

## KARABAKH, ABKHAZIA – WHERE NEXT FOR NATO?

*“Kosovo may become a next step in the evolution of a new European or even international order”* Michael Lemmon, US Ambassador to Armenia, April 1999

It would have been unthinkable even a year ago to imagine the NATO alliance calling the shots in the former Soviet Union. But that may very well soon be the case. The Caucasus region seems to be bubbling up with many of the ingredients which led to the Kosovo conflict – plus oil. From the early 1990s, Western businessmen led by the US have invested billions of dollars in oil and gas exploration projects in the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. However, the way these resources reach Western markets has still not been satisfactorily solved.

As well as the decrepit state of post-Soviet infrastructure, there are unresolved political problems in the Caucasus region. Separatist movements in Georgia and a dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the status of the break-away region of Nagorno-Karabakh have made the choice of a route for pipelines to carry oil and gas to Western markets extremely problematic. Even though American relations with Iran have thawed somewhat recently, an Iranian route is still regarded as taboo by Washington.

At the moment oil reaches the West via the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline in Russia and the Baku- Supsa route via Georgia. But these are not ideal solutions: an explosion ruptured the Novorossiysk pipeline on 14<sup>th</sup> June and it was closed down. Supsa is a small-scale operation and can only cope with c.10% of expected capacity at the moment. The plan to construct a pipeline to pump oil from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan in Turkey has hit many obstacles, including money.

One reason why these projects are so unsatisfactory and why the costing is even more prohibitive than it need be is that they have to give Armenia a wide berth. Unlike the other Caucasian republics, Armenia has shown no desire to join NATO (apart from some participation in partnership for peace projects). It houses several large Russian military bases and recently updated its missile systems and took delivery of advanced jet fighters. It is widely accepted that Armenia came out of the war with neighbouring Azerbaijan in 1994 as the victor because it was supported by the Russians. Since then Armenia has been Russia's closest military ally in the region.

Neighbouring Georgia and Azerbaijan have followed a very different path. With Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Moldova they have opted out of the CIS security pact and formed a joint security alliance known as GUUAM. GUUAM's founding charter pledges military cooperation within the group and also with NATO. At the same time both Azerbaijan and Georgia have taken steps to bring themselves closer to NATO itself. On 30<sup>th</sup> May Georgia became an associated member of the NATO parliamentary assembly and on 31<sup>st</sup> May Azerbaijan gained the less prestigious position of observer status. Azerbaijan has been asking for NATO membership for some time and some commentators say that a US military presence in Azerbaijan is inevitable.

On 14<sup>th</sup> June, 1999 fighting broke out between the forces of the breakaway republic of Nagorno Karabakh and Azerbaijan for the first time since 1997. Each side blamed the other and, indeed, the incident may be no more than one of many skirmishes that have occurred since a cease-fire in 1994. Meanwhile, in early June Georgian and Abkhaz officials met in Istanbul to try to find a way out of the impasse that has existed there since 1993. There are signs that attempts may be underway to solve the smouldering problems of the Caucasus region once and for all – the US ambassador at large and special advisor to the Secretary of State for the newly independent states, Stephen Sestanovich, visited the Caucasus in May to set out the US's position. But, while Georgia and Azerbaijan may be amenable to the West's blandishments how can Armenia be brought on board without creating a confrontation with Russia?

**Armenia and Karabakh:** Negotiations over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh have been held sporadically since 1994 under the aegis of the OSCE's Minsk process. Co-chaired by the

United States, France and Russia the group has never wavered from the condition that Azeri sovereignty should, somehow, be preserved. This was the outcome of the Lisbon Summit in 1996. Indications that President Levon Ter-Petrossian's was ready to accept the deal caused his overthrow by pro-Karabakh forces in Yerevan in February 1998.

However, in March 1999 the Minsk Group seemed to change tack and now proposed the creation of a 'common-state' composed of two equal entities – Azerbaijan and Karabakh. The tables had now turned. While this solution was now an acceptable beginning to negotiations for the authorities in Karabakh, it was denounced by Baku. One of the problems was there seemed to be no precedent anywhere else for such an arrangement.

In June 1999 a BHHRG representative visited Karabakh to discuss these and other issues with politicians and others there. The republic has a parliament of 33 deputies representing 4 political parties: Communists, Dashnaks, Social Democrats and Liberal Democrats and is led by its president, Arkady Ghoukassian. Ashot Gulyan, the deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, said that they accepted the common-state proposal as a negotiating tool although they didn't like it. However, they seemed relaxed about the situation as they saw no likelihood of Azerbaijan accepting the proposal anyway. They were ready for compromise on the basis of the common-state idea, they said. It appeared that the republic's government still had faith in the support of the Armenian government. But that may not last forever.

The British Helsinki Human Rights Group monitored the recent parliamentary elections in Armenia . There they found people discussing the war in Kosovo and its possible ramifications for their own problems with Karabakh. Although most Armenians we spoke to could see no likelihood of there being any change in Armenia's support for Karabakh's independence, for the first time in visits made over the past four years the Group's representatives noted that concern for the republic's future was palpable.

