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School of International Affairs

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adabiweekly@ada.edu.az

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AZERBAIJAN: MOVING FROM 2008 TO 2009

Editorial Note: The end of one year and the beginning of another are always occasions for reviewing what has taken place and projecting what is likely to occur in the future. What follows are several perspectives on both the past and the future for Azerbaijan in the world, and on the ways in which developments in 2008 will affect those in 2009.

Azerbaijan in the World: In your view, what were Azerbaijan's major foreign policy achievements in the last year?

Khazar Ibrahim [Spokesperson for Azerbaijan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs]: First, concerning the major foreign policy issue – the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – two important documents were produced: the UN General Assembly March 14 resolution (A/RES/62/243) and the Moscow Declaration. The first called for the immediate, complete and unconditional withdrawal of all Armenian forces from all the occupied territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan and reaffirmed that no State shall recognize as lawful the situation resulting from the occupation of the territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan, nor render aid or assistance in maintaining this situation. The second made it clear that the conflict must be resolved on the basis of fundamental principles of international law. Also, with signatures of Presidents of

Azerbaijan and Armenia, the Declaration once again highlighted the interstate nature of the conflict, as well as the stage-by-stage roadmap for its resolution.

Moreover, many international organizations, including UN, the Council of Europe, NATO, and OIC, as well as many nations reiterated their full support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity. The final communiqué of the North Atlantic Council's December meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers reads: "We continue to support the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. Peaceful conflict resolution founded on these principles has gained increased relevance for overall stability in the region."

As a country which is part of the Caspian, South Caucasus and Black Sea regions, Azerbaijan contributed to the development of cooperation in all of them. President Ilham Aliyev said that Azerbaijan's initiatives opened up opportunities for the neighbors, while also advancing Azerbaijan's national interests. Thanks to Azerbaijan's leading role, countries of Central Asia, as well as Caspian Sea, Black sea, and prospectively Baltic sea regions work together in joint projects.

Euro-Atlantic and European integration agenda of our foreign policy has advanced. Azerbaijan continued its mutually beneficial cooperation with EU through Neighborhood Policy and welcomed plans for a new Eastern Partnership. NATO IPAP's implementation continued within its second phase.

Azerbaijan's contribution to international peace and stability multiplied with a sizable increase in number of troops in Afghanistan. Moreover, Azerbaijan assisted many nations during natural disasters and other calamities with expertise and financially. In recent years, Azerbaijan provided some 4 million USD in cash.

And the country continued to play an important role as an energy supplier. The energy summit, held in Baku, emphasized increased interest to the Caspian energy resources and underlined diversification as a core for Azerbaijan's energy policy. The Summit declaration specified that "the Caspian region is one of the largest centers of production of the hydrocarbon resources and transportation of energy to international markets and represents the significant element in the system of the Euro-Asian Oil Transport Corridor."

Hulusi Kılıç [Ambassador of Turkey in Azerbaijan]: Although some might not call it a "foreign policy achievement," President Ilham Aliyev's re-election has significant international consequences, reassuring Azerbaijan's friends, including Turkey, of continuity in Baku's self-confident and stable approach to the world.

Vugar Seyidov [Independent Analyst]: In 2008, Azerbaijan retained its leading role in the South Caucasus and continued its rise as a regional economic and political power. Azerbaijan managed to stay out of the military conflict in the western part of the South Caucasus and ensured the operation of the strategic energy supply pipelines.

In 2008, Azerbaijani diplomacy gained another success – the adoption of the UN Resolution on Nagorno-Karabakh, which once again called Armenia to liberate the occupied territories of Azerbaijan and re-affirmed Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan.

Later, the Moscow Declaration re-affirmed that there are two parties to the conflict – Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Finally, the Energy Summit that took place in Baku cemented Azerbaijan's key role in the East-West and South-North hydrocarbon transport corridor.

AIW: There have been many important changes in the international environment over the last 12 months that may prove crucial in defining Baku's future foreign policy. Among those are the August crisis in Georgia, the election of Obama as the US 44th president, and the global financial crisis and the radical slump in oil prices. What specific challenges do these events have for Azerbaijan and its foreign policy?

Amb. Kılıç: More than almost any other country in the region, Azerbaijan has to maintain a careful balance in its foreign policies. It is by all accounts a central country of the Caucasus but it is also a country with a larger geo-economic and geopolitical position. It is situated geographically and politically between East and West. It is a secular democracy but also a Muslim state. And consequently, its foreign policy must and does reflect all these often competing factors. In my view, this underlying situation continues to be far more important in determining Azerbaijan's foreign policy than any of the sometimes dramatic events of the last year.

Kh. Ibrahim: Azerbaijan's foreign policy is shaped by national interests and by developments in the regional and international environment. The events you mentioned have influenced regional and international landscape and Azerbaijan takes them into due consideration in executing its policies.

Azerbaijan has strategic interests in Georgia, including the major pipelines delivering the Caspian energy resources to the world markets. So, Azerbaijan is a strong proponent of peaceful and stable Georgia and region. We believe that there are too many conflicts in the South Caucasus and that they should be solved rather than exacerbated.

The election of Barack Obama as president of the United States will have a major impact globally and on the region because of widespread expectations that he will be more multilateralist than his predecessor has been and predicate his policies on the norms of international law.

