

Keeping ‘the Gun On the Wall’

by Roman Bessonov

“Southwest Asia is to be recognized as bounded by four principal states, whose appropriate cooperation is indispensable for creating a zone of stability among the nations and peoples of the region as a whole. These are Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Egypt. The security of the northeast corner of the region so defined, depends on protecting its flank, by ensuring non-interference from outside interests, that by the exclusion of meddling outside parties from intrusion into current discussions on cooperation among Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Iran.”—Lyndon LaRouche, in “Southwest Asia: The LaRouche Doctrine” (EIR, April 30).

We continue our reports on the northeast corner of Southwest Asia, with Russian analyst Roman Bessonov’s look at developments in the Transcaucasus.

The playwright Anton Chekhov taught that if a gun is hanging on the wall in the first act of a play, by the last act it will have been fired.

In certain areas of the world, it is traditional to have a real gun on the wall at home. In the former Soviet Union, such is the custom in the same regions where division of the Soviet heritage has cost rivers of blood and tens of thousands of human lives. Now, thirteen years after the disintegration of the U.S.S.R., the governments and agencies which regard themselves as the winners of the Cold War, think nothing of using the bleeding memories of the peoples of those territories for “strategic purposes” related to the new world warfare officially labeled as “the war against terrorism.”

The Curse of Oil

In a recent interview with Voice of Russia, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Sestanovich declared that U.S.-Russian relations are impeded by the Cold War mind-set of top Russian politicians, whom he diplomatically did not mention by name. Not being a professional diplomat, I’ll mention some names that likely are not familiar to Sestanovich—not the proverbial Liberal Democratic Party chief Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, or Communist Party leader Gennadi Zyuganov; not the “nationalist” Dmitri Rogozin or State Duma Security Committee chairman Konstantin Kosachev, who frequently appear on TV. I’ll mention people from the once large and energetic community of democratic idealists,

who were recruited into public policy and the mass media during the romantic and naive dawn of Russian democracy in 1989-1991. Take Valeri Tishkov, minister of ethnic relations in President Boris Yeltsin’s first cabinet, a highly professional scholar who had never been involved in politics or government before. In 1991-93, he honestly tried to reach compromises between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, between the Ossetians and the Ingushi, between the Moldovans and the breakaway territory of Transdniestria. In 1997, his revelations in a retrospective article in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* were not romantic at all. They were bitter and indignant. He wrote that concern over human rights on the part of Western strategic circles, involved in diplomatic and consulting work across the former U.S.S.R., was nothing but a cover for plans for the complete fragmentation of Russia. As an example, he mentioned Paul Goble, a former U.S. State Department official and later director of the Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe broadcasting and analysis center.

A number of journalists of the young, post-Soviet generation experienced a similar, spectacular change of mind. In the Summer of 1993, in the editorial offices of the post-Komsomol (Young Communist League) newspaper *Smena*, I found its deputy editor, Vladlen Chertinov, engaged in an unusual occupation: Instead of writing some new encouraging report about the progressive Mayor of St. Petersburg Anatoli Sobchak, he was studying a map of the Caspian Sea Basin. Turning to me, he said, “You see, it seems to me that what is called democracy, is mostly a restitution.” “Of what?” I asked. “Of interests. Once, it was British Oil. Now, it is British Petroleum.”

A year later, a Russian military contingent, part of the once powerful Soviet Army, intervened in the breakaway southern Russian province of Chechnya and encountered stiff resistance from paramilitary units, armed with Soviet weapons generously bequeathed to them by Soviet generals. That intervention was occasioned not by motives of anti-terrorism, but by oil. Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin’s government was told by the Baku, Azerbaijan-based, and BP-dominated consortium for the development of Caspian offshore oil, that the only obstacle to the most convenient pipeline route from Baku to Novorossiysk, was the unstable regime in Chechnya—unrecognized, but effectively independent at that time. The premier believed it would be just a technical adjustment to replace the Chechen leader, Jokhar Dudayev, with some convenient Moscow bureaucrat. That adjustment cost thousands of lives and wreaked immense destruction on the region’s infrastructure and the rest of its economy, not to mention doing irreparable damage to the international and domestic authority of the Kremlin.

