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Prospects of war in Transcaucasia and Central Asia

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1. The global scene

Transcaucasia and Central Asia are still key conflict areas in the post-Soviet territory (apart from Crimea). Security prospects are determined here by following factors:

- (1) the nature of the strategic dialog between Russia, the United States and the accompanying European Union, interests of China, Turkey and Iran;
- (2) domestic political situation in the countries of the mentioned regions;
- (3) regional conflicts (Georgian-Abkhaz, Georgian-Ossetian and Nagorno Karabakh, Azerbaijani-Iranian ones), other regional conflicts (Kazakh-Uzbek, Uzbek-Tajik, Afghan-Tajik (Uzbek, Kyrgyz) ones) and other discreet conflicts taking shape of the “security expansion” (for instance, Iran's in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, Iran and China's in Central Asia);
- (4) capability of local regimes to generate domestic and external conflicts on their own.

The key problem around which the regional competition is taking place is in control over the energy potential of the Caspian and the transit potential of the Black Sea region, which is a part of the bigger Balkan-Black Sea region and the prospect of “the global Balkans from Suez (Kosovo) to Xinjiang” directly including Central Asia and Kazakhstan. In this case, the traditional role of “restraining” Russia from its southern borders is being accomplished by the western line of “containment” through the Baltic-Black Sea-Caspian axis. And, which is the most important, “restraining” Russia is a part of the Euro-Atlantic “containment” of the Arabic world and China, and Eurasia in general.

The West has been suffering economic losses and is short of time in the practical implementation of its new Euro-Atlantic projects around the “Transcaucasian Corridor”: after investing finances into laying alternative pipelines, including the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, by promoting Nabucco, by involving Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan into the “corridor,” the West has failed to provide guaranteed sources for filling the pipes, and even



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estimated amounts of the resources to be exported have no principal influence upon the energy market. That is why Kazakhstan rich in natural resources becomes a focus of special political, military and humanitarian attention of the West, whose key task is to pull Kazakhstan away from Russia and China. Evidently, the most realistic scenario of such pulling away will be communicational, economic and defense isolation of Kazakhstan in the region. The harder for Kazakhstan will be the results of rearming its anti-aircraft defense by NATO specialists that would put under its control the whole Western China, Russia's territory up to the Arctic Ocean and the Persian Gulf countries and pose a direct threat to all Kazakhstan's neighbors. Opposite to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan has not acknowledged the prospect of turning into a small change in the strategy of “containment.”

Meanwhile, the key generator of political conflicts in the “global Balkans” area are the United States rather than regional forces; namely, the inability of the USA as an irresponsible external force results of whose policy were disintegration of Iraq, activity of Iran, indetermination of Turkey and the drug and terror epidemic from Afghanistan.

2. Transcaucasia

Up to date, the priority practical and tactical goal of the West in region is to implement the Trans-Caspian pipeline that could fuel the pipeline junctions along the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey line as well as load transshipping capacities of Georgian ports.

At the same time, the West has been strategically pushing Iran and Turkey from the region which makes them situational partners of Russia. Nevertheless, Turkey is still exerting gross political impact upon the situation in Azerbaijan using extended social networks as well. In its turn, Iran, parallel to weakening Russia's positions, is increasing its presence in Armenia, turning eventually into a factor guaranteeing security of the republic.

After [Mikhail Saakashvili](#) and his team came to power, Georgia handed over its sovereignty to the United States, assuming a role of a full-extent buffer zone from Russia that hampered its capability to increase its regional interests. Withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Batumi and Akhalkalaki as well as a many-year massive anti-Russian campaign instigated by Saakashvili bereaved Moscow of any influence in Georgia. As a result, Russia practically had to fence off the region blocking transport links via a check-point on the Georgian Military Highway and the ports of Poti and Batumi. Within whole that period, the only legal land way from Russia to the region was via Dagestan to Azerbaijan and was used only locally.

The Georgian-Russian confrontation granted a great limit of time to the West and an extensive space for maneuvering in increasing their influence upon the political systems of the countries. At the same time, the energy dialog of the West with



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Azerbaijan was grounded basically upon prospects of neutralizing Iran, and with Armenia upon a possibility to take the country out of the Russian orbit and unblock the border with Turkey. Neither of the goals can be considered to be fully accomplished, as both Tehran and Ankara did their best not to let Washington's positions strengthen excessively.

