

Russia prepares for a US-Israeli military strike against Iran

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Russia has undertaken intensive preparations during the past few months for a possible military strike by Israel and the United States on Iran. According to recent reports, the Russian General Staff expects a war against Iran this summer, with enormous repercussions for not only the Middle East but also the Caucasus.

Russian troops in the Caucasus have been technically upgraded, and a missile division situated on the Caspian Sea has been placed in readiness. The missile cruisers of the Caspian flotilla are now anchored off the coast of Dagestan. The only Russian military base in the South Caucasus, located in Armenia, is also on alert for military intervention. Last autumn, Russia sent its aircraft carrier Kuznetsov to the Syrian port Tartous following the escalation of the conflict in Syria. Experts believe that Russia would support Tehran in the event of war, at least on a military-technical level.

In a commentary in April, General Leonid Ivashov, president of the Academy of Geopolitical Science, wrote that “a war against Iran would be a war against Russia” and he called for a “political-diplomatic alliance” with China and India. Operations were being undertaken throughout the Middle East in order to destabilise the region and proceed against China, Russia and Europe. The war against Iran, Ivashov wrote, would “end up at our borders, destabilise the situation in the North Caucasus and weaken our position in the Caspian region.”

Of central concern for Moscow are the consequences for the South Caucasus in the event of a war against Iran. Armenia is the only ally of the Kremlin in the region and has close economic links with Iran, while neighbouring Georgia and Azerbaijan maintain military

and economic ties with the United States and Israel.

The Kremlin fears above all that Azerbaijan could participate in a military alliance alongside Israel and the United States against Iran. Azerbaijan borders Iran, Russia, Armenia and the Caspian Sea, and since the mid-1990s has been an important military and economic ally of the US in the South Caucasus, housing several American military bases.

Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan are already very tense. Tehran has repeatedly accused Baku of participating in terrorist attacks and acts of sabotage, most probably in collaboration with the Israeli and American intelligence agencies. In recent years, Azerbaijan has doubled its military spending and in February completed a weapons deal with Israel worth US\$1.6 billion involving the supply of drones and missile defence systems.

Citing senior sources in the Obama administration, Mark Perry told the American journal *Foreign Policy* in late March that Baku had allowed Israel access to several air bases on the border to northern Iran that could be used for an air strike on Tehran. The magazine quotes a senior government official saying, “The Israelis have bought an airport and this airport is Azerbaijan.” Perry warned, “Military strategists must now take into account a war scenario, which includes not only the Persian Gulf, but also the Caucasus.”

The Baku government immediately denied the report, but the editor of the Azerbaijani newspaper *Neue Zeit*, Shakir Gablikogly, warned that Azerbaijan could be drawn into a war against Iran.

Even if Azerbaijan should not prove to be the starting point for an Israeli attack on Iran, there is the danger that war will lead to a military escalation of other territorial conflicts such as the dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The region has been independent since the end of the civil war in 1994, but the government in Baku, the US and the European Council insist it be regarded as part of Azerbaijan. There have been repeated border conflicts between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the past two years, and commentators have warned that the dispute could escalate into a war involving Russia, the United States and Iran.

In a recent interview with Russia's *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, military expert Mikhail Barabanov said that conflicts in the post-Soviet region could lead to military intervention in Russia. Any intervention in the region by the US or other NATO power would bring with it "the inevitable risk of the use of nuclear weapons." Russia has the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world after the US.

Due to its geostrategic importance, Eurasia has become the epicentre for economic and political rivalries and military conflicts between the US and Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia form a bridge between resource-rich Central Asia and the Caspian Sea on one side, and Europe and the Black Sea on the other.

The US has sought to win influence in the region via economic alliances since the 1990s. In 1998, the future US vice president Richard Cheney, then CEO of the oil services giant Halliburton, declared, "I can not remember a time when a region so suddenly gained such huge strategic importance as the Caspian."

In his book *The Grand Chessboard* (1998), Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to US president Jimmy Carter, wrote: "A power that dominates Eurasia would control two thirds of the most advanced and economically productive regions of the world. In Eurasia, there are about three-quarters of the known energy resources in the world."

The central importance of the region is its role as a transit area for energy supplies to Europe from Asia, which bypasses Russia. By supporting alternative pipeline projects, Washington has sought to weaken Russian links to Europe, which depends heavily on Russian oil and gas.

So far, Georgia is the key country for the transit of gas and oil supplies and has been at the heart of conflicts in the region. Georgia's "Rose Revolution" in 2003 was instigated by Washington to push Mikhail Saakashvili into power as president in order to safeguard US economic and strategic interests in the region. It led to an intensification of tensions with Moscow for geostrategic supremacy. The war between Georgia and Russia in the summer of 2008 represented a further ratcheting up of the rivalry between the two countries with the potential to expand into a Russian-American war. Relations between Russia and Georgia remain very tense.

US influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia has declined significantly in recent years. In addition to Russia, China has emerged as a major force in the area, establishing significant economic and military ties with Central Asian states such as Kazakhstan. Although Russia and China remain rivals, they have struck a strategic alliance in their competition with the United States. For the US, war against Iran represents a further stage in its growing confrontation with China and Russia for control of the energy resources of Central Asia and the Middle East.



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