

THE THREE COLORS OF WAR: RUSSIAN, TURKISH, AND IRANIAN MILITARY THREAT TO THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract

The South Caucasus once again became a ground for major regional power competition after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Russia, Iran, and Turkey vie for power and influence, as well as for the access to strategic resources and transportation routes. These three major regional powers have used or threatened to use their armed forces against the region. Russia has invaded and threatened Georgia, Turkey has planned an invasion of Armenia and Georgia, and Iran has threatened Azerbaijan. Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran will remain willing to use force in the South Caucasus if they feel that their vital interests are at stake. The governments of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have to rely mainly on themselves, and strengthen the weakest areas of their national defences. Georgia's Black Sea, and Azerbaijan's Caspian Sea coasts remain examples of poorly defended lines, weaknesses of which could be easily exploited by the main opponents of the states in question.

Keywords: *South Caucasus, Invasion, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Defence, Security*

Introduction

The South Caucasus region, comprised by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, is surrounded by three large regional powers, Iran, Turkey, and Russia, which for the last 200 years have played influential roles in regional politics and security arrangements. In the 19th century, all three major powers invaded the Caucasus, with Russia managing to achieve the most. The second half of the 19th century and most of the 20th saw Russians dominating the region, and Persians and Ottomans playing the role of challengers. Things have changed considerably since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. After the restoration of independence and sovereignty by Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, they found themselves on a new playing field with the two other major powers back in action and vying for more power and influence.

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All three dominant powers have the ability to influence things in the region by employing economic and political means at their disposal. Even the smallest and the most insignificant of international regions may become of huge strategic significance, if the major powers involved in the region decide to compete and vie for gains. The South Caucasus is no exception, as the region has attracted attention of not only historically major players, but also newcomers, such as the United States and China. After 15 years of the restoration of sovereignty by the South Caucasian states, Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran continue to play decisive roles in regional politics.

Russia: An Old Country and the Sea

Russia has been the most aggressive of the big three since the dissolution of the USSR. Moscow has resorted to the use of force in the South Caucasus many times, as it sees this region as vital to its national interests. Of the highest importance for Russia is the energy corridor that runs through the region as it represents the only alternative route for Azerbaijani and Central Asian energy resources to be shipped to Western markets. Moscow wants to have the final say on this issue, as Russia funds its state defence and security enterprises, and basically, holds the vast country together due to its easy access to crude oil and natural gas. To further provide for survival and power of the Russian state, the Kremlin will not hesitate to use its armed forces, as well as its former KGB apparatus to gain as much influence in the region as it needs.

One obvious area Russia exercises huge dominance over in the states of the South Caucasus is the Black Sea. Of the three South Caucasian states, only Georgia has access to the Black Sea, and it is ill equipped to deal with any military challenges that Moscow may throw its way in that area. In October 2006, Russia's Black Sea fleet conducted live fire maneuvers off Georgia's Black Sea coast. According to Georgian officials, Russian ships were as close as 16 miles from the Georgia's coastline.¹ The live fire exercise disrupted civilian shipping in the area, as the Russian military vessels blocked the Georgian ports Poti, Supsa, and Batumi. The Russian government clearly intended this exercise as a hostile act, as they declined to inform the Georgian counterparts of the movements of their vessels, and deliberately misinformed the public of the nature of the exercise. Defence Minister Ivanov labeled it part of Black Sea Harmony (BSH), a joint exercise with Turkey that is supposed to be conducted after advance planning. Ankara, however, rejected this claim, and expressed its surprise at such claims.²

Since then Russian Black Sea fleet vessels entered Georgia's territorial waters a number of times, more recently during the November 2007 rallies in Tbilisi. Such incursions take place without advance notice of warning, as the Russians feel secure from any credible response by the

¹ Vladimir Socor, "Tbilisi Claims Russian Navy Holding Exercises off Georgian Coast," Eurasia Daily Monitor, Vol. III, Issue 194, October 20 2006, The Jamestown Foundation, (http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=414&issue_id=3895&article_id=2371563)

² Ibid.

