enmity for Armenia and its extensive cultural, and increasingly military, ties to the many states in the region.

Georgia is plagued by its own separatist problems in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Ajaria and Javakheti. Russian elements, if not the Russian government, have done much to exacerbate the situation and are thought to be behind several assassination attempts against President Eduard Shevardnadze. Russia took advantage of Georgia's disarray to pressure it into joining the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and permitting Russian troops to set up bases on Georgian soil under the banner of a CIS peacekeeping mission.

In fact, Russia is involved in one way or another in just about every country in its "near abroad," in part because one in seven of the region's inhabitants is ethnically Russian. The Russian army has thousands of



soldiers deployed in neighboring states as a forward defense of its own borders against ethnic instability and Islamic fundamentalism. It has too small a presence to create genuine stability, but enough of a presence to risk finding itself ensnarled in any number of local conflicts.

### **A Growing American Military Presence**

The United States provides aid to the region through a variety of agencies and programs, including humanitarian relief funds, the Freedom Support Act, the Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR, also known as Nunn-Lugar) program, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) initiative, direct foreign military assistance, and international military education and training (IMET) programs. During the last Congress, Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) introduced the Silk Road Strategy Act (which one critic called "the oil and gas interests bill") to provide additional assistance, including military equipment. It also advocated U.S. support for peacekeeping in the region.

The United States is actively pursuing nuclear counterproliferation policies in the Newly Independent States (NIS) through the CTR program. Local governments lack the funds and expertise to guarantee the security of the Soviet Union's legacy of uranium mine processing plants, power reactors and other facilities. U.S. efforts include funding, training and equipping border guards, as well as more dramatic operations to ensure that weapons-grade materials don't fall into the wrong hands. In 1998, for example, U.S. technicians removed 5kg of Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) from a Georgian reactor site in Operation Auburn Endeavor.

The U.S. military interacts with almost every military in the region through PfP exercises as well as so-called "in the spirit of" PfP exercises, which are bilateral or multilateral exercises that are not officially part of the NATO program. One such initiative is the multinational Central Asian Battalion (Centrazbat), created in 1996 by the United States, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The following year, five hundred U.S. soldiers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division took part in the longest nonstop aerial deployment in U.S. history by joining contingents from six regional militaries for a jump into Kazakhstan. While PfP exercises fall under the purview of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), the region as a whole is divided between U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) and U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), and many non-NATO exercises are hosted in the continental United States.

Last December, Kazakhstan and the United States reached an agreement to intensify and broaden military contacts, including extending CTR activities and possibly cooperating in the development of Kazakhstani mobile reaction forces for counterinsurgency missions. In January 1999, the United States reached its first official security-related agreement with Azerbaijan to begin training Azeri troops, principally in counterproliferation and border control tasks. Last year the United States participated in 30 exercises with the Georgian military—up from 10 just four years previously—and pledged to deliver coastal patrol boats and ten UH1 helicopters. And the region is clamoring for even more U.S. military involvement. Azerbaijan recently suggested that the United States open a military base there, and both Azerbaijan and Georgia announced their support for NATO-led peacekeeping forces in their respective countries. Georgia has asked NATO for technical assistance to protect its pipelines.

As a result, the U.S. military is paying close attention to the region. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) has incorporated the challenges of operating in such an environment into a new wargaming model. U.S. forces fighting or peacekeeping in the states surrounding the Caspian Sea likely would be confronted with ethnic conflict and guerrilla warfare in rugged terrain and urban areas, not to mention the logistic nightmare of deploying to a landlocked theater.<sup>6</sup> It is unlikely that the United States could satisfactorily resolve this type of conflict without putting “boots on the ground.” During the later stages of the Kosovo conflict, experts estimated it would take anywhere from three to six months to deploy sufficient ground forces to the region, even though the effort would benefit from the area’s proximity to seaports and extensive NATO infrastructure—factors that are absent in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Commitment of an American land force could provoke Islamic fundamentalists or lead to confrontation with Russian forces. Relations with Russia already are under strain due to the pipeline maneuverings and the war in Chechnya, which has made a mockery of Russia’s obligations under the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty. Russia resents U.S. involvement in its “near abroad,” particularly in the wake of NATO enlargement into its former Eastern European buffer zone. Any U.S. strategy for the Caspian Sea region will have to consider the corresponding stresses on U.S.-Russian relations.