The just resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict based on norms and principles of international law is long overdue. The United States as a co-chairman of the OSCE Minsk Group has a key role to influence the resolution process and Barack Obama can bring this change. Another important issue of concern for Azerbaijan, which unjustly lasts almost two decades, is section 907 to Freedom Support Act. The section sanctions (it is waived annually by the US President) Azerbaijan, a victim of foreign military occupation, while rewarding Armenia, the aggressor. This moral issue, if solved, could in large measure contribute to the positive image of the United States in Azerbaijan.

V. Seyidov: The major events mentioned in the question indeed have implications for Azerbaijan. The country borders with Georgia, and the outbreak of a real war there cannot go unnoticed in our country. The election of the new president in the US – Azerbaijan's strategic partner – will certainly have a great deal of impact on the

development of the bilateral relations between the two countries as well. And since oil is the main item of the Azerbaijani export, the dramatic fall in oil prices will have an impact on the economic policy of Azerbaijan.

AIW: Looking ahead, what do you see as Azerbaijan's major challenges and opportunities in the year of 2009?

Amb. Kılıç: Azerbaijan's most immediate challenge in 2009 will no doubt continue to be its conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Baku has reaffirmed its commitment to resolve the issue within international law and via the Minsk Group process, and we are hopeful that some progress will be achieved in the year ahead. After the August crisis in Georgia, that is particularly important lest there be new violence in the Caucasus.

Azerbaijan also has a very significant interest in seeing a resolution of the Georgian crisis because of its interests in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines and of its ties with the West both as an energy supplier and more generally. Azerbaijan is a key country for the diversification of the energy resources of the European Union countries, and the European Union should do more to achieve peace in the region.

Kh. Ibrahim: Azerbaijan will continue to be a predictable international player; it will continue to contribute to a better and more stable region and the world while advancing its national interests.

In 2009, a just resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will remain a priority. Azerbaijan will also continue to participate in European and Euro-Atlantic integration projects, work to advance bilateral relations with neighbors and key partners, and to contribute to international peace and stability, as well as to energy security.

While it is hard to name specific challenges and opportunities we should expect in 2009 due to a constantly changing nature of the international system, whatever those challenges and opportunities are, the strategy of Azerbaijan will be founded on its national interests and international norms and principles.

V. Seyidov: In 2009, the main challenge for Azerbaijani foreign policy will be to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Every effort must be made to make the process move forward. Restoration of the country's territorial integrity, outlined in the international documents as the basis for the conflict resolution, remains the ultimate goal of the Azerbaijani diplomacy.

AIW: In your opinion, what are the prospects for a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute after the developments of the last year?

Amb. Kılıç: After the latest developments in the Caucasus, there are real prospects aroused for the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey, as a member of that group, is supporting the Minsk Process and we believe the Moscow declaration is a step in the right direction. The momentum achieved now should not be ruined by all the relevant parties.

With regard to the Turkish initiative of the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, I would like to give a brief explanation of Turkey's motives and policy aims.

The August events in Georgia underscore how dangerous the Caucasus remains and also how little the existing mechanisms of conflict resolution have been able to achieve over the past 17 years. Turkey is convinced that all these conflicts can and must be solved by peaceful means with due respect to the territorial integrity of states, their independence, and national sovereignty. And consequently, we have launched this new initiative to give new impetus to the resolution of these conflicts.

We recognize that at present there is insufficient confidence among the countries of the region and that confidence building measures are needed if negotiations are to proceed in a productive way. The CSCP will thus work to strengthen regional peace, stability and security by encouraging regional political dialogue, enhancing economic cooperation, and developing good-neighborly relations in the region.

Our proposal is thus not an alternative to any institution, mechanism or any international organization which deals with the problems of the Caucasus. On the contrary, the CSCP is an additional platform to facilitate the communication among Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. The CSCP is a facilitator, not a competitor.

We believe that the CSCP will have a triggering effect on the previously existing but currently dormant processes. We believe that it is the only forward looking initiative now available to facilitate the formation of a common platform for countries of the region. Today, it is important to bring together Georgia and Russia as well as Azerbaijan and Armenia and Armenia and Turkey.

What are the next steps? First, we believe that maintaining the channels of dialogue among the regional countries is an absolute necessity under the current circumstances. Second, being a country in the region and of the region, we feel a special responsibility to promote that. And third, we are open to new ideas as this process goes forward.

The first meeting of the CSCP took place during the 16th Ministerial Council Meeting of the Organization for the Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Helsinki, and all countries that participated in the meeting have agreed to go forward. We believe there will be positive developments regarding the platform in 2009.

V. Seyidov: The Moscow Declaration opened new opportunities for the resolution of the conflict. It reiterated that the conflict can and must be settled based on the norms of international law and adopted within its legal framework international documents. But prospects for the resolution of the conflict largely depend on the ability of the international community not only to show the ways how to resolve the conflicts but also to enforce the realization of international conflict resolution mechanisms. Unless Armenia is compelled to comply with the norms of international law, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh will remain frozen.

WHAT 2008 MEANS FOR AZERBAIJAN IN THE WORLD IN 2009

Paul Goble
Publications Advisor
Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy

The year 2009 opens as did its predecessor 2008 with Azerbaijan receiving criticism from some foreign governments and human rights activists for its decision to ban foreign broadcasts, Russian and Turkish television a year ago and British and American radio broadcasts now. But during the intervening 12 months, Baku both achieved many other things and was affected by many other developments, all of which are certain to affect its international standing more profoundly than either of these decisions about the media.

