

Russia remains a Black Sea power

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If the struggle in the Caucasus was ever over oil and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) agenda towards Central Asia, the United States suffered a colossal setback this week. Kazakhstan, the Caspian energy powerhouse and a key Central Asian player, has decided to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Russia over the conflict with Georgia, and Russia's de facto control over two major Black Sea ports has been consolidated.



Dmitry Medvedev

At a meeting in the Tajik capital Dushanbe on Thursday on the sidelines of the summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev told Russian President Dmitry Medvedev that Moscow could count on Astana's support in the present crisis.

In his press conference in Dushanbe, Medvedev underlined that his SCO counterparts, including China, showed understanding of the Russian position. Moscow appears satisfied that the SCO summit also issued a statement on the Caucasus developments, which, inter alia, said, "The leaders of the SCO member states welcome the signing in Moscow of the six principles for regulating the South Ossetia conflict, and support Russia's active role in assisting peace and cooperation in the region." The SCO comprises China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

There were tell-tale signs that something was afoot when the Kazakh Foreign Ministry issued a statement on August 19 hinting at broad understanding for the Russian position. The statement called for an "unbiased and balanced assessment" of events and pointed out that an "attempt [was made] to resolve a complicated ethno-territorial issue by the use of force", which led to "grave consequences". The statement said Astana supported the "way the Russian leadership proposed to resolve the issue" within the framework of the United Nations charter, the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 and international law.

The lengthy statement leaned toward the Russian position but offered a labored explanation for doing so.

Kazakhstan has since stepped out into the thick of the diplomatic sweepstakes and whole-heartedly endorsed the Russian position. This has become a turning point for Russian diplomacy in the post-Soviet space. Nazarbayev said:

I am amazed that the West simply ignored the fact that Georgian armed forces attacked the peaceful city of Tskhinvali [in South Ossetia]. Therefore, my assessment is as follows: I think that it originally started with this. And Russia's response could either have been to keep silent or to protect their people and so on. I believe that all subsequent steps taken by Russia have been designed to stop bloodshed of ordinary residents of this long-suffering city. Of course, there are many refugees, many homeless.

Guided by our bilateral agreement on friendship and cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia, we have provided humanitarian aid: 100 tons have already been sent. We will continue to provide assistance together with you.

Of course, there was loss of life on the Georgian side - war is war. The resolution of the conflict with Georgia has now been shifted to some indeterminate time in the future. We have always had good relations with Georgia. Kazakhstan's companies have made substantial investments there. Of course, those that have done this want stability there. The conditions of the plan that you and [President of France Nicolas] Sarkozy drew up must be implemented, but some have begun to disavow certain points in the plan.

However, I think that negotiations will continue and that there will be peace - there is no other alternative. Therefore, Kazakhstan understands all the measures that have been taken, and Kazakhstan supports them. For our part, we will be ready to do everything to ensure that everyone returns to the negotiating table.

From Moscow's point of view, Nazarbayev's words are worth their weight in gold. Kazakhstan is the richest energy producer in Central Asia and is a regional heavyweight. It borders China. The entire US regional strategy in Central Asia ultimately aims at replacing Russia and China as Kazakhstan's number one partner. American oil majors began making a beeline to Kazakhstan immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 - including Chevron, with which US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice was associated.

Unsurprisingly, Kazakhstan figured as a favorite destination for US Vice President Dick Cheney and President George W Bush has lavishly hosted Nazarbayev in the White House.

The US had gone the extra league in cultivating Nazarbayev, with the fervent hope that somehow Kazakhstan could be persuaded to commit its oil to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, whose viability is otherwise in doubt. The pipeline is a crucial component of the US's Caspian great game.

The US had gone to great lengths to realize the pipeline project against seemingly hopeless odds. In fact, Washington stage-managed the "color" revolution in Georgia in November 2003 (which catapulted Mikheil Saakashvili to power in Tbilisi) on the eve of the commissioning of the pipeline. The general idea behind the commotion in the South Caucasus was that the US should take control of Georgia through which the pipeline passes.

Besides, Kazakhstan shares a 7,500 kilometer border with Russia, which is the longest land border between any two countries in the world. It would be a nightmare for Russian security if NATO were to gain a foothold in Kazakhstan. Again, the US strategy had targeted Kazakhstan as the prize catch for NATO in Central Asia. The US aimed to make a pitch for Kazakhstan after getting Georgia

inducted into NATO.

These American dreams have suffered a setback with the Kazakh leadership now closing ranks with Moscow. It seems Moscow outwitted Washington.

Belarus voices support

The other neighboring country sharing a common border with Russia, Belarus, has also expressed support for Moscow. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko visited Medvedev in Sochi on August 19 to express his solidarity.

"Russia acted calmly, wisely and beautifully. This was a calm response. Peace has been established in the region - and it will last," he commented.

What is even more potent is that Russia and Belarus have decided to sign an agreement this autumn on creating a unified air defense system. This is hugely advantageous for Russia in the context of the recent US attempts to deploy missile defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic.

