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EXPERT OPINION

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The publication is made possible with the support of the US Embassy in Georgia.

Editor: Jeffrey Morski

Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

ISSN 1512-4835
ISBN 978-9941-0-6498-2

Introduction

NATO's 2014 withdrawal from Afghanistan will bring at least momentary Western refocus on the South Caucasus East-West Corridor across which much of the alliance's homeward-bound equipment will pass. Meanwhile, as Sochi's Olympic ski runs turn from snow to mud, expect Russian President Vladimir Putin to do his all to insure that any resurgence of Western interest will indeed be momentary. He is liable to succeed if Washington and other Western capitals persist in seeing the South Caucasus as a grab-bag of hard-to-pronounce place names where often bizarre episodes occur, rather than a coherent region in which it has vital interests.

The narrow corridor formed by the Rioni and Mtkvari (in Georgia) or Kür (in Azerbaijan) Rivers that leads from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea is the geopolitical key to Putin's quest to recreate the Russian Empire. Will he succeed in reestablishing the Caucasian isthmus as a land-bridge between Russia and Western Asia, particularly Moscow's clients in Iran and Syria? Or will the Corridor continue to become a history-altering portage between Europe and Central Asia? Putin wants the former and fears the potential of the latter.

Because Putin fears the history-altering potential of a viable non-Russian corridor between the Black Sea and the Caspian, Moscow is locked into a zero-sum mindset. And in geopolitics, when one side calls a zero-sum-game, the game becomes zero-sum, no matter what the other players want. To understand what is at stake, Westerners must focus on the South-Caucasus as a unique system-of-systems—pipelines, rail, road, air, sea and even fiber-optic cable.

Azerbaijan and Georgia form the fulcrum of this system-of-systems, however, at its extremes are Houston, westernmost port in the Atlantic Ocean,[1] and Shanghai, Asia's gateway to the Pacific. If the South Caucasus East-West Corridor's full potential were realized, it would connect the North Atlantic water system, including the Mediterranean and Black Seas and the Rhine-Main-Danube River-Canal system, with a Eurasian land route that reaches the Pacific Ocean. And with communication and commerce come people, so the East-West Corridor could also become a pathway for ideas, perhaps the most important prospect of all.

The Eurasian Heartland

The reason why the South Caucasus East-West Corridor is so important—and so contentious—is that it is the only passage from Europe into the Eurasian Heartland that is not controlled by Russia. Although it may run

counter to intuition that a large bit of the Eurasian landmass is virtually inaccessible, a look at a topographical map confirms the point. One can debate the precise boundaries of the Eurasian Heartland, however, the concept of the "geographical pivot of history," first advanced by Sir Halford Mackinder in 1904, remains valid today.[2]

Standing back from a topographical map of Eurasia, one sees a vast swath of territory bounded by a horseshoe of icy water, mountain and desert. Open end to the west, ice to the north, mountain and desert to the east and south in an arc that extends from the Verkhoyansk Mountains to the Caspian Sea, the horseshoe explains so much about the geopolitical history of Eurasia. Roughly, what Mackinder called the "citadel" of Eurasia was the eastern two-thirds of the Russian Empire, "the first tenant of the Heartland with a really menacing man-power."[3]

Interestingly, just four years earlier, in 1900, the great American sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan had made a similar point.

> "Upon a glance at the map one enormous fact immediately obtrudes itself upon the attention—the vast, uninterrupted mass of the Russian Empire…To this element of power—central position—is to be added the wedge-shaped outline of her territorial projection into central Asia, strongly supported as this is, on the one flank, by the mountains of the Caucasus and the inland Caspian Sea—wholly under her control—and on the other by the ranges which extend from Afghanistan, northeasterly, along the western frontier of China."[4]

Despite the obsessive juxtaposition with which some modern scribblers present Mackinder and Mahan, this is just one of the many things upon which these two great strategists agreed. Each from his own vantage point agreed that the Eurasian Heartland is mostly impenetrable by sea power and that most of it was controlled by the Russian Empire.

And the mountains and desert that comprise the eastern and southern portions of the horseshoe served the Russians well. The barriers were porous to horsemen and cameleers, of course, but generally not to major military formations or efficient commerce.