And while 2008 did not prove to be the kind of breakthrough year for Azerbaijan that many of its leaders and people had expected, it did mark a dramatic rise in Baku's standing among governments around the world, an increase that in the year ahead almost certainly will prove a mixed blessing. On the one hand, its rise gives Baku far greater opportunities for influence in the future than it has had up to now. But on the other hand, this increase in status guarantees that Azerbaijan will be subject to new pressures and greater scrutiny from abroad than at any time in the past.

The impact of 2008 on 2009 is perhaps best explored not holistically but rather in terms of the implications for the future of five specific actions the Azerbaijan government itself took and five discrete developments in the international environment which have affected Azerbaijan and forced Azerbaijan to respond. Only after all ten of these are considered is it reasonable to talk briefly about what the next 12 months, which themselves will be filled with as many unexpected developments as the last, are nonetheless likely to mean for Azerbaijan and its relationship with the world.

During the course of 2008, Azerbaijan took many actions which are likely to affect its standing in the world in the future. Analysts and officials are certain to disagree both on the specific list and on the ranking of the events included on it, but nearly all those who have been keeping track of Azerbaijan over the last year are likely to agree on the following five actions, discussed below in terms of the date of their occurrence, as among the very most important.

First, on March 14, Azerbaijan succeeded in getting the United Nations General Assembly to adopt a resolution on "The Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan," a decision that many in Baku viewed as a major triumph even though the non-binding measure was approved only 39 to seven with 100 abstentions. That is because Azerbaijan secured passage even though the resolution which supported Baku's position on the resolution of the Karabakh dispute was approved despite the opposition of all four members of the Minsk Group, including the Russian Federation and the United States.

Since that vote, Azerbaijan has sought to make the position of countries on this measure a litmus test of their standing with Baku, an effort that has forced

many governments that abstained to declare that they back Azerbaijan's views on territorial integrity as the primary principle for the resolution of the Karabakh dispute and that has simultaneously undermined the importance of the Minsk Group as a group while allowing Moscow to play an expanded role in promoting bilateral talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia, even if it is not yet clear that the Russian government is in fact desirous of a final settlement of a conflict it has exploited since the beginning to maintain or enhance its own standing in the South Caucasus.

But having won this victory, Azerbaijan has raised the bar for itself, with many in Baku assuming that it will be able to achieve even more definitive international statements on its behalf and equally many in other countries viewing Azerbaijan as a rising power that is able to overcome the opposition of the major states in the Minsk Group. That creates both opportunities for Azerbaijan and dangers either from overreaching in the future or from failing to achieve what its own people and others expect.

Second, on October 15, Ilham Aliyev was re-elected Azerbaijan's president with 88 percent of the vote, an election most observers suggested had been carried out far closer to international norms than had earlier polls, although many pointed to the failure of some opposition parties to field candidates against him as a form of protect as a problem. Related to that development was the Azerbaijani parliament's decision at the end of December 26 to have a referendum on March 18, 2009, on a constitutional amendment that would allow Aliyev or some other future president to serve more than two terms in a row, a measure that the current president's supporters say is the essence of democracy because it allows the people of Azerbaijan to continue to support someone they have demonstrated they back but that his opponents suggest creates the risk that he will be president for life.

After the election and even more in anticipation of a referendum that his supporters are certain will end with a victory, President Aliyev stands unchallenged at the top of the political pyramid in Azerbaijan. On the one hand, that gives him the opportunity to take risks and pursue policies that a political leader more directly challenged would not dare make. But on the other, it means that he and others in the Azerbaijani political system must work to promote the inclusion of more people in political process who will thereby acquire the skills to assume even more important positions in the future.

Third, on November 2, President Aliyev met with his Armenian and Russian counterparts in the Kremlin and signed the Moscow Declaration calling for more negotiations between Baku and Yerevan to find a solution to the Karabakh dispute, the first accord signed by both Azerbaijani and Armenian presidents since the 1994 ceasefire and one that effectively eliminates Stepanakert as a party to such talks, at least in the Azerbaijani interpretation of the document.

Among the consequences of this accord, perhaps the most important was the way in which the Moscow Declaration effectively reduced the importance of the OSCE Minsk Group, the protestations of all the participants to the contrary notwithstanding. On the one hand, that puts greater responsibility on Baku and Yerevan to make progress on their own, something neither will find it easy to do given the diametrically opposed positions the two sides have on many issues. And on the other, the document, by sidelining the Minsk Group, almost certainly invites individual powers from within that group, such as the Russian Federation and

Turkey, and others outside it, including Iran, to play a larger role, moves that will at the very least complicate diplomacy on this issue in the year ahead.

For Baku, this almost certainly will mean that its "balanced" foreign policy will be challenged in new ways because the Azerbaijani government will have to measure and then balance the influences of Russia and the West but many other, often competing influences as well. That will put new burdens on the foreign policy apparatus in Baku and make it imperative that President Aliyev's plans to expand that apparatus both within Azerbaijan and in embassies abroad go forward at a rapid pace.

Fourth, on November 14, the Azerbaijani parliament votes 86 to one to pull its peacekeeping unit from Iraq where it had been since 2003, a decision followed shortly by the announcement that the Azerbaijani and Russian defense ministries had signed an expanded cooperation agreement and one that suggested to some analysts that in the wake of the events in Georgia, Baku's "balanced" foreign policy was tilting away from the West and toward Moscow, even though Azerbaijan subsequently committed itself to send units to Afghanistan sometime in 2009.

