

MERIA

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: OBAMA'S FAILED RUSSIA "RESET" AND THE PUTIN DOCTRINE IN PRACTICE

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Since 2009, under President Barack Obama, the U.S. has pursued a "Russian reset" policy, promising a fresh start to previously tense relations. Yet this policy has failed to improve American interests, particularly in the South Caucasus region, which is strategically important for both Israeli and U.S. policy towards the greater Middle East and the post-Soviet space. This article examines the priorities of both the Obama administration and President Vladimir Putin's doctrine and evaluates the implications of the Crimean crisis for the South Caucasus. Finally, it demonstrates that in light of this failure, new U.S. initiatives are urgently needed to enforce peace along international borders and America's strategic interests in the South Caucasus and throughout Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Since the collapse of the USSR, the South Caucasus has become an arena for the power struggle between the West and Russia. The South Caucasus is of great importance for its geostrategic location and its access to Caspian's energy resources. Geographically, the region is a land bridge between the Black and Caspian Seas. Its proximity to the Middle East increases its importance for both the U.S. and Israeli Middle East policies. The South Caucasus is also a politically sensitive region of the former Soviet Union. The large energy resources of the Caspian increase the South Caucasus' role in European and Israeli energy security.

IMMEDIATE POST-SOVIET PERIOD

The South Caucasus was a central focus of U.S. foreign policy toward the USSR. However, shortly after the Soviet Union's disintegration in December of 1991, the first high-level contacts with leaders of all three South Caucasus states took place when the Secretary of State, James A. Baker, embarked on a historical trip to Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Central Asia on February 12, 1992 and to Georgia on May 26, 1992. The visit proved the strategic importance of the South Caucasus states to America's interests in the post-Soviet space. It also generated a clear message that the U.S. had strong intentions to launch active diplomacy towards all three newly-emerged countries of the South Caucasus without discrimination. So, despite the strong opposition of the Armenian-American diaspora, the U.S. opened its Embassy in Baku, Azerbaijan without delay in March 1992.

In this period immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly emerged states of the South Caucasus held unbalanced influence on Capitol Hill. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia at the time did not have influential diasporas or the relevant political experience to deal with the U.S. Congress and administration. Thanks to its powerful diaspora, Armenia held a higher standing and perception within the U.S. So Armenia widely exploited its diaspora network to shift American policy towards a pro-Armenian stance in the South Caucasus.

Indeed, the U.S. Congress excluded Azerbaijan at that time from receiving U.S. government assistance under Section 907 of the 1992 Freedom Support Act (FSA). Despite strong opposition from the George H.W. Bush administration, the language of Section 907 of the FSA prohibited government-to-government assistance to Azerbaijan. Capitalizing on its temporary advantage, the Armenian-

American diaspora tried to put Armenia at the center of America's regional policy, pushing Armenia as a key promoter of American interests in the South Caucasus. Strong efforts were also launched to gain U.S. support for Armenia's position in its conflict with Azerbaijan over Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region. However, as further political events showed, the diaspora had miscalculated or overestimated Armenia's power in promoting U.S. interests in the region. Subsequently, both the diaspora's and Armenia's goals began to contradict America's strategic interests in the South Caucasus and in the Caspian Basin.

AZERBAIJAN'S "CONTRACT OF THE CENTURY" AND U.S. REGIONAL ENGAGEMENT

On September 20, 1994, Azerbaijan signed a production-sharing contract, or "Contract of the Century," with a consortium of international oil companies (British and American oil giants) to explore for oil in Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea sector. The discovery of the Azeri, Chirag, and Guneshli oil fields in that region significantly energized U.S. policy and diplomacy to transform the area into an important source of non-Middle-Eastern energy. Huge Azeri oil and gas reserves also raised the issue of energy transportation routes to bypass Russia. In this light, some experts have emphasized the three main drivers of U.S. foreign policy at that time: the role of energy production to strengthen the sovereignty of the South Caucasus nations; U.S. corporate interests; and the role of Caspian energy resources for global energy security.¹

There is no doubt that the decision of the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev to bring American and British oil giants into the South Caucasus and Caspian affairs was a successful step in his strategy to find a delicate balance between enforcing Azerbaijan's security and promoting U.S. interests. He and President Shevardnadze of Georgia also attempted to bring Azerbaijan and Georgia into focus in U.S. policy and while countering Russia's influence.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan tried to strengthen its national independence and security while liberating lands occupied by Armenia. Azerbaijan needed to contain strong pressure from both Iran and Russia, which both provided large-scale assistance to Azerbaijan's regional rival - Armenia. Trying to stabilize and strengthen Azerbaijan's independence, the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev oriented the country's foreign policy towards the West and Israel. Thus the "Contract of the Century" was President Heydar Aliyev's strategic step to anchor Azerbaijan to the West.