Around that time, a friend of mine in Ukraine showed me a number of graphs he had copied in some government office in Kiev, which illustrated with convincing columns and circles, the advantages of building a pipeline from Odessa on Ukraine’s Black Sea coast to Brody near the Polish border

FIGURE 1

Southwest Asia and Transcaucasia



In the Southwest Asia region, neighbors of Iraq are key to an arrangement to get U.S. forces out quickly; but so is peace in Transcaucasia, “the northeast corner of Southwest Asia,” which requires ending the destabilizations of Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and their relations to Iran and Turkey.

(and near Soviet-era export pipeline terminals for oil and natural gas sold to Western Europe), in order to deliver fabulous quantities of Caspian oil to Europe, bypassing Russia and thus establishing the “energy independence” of Ukraine. My friend did not know—as Kiev propaganda was not supposed to tell him—that similar illusions were being spawned, at the same time, in Romania—playing its government against Ukraine, luckily without bloody consequences—and Bulgaria. All three governments were being lured by the same agency—British Petroleum—and with the same bait: riches from Caspian oil.

This information poison was spread not only in the former Comecon member countries, while their real economies were falling into ruins. It even reached desolate mountain villages in Dagestan—in southern Russia, east of Chechnya and north of Azerbaijan. There, amid the criminalized economy of the North Caucasus, the semi-literate Magomed Tagayev, who in childhood had written leaflets in memory of Iosif Stalin, penned a theoretical justification of a terrorist struggle against despised Moscow, “which is owned not by the Russians but by Zionists.” The free Caucasus Confederation dreamed of by this future head of the Rebellious Army of the Imam would, of course, gain access to Caspian oil. And that oil would be shipped not through the Russian port of Novorossiysk, but directly to the West—apparently, through Georgia. Tagayev had a soft spot for certain liberal politicians even in hated Russia, those who had made “self-determination” of the

North Caucasus republics their cause, but his favorite personality was the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, whom he compared—thus exposing the core of his naive leftist view of the world—to Fidel Castro.

Today, Magomed Tagayev is in jail in Makhachkala, Dagestan. Basayev is at large in Chechnya, sought by Russian forces in connection with the May 9 murder of Chechen President Ahmad Kadyrov. And Leonid Kuchma, President of Ukraine, declares: “Forget about Caspian oil. It is even not sufficient to fill one pipeline”—and orders the empty Odessa-to-Brody pipeline to be used for shipping oil from Brody to Odessa, instead.

This option wins support from none other than British Petroleum and its Russian partner, Tyumen Oil Company (BP-TNK), who are eager to ship Urals Blend crude oil from Russian oilfields to Brody terminal, thence to Odessa and by tanker through the Straits into the Mediterranean.

And no BP official is about to repent for the thousands of perished and millions of homeless people, sacrificed to the non-existent miracle that once blurred the vision of the late President Geidar Aliyev in Baku, former President Leonid Kravchuk in Kiev, Victor Chernomyrdin in Moscow, and Magomed Tagayev in the village of Ansalta, Daghestan. Why repent, if the strategic objective has been achieved? Millions of people despise Moscow, Moscow does not trust Kiev, and Baku hates Yerevan. Isn't this harvest of evil fine for geopoliticians like Zbigniew Brzezinski, a consultant for BP-

FIGURE 2

Transcaucasia

Amoco? If his thinking is not Cold War thinking, is it something even worse?

Not only his. Under the George W. Bush Administration, casting “the oil curse” has been the job not so much of theoretician and businessman Brzezinski, as of a practical purveyor of his designs—State Department official Stephen Mann, as Ambassador for Caspian Basin Energy Development in 2001–2003, then co-chairman of the Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh since March 2003. This person is as great an instrument of foreign meddling in the region, as are the international agencies behind the assassination of Kadyrov in Chechnya. During his Caspian assignment, Mann made his contribution to keeping the ownership status of the Caspian Sea unresolved, by sowing discord among the littoral nations with such interventions as lobbying Kazakhstan’s leaders to help bypass Iran in the construction of new pipelines in the area.