Meanwhile, the West gained substantial success particular in engaging the three countries in the region into NATO Individual Partnership Action Plans and for Georgia, in stating clearly the prospect of the country joining the alliance. The USA announced directly it was considering the region as a territory for deploying its air defense. The Azerbaijani territory is already granted for putting into practice interests of the American radiolocation systems and Air Forces. An agreement signed by the US and Azerbaijan on military and technical cooperation foresees US plans to connect the radiolocation station in Lerik and radiotelephone observer station in Agstafa to the Kavkaznet radiolocation system that they intend to establish in South Caucasus. The USA has placed its radars in the territory of Astarra and Xizi districts, modernized an air-defense base in Kurdamir, is taking part in talks between Moscow and Baku about future exploitation of the Gabala Radiolocation Station. From time to time, Azerbaijan is trying to calm down Tehran saying it would not take actions against the southern neighbor, however, it is evident that it is impossible to calm down Iran by statements and pledges. Iran continues developing its military cooperation with Russia in improving its air defense, including supply of S-300 air defense systems. Russia has been leveling off the actions in arming Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tehran is pursuing not only the evident “security expansion” to Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, but is carrying out the most active intelligence activity in Transcaucasia, while it does not give up attempts to establish pressure groups within frameworks of religious schools. The regional policy of Iran is in backing the outlines of the Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis, maneuvering in the relations with Yerevan and Baku by using the Karabakh factor. In this situation, Armenia acts as a weak sister, which is, in spite of its peculiar ties with Iran and Russia, subjected to the will of the USA.

If US active policy in Transcaucasia brings about tension in the relations of Iran and Azerbaijan, Tehran and Yerevan, on the opposite, are having a pointedly constructive dialog with each other. For the Iranian side, the relations with Armenia are important in terms of securing pressure levers upon Baku and preserving its presence in the border region at all; for Armenia, Iran is becoming an alternative pole in providing its national security.

Russia is actively involved in Armenian-Iranian energy projects. Iran, Russia and Armenia have a number of joint projects — a railway link from Armenia to Iran with participation of the RZhD Russian Railways company, an oil refinery at the Armenia-Iran border with participation of [Gazprom](#), supply of gas from Iran to electricity producing facilities in Armenia owned by Russia, increasing carrying capacity of electricity networks to export electricity from Armenia to Iran. Meanwhile, Tehran is



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trying to sustain relations with the authorities in Nagorno Karabakh, particularly by conducting several construction projects there.

The Turkish-Armenian and Turkish-Azerbaijani relations are built on the reverse logic. Washington's effort aimed at reconciliation of Yerevan and Ankara and unblocking a section of the state border between the two countries bore no results. The government in Yerevan knows it perfectly well that Ankara is in no way interested in establishing dialog with the Armenians. The prospect will not suit Azerbaijan either, which is the major regional Turkish prop and supplier of hydrocarbons via Turkish transit routes. One can state that the United States has abandoned promoting its reconciliation strategy, moreover, discrepancies between the USA and Turkey around Iran and sovereignization of Kurdistan appeared.

Thus, the policy of the USA and its allies in Transcaucasia met practically consolidated aversion from Russia, Iran and Turkey. Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia will have to choose in the long run their own way depending on outcomes of this struggle of positions: either to form their own strategy at their own risk or become small change of the American strategy of "containment," responsibility for which would be assumed by neither the United States nor Russia or Iran. To cut it short, the options are not satisfactory.

3. Kosovo forever

The precedent of Kosovo independence recognition, as expected, resulted in radical change of the situation in Transcaucasia, where three territorial conflicts involving ethnic and religious elements have been smoldering.

Despite the fact that before the declaration and recognition of Kosovo independence, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia announced that conflict settlement in the region was developing irrelevantly to the outcomes of the developments in Kosovo, their behavior after the Kosovo precedent showed the opposite. In particular, the Kosovo independence was not recognized by Azerbaijan despite the contrary decision made by Turkey. Even the pro-American Georgian government refused to follow the example of Washington and recognize Kosovo. Meanwhile, the Armenian authorities did not rule out recognition of Kosovo, despite the unambiguously negative attitude of Russia and Iran. There is direct evidence of a situational behavior of Baku, Tbilisi, and Yerevan. Denying the precedent nature of Kosovo by word of mouth, the Transcaucasian nations treated it as precedent, each deciding to fill it with the contents the needed. Tbilisi is against Kosovo, as it does not want it to repeat globally in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Baku opposes Kosovo as it does not want the same recognition of Karabakh; Yerevan backs it, as it is fighting for at least preserving the legal personality of Karabakh.

