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Checking Putin's Eurasian Ambitions

Georgia and Azerbaijan can deny Moscow access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. But they need U.S. support.

By
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American leaders have responded to Moscow's annexation of Crimea by beefing up NATO allies in Russia's vicinity, and rightly so. But it's imperative that Washington also pay attention to the security of the South Caucasus corridor through Georgia and Azerbaijan, which is crucial both for reverse transit from Afghanistan and Western access to the heart of Eurasia.

Though separated by the Black Sea, the fate of Ukraine and the countries of the South Caucasus is intimately connected: They are both central to Vladimir Putin's dream of a "Eurasian" empire, stretching fromBelarus to Tajikistan. Without Slavic Ukraine, there can be no real Eurasian union. Without control over the South Caucasus corridor, Russia can't secure the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

The East-West corridor connecting Europe with the heart of Eurasia has been an important and bipartisan success of U.S. foreign policy. From the early 1990s, America supported the sovereignty and independence of the former Soviet republics, while helping develop the oil and gas wealth of the Caspian littoral. Washington played the central role in ensuring that Europe became the first major export destination of Caspian oil.

Then the 9/11 attacks showed the importance of this corridor for America's own national security. The willingness of post-Soviet states to assist in the war on terror was directly proportional to their level of independence from Moscow. And with Iran out of the question and Russia imposing many conditions and caveats, the airspace of Georgia and Azerbaijan became the only reliable air corridor connecting NATO territory with Afghanistan. Similarly, the land bridge across Georgia and Azerbaijan carries about a third of the logistics for the Afghanistan operation.

In the past five years, however, President Barack Obama's "reset" policy prioritized relations with Moscow at the expense of these smaller states. For the leaders of post-Soviet

states, American disengagement from their security affairs was paralleled by growing Russian pressure to abandon their pro-Western foreign policies.

As U.S.-Russian relations deteriorate over Ukraine, the fallout won't be limited to Ukraine. The South Caucasus is a most likely area for Moscow to create further mayhem. Mr. Putin understands the strategic value of the South Caucasus corridor more than most Western planners. Hence the 2008 invasion of Georgia, which as even former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has acknowledged was aimed at stopping NATO expansion. "If the war against Georgia had not happened," Mr. Medvedev said in 2011, "several countries would join NATO."

Over the past few years, Russia has cooperated with the U.S. by opening the northern-distribution network to supply the operation in Afghanistan across Russian territory. Wisely, however, the U.S. ensured part of the network went through the South Caucasus instead of Russia. Moscow could easily threaten to shut down its portion of the network, leaving the Pentagon with two options: going south through Pakistan or west across the Caucasus. In other words: If Moscow were to block access through the South Caucasus, Washington could find itself at the mercy of Islamabad.

Moscow has already consolidated its control over Armenia. Yerevan, like Tbilisi, had negotiated an association agreement with the European Union in July 2013. Yet Mr. Putin two months later bullied Yerevan to join his own custom union instead. And in both Georgia and Azerbaijan, Mr. Putin is investing in pro-Russian constituencies among opposition politicians, civil-society groups and ethnic minorities. Leaders in both Azerbaijan and Georgia have been left unimpressed by the Western reaction to the Crimea crisis. Both wonder when and where the risks of their pro-Western foreign policies outweigh the benefits.

Using its huge military presence in Armenia, Moscow could stir trouble with Azerbaijan, given the festering conflict between those two countries over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. And Georgia lies between Russia and Russia's Armenian bases. As Tbilisi plans to sign its own association agreement with the EU this summer, Russian pressure is bound to intensify. What if Moscow demanded a military corridor across Georgia to its bases in Armenia? If the fractious and untested Georgian government felt no American backing, it's an open question how Tbilisi would respond.

Such a development would have serious implications for America. If only one of the two gives in, Moscow would gain control over the reverse transit route from Afghanistan. And in the longer term, such a scenario would mean the loss of Washington's access to Central Asia. With that, any hopes of Caspian energy resources helping to diversify the EU's energy security could come to naught.

None of this needs to happen. To prevent such an outcome, the Obama administration must reassure its allies in Tbilisi and Baku.

First, U.S. leaders must make clear that the "reset" no longer applies: America's engagement in the region will no longer be indexed to Moscow's reactions. High-level visits of American diplomats and military leaders are needed to signal that Washington takes the security of the region seriously; bilateral security and defense ties must be deepened.

Mr. Obama should consider officially pronouncing his support for Georgia to receive a membership-action plan at the upcoming NATO summit; Azerbaijan doesn't ask for one, but Washington should consult with Baku on steps to deepen NATO cooperation, as well as enhance America's role in negotiations over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Deploying American military facilities and personnel—if only for logistical purposes—in either or both countries would also send the right message to Moscow.

The South Caucasus could serve as a powerful bulwark against the Russian imperialist tide—but only if the U.S. recommits itself to the region's security.

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