Georgians. Moscow will try to maintain its dominance in the Black Sea, as without proper defences Georgia will not be able to exercise its full sovereignty, and Azerbaijan and Armenia will lose as their access to the outside world will be limited to Russian and Iranian controlled routes.

The October 2006 live fire exercise followed the Tbilisi-Moscow spy row, and signaled sharp deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations. After imposing comprehensive economic embargo on Georgia, and organizing mass deportations of ethnic Georgians from Russia, the Kremlin sharply highlighted vulnerabilities in Georgia's defences – its Black Sea coast has been virtually undefended from a potential sea invasion since the breakup of the Soviet Union. The small Georgian navy and coast guard cannot do much to deter such hostile acts let alone repel a full scale invasion.

Georgia should assert its sovereignty and independence by establishing a noticeable military presence in the Black Sea. It needs a deterrent for potential invasion and intimidation by a hostile power. With the Black Sea coast exposed, Georgian territorial waters poorly defended, and its exclusive economic zone poorly monitored, Tbilisi's chances of re-uniting the country and establishing itself as a viable political entity remain small. Even if the country's current problems could be solved, without a strong naval presence Georgia would remain very vulnerable for future encroachments on its sovereignty.

Moscow has funded the breakaway Abkhazia, and supplied it with armed warships. Georgia's separatist province is now claiming control over its 'territorial waters' in the Black Sea. Abkhazia is a major piece in Russia's Black Sea regional calculations, as it could serve a number of useful purposes. Small, but well armed and supplied Abkhaz military could be used as an intimidating factor against Caucasian states' ambitions to exercise independent foreign and defence policies. The Abkhaz forces could also disrupt energy routes in the region not favoured by Moscow. Further, Abkhazia could be used by Moscow to re-assert its control over Georgia as this separatist province remains *de jure* part of Georgia, and theoretically the country's re-unifications could be initiated from both ends. Control of Georgia is crucial for Russia's new great power game, as Moscow sees energy as the key for its comeback on the world stage, and Georgia remains its chief rival in securing the access to energy resources of the South Caucasus and Central Asia from the west.

Georgia's Black Sea coast is virtually undefended from a sea invasion – currently this can be easily undertaken by Russia, and potentially even by Abkhazia. It is hard to imagine that the General Staff of the Russia's armed forces does not have a plan for a potential full-scale invasion of Georgia. Given its historical legacy (the Soviet army had offensive and defensive plans for almost every contingency), and current tense relations between Moscow and Tbilisi that are not likely to better anytime soon, this would be a very natural assumption. In such a plan, an invasion from the sea would figure as the most prominent option, as the sea side remains undefended. Plus, the Russians have both training and military experience of sea invasion of Georgia.

The Soviet navy, marines, and the army regularly practiced seaborne invasions in Georgia (mostly Soviet Black Sea fleet).³ Russians have assailed Georgia's Black Sea coast in combat formations a number of times since the collapse of the USSR. The Russian Black Sea fleet and army supported the Abkhaz separatists during the 1992-1993 war, and have continued providing military assistance since the end of military conflict. Further, in 1993, combat-ready Russian forces landed in the Poti area to 'help' the Georgian government, which was struggling with a pro-Gamsakhurdia uprising in western Georgia.

Georgia's land border with Russia is naturally protected by the Caucasus Mountains. In fact, Georgia historically has not experienced a large scale invasion from the north as hostile parties mostly came from southern and eastern directions. On the other hand, geography of Azerbaijan's border with Russia adjacent to the Caspian Sea is more 'welcoming' to a potential Russian invasion. In 1920-1921, when Russia re-occupied the three South Caucasus republics, the Bolshevik- controlled 11th Army invaded Azerbaijan first, and then it advanced to Armenia and Georgia.

