

Reality Bites ['merika] Again

by J. H. Kunstler via dingo - kunstler.com *Tuesday, Aug 19 2008, 8:43am*

international / social/political / other press

The feeble American response to Russia's assertion of power in the Caucasus of Central Asia was appropriate, since our claims of influence in that part of the world are laughable. The US had taken advantage of temporary confusion in Russia, during the ten-year-long post-Soviet-collapse interval, and set up a client government in Georgia, complete with military advisors, sales of weapons, and even the promise of club membership in the western alliance known as NATO. These blandishments were all in the service of the Baku-to-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which was designed specifically to drain the oil region around the Caspian Basin with an outlet on the Mediterranean, avoiding unfriendly nations all along the way.

At the time this gambit was first set up, in the early 1990s, there was some notion (or wish, really) among the so-called western powers that the Caspian would provide an end-run around OPEC and the Arabs, as well as the Persians, and deliver all the oil that the US and Europe would ever need -- a foolish wish and a dumb gambit, as things have turned out.

For one thing, the latterly explorations of this very old oil region -- first opened to drilling in the 19th century -- proved somewhat disappointing. US officials had been touting it as like unto "another Saudi Arabia" but the oil actually produced from the new drilling areas of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and the other Stans turned out to be preponderantly heavy-and-sour crudes, in smaller quantities than previously dreamed-of, and harder to transport across the extremely challenging terrain to even get to the pipeline head in Baku.

Meanwhile, Russia got its house in order under the non-senile, non-alcoholic Vladimir Putin, and woke up along about 2007 to find itself the leading oil and natural gas producer in the world. Among the various consequences of this was Russia's reemergence as a new kind of world power -- an energy resource power, with the energy destiny of Europe pretty much in its hands. Also, meanwhile, the USA had set up other client states in the ring of former Soviet republics along Russia's southern underbelly, complete with US military bases, while fighting active engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Now, if this wasn't the dumbest, vainest move in modern geopolitical history!

It's one thing that US foreign policy wonks imagined that Russia would remain in a coma forever, but the idea that we could encircle Russia strategically with defensible bases in landlocked mountainous countries halfway around the world...? You have to ask what were they smoking over at the Pentagon and the CIA and the NSC?

So, this asinine policy has now come to grief. Not only does Russia stand to gain control over the Baku-to-Ceyhan pipeline, but we now have every indication that they will bring the states on its southern flank back into an active sphere of influence, and there is really not a damn thing that the US can pretend to do about it.

We could have spent the past ten years getting our own house in order -- waking up to the obsolescence of our suburban life-style, scaling back on the Happy Motoring, reconnecting our cities with world-class passenger rail, creating wealth by producing things of value (instead of resorting to

financial racketeering), protecting our borders, and taking the necessary measures to defend and update our own industries. Instead, we pissed our time and resources away. Nations do make tragic errors of the collective will. The cluelessness of George Bush is nothing less than a perfect metaphor for the failure of a whole generation. The Boomers will be identified as the generation that wrecked America.

So, as the vacation season winds down, this country greets a new reality. We miscalculated in Western and Central Asia. Russia still "owns" that part of the world. Are we going to extend our current land wars there into the even more distant and landlocked Stan-nations? At some point, as we face financial and military exhaustion, we have to ask ourselves if we can even successfully evacuate our personnel from the far-flung bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

This must be an equally sobering moment for Europe, and an additional reason for the recent plunge in the relative value of the Euro, for Europe is now at the mercy of Russia in terms of staying warm in the winter, running their kitchen stoves, and keeping the lights on. Russia also exerts substantial financial leverage over the US in all the dollars and securitized US debt paper it holds. In effect, Russia can shake the US banking system at will now by threatening to dump its dollar holdings.

The American banking system may not need a shove from Russia to fall on its face. It's effectively dead now, just lurching around zombie-like from one loan "window" to the next pretending to "borrow" capital -- while handing over shreds of its moldy clothing as "collateral" to the Federal Reserve. The entire US, beyond the banks, is becoming a land of the walking dead. Business is dying, home-ownership has become a death dance, whole regions are turning into wastelands of "for sale" signs, empty parking lots, vacant buildings, and dashed hopes. And all this beats a path directly to a failure of collective national imagination. We really don't know what's going on.

The fantasy that we can sustain our influence nine thousand miles away, when we can't even get our act together in Ohio is just a dark joke. One might state categorically that it would be a salubrious thing for America to knock off all its vaunted "dreaming" and just wake the fuck up.

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