And fifth, on November 14-15, the presidents of six countries and senior representatives of 16 other states met in Baku for an energy summit – the fourth in a series that began in Vilnius several years ago – an event that reinforced Azerbaijan's relations with the oil and gas exporting countries of Central Asia and one that President Aliyev suggested underscored Azerbaijan's geopolitical status as the key crossroads of east-west and north-south energy flows from Eurasia to the outside world.

In addition to these actions, Azerbaijan was profoundly affected by five broader international developments, some of which reinforced the consequences of these decisions about its foreign policies and others of which undercut them. First of all has been the world financial crisis including the dramatic decline in the price of oil, Azerbaijan's major export. That has reduced the amount of money Azerbaijan has for the future, but it has also shown that Baku's stewardship of its oil earnings in the past has provided it with more of a cushion than many other countries in similar straits now have. Whether that will be enough, of course, depends on how long the crisis continues and how low the price of oil remains.

Second, the Russian invasion of Georgia changed the security calculations of all countries in the region, including Azerbaijan. For the first time since 1991, the use of military power across international borders is now thinkable, something that may tempt some in Azerbaijan to use force against Armenian occupiers. And also for the first time since the end of the Soviet Union, governments must view militaries not simply as structures which promote national integration but as an important component for national defense. That in turn means greater spending on military equipment and personnel and a greater voice for military personnel in national security decision making.

Third and fourth, the Turkish government has pursued a rapprochement with Armenia, challenging one of the fundamental assumptions of Azerbaijani foreign policy, and the Iranian government has assumed a larger regional role, raising the stakes for Azerbaijan's relationship not only with Tehran over the question of ethnic Azerbaijanis in the south but also with other regional players who may be able to count on support from Iran. How far either Turkey or Iran will go and how much

they will affect Azerbaijan is one of the key questions that may be answered in the new year.

And fifth – and possibly the twin developments that have the potential to be “wild cards” in 2009 – both the Russian Federation and the United States chose new leaders in 2008, leaders whose approach to Azerbaijan may be very different than their predecessors. Having succeeded Vladimir Putin as Russian president, Medvedev appears ready to pursue an even more expansive approach to the former Soviet space than his predecessor, less ideological perhaps but more concerted. That will present new challenges for Baku to which its leadership will have to respond.

But more dramatic are likely to be the changes resulting from the election of Barak Obama as president of the United States. While his statements during the campaign about 1915 have attracted more attention than they probably deserve – history suggests that such comments tend to be a staple during American election years but not at other times – Obama is going to be a very different American leader than George W. Bush, the man he succeeds, in at least three ways: He is likely to be less focused on oil than Bush has been. He is certain to be more focused on democracy and human rights. And he is likely to be less driven by personal ties with foreign leaders than the current occupant of the White House.

How all these things will combine in the year ahead is impossible to predict, but there are several obvious consequences. First, Baku is going to find itself both the beneficiary and the victim of its own successes in 2008. It will have more opportunities to play a role in international affairs than ever before, but it will be scrutinized and possibly criticized for actions and policies that most other countries have chosen to ignore in the past. The former is something that Azerbaijanis will take pride in; the latter is something many of them may find difficult to accept.

Second, even though Baku is certain to continue to pursue what President Aliyev calls its “balanced” foreign policy, the meaning of that balance is shifting, not only because of the changed power relations of the countries which have been players in the South Caucasus in the past but also because of the entrance or re-entrance of other powers that Baku has generally been able to ignore in this calculus up to now. That will require a more complicated balancing act, one that will challenge both the Azerbaijani government and the Azerbaijani people in new ways.

And third – and again this may be the most important cautionary note – 2009 is almost certain to feature unexpected developments that no one in Baku or elsewhere is planning for. Azerbaijan has had a cushion in the form of its oil wealth and its remarkable stewardship of same. Now, that cushion is smaller than it was, and consequently, the risks of being wrong in what is an increasingly dangerous world are greater, a challenge that the Azerbaijani government is far from alone in now having to face.

THE OLYMPICS WAR

Thomas Goltz
Montana State University

Editorial Note: Thomas Goltz, when not teaching in the Political Science Department at Montana State University (Bozeman, Montana), rides the highways and byways of the Caucasus, and is the author of three critical books on the region: "Azerbaijan Diary;" "Chechnya Diary" and "Georgia Diary." Below is an excerpt from the updated Epilogue of his "Georgia Diary." The paperback version of Goltz's book will be re-issued by M.E. Sharpe in January, 2009.

For the New Russia leadership under the thumb of Vladimir Putin, Saakashvili's "democratic" experiment in Georgia was more than a thorn in the Russia side, it was a geopolitical nightmare come true. Right there, running for almost 400 miles along its restive southern border, was a country that not only was seeking to join the European Union, but the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO.

While these ideas had actually been initiated by Eduard Shevardnadze back in the late 1990s in a half-hearted way, it was Saakashvili who made them central to his internal and external policies - and it drove the Russians crazy.

I vaguely remember the first time I heard of the Georgia-in-NATO application; I believe it was at a conference on the Caucasus at Harvard, in 1997 or '98, and everyone in the room chuckled because the idea was so ludicrous. *Georgia, in NATO?* What could the economic basket case and semi-occupied mini-state in the Caucasus offer in exchange for the NATO Article Five promise of Common Security, meaning an attack on one member is an attack on all? Of course the experts also thought about Moscow's potential response to this most recent affront, but Russia under Boris Yeltsin was itself an economic basket-case at the time, and still reeling from its humiliating defeat in Chechnya. In retrospect, it is precisely because of Russia's perceived weakness at the time that certain parties in Brussels (and Washington) actually allowed the seed of Georgia's hope to join the alliance to germinate.