Indeed, trade between the sparsely populated Eurasian Heartland and populous China is a relatively recent phenomenon. The Trans-Manchurian Railroad was opened in 1905; the Trans-Mongolian in 1955; the Silk Road in 1990 and the Kazakhstan-China Railroad in 2011. Energy pipelines have been developed even more recently than the rail lines: the Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline in 2005; the Turkmenistan-China natural gas pipeline in 2009 and the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline in 2011.

Easy access to the Eurasian Heartland; that is, the open end of the horseshoe, is in the west, across or close to densely populated areas of Russia. There are three efficient routes in and out of the Eurasian Heartland. The first is the North European Plain, the route used by Napoleon and Hitler. This partially explains Russia's historical obsession with Poland, the Baltic Sea and the Baltic coast. The second is the Romanian Lowland, between the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea. This route was also used by German and Romanian forces invading Russia in 1941. This partially explains Russia's historical obsession with the Turkish Straits, Bessarabia and Ukraine.

Today, both of these routes are controlled by Russia. However, Ukraine's current travails are partially rooted in this geography—the Kremlin cannot abide what it sees as the potential loss of this large buffer zone east and north of the Carpathian Mountains.

The third access route to the Eurasian Heartland is the South Caucasus East-West Corridor that runs through Georgia and Azerbaijan. Beginning at the Georgian Black Sea ports of Batumi, Poti, Ochamchire and Sokhumi, this route traverses the sub-tropical Kolkhida Lowland, gradually rising with the Rioni River, which drains westward into the Black Sea. The route ascends the Likhi Mountains, which form the ridgeline between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea watersheds. Soon after the tunnel beneath the 949 meter Surami Pass, the route joins the Mktvari River, flowing eastward, through the Georgian capital of Tbilisi into Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the Mktvari is known as the Kür River. The Kür crosses the Kür-Araz Lowland, draining into the Caspian Sea south of Baku, Azerbaijan's capital.

This corridor was known to the ancients; for example, it was mentioned by Strabo in his early 1st century *Geography*.[5] However, its heyday began with the Baku oil boom of the late 19th century. The Nobel and Rothschild families were big investors in Baku oil, and in 1883 they completed the railway to Batumi, which was a free port, to transport their product to markets beyond Russia.[6] In 1886, the Surami Pass was dynamited, rendering rail travel more efficient and enabling the construction of an oil pipeline, which was completed in 1903.[7]

In 1919, Mackinder updated his concept of the geographical pivot to reflect the geopolitical realities of the Great War, renaming it the "Heartland." His 1904 geographical pivot had been altogether based on physical geography—limited access, harsh climate and continental and Arctic river drainage. However, in his most famous work, *Democratic Ideals and Reality,* Mackinder wrote, "The Heartland, for the purposes of strategical thinking, includes the Baltic Sea, the navigable Middle and Lower Danube

[and] the Black Sea...The Heartland is the region to which, under modern conditions, sea-power can be refused access, though the western part of it lies without the region of Arctic and Continental drainage."[8]

One need only recall the allies' defeat in the 1915-1916 Gallipoli Campaign and their failure throughout the war to gain access to the Black Sea to grasp Mackinder's point. Furthermore, in the wake of the Russian Revolution, the March 1918 Brest-Litovsk Treaty gave Germany, in Winston Churchill's words, "the granaries of the Ukraine and Siberia, the oil of the Caspian, all the resources of a vast continent."[9]

Shortly after writing *Democratic Ideals and Reality,* Mackinder found himself a practical diplomat, trying to wrest away the Black Sea and the South Caucasus from the Bolsheviks. In late 1919, Mackinder was appointed British Commissioner to South Russia, essentially, emissary to the White Russian forces under General Anton Denikin. The Bolsheviks, Mackinder told the British Cabinet, could not be allowed to reach the Black Sea. Nonetheless, Britain decided to withdraw from the region, ceding access to the Eurasian Heartland to the Soviet Union for seven decades.[10]

One need only recall the Cold War Iron Curtain and Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia to grasp the point that, in the grand sweep of history, the areas that Mackinder assigned to the Heartland for geopolitical reasons are still contestable.

