

Background to the Russian assault on Chechnya: a power struggle over Caspian oil

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Tensions between Russia, the US and Europe have escalated in the course of Russia's seven-week military campaign against Chechnya. Since Moscow launched the war in September an estimated 4,000 Chechen civilians and 1,200 Chechen troops have been killed and 200,000 civilians have been forced to flee from their homes.

In the run-up to Thursday's summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), being held in Istanbul, Turkey, the US and European governments issued statements denouncing Russia's bombing of Grozny and other major cities. Russian President Boris Yeltsin dismissed all such criticisms, saying the Western countries "have no right to blame Russia for destroying bandits and terrorists on its territory".

There is an abundance of cynicism and hypocrisy on all sides. The US, Britain, France, Germany and the other NATO powers express shock and dismay at Moscow's indiscriminate bombing of cities and other civilian targets in Chechnya, only a few months after their own brutal air assault on Serb towns and cities. As one Russian official complained, when American missiles killed Serb civilians, Washington called it "collateral damage", but when Russian bombs kill Chechen civilians, American officials talk of human rights atrocities.

Not one of the thousands of Western journalists covering the OSCE summit has noted the obvious irony of American and European leaders gathering to proclaim their devotion to human rights, democracy and peace in a country notorious for police state repression and one of the world's longest and bloodiest military campaigns against an ethnic minority—Ankara's war against the Kurds in the southeast of the country.

The Russians, for their part, justify a brutal aggression to maintain Moscow's grip on the land, resources and impoverished peoples of the northern Caucasus as a police action against terrorism.

As always in conflicts between major capitalist powers, there are the declared motives and the real, unstated aims and interests that lie behind the propaganda. A measure of how sharp antagonisms have become is the statement made last Friday by Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev. Accusing the US of supporting the Chechen rebels, he told a meeting of Russian military top brass, "The United States national interests require that the military conflict in the north Caucasus, fanned from the outside, keeps constantly smouldering." Sergeyev added, "The West's policy is a challenge to Russia with the aim of weakening its international

position and ousting it from strategically important regions."

Reporting Sergeyev's comments, the November 15 *New York Times* noted, "Such suspicions have been fuelled in Russia by American attempts to persuade former Soviet republics in the region to build an oil pipeline that would skirt Russia and Iran." This broadly hints at a key issue in the present conflict in Chechnya. What is being played out there is a great power struggle between the US, Russia and Europe over control of the strategically vital Caucasus, which borders on the Caspian Sea, site of the world's largest deposit of untapped oil reserves. At stake in this contest are billions of dollars in oil and gas revenues and the vast military and geopolitical advantages that fall to whichever power gains a dominant position in Central Asia.

Transcaucasia has strategic significance for Western companies and the US and European governments because it serves as a bridge between Caspian oil fields and Europe, via either the Black Sea or the Mediterranean. In October of 1997 *Le Monde Diplomatique* made a sober estimation of the implications of friction over control of the Caspian for relations between the US and Russia, writing, "American oil companies were interested in the Caspian long before the State Department came up with a coherent policy for the area.... The negotiation of oil contracts enabled Washington to show a direct interest in the region.

"The US government sees it as an extra source of energy, should Persian Gulf oil be threatened. It also wants to detach the former Soviet republics from Russia both economically and politically, so as to make the formation of a Moscow-led union impossible. In an article published in the spring, former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger wrote that if Moscow succeeded in dominating the Caspian, it would achieve a greater victory than the expansion of NATO would be for the West."

Concluding its overview of the situation, *Le Monde Diplomatique* wrote: "The Caucasus is an amazing mosaic of alliances, with each [republic] seeking the patronage of one or more foreign powers. As the new arrival, the United States is trying to secure for itself a major role, with a commensurate reduction in the Russian presence and Iranian ambitions. Jealous of these developments in what has only recently become foreign territory, Russia is still reeling from its [1995] defeat in Chechnya. In short, the next stage in Caucasian history will be played out between the ascendancy of American power and the resistance of Russia."

For several years, rival pipeline projects have been vying for

control of oil supplies. US corporations Exxon, Pennzoil and Unocal are involved in an oil consortium of (Chechnya's neighbour) Azerbaijan and 11 Western companies, led by British-US company BP Amoco — the Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium (AIOC). Its aim is to construct a pipeline to carry the bulk of Azeri oil output from the Caspian seabed. American petroleum concerns are currently responsible for more than 50 percent of oil investment in Azerbaijan.