Azerbaijan is also vulnerable by the Caspian Sea, as the Russian navy maintains superiority in this land-locked body. Making Azerbaijan's defences more credible in the Caspian is more complicated as other littoral states may not necessarily support strengthening of Baku's sovereignty. Iran has been especially aggressive toward Azerbaijan, as it challenges the legal status of the Caspian, as well as Baku's ownership of certain off-shore Azeri oil fields. Turkmenistan has been traditionally leaning toward Russia, and it will not complicate relations with the big brother for the sake of Azerbaijan.

On the Georgian-Russian border in Caucasian Mountains, there are only a handful of passable roads that potential northern invaders could use, and even they could be easily blocked or destroyed. In a scenario of Tbilisi asserting its control over the Tskhinvali region, the only thing the Georgian army would have to do to cut Russia's military support routes with the local separatists is to block or disable the Roki Pass. All other roads linking the separatist Tskhinvali region with the Russian Federation will be impassable from late fall to early spring. However, Georgia would still be wide open to retaliation from the sea.

Similarly, military options for Azerbaijan in addressing the Karabakh question do not look bright, as the country remains virtually undefended from a potential attack from the Caspian Sea. Both Russia and Iran would very likely support Armenian and Karabakh forces if hostilities were to resume between the sides. Moscow and Tehran may, under favourable circumstances, form an alliance against Azerbaijan, and try to divide its rich crude oil reserves in the process.

³ Back then Georgia was part of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet army used Georgian sea coast for practice purposes only. The author of this article was part of such exercises in the 1980s.

Because of the above, both Azerbaijan and Georgia need to restore their sovereignty over territorial waters, deter potential aggression from Russia, and check military ambitions of other hostile parties. It would be naïve to expect Moscow to just hand over control of Abkhazia to Tbilisi after extending so much effort and resources there. Georgia is the only alternative to Russia for South Caucasus and Central Asian energy shipment routes and transportation corridors destined to Western markets. By eliminating this alternative, Moscow would make a major step toward re-establishing itself as a world power, and extending influence over its southern and western neighbors.

Georgia has more chances at enhancing its defences, and warding off a potential invasion from the sea. Tbilisi could utilize good will of friendly littoral states and deploy diesel submarines. According to Canadian Commodore Denis Rouleau, submarines are "a phenomenon tool for collecting intelligence."⁴ Modern submarines are fitted with newest intelligence collecting capabilities that allow them to collect a variety of information about the surface vessels. A submarine can 'sit' very quietly, and collect intelligence, complete with imagery, etc, without being detected by the opposition. For any surface vessel and/or fleet commanding officer "to know that there's a sub somewhere, but not to know where it is exactly, is the scariest thing out there."⁵ Boats carry at a minimum 12 torpedoes each (most carry more, and some may carry missiles in addition to torpedoes). Any enemy considering invasion would be certain to reckon the submarine while performing a cost/benefit analysis. Most modern diesel-electric (and AIP) submarines have an endurance of few weeks.⁶ A small fleet of subs can do much damage to a larger fleet of surface vessels, and check naval supremacy of larger sea powers.

Moscow will use vast foreign intelligence experience and apparatus to prevent Georgia from acquiring submarines or otherwise strengthening its defences on the Black Sea. Kremlin's best bet is to manipulate Georgian government and the country's political class, both of which it has been doing quite well recently. Moscow benefits from keeping Georgia and Azerbaijan weak as it seeks to secure the regions energy reserves and pipeline networks for itself.

Cold Turkey

Turkey seems to be the least likely source of invasion of the South Caucasus; however, apparently Ankara came very close in 1993 to sending its troops to Karabakh and Georgia. Ambassador Chrysanthopoulos of Greece tells an interesting story linking the October 1993 failed coup in

⁴ Commodore Denis Rouleau, Keynote Speech to the 23rd Annual Political Studies Students' Conference, the University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, January 31 2007.