Undoubtedly, the Contract changed the region's political landscape. The Contract confirmed Azerbaijan's strategic characteristics in promoting U.S. interests in the region. The Contract also became a long-term tool to project U.S. power deep into Central Asia. In this way, the Contract opened the gates for the West's direct engagement into the South Caucasus and Caspian basin's affairs. Coming so many years after the British withdrawal from Baku in August 1919, ending Western presence in the South Caucasus, the Contract sent Russia the message that the West had returned as a strong and powerful actor in the region.

Indeed, the U.S., the European Union (EU), as well as Turkey and Israel, started to take increasing roles in the South Caucasus affairs, which traditionally have been orchestrated by Iran and Russia. The Clinton and Bush administrations launched a package of long-term programs (Partnership for Peace, Silk Road Strategy Act; and later, the Caspian Watch and the EU's Eastern Partnership), oriented to strengthen the West's presence, while minimizing both Iranian and Russian influences.

After the tragic events of September 11, the U.S. significantly expanded its political, military, and security cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus, enlisting them in the U.S. war on terror. All three countries agreed to allow passage through their airspace. On December 16, 2001, U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld visited all three capitals of the South Caucasus countries to consolidate U.S. military ties to this vital region. In Baku, Rumsfeld also announced that "the United

States Congress appears within days of waiving sanctions imposed in 1992 under the Freedom Support Act”².

By early 2002, the U.S. had initiated a train-and-equip program for the Georgian military. There were also some indications that the U.S. Department of Defense intended to establish a military presence in Azerbaijan. In December 2003, in a meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Rumsfeld expressed interest in establishing a U.S. air base on the Apsheron peninsula³. However, Azerbaijan denied this option, so as not to anger Iran and Russia.

Within a couple of years, Azerbaijan and Georgia started to rank among the most reliable and committed partners providing support for NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. The U.S. also realized that Azerbaijan and Georgia, unlike Armenia, were crucial countries that could promote America’s interests in the region and beyond. In this context, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline (BTC), a main export pipeline to pump Caspian oil to world markets via Georgia, was the next strategic step in involving Azerbaijan and Georgia in strengthening America’s influence. The BTC also became a key element for Israel’s energy security⁴. Finally, the BTC enforced the “Contract of the Century” strategy: to engage the West, while balancing Russia’s influence.

Meanwhile, massive long-term international projects aimed at pumping and transporting Caspian energy while bypassing Russia shifted American policy towards the region. The South Caucasus became an increasingly important component of U.S. foreign policy. Azerbaijan and Georgia both aligned themselves with the U.S. and sought integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, while Armenia deepened its ties with Moscow. So the U.S. began focusing on Azerbaijan and Georgia in its regional policy and increased its direct assistance to Baku and Tbilisi⁵. Finally, the large energy projects pushed Washington to gain strategic momentum in the Caspian basin, which greatly angered Moscow.

Once the BTC began operation in 2005, Russia realized that the U.S. had been rapidly increasing its operational abilities, trying to limit Russia’s influence. Moscow understood that Washington had become a powerful actor that could seriously jeopardize Moscow’s interests in this sensitive part of the world.

RUSSIA’S RESPONSE: THE WAR WITH GEORGIA

Undoubtedly, Azerbaijan’s “Contract of the Century” accelerated American economic and political penetration. Washington became a key player, directly engaged in complex affairs in the South Caucasus and Caspian basin. The U.S. through its strategic initiatives, had gained significant momentum, expanding its influence in the region and beyond. This tendency created a serious concern in Moscow and Tehran because it led to inevitable erosion of Russia’s and Iran’s historical dominance⁶.