The US government has insisted from the outset that the pipeline run from Azerbaijan to Turkey, passing through Chechnya's other near neighbour, Georgia, despite the fact that this route will entail double the cost of a much shorter route running between Azerbaijan and Iran. Washington's aim is to ensure that oil supplies be immune from both Russian and Iranian interference. The US-backed pipeline could carry 50 million metric tons per year (one million barrels per day) from Baku to Turkey's Mediterranean port of Ceyhan.

Europe's interest in the Caspian region is also substantial. Its central project is a trade link between the Black Sea and Central Asia, through the construction of a highway from the north Turkish industrial town of Samsun to the Georgian port of Batumi. The Shah Deniz oil field in the Caspian is being explored by a consortium led by European corporations, without US involvement, which could erect a pipeline through Iran.

Disputes over oil were at the heart of Russia's earlier decision to go to war against Chechnya in December 1994, because its sole operational pipeline for Caspian oil was under threat from Islamic separatist forces. The separatist rebel leaders in Chechnya, who are known to have links to organised crime interests in Europe and elsewhere, place potential control over oil routes and pipelines in the northern Caucasus very much at the centre of their own calculations.

A significant factor in Russia's decision to end its military operation in 1996 was fear that it would lose any chance of beating off its US and European commercial rivals for control of Caucasian and Central Asian oil supplies. Since then, Russia has sought to elaborate its own response to US economic encroachment in the Caspian. Last November 29, the Caspian Pipeline Consortium led by Russia announced plans for a \$2.2 billion pipeline to carry Kazakh oil from the Tengiz field in the Caspian Basin to the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiik, bypassing rebel Chechnya.

The 1,500-kilometre pipeline was the first major project tapping the Caspian Basin's resources to get off the ground. Russia advanced the pipeline as an alternative to the US-led project for Azerbaijan and secured a temporary contract to pump 5 million metric tons of Azeri oil a year until 2003, when the US-led AIOC project is slated to be fully operational.

When bombings were carried out in Dagestan in August by a force of 1,200 Chechen rebels, the Russian pipeline was forced to close temporarily. This disruption provided a major impulse for the Yeltsin government to prepare a new assault on Chechnya.

Russia's concerns over Chechnya grew as a result of the US-NATO war against Serbia and the subsequent NATO occupation of Kosovo. The war ended with NATO Supreme Commander General Wesley Clark ordering British and French forces to launch

a military assault to prevent Russian troops from taking control of the Pristina airport on June 12. The US general's orders were rejected by the British commander of the NATO forces on the ground in Kosovo, General Michael Jackson, who told Clark, "I'm not going to start World War III for you."

The significance of these events—and the establishment of Kosovo as a de facto US protectorate—was not lost on the Russian military and political elite. At the same time the Yeltsin government and its policy of deferring to the Western imperialist powers were badly discredited by the Balkan War.

Against a background of growing popular hostility towards the US, the most right-wing nationalist forces within the nomenklatura and the military were emboldened to insist that a stand be made to safeguard Russia's interests in the Caucasus. The intervention in Chechnya was meant to be a warning to the Western powers—and the surrounding Caucasian republics—that Russia was still a force to be reckoned with. As the chief of the Russian air force, Anatoly Kornukov, warned this week, "We are restoring order in our own country and no one has the right, or will stop us, from doing so. Russia is not Iraq, it is not Yugoslavia, and any attempt at [foreign] interference will be resolutely blocked."

The increasingly militaristic posture of the US, and the aggressively nationalist response of Russia, threaten far worse than the human tragedy that is presently unfolding. America's new plan to create a Star-Wars style "theatre missile defence" as a national shield against nuclear missiles is in breach of the 1972 US-Russian anti-ballistic missile treaty. The ABM treaty restricts the US and Russia to siting their missiles at one location each—North Dakota and Moscow. Next year, however, the Clinton administration is set to approve a new anti-ballistic system in Alaska supposedly to prevent attacks by "rogue states" such as North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

Yeltsin wrote a letter to Clinton, saying these plans could have "extremely dangerous" consequences for arms control accords, while General Vladimir Yakovlev of Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces said that Russia would consider itself "freed from all arms control obligations" should the ABM treaty be altered. At the beginning of this month, Russia test-fired two missiles, including an anti-missile rocket and a nuclear-capable SS-21 tactical ballistic missile, for the first time in six years.



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