⁵ Interview with Commodore Rouleau, Winnipeg, MB, January 31 2007.

⁶ Stan Zimmerman, "Submarine Technology for the 21st Century," Trafford Publishing, 2006.

Moscow, with Turkish designs for the South Caucasus.⁷ On October 5 1993, then President of Armenia Levon Ter-Petrossian told Ambassador Chrysanthopoulos, who was posted in Armenia at that time, that he had armed forces of Armenia on maximum readiness because he expected Turkey to attack Armenia: there was a possibility that about ten thousand Russian soldiers "guarding the border between Armenia and Turkey" would be ordered to return to Russia.

Apparently, Ter-Petrossian was convinced that Turkey would take advantage of serious unrests in Russia, and occupy Armenia using a pretext of either the Kurdish question or the protection of Nakhichevan.⁸ President of Armenia had intelligence reports that Ankara was considering such a course of action, and his suspicions were further confirmed by Turkish armed forces penetration on October 5 into Iraq in hot pursuit of PKK guerillas.

On October 11 of the same year, Ambassador of France to Armenia, Madam France de Hartingh,⁹ whom Ambassador Chrysanthopoulos describes as "a dynamic woman who spoke fluent Russian and knew very well the problems of the region,"¹⁰ informed the Greek ambassador that according to French intelligence sources, there had been an agreement on Armenia between a leader of the Russian coup, Chairman of Russia's Supreme Soviet, Ruslan Khasbulatov, and Ankara. Reportedly, Khasbulatov promised Turkish leaders that he would allow Turkish incursions of limited nature into Armenia, to round up PKK guerillas, and "into Georgia to secure Abkhazia." According to the same source, Khasbulatov had also planned withdrawal of Russian troops from Armenia. Chrysanthopoulos adds that the same information was later confirmed by his "United States colleague."¹¹

On October 12, Chrysanthopoulos had a conversation with Vazgen Sargsian, Defence Minister of Armenia. Sargsian also linked the events in Moscow with Turkish military build-up at the Armenian border. Sargsian also remembered the September 22 visit to Armenia by a Turkish military delegation under General Hayrettin Uzun in the framework of CSCE verification missions. The Turkish delegation reportedly asked to visit Armenia's border with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Quite predictably, the Armenian military authorities did not allow the Turkish officials to inspect the frontiers by land, but did so from a high-flying plane instead. On October 2 and 3, when the Moscow unrest was in full swing, Armenian authorities panicked that the Russian troops would be withdrawn from the country, and a Turkish invasion was imminent. Defence Minister Sargsian¹² was in constant communication with his Russian counterpart, who assured him a

⁷ Leonidas T. Chrysanthopoulos, "Caucasus Chronicles: Nation Building and Diplomacy in Armenia, 1993-1994," London and Princeton: Gomidas Institute Books, 2002

⁸ Ibid, pp. 76-77.

⁹ Madam Hartingh was France's first ambassador to Armenia.

¹⁰ Chrysanthopoulos, p. 30.

¹¹ Harry Gilmore was America's first ambassador to Armenia, 1993-1995.

¹² Mr. Sargsian (sometimes spelled as Sarkisian) subsequently became Prime Minister of Armenia. He was assassinated in October 1999, when gunmen stormed the Armenian Parliament and opened fire killing several top government officials.

number of times that there was no question of recalling the Russian troops from the Turkish-Armenian border.¹³

Ambassador Chrysanthopoulos believes that the above mentioned scenario was quite credible,¹⁴ and such an agreement did exist between Ruslan Khasbulatov and Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Çiller. He does indicate that the increase of Turkish armed forces at the border could be "attributed to the occupation of Fizuli by the Karabagh armed forces." Further, Chrysanthopoulos provides only Khasbulatov's ethnic background, "Chechen Moslem," as his motivation to surrender Armenia to Turkey; however, this does not seem to be a very credible reason for such a major concession.