According to Russian media reports, Belarus has several S-300 air defense batteries - Russia's advanced system - on combat duty and is currently negotiating the latest S-400 systems from Russia, which will be made available by 2010.

Attention now shifts to the meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which is scheduled to take place in Moscow on September 5. The CSTO's stance on the crisis in the Caucasus will be closely watched.

It appears that Moscow and Kazakhstan are closely cooperating in setting the agenda of CSTO, whose members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The big question is how the CSTO gears up to meet NATO's expansion plans. The emergent geopolitical reality is that with Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow has virtually checkmated the US strategy in the Black Sea region, defeating its plan to make the Black Sea an exclusive "NATO lake". In turn, NATO's expansion plans in the Caucasus have suffered a setback.

Not many analysts have understood the full military import of the Russian moves in recognizing the breakaway Georgian republics. Russia has now gained de facto control over two major Black Sea ports - Sukhumi and Poti. Even if the US-supported regime of Viktor Yushchenko in Ukraine creates obstacles for the Russian fleet based in the Crimean port of Sevastopol - in all probability, Moscow will shrug off any Ukrainian pressure tactic - the fleet now has access to alternative ports on the Black Sea. Poti, in particular, has excellent facilities dating to the Soviet era.

The swiftness with which Russia took control of Poti must have made the US livid with anger. Washington's fury stems from the realization that its game plan to eventually eliminate Russia's historical role as a "Black Sea power" has been rendered a pipe dream. Of course, without a Black Sea fleet, Russia would have ceased to be a naval power in the Mediterranean. In turn, Russia's profile in the Middle East would have suffered. The Americans indeed had an ambitious game plan towards Russia.

There is every indication that Moscow intends to assert the strategic presence of its Black Sea Fleet. Talks have begun with Syria for the expansion of a Russian naval maintenance base at the Syrian port of Tartus. The Middle East media recently suggested in the context of Syrian President Bashar

al-Assad to Moscow that Russia might contemplate shifting its Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol to Syria. But this is an incorrect reading insofar as all that Russia needs is a supply and maintenance center for its warships, which operate missions in the Mediterranean. In fact, the Soviet navy's 5th Mediterranean Squadron had made use of Tartus port for such purpose.

China shows understanding

Moscow will approach the CSTO summit pleased with the SCO's backing, even if it was not without reservations. Medvedev said of the SCO meeting,

Of course, I had to tell our partners what had actually happened, since the picture painted by some of the Western media unfortunately differed from real facts as to who was the aggressor, who started all this, and who should bear the political, moral and ultimately the legal responsibility for what happened ...

Our colleagues gratefully received this information and during a series of conversations we concluded that such events certainly do not strengthen the world order, and that the party that unleashed the aggression should be responsible for its consequences ... I am very pleased to have been able to discuss this with our colleagues and to have received from them this kind of support for our efforts. We are confident that the position of the SCO member states will produce an appropriate resonance through the international security, and I hope this will give a serious signal to those who are trying to justify the aggression that was committed.

It must have come as a relief to Moscow that China agreed to line up behind such a positive formulation. On Thursday, the Russian Foreign Ministry in Moscow also seems to have had its first contact with the Chinese Embassy regarding the issue. Significantly, the Foreign Ministry statement said the meeting between Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin and Chinese ambassador Liu Guchang took place at the Chinese initiative.

The statement claimed, "The Chinese side was informed of the political and legal motives behind Russia's decision and expressed an understanding of them." (Emphasis added.) It is highly unlikely that on such a sensitive issue, Moscow would have unilaterally staked a tall claim without some degree of prior tacit consent from the Chinese side, which is a usual diplomatic practice.

The official Russian news agency report went a step further and highlighted that "China had expressed its understanding of Russia's decision to recognize Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia".

The favorable stance by Belarus, Kazakhstan and China significantly boosts Moscow's position. In real terms, the assurance that the three big countries that surround Russia will remain on friendly terms no matter the West's threat to unleash a new cold war, makes a huge difference to Moscow's capacity to maneuver. Any time now - possibly this weekend - we may expect Belarus to announce its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Clearly, Moscow is disinterested to mount any diplomatic campaign to rally support from the world community for the sovereignty and independence of the two breakaway provinces. As a Moscow commentator put it, "Unlike in comrade Leonid Brezhnev's time, Moscow is not trying to press any countries into supporting it on this issue. If it did, it could find quite a few sympathizers, but who cares?"

It serves Moscow's purpose as long as the world community draws an analogy between Kosovo and the two breakaway provinces. In any case, the two provinces have been totally dependent on Russia for economic sustenance.

With the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, what matters critically for Moscow is that if the West now intends to erect any new Berlin Wall, such a wall will have to run zig-zag along the western coast of the Black Sea, while the Russian naval fleet will always stay put on the east coast and forever sail in and out of the Black Sea.

The Montreal Convention assures the free passage of Russian warships through the Straits of Bosphorous. Under the circumstances, NATO's grandiose schemes to occupy the Black Sea as its private lake seem outlandish now. There must be a lot of egg on the faces of the NATO brains in Brussels and their patrons in Washington and London.

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