Indeed, Russia reacted angrily to America’s rapid advance into the region, which Moscow’s decision-makers traditionally considered part of Russia’s “backyard.” As scholar Marcel de Haas noted: “...to counter this development, one of Russia’s tactics is to slow down Western advances...”⁷. Given this context, it’s possible that the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 actually originated from these tactics. Sources confirmed that the plan for Georgia was prepared by Russia’s Armed Forces General Staff from the end of 2006 to the beginning of 2007⁸, soon after the BTC started to operate in 2005. Moscow’s goals were clear: stop Russia’s retreat, retake the strategic initiative from the U.S. and protect Russian interests in the region.

Unfortunately, former Georgian President Saakashvili’s miscalculations led to Russian victory, strengthening Moscow’s security position in the region. Moreover, the war with Georgia provided a brilliant opportunity for Russia to shift the region’s balance of power and regain strategic momentum to enforce Moscow’s influence in its immediate neighborhood. Russia had demonstrated to global and regional powers that the South Caucasus (like the entire CIS) was Russia’s immediate area, giv-

ing Moscow exclusive rights to use force and manage the situation in accordance with its own strategic interests.

A further result of this conflict has been that Georgia and Ukraine have given up their agenda of advancing towards NATO membership. Additionally, two parts of Georgia have been recognized by Russia as independent states. Krzysztof Strachota and Wojciech Gorecki pointed out in 2008: "Western actors have in practice been forced to recognize Russia's military dominance in the region and act only in areas approved by Russia and within the limits set by Russia"⁹.

One might interpret the Georgia war as a direct message to the West: Russia recovers its old imperial ambitions, and the Russian military once again serves as a working tool in Moscow's strategic calculations. Mamuka Tsereteli, of the Washington, D.C.-based American University, emphasized: "As the Russia-Georgia conflict demonstrates, military force has become a major factor in Russian foreign policy"¹⁰. Moreover, Russia's rapid advance deep into Georgia also confirmed that Russia could reach both of the key U.S.'s partners' capitals, Baku and Tbilisi, easily, meaning that no power could stop Russia's forces. The war demonstrated that the Western companies' oil and pipeline infrastructures in the Caspian could be under threat, and that the West had no effective tools to stop Russia's military.

The Georgia war became a turning point in Russia's foreign and security policy toward the former Soviet republics. It seems that the Kremlin had adopted a new strategy: to expand Russia's military presence in its near abroad, and to keep former Soviet republics in Russia's orbit. Moscow started to intensify its military buildup in Russia's immediate neighborhood, and increased its pressure on neighboring countries to join to the Moscow-dominated Eurasian Union, to begin operating in 2015. In parallel, Russia pushed the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Russia-dominated post-Soviet security block.

In fact, in 2009, soon after the Georgian war, Russia pressured Kyrgyzstan to close its U.S. military air base at Manas, near Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan¹¹. A year later, Russia extended its lease for the military base in Armenia to 2044¹² and supplied large amounts of military hardware to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two Central Asian countries that also host Russian military bases¹³. Russia had already signed a deal with Kyrgyzstan to allow Moscow to keep a military base in the country until 2032¹⁴. Russia also signed \$4 billion military deal with Azerbaijan in 2010¹⁵ and negotiated plans to open military air base in Belarus in 2015¹⁶. Russia increased its military personnel to 5000 soldiers, and added combat helicopters to the fighter unit in Armenia¹⁷.

Undoubtedly, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 was a milestone development in the post-Soviet space. Russia enforced its dominance in the near abroad and increased its efforts to launch the Moscow-dominated Eurasian Union. However, the U.S. was shocked and pushed to adopt a new strategy.

AMERICA'S RESPONSE: "RUSSIA RESET" POLICY

When Obama took office in 2009, he immediately announced a new foreign policy strategy: to restart or reset relations with Russia. Relations between the U.S. and post-Soviet Russia had deteriorated to the point where some observers characterized them as a new Cold War¹⁸. However, attempts to improve relations with Russia were not unique to the Obama administration. As Paul J. Sanders, Executive Director of the Nixon Center, wrote, "... efforts made by previous two administrations included resets that ultimately failed to live up to expectations"¹⁹. But Dr. James M. Goldgeier of the Hoover Institution emphasizes that the origin of America's Russia "reset" policy has roots that run deeper, dating to the Clinton-Yeltsin period²⁰.