The Smell Of Drugs

In 1991, Abulfaz Elchibey, head of the Azeri Popular Front and newly elected President of Azerbaijan, declared that the road to Shusha—a town in the district of Nagorno-Karabakh, claimed by Armenia—runs through Tabriz, Iran. Accordingly, crowds of people destroyed customs posts on the Azerbaijani-Iranian border, which became an open window for all kinds of illegal trade over a period of many months, and a lever for destabilizing Iran through the idea of Greater Azerbaijan. Northern Iran, where Tabriz is located, is populated by ethnic Azeris.

This chapter in the history of the Republic of Azerbaijan is little noted by the Baku media today, when current President Ilham Aliyev raises the issue of drugs as grounds for interna-

tional economic sanctions against Armenian-run Karabakh.

Nor did the pro-democracy world community care much for the subject, during the period when Azerbaijan’s southern border was “democratically” opened. Young democratic leaders like Elchibey, Zviad Gamsakhurdia in Georgia, St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoli Sobchak, or Dudayev were allowed to play all sorts of games on the territory of the former empire—regardless of the consequences. The secession of Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan and Abkhazia from Georgia even won enthusiastic support from “Christianity-concerned” lords and ladies in London—residing next door to “Islam-concerned” lords and ladies, and both of them next door to the lobbyists for British Petroleum and related interests.

But these days, leaders of the “anti-terrorist coalition” are suddenly, ostentatiously concerned about these areas: Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Transdniestria—especially Karabakh. This tiny mountainous territory has

even merited personal attention from U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who during his March 2004 visit to Baku, declared that the problem of Karabakh should be solved by the so-called “step-by-step” approach. This means that first, Armenia should pull back military forces from Karabakh and the corridor connecting it to the rest of Armenia; then territorial negotiations might follow. Armenian sources emphasize that at least twice in recent years, the issue was nearly solved, but each time, circumstances intervened at the last moment.

The sources’ observation requires elaboration, since what it refers to involves as much cynicism as the above-mentioned Caspian oil fraud. The first attempt to “solve” the problem of Nagorno-Karabakh, in 1997, turned into a political destabilization of Armenia, wherein President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, accused by his close political allies of treason for betraying Armenian interests in Karabakh, was overthrown. The second, October 1999 attempt, involving a lot of diplomacy and timed to the Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), ended with the resignation of three top officials in Baku and the assassination of four top political figures in Yerevan—including the Prime Minister and the Speaker of the Parliament.

That 1999 “solution,” authored by Paul Goble and brought to Yerevan by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Secretary Strobe Talbott (who left Yerevan four hours before the shooting in the Armenian Parliament chambers), would have involved a territorial swap between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The disputed territory of Karabakh, with an ethnic Armenian population, was supposed to become a part of the territory of Armenia; in exchange, Baku would have received the Megri

Corridor, giving the main territory of Azerbaijan a direct link to Turkey by connecting it to the geographically separated Azerbaijani region called Nakhichevan, which already has a border with Turkey. The Megri Corridor was supposed to be controlled by an international peacekeeping contingent—to protect the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline; but it was obvious, without spectacles, that the overriding purpose of the design was to isolate Armenia from Iran.

The consequences of the October 1999 massacre in the Armenian Parliament are very much a part of the scene today. Stepan Demirchian, son of assassinated Speaker of the Parliament Karen Demirchian, is a leader of the opposition to President Robert Kocharian. In some mass media, Kocharian, who replaced Ter-Petrosian in 1998, and his ally Defense Minister Serge Sarkisian, are described as the “contractors” of the 1999 assassination. This is one of the major political pretexts for *today’s* political destabilization in Armenia, coinciding with a number of diplomatic, paradiplomatic, criminal, and ostensibly “anticriminal” efforts to revive the Karabakh issue.