Kosovo rid the West of time, space for maneuver and pure political influence in Transcaucasia. Everyone here has no place to retreat; everyone has to hurry and



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substitute the voluntary “allied relations” with the West by primitive bargaining: it is evident to everyone that after Kosovo there won't be enough security for all.

After withdrawing the regime of economic sanctions against Abkhazia and deciding to render economic support to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia, although it did not declare its readiness to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, is bringing about integration of the two protectorates: when Georgia enters NATO, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are supposed to be fully secured from a possible aggression from Georgia.

Nevertheless, with direct military assistance of the western allies, Georgia has been intensely preparing itself for military settlement of the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi are getting closer, Georgia will be increasing its military pressure in the conflict zones, blackmailing Russia with possible derailment of the Olympics (and renewal of the ethnic conflict in North Caucasus by expelling Ossetian population from South Ossetia).

Simultaneously, the USA and the European Union have stirred their activity in “peaceful” entrance to the settlement processes in Transdnestr, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, by offering to regional elites humanitarian, political and economic gains from the cooperation with the West, while counterweighing Russia's role at the same time. Top officials in Transdnestr and Abkhazia, the opposition in South Ossetia have already picked up the Western rhetoric of multipolar foreign policy as their official doctrines. Thus, there are trying to reduce their dependence from the changing Russian-American and Russian-European relations. At that, however, the West has not envisaged practical mechanisms of guaranteeing the capitulated nations and elites from Yugoslavia-style purges. All this is pushing Georgia and Moldova to give up peaceful settlement.

At the same time, the whole Georgian military and NATO military assistance are guided by not only offensive (Abkhazia, South Ossetia), but rear role of Georgia in future US activity against Iran as well as in activity of radical Muslims in Russia's North Caucasus.

Azerbaijan has been torpedoing the many-year effort of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, the USA and France) in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement. During a severe domestic crisis in Armenia, it persuaded the UN to adopt a resolution that weakened dramatically Armenia's positions in Karabakh, announced a possibility to dissolve the Minsk Group and warned that recognition of Nagorno Karabakh by Armenia would result in a war.

Meanwhile, the level of threats (from Georgia) and the weight of security guarantees for Abkhazia, South Ossetia (from Russia) cannot be compared with the realities of Nagorno Karabakh. While the former Georgian territories are under supervision of the CIS peacekeeping forces, are populated by Russian citizens and have common borders with Russia, Nagorno Karabakh is falling out of Russia's sphere of control.



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The only security guarantor of Nagorno Karabakh is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia. In recent years, Moscow has taken action to engage Nagorno Karabakh into the common political context with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transdnestr, but this was met with aversion by Armenia (in particular, representatives of Stepanakert were invited to hearings at the Russian State Duma on prospects of conflict settlement, but decided not to come under recommendation from Yerevan). Russia has already made it public that a war of Azerbaijan against Nagorno Karabakh would not serve as a reason for Armenia's CSTO partners to get into the operation.

The USA has made significantly active its effort in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement. Within frameworks of the Minsk Group, basic settlement principles were elaborated: the Armenians agree to return to Azerbaijan five of the seven occupied territories around the territory of the former Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Republic, into which Azerbaijani refugees return, peacekeepers from countries that are not members of the Minsk Group are deployed there, communications restored. Only after that a stage-by-stage settlement of the question of the status of Nagorno Karabakh will be started: Nagorno Karabakh is proposed to be granted postponed status that would be finally formalized after a referendum in 10-15 years (the format of such a referendum was not specified). It is evident that the settlement scenario proposed by the USA in the current situation can suit only Armenia. Together with the format of settlement with participation of the OSCE Minsk Group the plan was torpedoed by Azerbaijan as well, which pushed Armenia towards NATO even more.

