

Current Military and Political Menaces in the South Caucasus

Written by Eduard Abrahamyan

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EDUARD ABRAHAMYAN, FEB 11 2015

It is becoming increasingly clear that the Russian leadership cannot stand Western pressures around Ukraine. Simultaneously, from the Russian point of view, there has never been a complicated situation like this, when an opponent side, such as NATO, may approach closer to Russia's borders. The core of Russia's interest is to maintain the opportunities of interference in Ukraine's internal affairs in the future (House of Representatives 2014) [1]. Consequently, the separation of Eastern rebel territories from Ukraine may become an isolation factor for Russia. There is an assumption that Putin is interested in a Russian designed "peacekeeping regime" in the region which could see him retain and even enhance the impact in Ukraine. In contrast to this, pro-Russian separatists exceeded their activity that, eventually, could likely circumscribe the political and military role of Russia in Eastern Europe in general and in whole Ukraine in particular (Der Spiegel 2014).

Although Russia's military opportunities in Ukraine are seemingly restricted, Putin's political planners, in unison with military advisers, emphasize the need for revenge against the United States and its allies (Dugin 2014) in other geopolitically crucial regions such as the Eastern Black Sea region – the Caucasus. Therefore, the Russian military-political elite counts on general destabilization (Von Robin 2014) which, on appearance, will push the United States to come to an arrangement with Russia over various frozen and potential conflicts.

The proponents of Eurasianism (a political movement that believes Russia does not belong in the category of Europe) of Russian society such as military authorities and Vladimir Putin's administration are facing an inextricable situation where the government, in order to save its image as a super-power and to avoid furthering an inferiority complex, needs at least a local victory. In the case of heavy economic and political sanctions, Putin needs to show Russian society and his oligarchic circle that the country is able to dictate rules to its geopolitical rivals in the global political game. Thus, to obtain the necessary results, Putin is attempting to reveal the regional vulnerability of the United States and its allies to defeat them. The Black Sea-Caucasian region, as Russia's military command considers, is one of the most convenient places for successful rivalry.

Russia Exerts Major Influence

The South Caucasus are a periphery of the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. They consist of the countries Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, that more or less favour the sharing of responsibility and a commitment to preserving stability and international order. The societies of Georgia and Armenia, widely share the common values of the West and position themselves as a part of Europe.

The recent and current actions of Russia are likely to be classified as attempts to disrupt the international order and stability. Respectively, disorder and instability in the periphery of South-Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region is likely to oblige Western countries to take action to maintain order (Gow 2005). Hence, the current situation in the South Caucasus would spur to intensify the individual co-operation and regional integration between NATO and South Caucasus states in order to forge an effective framework of defence and security.

The Caucasian region has historically been an area susceptible to ethnic destabilization. The Russian political elite

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believe that they have major influence to catalyze or settle the ethnic conflicts between three nations: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. This region is similarly considered by Putin's elite. The acknowledged Eurasian ideologist Alexander Dugin once claimed '[the]Caucasus is[are] definitely Russian land,'(ORT 2014) which implies that Moscow has never grown accustomed to sharing interests in this region with the West, even Iran or Turkey.

Furthermore, Putin will hardly become used to Georgia's status as NATO's potential ally. Consequently, there are increasing concerns about Armenia's feasible drift towards the West, regardless of the country's coerced inclusion in the Eurasian Union. Therefore, in order to redirect the focus from Ukraine and mark certain achievements in defending its interests, Russia's leadership is gradually changing the direction of its military and political activity.

On the one hand, Moscow assumes that conspicuous intensification of skirmishes between the two Caucasian nations – Armenia and Azerbaijan – will neutralize the aspirations of Armenia to turn towards the West and thus remain dependent on Russia. Moscow, through escalation of tensions in Karabakh, aims to induce the Armenian leadership to act according to Putin's anti-western plan to stimulate "controlled chaos" in various regions of Eurasia (Golts 2014). A case in point: the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's call to Eurasian Union members to undertake sanctions against the West (Amatuni 2014).