And Georgia began to push at this possibility every chance it got. Usually, these chances came in the form of participation in US-led international military peace-keeping operations, first in Kosovo (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and then, most significantly, in Iraq (2003), where the Georgian contingent in the so-called Coalition of the Willing grew from a symbolic 200 soldiers to 2,000, eventually making it the third largest contingent of foreign troops in the field after the USA and Britain until pulled out and flown home at the height of the Olympics' War crisis. In addition to currying favor with George W. Bush and his neo-con pals, the Georgian mission was also clearly designed so that Georgian grunts could receive specialized training in a real-time combat zone - and then bring that newly acquired knowledge back to Georgia and apply it when and where needed, such as the break-away territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

It is necessary to note that Georgia was not alone among the South Caucasus states to dabble in this realm. Azerbaijan, too, sent troops to Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq with the same aim of currying favor with/acquiring training from the USA. So did Armenia, although its presence in the American-led coalitions always seemed to have been made more out of a sense of not wanting to be left out than based on any sort of strategic enthusiasm (or, possibly because Moscow wanted to keep a pair of Russia-friendly Armenian eyes and ears in the multinational operations). What is instructive is a comparison between Baku's policies toward Moscow and those of Tbilisi, particularly after the arrival of Saakashvili to power in 2004. While Tbilisi embraced an openly anti-Russian policy in virtually all spheres – "baiting the bear" is one popular phrase to describe it – Baku was going out of its way to reassure Moscow of the long history that had bound the two fraternal peoples together as part of great tactical schmooze-job, and one that apparently has worked (at least so far). Although participating in diverse NATO-related events and even exercises, Azerbaijan made no attempt to "standardize" its military equipment with that of NATO, and made sure that its large purchases of machines and ordinance in recent years had "Made in Russia" stamped on a healthy proportion of all in-coming lethal orders. Baku even offered to lease the giant Russian radar station at Gabala to the United States as an alternative to the missile shield Washington wants to build in Poland and the Czech Republic to "protect" Western Europe from a sneak Iranian nuclear attack.

That offer, no doubt made sincerely by the Azerbaijanis to enhance their status with Washington and get some legal American boots on the ground, could not possibly have been made without the direct acquiescence (or direction) from Moscow. In the event, the United States declined the Azerbaijani missile shield and radar site, citing "technical reasons," and went on pursuing the Polish/Czech site deal, which Russia for obvious reasons regarded being directed not against Iran, but Russia itself – and thus became another irritant in the growing pile of (sometimes paranoid) complaints against NATO, adding still more fuel to the fire of Moscow growing ire toward upstart Tbilisi.

The Kremlin's response to all this was to make life in Georgia as miserable as possible, presumably to incite discontent and eventual revolt against Misha's Rose Revolution government. These included Moscow's slapping a visa regime on Georgian nationals wanting to work in Russia (and thus repatriate money), first restricting and then banning the import of traditional Georgian products (such as wine), shutting off gas supplies, terminating all banking and postal connections and then cutting off all transportation links between the two adjacent states, thus forcing all travelers to get from Moscow to Tbilisi via Baku, or Yerevan or Trabzon.

All this only made Saakashvili push ever harder to get under the NATO security umbrella, and as a full member. This program included the purchase of NATO-standard boots and bullets, and even the attempt to prove its value for NATO training by building a "NATO-spec" Special Mountain Forces school at a place called Sashkhere on the southern flanks of the Caucasus Mountains – within spitting distance of the Russian frontier. This was opened to great fan-fare in the summer of 2007.

While very heartening to Washington and certainly infuriating to Moscow (James Baker III had allegedly "promised" Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand eastward beyond a unified Germany if Gorby would let the Berlin Wall come

down), the idea of having a feisty new member on Russia's southern flank that had two smoldering conflicts ready to spark into war with Moscow gave other NATO members pause. This became only too apparent when Georgia formally notified NATO that it meant to follow other former Warsaw Pact states (Poland, the Czech Republic, etc.,) and wanted a MAP, or "Membership Action Plan."

The meeting that would decide the issue was held in Bucharest, Romania in April of 2008 and ironically turned out to be a disappointment for Georgia (and its fraternal applicant, Ukraine). Although there may have been others feeling a similar reluctance, it was Germany and France, over the protests of the United States, who scuttled both applications, declaring them to be "premature." Not surprisingly, Saakashvili claimed that without Georgia getting locked into NATO's collective security umbrella immediately, Russia would attack his country.

And indeed, while Misha's words might have sounded like impatient howling from a distant up-start, Moscow had in fact gone beyond the fulcrum point, having decided that the time to destroy Georgia's irritating inability to understand its place in the "world system" had come. Contingency plans dating back to at least 2004 became activated, and gears of Moscow's war machine began to turn.

Hindsight allows 20/20 vision on a number of things that now seem totally obvious. Arguably, the most important of these was Moscow's unilateral decision to grant Russian citizenship to the citizens of the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, allegedly to ease the burden of isolation of the people living in these unrecognized entities. Thus, when the conflict exploded, new Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was able to look the camera in the eye and announce to the world that Russia was merely protecting its citizens; the fact that these new "citizens" happened to live outside the legal frontiers of the Russian Federation contained a truly ominous element – namely, that Russia was claiming the right to intervene anywhere in the world where its citizens, new or old, might reside, such as eastern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula.