The Deal of the Century

In 1991, the Soviet Union imploded. The Central Asian countries, though susceptible to Moscow's influence, became independent. Azerbaijan and Georgia were free. In 1999, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey signed the agreement for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. "Russia cannot dictate this question," said Heidar Aliyev, late President of Azerbaijan.[11]

BTC pipeline construction began in 2003, exactly a century after oil flowed through the first South Caucasus pipeline. BTC was completed in 2005, and on May 28, 2006, the first drop of Caspian Sea oil to enter the pipeline at the Sangachal Terminal, on the Caspian shore, south of Baku, had wended its 1,768 kilometer way through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey to Ceyhan, on the Mediterranean coast.[12] The BTC pipeline became the foundation for the modern-day South Caucasus East-West Corridor. It was, as Aliyev dubbed it, "The deal of the century."[13]

Oil and Gas

Although the contemporary South Caucasus East-West Corridor is more than an energy route, oil and gas play a huge role. Even before BTC began

pumping, so-called "early oil" made its way since 1999 through the Western Route Export Pipeline that runs from Baku to Supsa, on Georgia's Black Sea coast. At Supsa, oil is loaded onto tankers that navigate the Turkish Straits to reach Western markets.[14]

Moreover, BTC's role has steadily increased since 2006. In 2009, it reached a throughput of 1.2 million barrels-per-day, now carrying oil not only from Azerbaijan, but also from Turkmenistan[15] and Kazakhstan.[16] Turkmen and Kazak oil cross the Caspian Sea by tanker and are loaded into the BTC pipeline at the Sangachal Terminal. At the far end of the BTC pipeline, oil is loaded onto tankers to head for Western markets.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan is developing the Kazakhstan Caspian Transportation System to feed oil from the Kashagan field, in the northern reaches of the Caspian Sea, into the BTC pipeline. Oil from Kashagan will be piped from a treatment facility at Eskene to the Caspian Sea port of Kuryk. From there, it will be shipped by tanker across the Caspian Sea to Baku to commence its journey through BTC.[17]

Running parallel to the BTC pipeline through Azerbaijan and Georgia is the South Caucasus Pipeline (SCP) that carries natural gas from Azerbaijan's offshore Shah Deniz field to the Turkish distribution grid.[18] The Turkish system supplies Western Europe via the Interconnector-Turkey-Greece-Italy (ITGI). The Turkey-Greece portion of ITGI that runs from Karacabey to Komotini has been in operation since 2007. In 2015, the Greece-Italy segment will run from Komotini to the Greek port of Igoumenitsa, on the Ionian Sea coast. From there, it will travel through the Poseidon undersea pipeline to the port of Otranto in Italy's Puglia Region.[19]

Meanwhile the natural gas link between the South Caucasus East-West Corridor and Western Europe was reinforced by a December 17, 2013 announcement of the Shah Deniz Consortium. The Consortium, led by British Petroleum, will transport gas from Shah Deniz Stage 2 through an upgraded SCP in Azerbaijan and Georgia, linking to the new Trans-Anatolian Pipeline (TANAP) to cross Turkey. Crossing the Greek border at Kipoi, the gas will enter the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) system to traverse Greece and Albania, and then arrive at San Foca, Italy via an undersea pipeline. The project should be complete by 2019.[20]

The TANAP/TAP selection eclipsed, at least for now, the alternative revised Nabucco project. Nabucco would have begun at the Turkish-Bulgarian border, traversing Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary, ending at a terminal in Austria. In a sense, this alternative would have struck a greater blow for European energy independence because it would have challenged Russian contractual supply arrangements to Central and Eastern Europe with

spot market arrangements. Nonetheless, the economic basis for Nabucco was not apparent to investors at the time of decision, and the TANAP/TAP choice firmly ties Azeri gas to Western Europe via the South Caucasus East-West Corridor.