## **A Responsible Policy**

The United States does have security interests in the Caspian Sea region. It is home to significant energy resources, while its location and instability are conducive to traffic in arms, drugs, and nuclear materials. Furthermore, the region’s unresolved internal and cross-border ethnic conflicts threaten to ensnarl neighboring countries such as Turkey (a vital ally), as well as Iran and Afghanistan (states with links to terrorism), and Russia and China (potential great power adversaries). The war in Chechnya has threatened to escalate, as Russia menacingly accused Georgia and Azerbaijan of supporting the rebels, causing those countries to call upon Turkey to assert itself more forcefully.

In an effort to bring stability to the region, the United States is promoting the new pipeline, providing economic assistance, and working more closely with local militaries. Yet American officials have not deemed these security interests vital enough to fight for. The United States repeatedly has denied that its role in the proposed pipeline or its participation in military exercises with local countries imply any sort of security guarantee.

The pipeline approach has the benefits of providing the United States with a regional perspective and the participating states with a framework for regional cooperation. The danger is that the pipeline politics may fail to generate the security bonanza officials are advertising, while the U.S. military becomes more closely involved with local governments. In such a scenario, the United States could become engaged in an unstable region that has acquired an insatiable appetite for American military presence. And if the United States wakes up one day surprised to discover itself being drawn into a conflict there, it will find itself virtually alone. It is highly unlikely that America’s allies, with the possible exception of Turkey, will be willing or able to send forces to such far-off lands.

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## Conclusions

The U.S. policy toward the Caspian Sea region is fraught with risk. America has an interest in a stable, accessible Caspian Sea region and should remain engaged to promote Western values and regional cooperation. The pipeline project and limited military contacts are useful tools. But a strategy that entails deeper defense relationships and hints of security guarantees risks drawing in American ground troops for peacekeeping or combat.

The recent fighting in Chechnya demonstrates some of the difficulties of operating in the region. The United States would require a full-spectrum force capable of performing peacekeeping, counterinsurgency and urban operations, and able to hold its own against more traditional powers should the conflict widen. The U.S. military is far superior to any force in the area, including the Russians. But it is underfunded and stretched thin by overseas commitments. It would be challenged to respond quickly with a full-spectrum force to a major crisis in the region.

The Army has a transformation vision to fulfill these requirements, but it needs sufficient funding to field the equipment, to develop the doctrine and to train adequately. Furthermore, the military has a shortfall in the necessary strategic mobility assets—particularly in the area of airlift—that is not being addressed by current planning.

Policymakers need to pay close attention to the commitments they are making in the Caspian Sea region, and to the risks associated with their decisions. The current policy toward the region does not minimize these risks, which appear to be out of proportion to U.S. interests there.

If such a policy continues, the country needs to begin preparing now for the possibility of greater military involvement. The United States must ensure that its military will have all the resources necessary to accomplish the missions it is given. Without such careful attention, the United States could slide into a quagmire for which neither the American public nor the U.S. military is prepared.

## Endnotes

1. Lally Weymouth, "Turkey's Pipeline Provocation," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1999, p. A23.
2. "Clinton Remarks at Signing Ceremony for the Baku-Ceyhan and Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline Protocol," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, November 18, 1999.
3. Remarks by Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), December 9, 1999.
4. "Caspian Sea Overview," 1999, from the Caspian Resource Library of the Council of Foreign Relations' Online Roundtable on the Caspian Sea Region, available at [www.treemedia.com/cfrlibrary](http://www.treemedia.com/cfrlibrary). Preliminary estimates of a recently discovered oil field off Kazakhstan would add anywhere from 8 to 50 billion barrels to this figure. (David Ottaway, "Vast Caspian Oil Field Found," *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2000, p. A1.)
5. Draft report of the CSIS Strategic Energy Initiative, *The Geopolitics of Energy in the Former Soviet Union*, 1999, p. 11.
6. For an in-depth analysis of logistics issues, see the December 1999 AUSA Institute of Land Warfare special report, *Strategic Mobility and Responsive Power Projection*.

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