Armenia today, like Georgia and Moldova, is among the poorest countries in the world in income per capita. The expense accounts for the delegations of U.S., British and French officials, along with Council of Europe, OSCE, PACE and NATO functionaries who visit Yerevan and Baku one after another, could feed the army of the Armenian unemployed as well as the Azeri refugees—whom the world community suddenly noticed around the same time as the drugs which, according to UN bureaucrats, are being cultivated in the mountains of Karabakh.

NATO ‘Surprises’ Pop Up in Azerbaijan

It is noteworthy that the drug issue was originally raised by Mikhail Saakashvili, whose end-2003 coup d’état in Tbilisi, Georgia was enthusiastically greeted by the progressive world community and who subsequently won the country’s Presidential elections with a 96% vote that any dictator would envy. This Saakashvili, a disciple of drug legalizer George Soros, brought up the issue in connection with the port of Batumi, which he asserted was being used by drug traders. This claim, Saakashvili then used as one major pretext to justify another coup d’état—in Ajaria (Batumi is this region’s capital). Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze was accused of tyranny and separatism, virtually forced into actually separatist behavior, and ultimately escaped to Moscow in May of this year.

Was the port of Batumi yesterday, and is Karabakh today, used for drug trafficking? Better put the question another way: which post-Soviet location on the route from the East to the West is *not* used for this purpose, when drug cultivation in Afghanistan, thanks to the splendid anti-terrorist efforts of the United States there, has surged by an order of magnitude? Who benefits most from this most lucrative illegal trade—corrupt petty officials along the route of shipment,

or those institutions that benefit from the enormous financial flows?

If the drug issue is so important, who can guarantee that the same Saakashvili, married to a Dutch lady and nurtured by George Soros with his special concern for human rights in Kosovo and the Ferghana Valley of Uzbekistan, will not use all the ports of Georgia for the same purpose? Is the progressive global community going to investigate him, too—or does he belong to a special caste of “professional democrats” above suspicion?

And why, finally, at the very moment when the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) is in Baku listening to Azeri President Aliyev’s call for international monitoring of drug-trafficking out of Karabakh (UNODC director Antonio Mario Costa visited Baku in December 2003), are NATO facilities being deployed in Azerbaijan? Safar Abiyev, Azerbaijan’s Defense Minister, has openly confessed that the United States needs those “mobile facilities” for the possible use in the Iraq war. “These are not airports, but just infrastructure that could be developed into airports in a short time,” he explained at the recent CIS summit, surprising even the most pro-Western and bellicose journalists from Baku. “When U.S. troops were deployed into Central Asia, that also came a surprise,” Abiyev explained.

Even judging by media reports, it is clear that UNODC representatives, planted in Baku to monitor the situation in Karabakh, would be sniffing not so much for drugs, as for weapons. Since Aslan Abashidze was ousted from Batumi, Russia still sells Armenia weapons for its defense, which creates a black market in the region for spare parts and replacements.

The exchange of territory, Karabakh for the Megri corridor, is now once again being urged on the Armenian leadership, which is under threat of political destabilization, with opposition demonstrations roiling all Spring. The Goble Plan was raised in talks between Presidents Aliyev and Kocharian on the sidelines of a European conference in April, but rejected by Armenia as a basis for negotiations. An Armenian-Azerbaijani media survey in early 2004, funded by George Soros’ Open Society Institute, highlighted “expert” opinions that the Karabakh-Megri swap was a viable option. It suggests the deployment of peacekeeping forces along the Megri Corridor. For what purpose? The notorious Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is now being constructed across Georgia, north of Yerevan and Stepanakert, and does not involve Megri. Thus the only purpose in pushing for foreign forces to be stationed on the Megri Corridor would be the effort of “containing Iran,” the subject of much paranoid attention from the crazy U.S. hawks of Cheney’s team.