In 1993, one could imagine Turkey helping Azerbaijan, and preventing its collapse under joint Armenian, Russian, and Iranian pressure. However, one could also imagine Azerbaijan managing its own problem with Karabakh had the Russians not supported the Armenian-Kharabakh troops in the first place, with weapons, ammunition, fuel, and expertise. Therefore, for Azerbaijan to win or at least to be better positioned for the post-war settlement they needed to convince Moscow to quit supporting the Armenians. The Karabakh question, in theory, could have been settled without Turkish or Azeri invasion of Armenia.

It is more difficult to imagine Turkey invading Georgia "to secure Abkhazia," although poor coastal defences would make that a possibility even today. Such an invasion would have been perceived as a hostile act as in 1993, neither Georgia nor the Abkhaz rebels had invited Ankara to become an occupying or peacemaking power in Abkhazia or elsewhere in Georgia.

It is quite possible that Ankara indeed had an agreement with Khasbulatov. It is difficult to judge what was the nature of the Turkish game plan for the invasion, but it was likely influenced by perceptions that the former Soviet space was falling apart – civil and inter-state wars were raging in the Caucasus, rebellion was taking place in Moscow, and violence (Moldova, Tajikistan) elsewhere. Turkey could not dare advance its troops against the Russians, but with the Russians weakened or gone from the region, Turkish invasion of Armenia is not a very unlikely scenario. Ambiguities of 1993 eventually contributed to the Armenian victory in the Karabakh war, and the inability or unwillingness by the Europeans and others to stop the ethnic cleansing of almost one million Azerbaijanis and others from the Armenian occupied territories.

Persian Letters

It is counter-intuitive, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has exhibited more balanced and less aggressive behaviour toward the South Caucasus than the other two major

¹³ Chrysanthopoulos, pp. 78-79.

¹⁴ Interview with Leonidas T. Chrysanthopoulos, Ambassador of Greece to Canada, Winnipeg, MB, February 5 2002.

powers. Tehran assisted Armenia in its war against Azerbaijan, but only came close to blows with Azerbaijan once – disputed oil field in the Caspian Sea in 2001-2002 generated much hot air both in Baku and Tehran.

In July 2001, Iran threatened the use of force unless Azeri oil exploration vessels left the area in the Caspian Sea that Tehran regards as its own.¹⁵ After the dissolution of the USSR, Iran effectively laid a claim over 20 per cent of the Caspian, which translates into many billions of barrels of crude oil reserves.¹⁶ Tehran constantly violates Azerbaijani airspace and territorial waters, most recently such violations occurred in February, and again in November of 2007.¹⁷

Since the early 1990s, Tehran's major objective in the Caucasus has been to build bridge-ways to Russia and Europe. At least, that was Iranians' initial claim,¹⁸ and most of their activities afterward have supported it. Despite its stand-off with the US and disagreements with Europeans, Iran has managed to cultivate friendly relations with Western leaning Caucasian states. Tehran has especially warm relations with Yerevan – leaders and social groups from the two countries proclaim eternal brotherhood, and historical continuity of their common evolution. Armenia has managed to run very successful foreign relations in the 1990s gaining much help from Iran, as well as from the United States, and most importantly, from the Russian Federation – from 1993 to 1995 Moscow shipped over US \$1 billion of arms to Armenia,¹⁹ and provided most of its fuel as well.

Volunteers from Iran helped Armenians fight in the Karabakh war.²⁰ Tehran's general goal in the South Caucasus has been to check ambitions of those in Azerbaijan who desire to see two Azerbaijanans, one sovereign state, and the other a province in Iran re-united.²¹ Iran has also tried to promote a form of irredentism in Azerbaijan. In 1993, one Alikram Humbatov led an ill-conceived rebellion in Azerbaijan's southern area populated by the Talysh, and declared himself head of 'the Talysh-Mughan Republic.' The rebellion was stopped in a couple of days, but it is widely believed that ever since Tehran has exercised wide influence over the Talysh, a Persian

¹⁵ "Baku-Tehran Dispute over Oilfield," APS Diplomat Recorder, accessed at (www.thefreelibrary.com).