The second obvious signal of nefarious intent was the decision to send in railway workers to Abkhazia in early 2008, allegedly to upgrade the line leading from the Russian border crossing point at Ptsou down to the port of Ochamchira near the Georgian frontier. This, too, was announced as a humanitarian gesture designed to help end the plight of the isolated Abkhaz. As it turned out, these upgraded railway tracks served the Russian military very nicely to transport masses of tanks and other equipment to "the front" in a speedy manner once war broke out.

The third element, observers suggest, was to hold military exercises in July in and around North Ossetia, an autonomous republic inside the Russian federation that flanks South Ossetia in Georgia – and then keep those forces there in pre-position before the order to invade was given.

The fourth and last is the fuzziest but arguably the most important: the utterly cynical but extremely effective decision by Moscow to launch the campaign on the very day the entire world was distracted by the Grand Opening of the Beijing Olympics. This included the theatrics of a "shocked" Vladimir Putin, wagging his finger at George W. Bush for allowing his hot-headed "client," Misha Saakashvili, to destroy the peace in the tinder-box of the Caucasus on such an auspicious occasion.

So, why South Ossetia?

Quite frankly, because it was so easy.

Ever since breaking away from the rest of the country in 1990/91 after the government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia declared a policy of "Georgia for the Georgians," the erstwhile Autonomous District of South Ossetia was effectively divided into three minuscule parts: the area of the administrative capital city of Tskhinvali ("Skin Valley" to some wags) and north, populated by some 40,000 or so ethnic Ossets; another third, populated by ethnic Georgians, and which remained under de-facto Georgian control; and the remaining third, which was more or less uninhabited mountain. But because the territory had been legally defined as "the Autonomous District of South Ossetia" during Soviet times, the totality of the territory was claimed by both sides, demographics be damned (and despite the odd fact that almost the same number of ethnic Ossetians were resident in "mainland" Georgia outside the autonomous district).

In any case, the "Ossetian" third of the blighted territory sought and received protection from Russia back in 1990, and soon devolved into a "black hole" criminal state famous throughout the region for smuggling thanks to the porous nature of the "border" between "mainland" Georgia and the Ossetian entity, and the proximity of the Roki Tunnel leading north under the Caucasus Mountains and into the friendly Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia inside the Russian Federation. Most of the north-bound traffic in contraband took the form of stolen cars, while women, fake high-end booze and drugs made their way south into Georgia, and from there to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and elsewhere. [1]

Tension only increased with the emergence of Eduard Kokoity as the new tough-guy honcho of the quasi-state. Kokoity, born in 1964, was free-style champion wrestler, member of the national wrestling team of the late USSR and leader of the Tskhinvali chapter of *Komsomol*, or Young Communist Youth League, until the collapse of the USSR and the outbreak of hostilities in South Ossetia in 1990/91. In the code-studded world of the former USSR, "wrestler" is usually equated with the concept of "enforcer," and all indications (and indeed, photographs) are that the burly Kokoity spent time in the thug trade after becoming involved in "biznes" in Moscow and St. Petersburg. (I often wonder if I used him as my driver during the Sakhalin island earthquake in the Russian Far East in 1996, but cannot be sure). Eventually, he moved back to Tskhinvali, got involved in what passed for local politics (basically, clan-rivalry concerning who would control lucrative smuggling operations in the area) and was elected president in 2001. The ousting of Shevardnadze in Tbilisi in 2003 and the attendant clean-up campaign initiated by Saakashvili almost inevitably put the two men and all they represented on a collision course.

As part of his promise of restoring post-Shevardnadze Georgia that was in control of all its territory, Saakashvili's first move was to put-paid to Adjarian leader "Batono" Aslan Abashidze's pretensions to independent action, forcing the Lord Protector to flee from Batumi to Moscow in the spring of 2004. Leaving the more-problematic issue of how to bring secessionist Abkhazia back into the happy-family fold for later, Saakashvili next turned to South Ossetia, where he initiated a carrot & stick approach. The carrot was the appointment of a special Minister for Re-integration in the person of Timuri Yakobashvili to deal with all aspects of the Georgian-Ossetian standoff, ranging from the construction of schools and even

swimming pools to conflict management among hotheads on either side, as well as setting up a "loyalist" government in exile with offices in downtown Tbilisi, led by one Dmitri Sanakoyev. The stick was the upgrading of Georgian military forces with the help of US and Israeli trainers (although the government-in-exile might be regarded as part of the stick, too). Tension ebbed and flowed, peace initiatives launched and died as Saakashvili's Georgia embarked on a remarkable economic boom and lifted itself ever further away from Russia, even while Kokoity's South Ossetia slid ever deeper into the post-Soviet morass.

Then came the year 2008. Although there had been "incidents" prior to the (failed) Georgian effort at Bucharest to be granted NATO MAP status, there was a decided spike in inter-communal violence after the April summit. Georgian policed patrols were ambushed, and villages in the "Georgian" sector came under attack under cover of darkness, resulting in retaliations against Ossetians. Russian "Peace-keepers" stationed in the area as part of a OSCE-reconciliation agreement did little or nothing to stem the growing violence over the early and mid summer of 2008, and were tacitly accused by the Georgian side of aiding and abetting Ossetian militia forces.