Meanwhile, in 2009, the "reset" policy was launched following serious disagreements between Washington and Moscow on the Europe-based missile-defense system, Iran's nuclear program, post-Soviet politics, NATO's eastward expansion, the Georgia war of 2008, and other issues. In this context the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 was a crucial factor in the South Caucasus' "front line" of opposition between the U.S. and Russia, which pushed the Obama administration to reset its relations

with Russia. Political analysts even suggested that the war in Georgia was a proxy American-Russian war, for the Georgian forces were supplied and trained by Washington²¹. The Obama administration considered this “reset” an essential step in improving relations and overcoming the sense of distrust between the countries. Some expert commentators, such as Thomas E. Graham of Kissinger Associates and Peter Baker of the New York Times, believed that Obama’s reset was a “new partnership”²².

In fact, both Obama and Russian President Medvedev considered their personal friendship to be evidence for the reset’s success. At the 2010 APEC summit in Japan’s Yokohama, Obama met with Russian President Medvedev in an informal meeting to discuss a wide range of bilateral and global issues. Obama made statements such as, “my friend Dmitri,” calling Medvedev “an excellent partner,” while President Medvedev replied in kind, calling his relationship with Obama “very pleasant for me” and saying that he and Obama “understand each other very well”²³.

For Obama, the goal of the “reset” was to replace conflict with cooperation, or “selective cooperation” with Moscow on issues that were among the top U.S. priorities, such as the war in Afghanistan, Iran’s nuclear-weapons aspirations, New START and nuclear proliferation²⁴.

DOUBTS ABOUT OBAMA’S “RUSSIA RESET” POLICY

At the time, political analysts from both sides of the Atlantic expressed serious doubts about Obama’s success in improving Russian-U.S. relations. Some called Obama’s reset a “capitulation” and stated it was a “dangerous bargain.” They also regarded it as a policy of “seeing no evil”²⁵. They directly criticized the Obama administration for its wrong approach and for the possible “grand bargain,” or political deal behind closed doors, between the U.S. and Russia as part of the administration’s reset efforts with Russia.²⁶

David J. Kramer, former deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs in the George W. Bush administration, wrote in the Washington Post: “... the administration would pursue a ‘Russia first’ policy at the expense of Russia’s neighbors. The problem, it appears, is actually worse: the administration seems to have moved toward a ‘Russia only’ approach, neglecting and even abandoning other countries in the region”²⁷.

Dr. Ariel Cohen of the Washington, D.C.-based Heritage Foundation claimed this “Russia first” approach seriously damaged U.S. interests. He argued that Obama’s “reset” policy had failed to improve bilateral relations and that Obama conceded too much to Russia. He stated: “... the Kremlin is exploiting Obama’s ‘see no evil’ approach in Russia’s expansion into former Soviet space and cooperation with anti-Western regimes. The Obama administration’s Russia policy will inevitably produce a massive loss of American influence in Eurasia and jeopardize the security of the U.S. and its friends and allies east of the Order”²⁸.

PUTIN’S DOCTRINE AND ITS PRACTICE IN THE REGION

In a well-known statement, Putin has argued that the breakup of the USSR was “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”. Since his election in 2000, Putin has tried to recover for Russia political and geostrategic assets that were lost by the USSR in 1991. Putin is attempting to renew Russia’s status and influence in both regional and global politics, while claiming for the Russian Federation the same great power once wielded by the USSR.

He began to increase Russia’s military budget while trying to frustrate and foil U.S. initiatives toward the post-Soviet space, which he perceived as threatening Russian interests. He has also expanded Russia’s relations with countries that share anti-American politics, and attempting to exploit diplomatic friction between the U.S. and its allies. Putin’s attempt to restore the Russian sphere of influence and regain its superpower status, some analysts argue, is Russia’s new foreign policy concept, otherwise known as the Putin Doctrine²⁹.