¹⁶ Ariel Cohen, "Iran Claims Over Caspian Sea Resources Threaten Energy Security," Executive Summary #1582, The Heritage Foundation, < www.heritage.org/Research/Iraq/bg1582es.cfm >.

¹⁷ Khazri Bakinsky and Mina Muradova, "Azerbaijan: US-Iran Tensions Cause for Minority Arrests?" eurasianet.org < www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav030507a.shtml >.

¹⁸ A conversation with Iran's ambassador to Georgia, spring 1994.

¹⁹ "Caspian Sea Region: Regional Conflicts," July 2002, US Energy Information Administration, (www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/caspconf.html).

²⁰ Interviews in Erevan, March 1993. Reportedly, ethnic Armenian volunteers from other Middle Eastern countries, such as Syria and Lebanon, also served in the Armenian armed forces.

²¹ Abulfaz Elchibey, a nationalist president of Azerbaijan (1992-1993), under whose leadership Azerbaijan lost some territories to Armenia, explicitly expressed such sentiments.

dialect speaking Shi'a group.²² In 2003, Iran held large scale military maneuvers in its Azerbaijan province to send a clear message of threat to Baku.²³

Violations of Azerbaijani airspace by Iran are very similar to Russia's violations of Georgian airspace. The two countries, Iran and Russia, even plan a joint naval task force in the Caspian Sea, which is going to be established after a successful resolution of the status of the Caspian Sea.²⁴ Moscow has already started beefing up its military presence in the Caspian Sea by providing its Caspian Flotilla with new vessels, and repairing older ones.²⁵ Since 2002, Iran has been rebuilding its naval forces as well – Tehran has initiated major vessel building works in the country, and has purchased boats and equipment abroad, specifically in China.²⁶ Azerbaijan remains to be the prime target of Iranian and Russian build-ups in the Caspian.

Conclusion

The Caucasus as a modern international region has been shaped by interactions among the three dominant powers that surround it. Currently, the region occupies a crucial strategic point in long-term calculations by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well by the US and other powers with a global reach. Small countries frequently get traded in international diplomatic games and gambles, and for that reason they need to depend mostly on their own strengths. Of the three Caucasian states, only Armenia, a landlocked country, can effectively defend itself from a potential invasion. Azerbaijan and Georgia have recently developed and invested into land forces, but have ignored the needs for naval and coastal defences. If the lessons given by Russia and Iran during the last fifteen years are worth anything, Baku and Tbilisi have to acknowledge that they are in charge of maritime countries that need adequate naval defences to be credible international players.

As far as Armenia is concerned, in the immediate future it faces no real threat of invasion from outside the region. Azerbaijan might try to re-take its lost land by military force, but most likely Ankara will not support it if the Russians remain militarily committed to Armenia. However, with time, and eventual weakening of Russia's military presence in the region, Turkey might present a serious threat to Armenia's security and defences. The South Caucasus has seen many empires over centuries, none of them managing to stick around forever, and there is no reason why Russia, which has been in the South Caucasus for about 200 years, should be an exception.

²² Bakinsky and Muradova.

²³ Stephen Blank, "New Military Trends in the Caspian," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 06.01.2005 (www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3072).

²⁴ "Iran and Russia May Establish Joint Navy in the Caspian Sea," *RIA Novosti* report posted by GlobalResearch.ca, October 15 2007 < www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=7097 >.

²⁵ "Caspian Flotilla," GlobalSecurity.org (www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/mf-caspian.htm).

²⁶ "[Iranian] Navy," GlobalSecurity.org < www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/navy.htm >.