The victory of the Unity bloc in the parliamentary elections does not immediately indicate any change of tack, particularly as the new prime minister is thought to support a tough line on Karabakh. However, that may not continue. In an article in the newspaper *Noyan Tapan*, the Armenian commentator David Petrossian pointed out that when the ratification of the Armenia-Russian agreement on the status of military bases in Armenia was discussed in the parliament in 1997 only 11 deputies voted against or abstained of which 5 were from Sargssian's Republican Party. Petrossian concluded that "in certain situations, there may be pro-Western and pro-NATO sentiments in the Unity bloc which, however claims to be pro-Russian".

It may happen that the new government in Yervan seeks to edge closer to the West. Many think that the Armenia's president, Robert Kocharian, will be side-lined by the new power structures, which will further isolate the government in Stepanakert. What sort of deal might be done?

There are three possibilities:

1. Hostilities resume and Azerbaijan recovers the provinces lost in 1993-4 with Karabakh reintegrated into the country, but with extensive guarantees of autonomy.
2. The result of such hostilities is, again, that Armenia is the winner
3. 'Regionalization' of the area whereby an international peace plan is brokered which redefines the Caucasian republics and their autonomous statelets along the lines of the Transcaucasian federation set up by the Soviets and which lasted until 1936. Apart from GUUAM, numerous projects are afoot to bring the region together, like the EU-sponsored TRACECA programme for improved transport links between Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The resumption of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia may indicate that force is again being reverted to as a solution to the impasse over Karabakh – each side blames the other for the fighting. But it may also be a way of forcing the issue and suing for peace.

**Georgia:** Georgia's president Shevardnadze has also talked recently about settling the long-standing impasse over the status of the break-away republic of Abkhazia. Georgian and Abkhaz officials met in Istanbul in June to try to find a common position for negotiation. Georgia claims to have humanitarian concerns over its c.250,000 Georgian nationals who fled Abkhazia when hostilities were at their height in 1992-3.

However, members of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group who visited these refugees at camps in Georgia in January 1999 can only regard this as a cynical ploy: starved of aid, poverty-stricken and abandoned, their attempts to go home have been regularly thwarted by the regime in Tbilisi. Unlike the refugees in Kosovo, these people have been totally abandoned by the international community. [See BHHRG '**An Alternative Report on the Human Rights Situation in Georgia**' <http://www.bhhrg.org>]

On several occasions Shevardnadze has openly called for a 'Kosovo solution' to the Abkhaz problem. In his weekly radio broadcast on 7<sup>th</sup> June he said "The operation for **coercing** peace in Kosovo is based on principles ... which are fully acceptable to Georgia ... these "principles" may become a significant precedent for a peace process in some other conflict zones, for instance in Abkhazia". On 10th June Shevardnadze quoted a senior NATO official saying "it is time we contemplated the possibility of internationalizing the peace process in Abkhazia" and, again, he talked about establishing peace by "**coercion**".

Presumably, Shevardnadze is anticipating a NATO-led bombing campaign against Abkhazia along the lines of the alliance's attacks on Yugoslavia to "coerce" peace. However, it is hard to see the comparison with Kosovo. In the equation "breakaway" Abkhazia is like Kosovo, while Georgia (which wants to retain control of a rebellious province) is in a similar position to Serbia. The reasoning does, however, illustrate the flexible nature of humanitarian intervention which, if it was to take place in this case, would involve taking a hammer to crack a nut even smaller and poorer than Serbia.

That is, unless Russia intervened. The Russians not only helped Armenia to win the war against Nagorno-Karabakh they also helped the Abkhaz escape Georgia's clutches. Would they sit back while NATO-sponsored interventions took place in its own back yard? There are two large Russian bases in Armenia and Russian troops are stationed in Georgia. On 15<sup>th</sup> June the Russian news agency, RIA reported that the Foreign Ministry had stated that "Azerbaijan should beware of "whipping up tensions in the Transcaucasian region", such attempts "are fraught with serious consequences". The statement went on: "We cannot fail to be alarmed by NATO's claims to ascribe to itself the main role in settling conflicts outside the zone of its responsibility, statements concerning its intention to proclaim Transcaucasia a sphere of its interests. If NATO tried to create military bases in the region it would create a direct threat to Russia's security on its southern borders and would upset the traditional balance of forces in the region".

This warning may go unheeded. Both presidents Clinton and Yeltsin have only one more year to serve in office. Nobody knows who might come after them? An isolationist in Washington or a Communist/Nationalist in Moscow - either could oppose NATO's seemingly ineffable expansion eastwards. In which case there could be a blitzkrieg to 'solve' problems like Nagorno Karabakh and Abkhazia before power changes hands and which would involve another, but perhaps more dangerous, act of humanitarian intervention by NATO.