The first component of Putin's foreign policy consensus, as Leon Aron writes in *Foreign Affairs*, is "to maintain Russia as a nuclear superpower"³⁰ The second component is to export nuclear technologies, enhancing Russia's position as a global power. The third component is to recover Russia's close relations with its former Soviet clients in the Middle East. Finally, the fourth component, as Aron writes, is to ensure Russia's regional hegemony in near abroad and "... to strive for the political, economic, military, and cultural reintegration of the former Soviet bloc under Russian leadership". Regarding Russia's efforts to strengthen its position in the near abroad, Aron also emphasizes that

"[u]nder the Putin Doctrine, the pursuit of regional hegemony has acquired a new dimension: an attempt at the 'Finlandization' of the post-Soviet states, harkening back to the Soviet Union's control over Finland's foreign policy during the Cold War. In such an arrangement, Moscow would allow its neighbors to choose their own domestic political and economic systems but maintain final say over their external orientation. Accordingly, Moscow has taken an especially hard line against former Soviet republics that have sought to reorient their foreign policy."

Meanwhile, Russian opposition leader and former State Duma First Deputy Vladimir A. Ryzhkov believes that "the doctrine includes Russia's renunciation of attributing itself to the European and Euro-Atlantic civilization; selective recognition of the norms of international law; selective cooperation with international organizations; and the right to limit sovereignty of the post-soviet states, as well as to ignore national sovereignty and territorial integrity of weaker states."³¹

In fact, under direct pressure from Moscow, Ukraine's President Yanukovich did not sign a political association and free trade pact with the European Union, which was scheduled to take place at the Eastern Partnership Summit on November 28-29, 2013 in Vilnius, Lithuania³². Armenia was forced to abandon the process of signing a free trade agreement with the European Union as well³³. Russia has also pressured Armenia to join the Russia-led Customs Union of Belarus, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which plans to transform into the Eurasian Union by 2015³⁴.

Meanwhile, Russia has been strengthening the Collective Security Treaty Organization of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and it has been increasing its military presence in all of these countries but Kazakhstan. The unchallenged Russian military's superiority in Russia's immediate vicinity is a crucial element of the Putin doctrine, as it can keep former Soviet republics under Moscow's control while stopping NATO's eastward expansion. Russia uses its military installations as a tool to force the West to avoid deploying US/NATO troops or troops of any NATO member country into Russia's immediate neighbourhood.

In this way, Russia's military base in Armenia transforms this country into a so-called "Russian fortress," ensuring Russia's regional dominance and preventing NATO's deployment in the South Caucasus, which holds geostrategic importance for Israel, as part of the Greater Middle East, as well as for the U.S. and Europe. The strategic characteristics of this base, thanks to newly deployed Fulcrum fighter jets³⁵ and attack helicopters³⁶, render it a key military installation in the region to project Russia's military power as far as the Persian Gulf and deep into the Middle East.

Russia's military base in Gyumri (Armenia) and its naval base in Tartus (Syria) are key elements in Putin's plans to expand Russia's influence in the Middle East and undermine America's dominance in the region as well as to shake America's global role, as it did during the Soviet era. In this context, Russia is not interested in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. If this occurs, there is no doubt it will erode any grounds for keeping the base in Armenia.

Moreover, in light of Russia's resent invasion of Crimea (Ukraine), the Russian military base in Armenia has become a real threat to Azerbaijan's and Georgia's independence. In 2008, as the Russo-Georgia war started, Georgian President Saakashvili was seriously concerned about the possible invasion of Russian troops from Russia's military base in Armenia. Russia demands a corridor for its

military base in Armenia through Georgia. Russia has also pushed Tbilisi to accept new realities and to recognize South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence as a precondition of re-establishing diplomatic ties that were broken after the 2008 war. In these ways, Russia is attempting to kill Georgia's NATO and EU ambitions.

In Azerbaijan, Russia has kept the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict "frozen," while holding the key to unfreeze the conflict at any moment. Moscow has pressured Baku to formally desist from using force to return Nagorno-Karabakh to its control. Russia is attempting to prolong the conflict and maintain the Azeri-Armenian hostility, using these as effective tools with which to manipulate both Baku and Yerevan to secure Russia's interests and dominance in the South Caucasus. Recently, the Kremlin has introduced semi-official speculations, including articles, analysis, interviews, and round-table talks in the Russian mass media and among its expert community related to Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's, as well as Nagorno-Karabakh's membership in the Moscow-dominated Eurasian Union³⁷. This approach is designed to increase the pressure on Georgia and Azerbaijan. So Russian political analysts do not exclude further cases of territorial "revisions" of both pro-Western Georgia and Azerbaijan if they escape from Russia's orbit.