The Banner Industry

In a recent interview, Moscow analyst Andranik Migranyan said that according to his knowledge, the transportation lines between Armenia and Turkey will be open by the end

of this year. But Turkey agrees to this only if the Karabakh problem is solved.

Discussions being held under the auspices of “conflictology” institutions are also fixated on this transport route. In particular, the Kettering Foundation organized an academic conclave at the Snegiri health resort in the Moscow region, in the framework of the long-standing Dartmouth Conference—a relic of the oligarchical diplomacy of Bertrand Russell’s circles with Nikita Khrushchov in the 1950s and 1960s.

Today’s private diplomacy around the Caucasus, and a good part of the public crisis-management efforts, threaten the statehood of all the countries involved or potentially

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affected. On the local level, that is Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, along with the unrecognized but actually existing republics of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. On the regional and global level: Turkey, Iran and Russia.

Why did George Soros’ protégés need to invent a new flag of Georgia, bearing a design reminiscent of crusaders’ banners? Why was the Georgian Orthodox Church so deeply involved, as well as the militant symbol of St. George? Could it mean that some of the current destabilization scenarios entail “holy war” of a sort?

Why did Mikhail Saakashvili need to reduce Ajaria’s autonomous status? Within the U.S.S.R., its autonomy was preserved in deference to the 1921 agreements between Soviet Russia and Turkey, which received a piece of Armenia’s territory, plus guarantees of autonomy for Ajaria and Nakhichevan. In 1992, Georgia and Turkey reaffirmed the Treaty of Kars, with its customs privileges for Turkish goods passing through Batumi. After a round of U.S.-Turkish and Russian-Georgian diplomacy, Turkey allowed Saakashvili to kick out Abashidze, the Ajarian leader, whose grandfather had been involved in the Treaty of Kars from the Turkish side. And Tbilisi’s intention to renounce the Treaty of Kars naturally irritates Azerbaijan, as it suggests that Turkey will be able to protect Nakhichevan about as well as the Azeris can protect, say, Northern Cyprus. No wonder: some romantic Armenian websites are already raising the issue of re-

claiming Kars and Ardagan, and dreaming of a new Armenian leader “like Saakashvili.”

This game with fire on top of a powderkeg is racing ahead before the complacent eyes of the progressive world community, which will later scream with horror at an explosion of regional warfare—though it is really still possible to avert that, by putting all the cards on the table and calling things by their names. In particular, calling Rumsfeld a criminal, or Sestanovich a liar.

Mikhail Margelov, head of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Russia’s Federation Council, believes that today’s NATO strategists are treating Russia in accordance with an approach that is more than a century old. He means the years preceding World War I, when the Russian Empire was dragged into conflicts in Transcaucasia, as well as the Balkans. We could also refer to earlier times, when Lord Palmerston prepared for war in the Black Sea, organizing insurrections in the North Caucasus and planting agents like Giuseppe Mazzini to brainwash European nations. Saakashvili recently reminded the European Union that his country is the oldest in Europe. Mazzini also liked to refer to pre-Christian times.

Corridors For Peace

It is true that the problem of Karabakh originated in the early 20th Century, though the region, like Ajaria, has a history of a statehood. It is true that Stalin’s July 5, 1921 decision to include Karabakh as an autonomous region in Azerbaijan is of historical significance. In its present form, however, this problem is rather a part of the post-World War II architecture.

The decision to remove the Azeri population from Karabakh was made by the U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers (still “People’s Commissars” at the time) in 1947, on request of the Armenian Communist Party leadership, supported by Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan. The pretext was Turkey’s relationship with Azerbaijan and Turkey’s participation in World War II on the Nazi side. No Russian specialist would say this openly: Too many sensitive issues are involved. Nonetheless, those circumstances, like the similar background of other territorial disputes in Europe, need to be understood and taken into account by people who have the power to prevent the huge explosion of this region, which is being prepared before our eyes—in particular, by the European Union, which is going to play a significant role in the outcome of today’s artificially manipulated crisis. And personally, by Terry Davis, a Briton who heads the Social-Democratic faction of the European Parliament, in case he is elected to the post of Council of Europe General Secretary in June. Some months ago, Davis was appointed rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) on prospects for settling the Karabakh conflict.