It is important to realize that once the economic collapse in Russia becomes imaginable, Moscow intends to be belligerent and unpredictable, in order to be seen as a necessary partner for the United States to calm tensions in the Black Sea region and Central Asia. Hence, pro-western Georgia can be a suitable target, and, according to Moscow's elaborating plan, a preferable tense situation in Georgia can limit and finally exclude NATO-EU influences in the Caucasus. Hence, this plan encompasses a number of local and inter-ethnic clashes, which will lead to a large-scale conflict and will provide opportunity for interference and manipulation.

Additionally, since Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili's government, Georgia has adopted policies to normalize ties with Russia. Today's political leadership of Georgia, led by Giorgi Margvelashvili, repeatedly declares its adherence to this policy. Despite this, Margvelashvili's carefully selected policies towards Moscow constitute as agreeing with Putin's leadership over certain issues (Tabula Georgian News Magazine 2014), and simultaneously apprehension of possible provocations from Russia.

In other words, the normalization of relations, even hidden agreements, does not ease the threats and fears of the Georgian political establishment and society towards Russia. Moreover, instead of Margvelashvili's efforts, the political antagonism towards Georgia's pro-European path persists on account of the unpredictability of Russia's political behavior and its readiness for manipulation.

Possible Threats Are Becoming Tangible

The anxiety is doubled because of Putin's rather strange communication project on the back of economic troubles, worth \$ 1.5 billion. This is the Avaro-Kakhetian highway construction. According to Putin's former economic policy advisor Andrey Illarionov, the construction of this strategically key road along the Georgia-Azerbaijan border proceeds intensively. Accordingly, this will enable Moscow to wage conflicts more effectively than in 2008 (Illarionov 2014). Particularly, the development of infrastructure foreshadows Russia's political and military activity in the Caucasian region in the near future, if they complete their mission in Ukraine.

The conflict of 2008 illustrated Russia's lack of necessary logistical capacities. If we take into consideration that the confrontation between pro-Western Georgia and Russia adopting Eurasian doctrine still tangible, there is urgent need for sophisticated infrastructure, specifically, a highway for Moscow, as an alternative to the Military-Georgian highway and to avoid Rock tunnel through South Ossetia. It is remarkable that the newly-constructed highway will facilitate the unexpected emergence of Russian troops and enable them to act more operatively than in 2008. In case of conflict, the Makhachkala-Tbilisi road will allow direct access to Armenia's border where the Russian 102nd base is situated.

As long as Russia has interest in retaining its system of interference, it will likely keep up attempts to implicate

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Armenia, Azerbaijan and different minorities of Georgia in different projects undermining stability and increasing tensions.

Features of Orthodox Solidarity and Prerequisites of Destabilization

To attain its objectives, the Kremlin has been involved in constituting and maintaining different groups in Georgia. This has included ethnic Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Mingrelians, Svans, Ajarians and Georgians. The traditional prop for Russians is the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC). The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church is likewise traditionally close (Kevorkova 2013).

According to the confessional hierarchy, GOC officially has autocephalous status, but, in reality, starting with Mikheil Saakashvili's presidency, when Georgia declared its pro-western political leaning, the Georgian priesthood started to gain increasing support and contributions from its faithful brothers in Moscow (Muradyan 2014). Russians used to emphasize the importance of the upbringing of the Georgian youth in a patriotic and religious way and as a result, a number of youth organizations and groups linked to the Georgian Orthodox Church. It is assumed that some are indirectly obedient to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The main reason for believing that Russia may exploit the Georgian priesthood is the habitual antagonistic behavior of the Georgian Orthodox Church towards Western values and attitudes (Democracy and Freedom Watch 2014). The Georgian priesthood and youth groups can become pivotal tools in Russian hands for provoking ethnic clashes with non-Georgians. The recent prolusion was in Tbilisi on 19 July 2014, when a group of 50 young Georgian nationalists attacked the Armenian Church during the liturgy (Bukia & Harutyunyan 2014). This incident shocked the Armenian community of Tbilisi but fortunately did not create a divide between Georgians and Armenians.