In addition to these tactics, Russia has been increasing efforts to consolidate its influence in the Caspian basin. On April, 22, 2014, during a meeting in Moscow of the foreign ministers of the Caspian Sea's littoral states--Iran, Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan--Russia (together with Iran) warned these states against the military presence of any non-littoral states in the Caspian Sea.³⁸

CRIMEA CRISIS: THE END OF THE "RESET"? IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Despite well-founded criticism of the Obama administration's Russian "reset" policy, the key goal of the "reset"--to replace conflicts with cooperation--was a valid and strategic goal to try to re-normalize relations between the U.S. and post-Soviet Russia. Within the "reset" policy, the U.S. gained Russia's support on some of the key priorities of America's foreign policy, such as on the issues of Iran and Afghanistan. However, the U.S. canceled the planned deployment of missile interceptors and radars in Poland and the Czech Republic. The U.S. postponed offering the NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine. Later, Washington began to send diplomatic signals encouraging Tbilisi to improve its relations with Moscow, which were seriously damaged after the Russo-Georgia war of 2008.

Meanwhile, there are indications that the Russian political elite interpreted Obama's "reset" policy as a sign of American weakness³⁹. The decade-long American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have fully exhausted the U.S. military machine and pushed the Pentagon in 2010 to abandon its "two-war doctrine,"⁴⁰ which invoked America's military goal of being able to "fight two simultaneous conventional wars"⁴¹. The Pentagon's move to reject this doctrine has generated serious speculation that America's global power is in decline.

Thus, the significant shift in America's foreign policy, presented by Obama's "reset" initiative, as well as the fact that the new U.S. military doctrine was focused on China not on Russia⁴², sent a message that Russia was no longer "the enemy," pushing the Kremlin to energize its newly-adopted foreign policy concept, the Putin doctrine. In addition, Obama's policy of non-intervention in Syria as well as Pentagon plans to shrink U.S. Army to its pre-World War II level⁴³, probably reassured Moscow that the U.S. was not interested in serving as a global arbiter⁴⁴. Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Endowment wrote in *The American Interest*, "The Russian elite interpreted the reset as weakness on the part of the Obama administration and as an invitation to be more assertive in the post-Soviet space and beyond."⁴⁵ In this context, the Crimean crisis could be interpreted as the Kremlin's powerful message to the world powers: Russia strongly intends to restore its non-Red Empire and retake its

superpower status. And Russia's Crimean "anschluss" demonstrates the Putin doctrine in practice, a clear sign of the threat to the post-Soviet states.

As if to emphasize this intention, on February 11, 2014, Russia started a large-scale military exercise in Armenia⁴⁶; moreover, since March 15, 2014 a group of Russia's Caspian Flotilla ships, including landing boats, have launched exercises in the Caspian Sea⁴⁷. In February 2014, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, Vice-Chairman of the Russian State Duma and leader of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), called for Russia to annex five entire countries--Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan--as Russia's "Central Asian Federal Region."⁴⁸ He also called on Russia to occupy Georgia and used offensive and humiliating words and phrases to refer to Azerbaijan and Ukraine⁴⁹.

Sergey Fedunyak, of the Kennan Institute, believes that

there is an increasing risk of the use of force by Russia against its neighboring countries, particularly, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus. In the first three cases, it may develop into hostilities of different intensity ranging from classical war with armed forces to "hybrid wars" with a high autonomy of soldiers and subversive small units. Georgia has already suffered from, and Ukraine has begun to experience, Russia's new approaches to war. In the cases of Kazakhstan and Belarus, there may be a "mild" annexation of a part of a territory or complete absorption that may be facilitated with populations' psychological and military unpreparedness to resist Russian occupation⁵⁰.

Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (Ukraine) is a failure of Obama's "Russian Reset" policy. The failure of the "reset" will have long-term implications for U.S. foreign and security policy. As Dr. Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. secretary of state, writes in the Washington Post "Most important, the U.S. must restore its standing in the international community, which has been eroded by too many extended hands of friendship to our adversaries, sometimes at the expense of our friends,"⁵¹.

Indeed, in the South Caucasus, the U.S. and NATO must reiterate their full support for independence, as well as for the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia. Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are America's allies, implementing pro-Western foreign policy that angers Moscow. There is no doubt that Russia will consistently follow the policies already described here to undermine the West's influence and to pressure America's friends in the region.

