



If the US does not act, the Caucasus will be under Russian control

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Since the Black Sea and its littorals have become contested zones between Russia and the West, it behooves us to think cogently about U.S. interests in the equally important Caucasus and how to defend them. Our vital interests are the same as the 1990s, even taking into account major changes in the regional and global strategic environment. We want these states to remain independent, enjoy real sovereignty within their treaty-defined borders, remain at peace with each other and be open to international economic markets.

Unfortunately, the current reality greatly differs. An honest assessment of recent U.S. policy must admit that Washington has neglected this region. Such neglect is misconceived and in no way benign. Instead it is malign neglect and contributes to the growing problems in the region, precisely because it leaves the field open to Russia to play its neo-imperial games.

Russia incited war against Georgia, and, subsequently, used its gains to repeatedly encroach upon Georgia's territorial integrity with impunity. It also deliberately perpetuates the Nagorno-Karabakh war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Russia has used the war to acquire a large and permanent military presence in Armenia, along with its other bases in what was Georgia and Russia proper. Moscow uses its military not only to subjugate Armenia, but also to threaten Azerbaijan and Georgia; project power into the entire Middle East and Black Sea; and contribute to the aerial and naval encirclement of our NATO ally Turkey.

Moscow also uses its considerable non-military powers to threaten Georgia's and Azerbaijan's sovereignty and the integrity of their political systems and exercises what amounts to economic hegemony over Armenia. Armenia's sovereignty has been mortgaged to Moscow since it needs Russian support regarding Nagorno-Karabakh, an issue that has hijacked its politics and poisons regional security while giving Moscow entree into the region.

Concurrently, Georgia works steadily, despite severe obstacles, toward becoming a democratic country worthy of membership in the EU and NATO. Nevertheless, it faces resolute and ongoing Russian efforts to subvert its economic and political independence by familiar means, namely corruption, media and information warfare, and energy blackmail.

A key factor that prevents Georgia's succumbing to such pressures is the subsidized energy it receives from staunchly pro-Western Azerbaijan. But Azerbaijan also faces Russian threats of ethno-religious and political incitement against the Aliyev administration in Baku, as well as Iranian threats and the ever-present possibility of Iran-Russia collaboration against them. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan is the only independent energy producer in the Caspian that Russia has not been able to constrain or coopt, its democratic deficits cannot be whitewashed.

How then should we proceed? Clearly Georgia and especially Azerbaijan are the two key strategic assets for the West and they must be defended. While there is no short-term fix or miracle cure, there is an answer.

U.S. leverage on Baku related to its continued democratization has weakened because we have neglected them, their territorial integrity and an equitable solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Until the U.S. and Europe take that issue seriously, before it again explodes into war, it is unlikely that Baku will take seriously the criticisms of its road to democracy.

By seriously addressing the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and launching a serious and credible mediation effort, we not only gain influence with Azerbaijan, we also, to the extent that we are successful, reduce Armenia's need to for Russia, thus laying the foundation for a more peaceable, democratic and liberal Caucasus. In addition, by boosting our presence across the region, we also lessen Russia's military threats to Georgia, creeping encroachment on its borders, and efforts to subvert it from within.

Caspian energy is vital to Europe as an alternative to Russian energy, a primary instrument by which Moscow wins friends and corrupts governments abroad. Moreover, Russian generals and officials have repeatedly spoken overtly of their desire to suborn Azerbaijan's independence and integrity.

If we continue to neglect regional security there, the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is already exhibiting visible signs of intensifying, will become much hotter and this can only lead to decisive Russian military moves against Azerbaijan and still more pressure by Russia against Turkey, the Black Sea and the Middle East, possibly in tandem with Iran.

A cogent strategic analysis dictates that we think seriously as to how we may reverse those years of neglect and give the Caucasus the attention it deserves. For in doing so we not only benefit the residents of those countries, but also promote our own interests and values.

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