A further Russian factor of impact, which constitutes a tangible menace to stability and security in Georgia, are the various pro-Russian groups living in Kvemo Kartli and Samtzkhe-Javakheti regions. Interestingly, as the inhabitants of the region observe, the activity of pro-Russians in Akhalkalaki and Marneuli is becoming more and more noticeable.

First, there is a group of former employees of the Russian 62nd military base in Akhalkalaki, which finally disbanded in June 2007 (Overland 2009). According to information, they have clubs for meetings, discussions and leisure and show a certain support for Russia in Samtzkhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions. Moreover, there is widespread belief among Armenian activists of Javakheti that this pro-Russian community, despite the rates of long-term unemployment, receives significant financial support from somewhere, without any conspicuous commercial activity. In other words, Russia has certainly exerted efforts to maintain its intelligence network among the Armenian and Azerbaijani minorities in Georgia, with the purpose to use its capacities in future.

Second, in recent times it has become noticeable the activity of former and current members of regional administrative authorities, who suddenly started to express their concerns about issues involving national minorities in Georgia. During the presidency of Mikheil Saakashvili this group always clashed with well-known national activists who struggled for national and human rights in Samtzkhe-Javakheti. The main reason for this turmoil in Samtzkhe-Javakheti is the deplorable economic and politically disorientated situation, which may be changed positively, as the former military base will be reorganized into a NATO-Georgian base, thus creating jobs for local inhabitants.

Finally, the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri, the second largest city in Armenia poses a considerable threat to the security of Armenia and Georgia. Russians are carrying out fortification of this contingent, which is the considerable menace to Armenian independence today. The staff of the Russian 102nd base have always paid close attention to the national issues of Samtzkhe-Javakheti and now, when US Congress may reject the ally status for Tbilisi, Russians are probably observing Georgia's minorities even more intently. Additionally, periodical violent events initiated by members of Russian personnel from the 102nd base, particularly murders of civilians and clashes, widely enhance the discontent of Armenian society towards the base (Sindelar 2015). The frequent problems with Russian soldiers underpin the conviction of precariousness of Russian military presence in Armenia. Furthermore, the Russian base poses not only a sense of permanent insecurity within inhabitants of Gyumri, but it is also

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envisaged as a potential source of destructive impact on regional policy (Giragosian 2015). Eventually, the experience of Russia in occupying the Crimean peninsula by “Little Green Men” from the Sevastopol base could easily be used to achieve its goals in Armenia or Georgia through the Russian military contingent of 102nd base. Hence, Moscow may view the Crimean scenario as an actionable precedent, as this method has proven to be efficient (Goble 2014).

Georgian authorities do what is possible to lessen Moscow’s negative line against Georgia’s decision to take the NATO/EU path, but the assumption is that economic pain will make Russia more belligerent. The same fear persists in Armenian society. Although coercion and blackmail in energy issues towards various neighbors may be an inherent feature of Putin’s current policy, Armenian authorities reluctantly joined the Eurasian Union, caused by immense compelling that makes Putin feel nascent distrust towards different Armenian institutions. Therefore, neither Armenia nor Georgia or Azerbaijan is immune to Russian actions.

Notes

[1] In the House of Representatives, U.S. , 113th Congress, H.Res. 758, ‘Strongly condemning the actions of the Russian Federation, under President Vladimir Putin, which has carried out a policy of aggression against neighboring countries aimed at political and economic domination’, resolution was agreed 4 December 2014, [Online], Available: <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/hres758> , Introduced [18 November 2014]

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About the author:

Eduard Abrahamyan has graduated from the Yerevan State University(Armenia), faculty of International Relations and Politics. He has conducted research in Armenia, the United Kingdom, and France on various issues, such as, political and military threats and risks in Black Sea, the prospects of political and military partnership between NATO and New Eastern Partners. Abrahamyan currently lives in London, UK and expertise in regional security and integration on the Eastern Europe and the Middle East at University of Westminster, UK. He is a fellow at Policy Forum Armenia,based in Washington,DC.