Since Putin's annexation of Crimea, it's entirely possible that Moscow may select Azerbaijan and/or Georgia as the next targets in Russia's plan to protect Russians and Russian-speakers, continuing its efforts to incorporate both Azerbaijan and Georgia into the so-called "Russian world." If Russia regains Azerbaijan and/or Georgia, this would reclaim full control over the Caspian energy reserves and energy transportation routes, jeopardizing America's interests and multi-billion dollar oil investments. It would also put an end to the West's new strategic plans to expand the Southern Corridor to bring Caspian gas to Europe and so to decrease Europe's dependence on Russia's gas.

Meanwhile, European leaders recently agreed to step up their moves to cut energy dependency, notably on Russia, after events in Ukraine. British Foreign Secretary William Hague suggested increasing gas exports to Europe and supporting projects such as the Southern Corridor pipeline in Baku, Azerbaijan, to be constructed in 2017, which will bring Caspian natural gas to Europe, bypassing Russia⁵².

In reducing Europe's dependence on Russian gas, involving Turkmenistan within the Southern Corridor is essential. The Trans-Caspian Pipeline (TCP) project between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan via the Caspian Sea needs to be on the table again to bring Turkmenistan's gas to the European Union via the Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) projects. Piping Turkmen gas to Europe should be the next logical step in the development of the Southern Corridor. The first Trilateral Meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Azerbaijan and

Turkmenistan in Baku, on May 26, 2014, was an important step in this direction. According to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, “The meeting is expected to address the opportunities for developing cooperation at bilateral and regional levels in matters of common interest to all three countries, especially in the fields of energy and transportation and to enable an exchange of views on international and regional developments”⁵³. Earlier, Ankara emphasized the importance of TANAP for the EU’s energy security following Russia’s military intervention in Crimea.⁵⁴

However, there is one problem: the West does not have an effective political or military tool to balance Russia’s military in Armenia, which has created a serious and direct threat to America’s strategic interests since the Crimea crisis, threatening the security of Western-oriented Azerbaijan and Georgia. It is also a threat to Western oil and gas infrastructures and pipelines.

The triangular cooperation between Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia offers intriguing possibilities, transforming this alliance into an effective defense tool to enforce peace, stability, and international borders in the South Caucasus. Today’s cooperation addresses politics, security, energy, transportation, trade and investment, but it needs to encompass a military dimension as well. A defense alliance could be created on the basis of the Turkey-Azerbaijan-Georgia triangle to protect Western oil and gas infrastructure, and to enforce Azerbaijan’s and Georgia’s independence. In this context, Azerbaijani, Turkish and Georgian defence ministers meeting in August 24, 2014, in Azerbaijan’s Nakhchivan is an important event in the right direction to discuss joint military exercises and measures to protect oil and gas pipelines⁵⁵.

Another possibility would be for Turkey and Azerbaijan and/or Turkey and Georgia to sign bilateral defense agreements to strengthen both Azerbaijan’s and Georgia’s defense capabilities. Military cooperation among these nations was discussed during the Tbilisi Summit of these nations’ presidents, held on May 6, 2014. In parallel with this trilateral military cooperation, the U.S. must support bilateral Turkish- Azerbaijani and Azerbaijani-Georgian military cooperation, which should be expanded upon and transformed into defense alliances as soon as possible. Furthermore, the formation of Azeri-Georgian or joint Turkish-Azeri-Georgian peacekeeping battalions is an attractive option as well. These approaches, along with close cooperation with NATO, will improve both Azerbaijan’s and Georgia’s defense capabilities. These measures may partially balance Russia’s military presence in Armenia as well as prevent Russia from taking potentially irreversible and aggressive steps against Georgia and Azerbaijan, essential given residents’ fears that Russia may take over as it did in 1920-1921, when Bolshevik Russia occupied all three countries in the South Caucasus and terminated each country’s short-lived independence.

Unfortunately, one negative outcome of the “Russian Reset” policy was that the U.S. has decreased its attention as well as its involvement within the South Caucasus region. As a result, the “reset” has failed to improve the political atmosphere and to solve “frozen” conflicts in the South Caucasus. Thus, there is no peace along the pipelines that are pumping Caspian energy to Europe. Moreover, there are indications that the region’s political situation has deteriorated and that America’s strategic interests are now under threat. Russia has been strengthening its influence, cementing its strategic positions in the region; it has also tried to secure its interests at any cost. Russia has pushed America to retreat and increased pressure on Azerbaijan and Georgia, which are America’s real friends. Indeed, on March 27, 2014, only two countries from the list of South Caucasus and Central Asian states--Azerbaijan and Georgia--openly supported the U.S.-backed UN resolution on Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity and deemed the referendum that led to Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula illegal.

