

# The pipeline diplomacy

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Very often in the discussion of Central Asian pipelines, the role of southern Caucasian states is overlooked. The Caucasian region is faced with a host of internal conflicts, namely Nagorno Karabakh, Chechnya, Abkhazia and the Kurd question. Hence, it is important to study how the southern Caucasian states' role impinges on the proposed construction, planning and supply of gas and oil pipelines.

Georgia throughout its history has served as a link between East and West and has been an outpost of Europe and Asia. Given its hydrocarbon reserves, it stands to gain from the under construction pipeline or any others that may be built there, transiting its territory. After all, Georgia is a competitor for East-West transportation routes. Officially, it, however, claims that it does not want to exercise any political leverage over its neighbours through the control of the pipelines. An idea is sometimes floated that the republic might lose out as transit pipelines state if its ethnic tensions with Azerbaijan and Armenia are amicably resolved. Or in case the projected pipelines may alternatively run through its immediate neighbour, Armenia.

But the overall benefits that would still accrue as a result of regional stability and peace will be more than that of expediency of the pipelines on its territory. At present, the Eurasian energy and common corridor project, including the TRACECA programme, is underway in Georgia.

President Edward Shevardnadze after coming into power in 1992 agreed to station Russian forces at four military bases in Georgia and allowed 100 Russian soldiers into Abkhazia for the CIS peacekeeping operations. Georgia felt annoyed when Russia started supporting separatist forces in Abkhazia. The speaker of the Georgian parliament, on an official visit to the US in April 1998, remarked that the agreement with Russia initialled in 1994 was not yet signed.

Moreover, according to him, Russia had violated the provisions of the deal by not assisting the solution of Abkhazia. After having been somewhat disillusioned with Moscow, Tbilisi turned to the West and supported the implementation of the projects encouraged by the West.

Armenia forms tiny wedge of territory in the otherwise unbroken 'Turkic' cultural chain that theoretically reaches from Istanbul to China's Uighur semi-autonomous region of Xinjiang. Both Azeri and Georgian governments drive popular support for their anti-Russian stance and both have experienced Russian-supported assassination attempts against their leaders. Russian forces are stationed in Georgia, and western Georgia faces ethnic separatism. Azerbaijan needs a stable and pro-West Georgia or it fears being cut off from its Western allies.

Neighbouring Armenia possesses neither oil nor gas resources. It also does not enjoy any proximity to the Caspian Sea oil. By occupying 20 percent of territorial enclave of Nagorno Karabakh within Azerbaijan territory with Armenian population, it is the southern Caucasian republic that has hindered the flow of Caspian oil to the Western markets.

Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM), and now Uzbekistan, entered into a cooperative union, which envisages cooperation on matters pertaining to security and integration. Also, the above four southern Caucasian republics are interested in international security and peacekeeping and are planning to establish a joint peacekeeping battalion. All of them are situated along the Eurasian transport corridor in southern Caucasus whose opening has great potential. Moreover, energy conservation is also part of the agenda. If one takes a bird's eye view of the whole Eurasian corridor, one finds that the southern Caucasian republics are developing stronger ties east of the Caspian. Hence, with peacekeeping battalions, it would be possible to secure cooperation between the two regional groupings with respect to the Eurasian trans-

port corridor.

In 1997, the Georgian government closed the vital base of Javakhetia, which has the Baku-Ceyhan traversing it. In a move to further lessen its dependence upon Russia, Georgia is rapidly moving to integrate with Nato and other Western political and economic organisations. Having signed the Baku and Ankara Declarations, it has demonstrated the importance it attaches to the creation of Eurasian corridor and realisation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline project.

In other words, it hopes to capitalise on pipelines that would greatly like to limit Russian access to its seaports. A Russian scholar, however, notes that the laying of pipelines would not bring prosperity to Georgia as it currently gets more revenues from the shipment of alcohol to Russia than it would get from oil transit.

Despite mistrust for Turks rooted in the past, Georgia has found it expedient to improve ties with Turkey as their mutual national interests coincide in many ways. For instance, Turkish-Israeli nexus has counter drawn the Iranian-Syrian-Armenian combine. Israel has also developed considerable interest in Azerbaijan. And, it has one of the largest sources of investment in Georgia's economy.

Israel took an overtly pro-Azeri position in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and was reportedly supplying arms to Armenia. It hopes to offer technical assistance to the oil republic and could build an underwater pipeline from Ceyhan to Israel once the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is realised. Interestingly, with US strong links and strategic interests in Turkey and the latter's strong links with Azerbaijan, the Jewish lobby in American Congress seems lately supportive of Azerbaijan after having split away from its one time ally, the Armenian lobby. In future, this cooperation is likely to increase further.

Armenia rejected the 1995 American proposal to transport Caspian oil through its territory. The then separatist leader and late prime minister and president of the republic, Robert

Kocharian, declared that they would never allow the transit of Azerbaijan oil to the world markets. However, the issue of Caspian oil started troubling the pragmatic leadership of president Levon Ter-Petrosyan. In fall 1997, he made a national appeal to his countrymen to safeguard their national interests against ethnic frenzy, but to no avail. Following his resignation in March 1998, the ultra-nationalist leader and supporter of Russia, Robert Kocharian, was elected the president. He started expanding Armenian link with Iran and Russia.

In 1999, the Armenian government had to rethink its foreign policy. It is becoming conscious of the dual effects of the proposed Baku-Ceyhan pipeline in terms of proven geopolitical situation. The Armenian lobbyists, active in the US capital, propagated the ideas that the pipeline projects would undermine stability in the region and that the oil reserves in the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian Sea were much less than often claimed. Moreover, they voiced fears of impending isolation of their country.

Armenia's moves in favour of the US as well as NATO illustrate attempts to win some assistance from both Moscow and Washington. However, as averred by a Russian scholar, it is doubtful that mere independence and economic integration in the region would lead to the resolution of longstanding conflicts. Israeli ties with Armenia have also grown apace since the latter's emergence as an independent state in 1991. Motivated by Iranian-Syrian nexus in reaction to Turkish-Israeli links, Armenia has ironically decided to tilt towards Syria.

In short, fresh alignments are in the offing in the Caucasus. In some ways, they are reflective of those in the Middle East together with Central Asia's attempts at reintegration, given historical contacts, with the southern Islamic countries. In light of this, it would be interesting to watch the unfolding developments in the southern Caucasus in the days to come.

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