The aforementioned Yakobishvili later told me that he was perhaps the first to learn of the pending war, albeit without actually being aware of that fact at the moment. The revelation came when he traveled to the outskirts of Tskhinvali on the early afternoon of August 7 in hopes of defusing the growing tension by meeting with one Yuri Popov, the Russian point-man in crisis talks, only to discover that he had been stood up. Calling Popov on his cell-phone, Yakobishvili was informed that the Russian was delayed because of a flat tire. "Well, put on the spare," Timuri suggested. "The spare is flat, too," Popov's response was. "Let me send my car to get you," Timuri tried. "Nyet," said the Russian. "Let's postpone it all until tomorrow."

Little known to Yakobishvili (or if he knew, he did not bother to share this information with me) his government was already in possession of the recordings of two cell-phone conversations, intercepted by Georgian intelligence during the pre-dawn hours of August 7. The conversations were between an Ossetian guard named "Gassiev" at the South Ossetia end of the Roki Tunnel that links the territory to the Russian Federation, and someone in the Tskhinvali military HQ.

"Listen, has the armor arrived, or what?" the voice on the cell phone traced to the HQ asks at 03:41 in the morning.

"I'll check," says Gassiev.

He calls back with an affirmative at 03:52. The column had arrived and trundled on under the command of one Colonel Kazachenko, presumably to the Russia base outside a town called Java. (Kazachenko was later identified as Colonel Andrei Kazachenko of the 135th Motorized Rifle regiment of the Russia Army's 158th Division, which had no business of being in South Ossetia at all.) When the story finally broke over a month after the event, the Russian leadership first declared all of the above to be complete nonsense; it later shifted its explanation of the deployment as being merely a routine "rotation" of CIS peace-keeper troops and transport – although according to the OSCE-brokered agreement that officially allowed Russia to

station 500 armed peace-keepers in the region, all such "rotations" require pre-notification and must occur during the day, and not the dead of night.

Why was none of this printed in bold on newspaper headlines throughout the world? Sadly, the individuals responsible for archiving the intercepts had somehow misplaced them, and they were not retrieved until long after the short war was over – but not before the intercepts had convinced Saakashvili and other elements of his security council that his country was under eminent attack, and that the only thing to be done was make a desperate bid to interdict *further* Russian reinforcements from coming through the tunnel to join the units already in country.

And that is what Georgia did on August 8th, thus allowing Russia to claim that CIS forces were under Georgian assault, and that its response was merely to mount a "counter-attack" to dominate the finger-pointing debate about who shot first. But a central fact remains: if the "Olympics' War" between Georgia and Russia began on August 8, the Russian *invasion* of Georgia began early in the morning of August 7. Indeed, there is now sufficient evidence to suggest that the United States warned Saakashvili that Russia was planning to use on-going provocations to lure Georgia into a so-called R-2-P trap, and urged him to resist the temptation to engage the Russians on any level because the larger Russian plan was the destruction of the infant Georgian military, major infrastructural projects, economic development, social cohesion and ultimately political stability should Saakashvili rise to the R-2-P bait. [2] But Saakashvili decided that even if he ducked and dodged on August 8, there would be another provocation on August 9, and then another on August 10, and so forth and so on. The only thing to do was make a stand, allow the conflict to escalate, and then hope for some sort of international intervention.

Brinksmanship, in a word, in true Caucasian style.

"We had to," he told me during a 3 AM meeting at the new presidential apparatus building some days after my arrival in Tbilisi, of which I will share details presently.

Notes

[1] The most interesting item to come to the light of day, however, was some 100 grams sample of weapons' grade uranium, as part of a sting operation mounted in January, 2006, when Saakashvili's security people managed to infiltrate a smuggling network and lured a North Ossetian by the name of Oleg Khintsagov to sell his "sample" to a cop posing as a Turkish bad-guy for a million bucks. Uncle Larry stumbled into a world exclusive on that story, which gave new meaning to the concept of "loose nucs," with "Skin Valley" emerging as a potential transit point thanks to the casual attitude of the local government toward crime of all sorts.

[2] R-2-P was a new acronym for me, and one I like so much that I have used it here twice: it means "Right to Protect," as in "Send in the Marines").

A CHRONOLOGY OF AZERBAIJAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

I. Key Government Statements on Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy

Speaking at the opening of the International Mugham Center in Baku, President Ilham Aliyev says that "the economy of Azerbaijan is part of the world economy and processes taking place abroad one way or another can be reflected in Azerbaijan" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/142098.html>).

Khazar Ibrahim, the spokesman for the Azerbaijan foreign ministry, reiterates that Baku is "categorically against any foreign illegal presence or activities in the occupied territories" (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140502.html>).

II. Key Statements by Others about Azerbaijan

Claudio Bisognero, the deputy Secretary General of NATO, says that it is "the principled position" of the Western alliance that the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia must be settled by peaceful means and that NATO does not see any role for itself in the resolution of the conflict (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140611.html>). In other comments, he says that NATO welcomes the contribution of Azerbaijan in the stabilization of conditions in Afghanistan (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140602.html>).

Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babajan tells the Turkish parliament that Ankara will "continue to broaden [its] relations with fraternal Azerbaijan based on the multi-faceted and common interests" of the two countries (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141743.html>).

Afghani Foreign Minister Dadfar Spanta says in Baku that Kabul "completely supports the position of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict." He tells his Azerbaijani counterpart Elmar Mammadyarov that Afghanistan is interested in studying Baku's experience in diplomacy, science and education, medicine, and agriculture (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140614.html>).

III. A Chronology of Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy

30 December

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov says that bilateral relations between Moscow and Baku have developed extremely well in the course of 2008, thus setting the stage for even closer cooperation in the future. In other comments at a Moscow press conference, he adds that the Russian government's proposal for joint Russian and American operation of the Gabala radar station remains on the table (<http://www.1news.az/politics/20081230101349904.html>).

