

Threat of war grows in the Caucasus

Clara Weiss
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In the Caucasus, where US geopolitical interests collide with those of Russia and Iran, the danger of war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is growing.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who visited Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia on June 4-6, poured more oil on the fire.

The territorial dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, to which both Armenia and Azerbaijan lay claim, goes back more than a hundred years, and broke out again with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Military conflicts have continued since the late 1980s and the independence of both countries. Some 25,000 people were killed in the 1991-1994 war and over a million displaced.

The region, today mostly inhabited by Armenians, belongs to Azerbaijan under international law, and therefore counts as being “occupied” by Armenia; both countries are still officially at war. Since 2010 there have been increasing clashes on the border.

Hillary Clinton’s visit to the region was accompanied by a new escalation of the conflict. Since the beginning of June, twenty Armenians and eight Azerbaijanis, including civilians, have been killed. Many media outlets now speak of a “war situation.”

The United States and the European powers are using the conflict to push back Russian influence in the region, which belonged to the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991. But they are not united amongst themselves. While France has supported Armenia, which also has Russian backing, the US works closely with Azerbaijan, Turkey and Georgia and also tries to draw Armenia to its side.

The US has expanded its influence in the region since the 1990s, much to the detriment of Russia and Iran. In particular, the Georgian “Rose Revolution” of 2003, in which they helped the current president Mikhail Saakashvili to power, was a milestone in this regard.

Both Georgia and Azerbaijan are close US allies and are armed by Washington militarily. Both countries belong to the so-called “Southern Corridor”, through which existing and planned pipelines bypass Russia delivering oil and gas from the Caspian region to Europe.

The US has tried so far to avoid a renewed military conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, since a war between the two countries might endanger American and European interests and could lead to a major confrontation with Russia and Iran.

During Clinton’s visit to the Caucasus, the *New York Times* warned: “America and Europe can no longer keep the Nagorno-Karabakh talks on the back burner. Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev faces domestic pressures to act, but Europe and America should caution him about the adverse consequences, notably a broader regional war. Energy investment in Azerbaijan and a major new gas pipeline to Europe, Nabucco, could become casualties.”

Nabucco is an EU pipeline project to deliver gas from Central Asia to Central Europe bypassing Russia. For several months it has been threatened with collapse.

During her visit, Hillary Clinton said that the conflict must be resolved peacefully. The next peace talks are due to take place on June 18 in Paris.

In recent years, the US has focused on building better relations with Armenia, to bring it closer to Turkey, a NATO member state. During her visit, Clinton stressed the importance of developing bilateral relations between the two countries.

Washington is trying to isolate Russia and Iran in the Caucasus, and to win Armenia for Trans-Caspian pipeline projects. Armenia is the last country with which Russia—and to some extent Iran—can assert influence in the region.

The tense relations between Moscow and Washington, as well as US and Israeli war preparations

against Iran, threaten a regional war in the Caucasus that could rapidly escalate into a conflict between the great powers.

Russia, which maintains its only military base in the Caucasus in Armenia, has signed a treaty to provide military assistance to Yerevan in case of war. The *New York Times* reported on June 11 that Russian military aircraft have held numerous exercises over Armenia. Russian colonel Igor Gorbunov told the Russian news agency *Interfax* that Russian pilots were preparing for combat operations.

Iran, too, is expected to stand on Armenia's side. Russian commentator Andrei Smirnov wrote recently: "Iran will also not allow the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh by Armenia. In the case of such a scenario, it would send troops into the region, because it is also a matter of life and death for Iran. The only open question now, is what will start sooner—war against Iran or in Nagorno-Karabakh."

The US would likely stand by Azerbaijan. The country is not only an important energy supplier and transit corridor for Central Asian and Caspian gas, but also of great military and strategic importance. Israel and the US have systematically armed its navy and army in preparation for war against Iran. (See: "Growing tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan")

Baku has already supported the US-led wars in Iraq, Kosovo and Afghanistan. About one third of the NATO troops deployed in Afghanistan pass through the Caspian republic.

During her talks with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, Hillary Clinton announced a further expansion of military and economic relations between the two countries and praised the participation of Azerbaijan in this year's NATO summit. This year, for the first time, Baku participated in a summit of the alliance, while Russian President Vladimir Putin refused to attend amid growing tensions with the US and NATO.

Clinton's visit to Georgia further fuelled tensions with Russia. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003 and the Caucasus war of 2008—which Georgia waged against Russia, with US support, over the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia—relations between Tbilisi and Moscow have been poor.

At the beginning of the year, Georgia issued so-called "neutral" passports to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, to replace Russian passports. According

to Russian media reports, the passports were issued by the Georgian Interior Ministry, and so are hardly "neutral". During her visit, Clinton said that Washington would recognize these passports.

The spokesman for the Russian Foreign Ministry Alexander Lukaschewitsch then declared: "Unfortunately, the statements by Mrs. Clinton in Georgia show that Washington has not learnt from the events in the Caucasus in August 2008."



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