After the Russian military base was withdrawn from Akhalkalaki (a southern Georgian territory populated mostly by Armenians), Armenia started having serious concerns about a prospect of establishing a base for soonest deployment of the "northern front." Implementation of the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railway construction project will contribute to it as well. A possible blockade from the north (from Georgia) would assign the position of a communications dead-end to Armenia even taking into account the still existing route via Megri, Armenia, to Iran. All this helps popularizing among the Armenians the idea that only Armenia can become an effective partner for NATO in the region, as Georgia's joining NATO would deteriorate the situation around Abkhazia and South Ossetia, increase the confrontation between NATO and Russia, and Azerbaijan's membership to NATO will only help strengthening Turkey's stance in the region.

The USA will be increasing its pressure upon Armenia (where social protest is still active and the level of confidence in the government is low) in order to withdraw it from the orbit of Moscow's influence. In the near future, the USA and the EU will take part in construction of a new nuclear power plant in Armenia, which will allow influencing the energy security of not only Armenia but the rest countries in the region as well, they will also actively promoting ex-foreign minister **Raffi Hovhannisyan** for the presidential post. Further deterioration of the domestic political situation in Armenia (and upcoming election of Azerbaijani President **Ilham**



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Aliyev for the second term) will have as a result destabilization in Karabakh. So, Armenia is interested in the settlement under the patronage of the United States, as it has no economic capabilities to maintain the status quo around Karabakh, while Azerbaijan and Turkey, Iran and Russia are not interested in the settlement under the American scenario.

This makes Russia engaged into regional conflicts in Transcaucasia, however, without providing acceptable starting opportunities for it in the region. Meanwhile, technically military preparedness of Georgia and Azerbaijan for conflicts is very high, however, it is low motivated among the troops. When Chechen units joined Russian peacekeepers changed dramatically the psychological portrait of the seat of war to Russia's benefit, but it does not change its passive defensive conception. Understanding disastrous outcomes of a future war in Karabakh also affects readiness of Armenia for a war with Azerbaijan. Such “war of nerves” puts the prospect of war in the extremely militarized Transcaucasia into dependence not on strategic, controllable factors, but rather upon a poorly controllable spontaneous “ignition” in front of which interests of regional powers and transregional communication projects are equally vulnerable.

Prospects of the key destabilizing factor in the region remain uncertain — US intentions regarding the Muslim Turkish government, establishment of an independent Kurdistan, Iran's nuclear program. A factor of restraint for US activity is huge political investments of the West introduced to the “Transcaucasian Corridor” that can cease its existence in case of war. Thus, the conflict initiative is mainly in the hands of those who is weighing effectiveness of two rival technologies of strategic containment of Russia:

- (1) to halt growth of its impact by diversifying routes of energy supply to Europe (through Transcaucasia) — or
- (2) to aspire to the same goal by undermining its underpinning in the conflict zones in Transcaucasia with a prospect of extending them towards North Caucasus.

Impact of the first scenario upon the real energy market of Europe is overestimated, while the practice of instigating a new Caucasian War against Russia is clearly underrated. However, the temptation of the global player to build “the global Balkans towards Xinjiang” is too high to let us hope that its pro-European sympathies would outweigh its anti-Russian, anti-Iranian and anti-Chinese complexes.

4. Central Asia

Contrary to Transcaucasia, potential military conflicts in Central Asia are results of new agenda not implemented in the past rather than of old, already shaped premises. There has been an assumption for along time that the key economic spring of the conflicts lies in the problem of the water and energy balance, where major sources of water and energy resources (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) are at the same time the



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poorest countries in the region, while major consumers of water and resources (Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) are the leaders. In this situation, all the parties in the water and energy balance saw Russia as a natural mediator in terms of finances, technology and policy in settlement of the issue.

Today, under conditions of a demographic crisis (overpopulation) in Uzbekistan, a financial crisis in Kazakhstan, economic, political and energy crises in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the most acute are contradictions of not general economic nature but rather of traditional — migration, terrorist, social and regional character. The role of new external players in Central Asia (Iran, China, Afghanistan) has harshly increased.

Two extraterritorial conflict zones have finally formed — the Afghan-Tajik border and Fergana Valley, to which the Islamist, terror and drug trafficking have direct corridor from Afghanistan. China has become a not less active player in developments in the region; it is directly interested in “security expansion” into Central Asia to provide safety of its Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous District that is a traditional goal for Islamists and a new target of the US activity in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mongolia. It is significant to mention that China's economic and other activities in the neighboring territories of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is based on practical absence of regular border between China and the countries, and, for instance, actual trade turnover between China and Kyrgyzstan is multiply higher than the trade turnover of Kyrgyzstan with Kazakhstan and Russia altogether.