Azerbaijan's National Radio and Television Council announces that as of January 1, 2009, Baku will not extend the licenses of the BBC, Voice of America and Radio Liberty to broadcast from stations based in Azerbaijan. The council explains that this is simply an extension of the earlier ban on Russian and Turkish television channels and has nothing to do with politics (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/142317.html>).

28 December

President Ilham Aliyev receives Sergey Naryshkin, the head of the Administration of the President of the Russian Federation, who assures the Azerbaijani leader of Moscow's interest in promoting the further expansion of relations between the two countries (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/142119.html>).

Debnath Shaw, India's new ambassador to Azerbaijan, arrives in Baku to take up his duties (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/142159.html>).

27 December

President Ilham Aliyev receives Russian Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov. Earlier, the Russian official and his Azerbaijani counterpart Safar Abiyev agreed to a plan for cooperation between their institutions (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/142093.html>).

25 December

Turkish Ambassador in Baku Khulusi Kılıç says that his government expects the signing of a Platform of security and cooperation in the Caucasus sometime in 2009 (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141855.html>).

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov says that his government may open a representation office in Baku and other world capitals (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141872.html>).

24 December

Turkish President Abdulla Gul telephones President Ilham Aliyev to congratulate him on his 47th birthday (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141748.html>).

Following the latest round of consultations by the Caspian littoral states, Kazakh officials who acted as hosts of this session say that a convention on the division of the sea and its seabed is 60 percent ready (http://www.echo-az.info/archive/2008_12/1959/politica05.shtml).

Saida Godzhamanly, director of the Baku Human Rights Bureau, says that the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) will discuss Azerbaijan's plans to hold a referendum on lifting the constitutional provision limiting the president to two terms (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141699.html>).

23 December

President Ilham Aliyev receives Peter Semnebi, the special representative of the Council of Europe for the South Caucasus (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141451.html>). Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov also receives the European official to discuss EU's Eastern Partnership project, regional security and a resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141515.html>).

US President George W. Bush announces that Washington is extending the system of trade preferences to Azerbaijan that the US offers to developing countries (http://www.echo-az.info/archive/2008_12/1957/politica07.shtml).

22 December

President Ilham Aliyev receives Georgian Foreign Minister Grigola Vashadze (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141364.html>). Earlier, the newly appointed Georgian official – his visit to Baku is his first foreign trip in that capacity – is received by Prime Minister Arthur Rasizade (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141413.html>) and by Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141301.html>).

President Ilham Aliyev receives General Hasan Ihsyz, the deputy chief of the general staff of the Turkish Armed Forces (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141367.html>). Ihsyz is also received by Defense Minister Safar Abiyev (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141372.html>).

Azerbaijan Deputy Foreign Minister Khalaf Khalafov meets Russian officials in Moscow to discuss the delimitation of the borders between the two countries (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141425.html>).

19 December

President Ilham Aliyev receives and accepts the letters of credence of the new Hungarian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Jeno Boros and the new Belgian Ambassador Philippe Getardi (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141115.html>).

President Ilham Aliyev receives Jose-Luis Herrero Ansola, the outgoing head of the Baku office of the OSCE, on the completion of his service in Azerbaijan (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141051.html>).

Azerbaijan and Jordan sign a protocol on the ratification of their bilateral agreement on extradition (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/141074.html>).

18 December

Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov receives Jose-Luis Herrero Ansola, the outgoing head of the Baku office of the OSCE, on the completion of his service in Azerbaijan (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140947.html>).

The Coordinating Council of Azerbaijanis of the World adopts a solidarity charter of world Azerbaijanis on its future work of organizing Azerbaijani communities throughout the world, including efforts to oppose adoption by other governments of resolutions describing the events of 1915 as a genocide and promoting the peaceful resolution of the Karabakh dispute on the basis of the principle of the

territorial integrity of Azerbaijan (http://www.echo-az.info/archive/2008_12/1955/politica05.shtml).

Lithuanian Ambassador to Azerbaijan Kestutis Kudzamanas says that economic and tourist ties between Baku and Vilnius are expanding rapidly (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140810.html>).

17 December

Azerbaijan announces its plans to send a new peacekeeping contingent to Afghanistan in the near future (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140710.html>).

Cuba's Ambassador to Azerbaijan Marcelo Caballero Torres says that the opening of the Cuban embassy in Baku both highlights the growth of relations between the two countries and provides the basis for their further expansion, including greater activity by the Azerbaijan-Cuba intergovernmental commission, the second meeting of which will take place in January 2009 (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140669.html>).

Belarusian Ambassador to Baku Nikolay Patskevich says that bilateral relations are developing in positive ways and that Minsk would like to play a larger role in promoting a settlement of the Karabakh dispute (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140645.html>).

16 December

The Council of Europe says that it is not satisfied with Azerbaijan's draft legislation on money laundering (<http://www.zerkalo.az/rubric.php?id=38288&dd=16&mo=12&yr=2008>).

Azerbaijan's Milli Majlis creates a parliamentary friendship group to promote relations with Afghanistan and SAR (<http://www.day.az/news/politics/140577.html>).

Note to Readers

The editors of "Azerbaijan in the World" hope that you find it useful and encourage you to submit your comments and articles via email (adabiweekly@ada.edu.az). The materials it contains reflect the personal views of their authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan.