Ukraine conflict exacerbates tensions in the Caucasus

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The Ukraine conflict is exacerbating the already tense situation in the Caucasus. Following the US and European Union-backed coup in Kiev, moves are now underway to speed up the inclusion of Georgia and Moldova into the EU and NATO, and strengthen ties with Azerbaijan. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have lined up behind the imperialist powers and the right-wing government in Kiev in their campaign against Russia.

The Caucasus has been a renewed focal point of imperialist interests since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and subsequent independence of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The region provides access to the Caspian Basin—one of the largest energy reserves in the world—and serves as a bridge between Europe and Central Asia.

Following the US-funded "Rose Revolution" in 2003, Georgia has emerged as the main partner of the US and the EU in the Caucasus. In 2008, Georgia conducted a war against Russia in an abortive bid to regain control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The two regions remain under Russian control and tensions between Russia and Georgia have intensified enormously.

At the end of February, Georgian President Irakli Garibashvili met with US President Barack Obama in Washington and urged the United States to accelerate the integration of the post-Soviet states into NATO and the EU. In particular, he called for NATO to accept Georgia earlier than previously planned. Garibashvili described the independence referendum in the Crimea as "illegal".

NATO had originally promised Georgia membership in 2008, but allowed the date to pass after its confrontation with Russia. The admission of Georgia into NATO would be an open provocation and threat of war against Russia.

Both Georgia and Moldova, which also has territorial disputes with Russia due to the secession of Transnistria, are also on the verge of concluding an Association Agreement with the European Union. Its signing has been brought forward for a second time, and will now take place in June.

Western propaganda frequently claims that after Crimea, Georgia could be Russia's "next target". In fact, there is a real risk that Georgia could provoke a war with Russia as it did in 2008. With its open support for the coup in Kiev, the Georgian government has left no doubt as to its willingness to once again provide a casus belli.

After Georgia, Azerbaijan is the second most important US ally in the Caucasus—not only against Russia but also against Iran. The Azerbaijani media is openly discussing direct military confrontation between the imperialist powers and Russia and a possible territorial breakup of Russia. The right-wing opposition Musavat party, which is pushing for an even stronger orientation to the West, vigorously supported the Kiev protests.

Following weeks of silence, the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev addressed the crisis in Ukraine for the first time on 20 March, a few days after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Without naming Russia, he declared that the "territorial integrity of a country" could not be "changed without its consent," thereby echoing the political line of Washington and Brussels.

The Internet newspaper Eurasianet quoted a senior Azerbaijani Foreign Ministry official, who stated that Baku could break all relations with Crimea: "There is still no decision made, but I expect it", he said.

In the war between Georgia and Russia in the summer of 2008, Baku refrained from taking sides. The integration of Azerbaijan into the preparations for war against Iran, however, has served to intensify tensions with Moscow in recent years. At the end of December 2012 the government in Baku forced Russia to abandon its radar station in Azerbaijan by demonstratively increasing the rent from 7 to 300 million dollars per year. The station was originally planned as the starting point for a joint missile defense project between Russia and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan is becoming increasingly important to the strategy of US imperialism following the war preparations against Iran and attempts to re-route energy supplies from the post-Soviet region to Europe, bypassing Russia. On 18 March the American ambassador in Baku, Richard Morningstar, stated that the crisis in Ukraine made relations

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between Azerbaijan and the US and the EU even more important.

George Friedman of the Stratfor Information Service, which has close links to US intelligence agencies, proposes forming an alliance of states, stretching from Estonia across Poland and Romania to Azerbaijan in order to "to engage and confront Russia" These states should build up their armed forces in a massive fashion and receive US military training, Friedman states.

"A failure to engage at this point would cause the countries around Russia's periphery, from Estonia to Azerbaijan, to conclude that with the United States withdrawn and Europe fragmented, they must reach an accommodation with Russia" Friedman writes. "This will expand Russian power and open the door to Russian influence spreading on the European Peninsula itself. The United States has fought three wars (World War I, World War II and the Cold War) to prevent hegemonic domination of the region. Failure to engage would be a reversal of a century-old strategy."

In a document from December 2013, "Azerbaijan's security and U.S. interests: time for a reassessment", Stephen Blank, who works for the United States Army War College, and various Washington think tanks, stresses that Azerbaijan is a key country in the region.

He quoted former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who wrote in the 1990s: "Azerbaijan can be described as the vitally important "cork" controlling access to the 'bottle' that contains the riches of the Caspian Sea basin and Central Asia. An independent, Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan, with pipelines running from it to the ethnically related and politically supportive Turkey, would prevent Russia from exercising a monopoly on access to the region and would thus also deprive Russia of decisive political leverage over the policies of the new Central Asian states."

Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey form an important corridor for the transportation of oil and gas from the Caspian region to the West, bypassing Russia. A number of pipelines are already up and running. The Trans-Anatolian pipeline (TANAP) is due to be completed in 2018 and is expected to deliver up to 30 billion cubic meters of gas from Azerbaijan's Shah Deniz field in the Balkans.

TANAP could also supply Ukraine, which struck a deal with Baku in November 2013 to form a joint consortium for the construction of the pipeline. Ukraine is heavily dependent on Russian gas supplies and has tried for years to lessen its dependency by promoting shale gas, liquefied natural gas imports and finding other energy suppliers.

Since the beginning of the TANAP project Azerbaijan has expanded its economic relations with a number of other Eastern European countries. On 18 March, Turkish Energy Minister Taner Yildiz said that the Ukraine crisis could transform TANAP into the key pipeline project in the region.

The ruling elites in Azerbaijan, however, are divided on the question of how far they should seek confrontation with Russia, fearing a resurgence of the war over Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the small mountain region of Nagorno-Karabakh resulted in around 25,000 fatalities between 1988 and 1994. A million were made homeless, and many have still found no permanent place to live. Since then there have been repeated border conflicts.

Tensions have increased in recent months with many observers fearing a new outbreak of war. Armenia has close political and military links with Russia, while Azerbaijan has close relations with NATO member Turkey.

The confrontation between Russia and the imperialist powers in Ukraine has served to further exacerbate the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia is the only Caucasian country to back Russia. So far, peace negotiations have been carried out by the so-called Minsk Peace group led by Russia, the US and France. Given the sanctions imposed by the West against Russia and a possible escalation of the conflict, however, it is unlikely that this fragile framework will be able to stabilize the situation.

Decades of Stalinist rule, the destruction of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism have transformed the entire region into a powder keg that could explode at any time. As was the case in Yugoslavia, the imperialist powers are exploiting national and ethnic tensions in Russia and the entire post-Soviet sphere to prepare military action aimed at imposing their control over the vast resources of the region.

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