After Sept. 11, 2001, Terry Davis warned the coalition partners that antiterrorist operations should not result in hu-

man slaughter. In interviews he gave in Transcaucasia, during his recent PACE mission there, Davis emphasized that solutions should avoid bloodshed—and referred to his own negative attitude to the intervention in Iraq. Such statements are encouraging, though their sincerity is hard to measure, as are the prospects for the Iraq situation itself. It may distract the attention of NATO and relevant agencies from Karabakh, the transport connection between Turkey and Armenia, and the Araks River—one more piece of natural infrastructure involved in plans for a new Armenian-Azerbaijani swap of territory.

The latest developments in the region, related to the use of infrastructure for peaceful purposes, suggest how tensions could eventually calm down—for economic reasons. A May 13 agreement to build an Iran-Armenia gas pipeline; the visit of Iran's Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi to Moscow on May 17; and the subsequent international forum in Moscow, at which Iranian Fuel Minister Gulam Reza Shafei spoke about prospects for cooperation on natural gas transport; all point to how Armenia's most severe economic problems can be solved in the near future. This would mean that the international "party of war," which is now trying to buy Armenia's commitment to the above-described Karabakh-Megri exchange, may lose its leverage.

A trilateral agreement, signed May 20 by the governments of Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia on a Kazvin-Resht-Astara railway link, involves the three countries in productive development, an essential alternative to war, and charts an indirect link between Baku and Yerevan. The failed effort of the Southern Azerbaijani separatists in Iran to impede this effort only proves its strategic significance—not for the particular interests of Iran or Russia, but for the whole area.

A year ago, Russia proposed to build a gas pipeline to Armenia across Georgia. This project was undermined by the forces who brought Mikhail Saakashvili to power—and the Georgians who voted for him will realize sooner or later that their emotions and their despair were very cynically played upon. Yet Georgia does have a good chance to benefit from the same Iran-Armenia gas pipeline, if it makes a choice in favor of the "party of peace."

Stephen Mann, the promoter of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, as well as John Ordway, U.S. Ambassador in Armenia until March 2004, had been pressuring Baku, Tbilisi, Moscow, Ashgabat (Turkmenistan) and Astana (Kazakhstan) against any cooperation with Iran. But already during the first discussion in Kazakhstan in 2001, its prime minister plainly told Mann that a gas transport link across Iran would be more secure and more feasible than across the seabottom, through Baku to Erzurum, Turkey. If such developments continue, and especially if the European Bank has the guts to promote investment in the Iran-Armenia gas project, the "party of war" will lose most of the irrational "romantic" arguments it is trying to play upon. The regional battle for peace may be decisive on a global level, as it concerns the

major strategic economic and trade links of Eurasia—the potential infrastructure of peace.

Those who take charge of this grand peace effort should listen to decent analysts from all the involved sides, who realize that the issues of unrecognized territories, which emerged out of bloodbaths, can't be solved in a year, or even within one generation. They also should not forget that as of now, peace in Karabakh rests on the ceasefire agreements signed on May 3-4, 1994, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, on the initiative of the defense ministers (not foreign ministers!) of Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Karabakh. This agreement much displeased then-Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who today is involved in the Dartmouth conferences, but he couldn't do anything about it. When foreign ministries become dysfunctional due to a Freemasonic or related international, anti-national disease, responsibility can be taken by persons with experience of warfare, who know the cost of blood and wish to avoid more. This is one more lesson of history which should be put on the table by those who have a moral and strategic right to destroy the war machine prepared along the borders of Transcaucasia, Turkey and Iran.

So, the guns should still hang on the wall—for the purpose of protecting those brave persons who challenge the evil across the inflamed territory of the Caucasus and Southwest Asia, but not for use by peoples against one another.

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