CONCLUSION

After Ukraine, what is Putin’s next target? This is an alarming question. The collapse of both Azerbaijan and Georgia as independent states, will have irreversible consequences on the whole post-Soviet region. The unstable Central Asian states may also become Russia’s next target. Russian

hardliners like Zhirinovskiy have already begun urging Russia to protect Russians in Kazakhstan and in other Central Asian states.

Putin's assertion that Russia has the right to protect Russians and Russian-speakers outside of Russia's borders is an alarming new development within Putin's doctrine, opening a door to Russian military intervention in the post-Soviet space, as well as in Central and Eastern Europe⁵⁶. Russia's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea challenges the post-Cold War order and America's role as a global arbiter. It also provokes NATO's defense strategies and challenges the vision that Europe is whole and free.

The U.S. needs to abandon the "reset" policy. It has been utterly exhausted, and has failed to protect and advance U.S. interests. Moreover, Obama's "reset" policy has led to a perception of America as "weak," likely resulting in Putin's miscalculations of America's global responsibility and investment in foreign policy goals. The U.S. must counteract this perception and reaffirm commitments to its allies in Central and Eastern Europe by increasing its own engagement in the South Caucasus and Central Asia⁵⁷.

In this context, the U.S. should launch a new assistance program to replace the old and out-of-date Freedom Support Act (FSA) of 1992. The FSA does not reflect the new realities in the post-Soviet space, since it mainly concentrates on Russia. Any new strategic program must focus on Russia's immediate neighbors to support their independence, territorial integrity, defense and economic capabilities. Since the Crimean crisis, it has become clear that Russia does not need America's assistance.

The U.S. and the European Union must increase their direct assistance to the countries of the former Soviet Union in order to help them continue asserting their independence in the region. The U.S. must re-engage in affairs within the South Caucasus, forging a strategy aimed at strengthening the region's links with Europe. In parallel to this U.S. action, the European Union must update its Eastern Partnership program, while NATO must update and expand upon its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with Azerbaijan for 2015-2016. A significant step in this direction occurred at the September 2014 NATO summit in Wales, where it endorsed a "substantial package" for Georgia to help it prepare for membership in the Alliance⁵⁸.

There is no doubt that the doors of NATO and the EU must be open to new members. In parallel, Dr. George Friedman (Chairman of Stratfor, a US-based geopolitical intelligence firm) argues that the West must create containment alliances from Estonia to Azerbaijan to enforce independence of the former Soviet republics and halt Putin's plans for Russian advancement. As he writes, "The United States has an interest in acting early because early action is cheaper than acting in the last extremity."⁵⁹

French President Francois Hollande's visit to the South Caucasus, from May 11 to 13, 2014, as well as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's intention to visit Azerbaijan and Georgia in the near future⁶⁰ and announced plans related a new Southern Gas Corridor led by BP, which will bring Caspian gas to Europe⁶¹ clearly demonstrate interest from the West, and particularly from the U.S., in enforcing its continued presence and influence. This also signals Washington's intention to oppose Russia's imperial ambitions in this sensitive part of the world. Further signaling this intention was U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel's two-day visit to Georgia⁶² immediately after the NATO Summit in Wales in September 2014.

In December 2012, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton warned that the U.S. is trying to prevent Russia from recreating a new version of the Soviet Union⁶³. Thus, now is the time for America to abandon its "reset" policy with Russia and demonstrate America's global power to enforce peace, stability and international borders. However, such a policy will likely not be established under Obama's administration, which has invested a lot of political capital to reset its relations with Russia; rather this may be left as an undertaking for the next U.S. administration.

If the U.S. forgets the South Caucasus countries, particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia, a trend exacerbated by Obama's "reset" policy, they will find themselves face-to-face with Russia's military

machine, as Britain did in 1919. In such a situation, there is no doubt Russia will “re-Sovietize” them, leaving them and the West to pay the huge price for such a disastrous policy.

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