Beyond the existing pipelines and the projects for which there are firm financial and engineering plans in place, there are a number of proposed energy projects that would further bolster the role of the South Caucasus East-West Corridor: White Stream, which would link Georgia and Romania via undersea pipeline; the Trans-Caspian pipeline, which would link Turkmenistan and maybe Kazakhstan with Baku; and the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Romania Interconnector (AGRI), which would set up a liquid natural gas train between the Georgian port of Kulevi and the Romanian port of Constanta.

Trains, Ports and Ships

Although the greater share of oil is transported by pipelines, rail transportation of crude oil and other petroleum products remains important. The transshipment point for this rail connection is the port of Batumi, a state-of-the-art facility now operated by KazTransOil, a Kazak company.[21] Furthermore, for the South Caucasus East-West Corridor to function as a portage between two seas, rail transportation, trans-Caspian ferries and associated facilities are vital. Raw materials and agricultural products move east-to-west and manufactured goods move west-to-east. As the region develops economically, transportation patterns will become more complex.

A passage taken from the website of Unistone, a Kazak company, illustrates the point.

> Unistone Company LLP (Kazakhstan) plans construction of the grain terminal in the city of Batumi (Georgia). In accordance with the instructions of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N.A. Nazarbayev as of January 23, [2013], regarding increasing cargo traffic on the Aktau-Baku-Batumi route, and in the framework of cooperation and improving partnership relations, [Unistone will] contribute to ensuring cargo transportation on the Aktau-Baku-Batumi route from Kazakhstan, including transit goods, and reverse loading of imported goods from the Black Sea. In accordance with the Resolution of Kazakhstan's President, the Company will extend transport services for general cargo handling and develop maritime traffic.[22]

Unistone will build grain elevators and associated facilities at Batumi, which will add to the capacity of other grain elevators already in operation

at Poti, Baku and the Kazak Caspian Sea port of Aktau.

Another indication that the South Caucasus East-West Corridor is an active and growing system-of-systems is landlocked Kazakhstan's development of a merchant marine fleet. KazMorTransFlot is headquartered in Aktau, but it also has a significant presence in Batumi. "We are proud of our national company's achievements, proud that our vessels not only ply the Caspian Sea, but also enter international waters," said KazMorTransFlot General Manager Marat Ormanov, concluding a February 2013 agreement for co-operation with the port of Batumi.[23]

Meanwhile, on the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan is investing heavily in improved port facilities. Work began in 2010 on a new port at Alat, 65 kilometers south of the currently used Baku International Sea Trade Port. A seven kilometer navigation channel has already been dredged and the new port is set to begin operation in 2015. Two ferry berths and eight cargo ship berths are planned in the port that will have a capacity of 11.6 million tons of cargo per year.[24] With the opening of Alat, and improvements at Batumi and Poti, the South Caucasus East-West Corridor will have modern port facilities on the Black Sea and the Caspian, connected by rail.

Moreover, rail service is set to reach way beyond the South Caucasus. With the October 29, 2013 inauguration of the Marmaray Tunnel, which travels beneath the Bosporus at Istanbul,[25] and the 2015 completion of the Kars-Tbilisi-Baku railroad,[26] it will be possible to board a train at London's Waterloo Station and alight on the shores of the Caspian Sea in Baku. Regrettably, there, one might wait considerable time before boarding a train ferry to Aktau or to Turkmenbashi, Turkmenistan's Caspian Sea port.

With improved trans-Caspian train-ferry service and better rail transport, one may soon be able to travel by rail from London to Shanghai or Hong Kong. Of course, rail service east of Baku is not the only remaining weakness in the South Caucasus East-West Corridor system of systems. Road transport lags considerably behind pipelines, rail and sea transport. And there are both infrastructure shortfalls and legal and administrative barriers to efficient transport among the Central Asian countries that must be rectified. For example, despite Kazakhstan's strategic foresight and considerable investment in ports, grain handling facilities and ocean-going ships; some suggest that this vast country's biggest challenge is internal grain transportation and storage.[27]