Facing external and domestic weakness of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan has to act more and more “impudently” in forming its own border system. Kazakhstan could become a rival for Uzbekistan in it, but now it has to resort to strategic defense in depth.

Within decades, the border with Uzbekistan has been painful for Kazakhstan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union the process of delimitation of borders has not been completed in the post-Soviet Turkestan, while the Soviet-time frontiers do not reflect peculiarities of historical settlement of ethnic groups in the territory of the region. Potential territorial disputes between the republics can appear because of the Kazakh cities of Turkestan and Sairam, which are populated by Uzbeks by 70-80%. The increasing proportion of Uzbek population in southern Kazakhstan, south-western Kyrgyzstan, northern Tajikistan has long ago turned from a problem of ethnic minority into a problem of prevailing regional ethnos not represented in regional and central governments (while hundreds of thousands of Afghanis have already naturalized in Tajikistan and are represented in local authorities). The situation is worsened by the problem ethnically-based agrarian slavery, self-acquisitions of city territories, special acuteness of the land issue in rural areas that causes extreme deficit of land in areas with mixed population, mass unemployment, permanent threat of famine and ethnic conflicts, increasing drug trafficking (officially registered drug trafficking from Afghanistan to Tajikistan and farther increased four times within



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recent years). In many cases, radical Islamist movements in countries of the region are characterized by mono-ethnic composition.

The unavoidable problem of succession of power in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and modernization of power in Turkmenistan within next few years, extreme weakness of the government in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, utmost low battle readiness of armed forces in most countries in the region make them especially vulnerable to external and internal risks of usage of force.

Escape of excessive population from Fergana Valley in general, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and in part to Kazakhstan only partially reduces the tension caused by domestic social problems. Any systematic measures to legalize or cut down labor migration in Russia and Kazakhstan will result in social bankruptcy of the government in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and further sovereignization of their provinces. The semiofficial security ideology of Kazakhstan states directly that after the regime changes in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan will be the key target of migration expansion of the Uzbek population that it won't be able to assimilate, which is fraught with danger of a social and economic explosion in southern Kazakhstan and around Alma-Ata. Under condition of the traditionally conflict relations of Kazakhstan with Uzbekistan this will inevitably result in spontaneous military actions along the border. Actual capitulation of Kyrgyzstan as a sovereign state in the project of the Central-Asian Union to the political and economic expansion of Kazakhstan, which despite its economic difficulties openly pretends for an actual annexation of Kyrgyzstan, nears the territorial split into two parts — the South, in which Uzbekistan will be dominating politically and economically, and the North, which will become Kazakhstan's protectorate. Here, one must expect increase of the level of terror threat from Afghanistan and specific expansion of China. In prospect of a conflict, say, in Fergana Valley, this will bring about its growing interference into the military security system.

A close to capitulation strategy of Tajikistan as a junior partner of the “Persian Bloc” (Iran-Tajikistan-Afghanistan) does not guarantee it from harsh clashes with Uzbekistan and growing danger of infiltration of Afghanistan in its domestic processes, which makes more than real future split of the country by external players as well as a long period of military instability.

5. Potential armed conflicts in Transcaucasia and Central Asia

High probability and intensity:

Kodori Gorge — Gali District — Ochamchira: Georgia — Abkhazia (with participation of Russia)

Tskhinval — Java: Georgia — South Ossetia (with participation of Russia)



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Nagorno Karabakh — Nakhichevan: Azerbaijan (with participation of Turkey) — Armenia

Osh: Kyrgyzstan — Afghanistan

Fergana Valley: Afghanistan — Uzbekistan — Kyrgyzstan — Tajikistan

Khodjent: Uzbekistan — Tajikistan

Medium probability and intensity:

Vakhsh — Pamir: Afghanistan — Tajikistan

Jalalabad — Osh: Uzbekistan — Kyrgyzstan

Derbent: Azerbaijan — Russia

Lenkoran: Azerbaijan — Iran

Shymkent: Uzbekistan — Kazakhstan

Low probability and intensity:

Akhalkalaki: Georgia — Armenia

Astrakhan: Russia — Kazakhstan

Altai: Russia — Kazakhstan

Chui Valley — Issyk Kul: Kazakhstan — Kyrgyzstan