Fiber-optic Cable for the 21st Century

Another challenge is what a Booz and Company study calls a "digital divide" between Central Asia and the Caucasus, on the one hand, and West-

ern Europe and East Asia, on the other.[28] The company measured this in terms of mobile devices, stationary computers, Internet penetration and broadband access. Perhaps a better mental image to represent the situation is a digital trough in the middle of Eurasia. To some extent, this will improve naturally with economic and infrastructure development. However, as with building railroads and ports, some top-down action may be necessary. To this end, the Trans-Eurasia Information Super Highway (TASIM) is an Azerbaijani initiative to lay 11,000 kilometers of fiber-optic cable with an initial bandwidth of 2 terabits per second between Frankfurt and Hong Kong.[29] This is an ambitious project, but one that matches the strides already being made to turn the South-Caucasus East-West Corridor into a 21st Century highway of every sort.

Conclusion

During 2014 and beyond, the United States and NATO will withdraw from Afghanistan, facing the same logistical challenges that were involved in getting there and resupplying there. The Northern Distribution Network (NDN) was created in 2009 to, in the words of Andrew Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson, "address a critical vulnerability: overreliance on fragile supply lines from the port of Karachi passing through enemy strongholds into Afghanistan."[30] Redundancy in supply routes made sense, indeed, it became vital. Equally vital was not to become too reliant on Russia. In other words, when it came to Russia, redundancy to the redundancy made sense. This was the genesis of the NDN's Southern Route, through the South Caucasus East-West Corridor. Kuchins and Sanderson explain:

> Despite Russia's equally important role as part of the NDN and general support of the Afghan stabilization effort, its actions in the Caucasus and the greater Black Sea-Caspian region have on the whole tended to run against the interests of NATO, as well as Tbilisi and Baku. During Russia's August 2008 intervention in Georgia, Moscow applied significant pressure on Ankara to strictly uphold the Montreux Convention on the Turkish Straits, so as to deny large-scale U.S. humanitarian relief for Georgians caught in the conflict. The same pressure could potentially be brought to bear regarding supplies bound for NATO troops.[31]

Although Russia generally found NATO's Afghanistan operation to be in its near-term interest, Kuchins and Sanderson correctly assessed Moscow's longer-term view.

Make no mistake—Russia's 2008 attack on Georgia was an attack on Western interests in the South Caucasus East-West Corridor. Its war plan ticked through just about every element of the Corridor: checkpoints along the

Tbilisi-Batumi road, destruction of Poti Port, a naval blockade, menacing the Baku-Supsa pipeline with bombs and missile strikes and even dynamiting the Kaspi railroad bridge well after the ceasefire. Moscow's intent was clear—it will try to control the South Caucasus East-West Corridor.

Nothing will have changed in the Kremlin's outlook as NATO withdraws. Expect Moscow to erect huge diplomatic and military "one-way" signs along the NDN, particularly along its Southern Route.

Do not expect the Kremlin to cheer for more and bigger pipelines and more efficient railroads across the South Caucasus, for modern ports and grain handling facilities, for rail travel from London to Shanghai or for the prospect of connecting the Eurasian Heartland with Rotterdam and Houston. Those are Western interests, not Russian ones.

There are good and sufficient reasons for the West not only to cheer but to help strengthen the South Caucasus East-West Corridor. Whatever the vicissitudes of energy supplies and prices, diversification of supply is the right policy for Europe. So are availability of other raw materials, opening of new markets, development of new trade routes and overall economic development in a region that is Europe's next-door neighbor. Furthermore, the West needs cooperation on counterterrorism and law enforcement issues, particularly to stem trafficking in people, drugs, weapons and nuclear materials.

Moreover, although it will take time, the independence and political development of the South Caucasus and Central Asia are also in the Western interest. By the way, an independent and efficient South Caucasus East-West Corridor could ultimately benefit vast swaths of the Russian Heartland as well. Regrettably, the Moscow power structure does not see it that way.

For these reasons and more, the West must nurture its relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia and forge stronger independent ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. We must understand the potential of the South Caucasus East-West Corridor as a system of systems, weigh our interests carefully and act resolutely. It will not be a job for the faint of heart, the glib or the impatient. Nonetheless, the history-altering potential of the South Caucasus East-West Corridor is clear, as is Western interest in realizing that potential.

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