



Russia Plays on Azerbaijan's Insecurity but Sinks into Its Own Troubles

Pavel K. Baev

Abstract

Russia's role in the Caucasus and its influence in Azerbaijan are strengthened by the reduction of Western commitments and the decline in international attention to the geopolitics of oil and gas. Moscow, however, pays insufficient attention to the evolving civil war in the North Caucasus and tends to miss the new conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus, while focussing on the partnership with Turkey. President Putin expects to gain prestige in Baku from his stance as a champion in the struggle against revolutions and Islamic radicalism but cannot admit that his profile is damaged by the unfolding political crisis in Russia.

Keywords: *Russia / Caucasus / Azerbaijan / Conflict / Security / Turkey / Syria / Iran / Arab Spring*

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by Pavel K. Baev*

Introduction

Russia has been a key proponent of the reconfiguration of the international system according to the vision of a “multipolar world” for most of the last decade. Ironically, however, it may be the least prepared among the established and emerging powers for the consequences of such transformation. The relative economic and military strength of key international actors is indeed rapidly changing, while the restructuring of the global governance architecture is typically lagging. Russia finds itself at a disadvantage in the brutal competition for global influence, being exposed to a great variety of security challenges.¹ Nowhere is the futility of Moscow's desire to gain greater status by exploiting the US's relative decline, NATO's post-Afghanistan traumas, and the EU's economic crisis more obvious than in the Caucasus.

It is in the Caucasus that the risks and challenges pertinent to the unstructured multipolarity are the most intense, so that tensions between “great powers” translate into clashes in local hot spots, like, for instance, in the Pankisi gorge in Georgia or in the Kodori valley, Abkhazia. Russia occupies a unique position in the Caucasus due to its involvement in adversarial interplays in the regional security complex on every level - from the attempt to curtail US influence to managing the *hijab* issue in a village school. In this multi-layered Russian involvement in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan is of crucial importance, not simply due to its role as a major oil and gas producer, but also due to the similarities between the two regimes and their shared security concerns related to Iran and the Middle East. In Azerbaijan, Russia's involvement is watched keenly, and often exaggerated, but the prevalent attitude in society is respect mixed with apprehension, while elites are wary and mistrustful.²

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* Pavel K. Baev is Research Professor at the Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). Support for his research on Russia's foreign policy from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is deeply appreciated. The author is grateful to Thomas de Wall for comments on an earlier version of this analysis.

¹ In the literature devoted to the uncertain transformation of international affairs, this author would pick two outstanding books: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision. America and the Crisis of Global Power*, New York, Basic Books, 2012; and Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2011. My analysis of Russia's vulnerability can be read in Pavel K. Baev, “The Russian Federation: Striving for Multipolarity but Missing the Consequences”, in Graeme P. Herd (ed.), *Great Powers and Strategic Stability in the 21st Century. Competing Visions of World Order*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 117-136.

² On these mixed feelings, see Anar Valiyev, “Neither Friend nor Foe. Azerbaijanis' Perceptions of Russia”, in *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 147 (May 2011), <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/neither-friend-nor-foe-perceptions-russia-azerbaijan>.

1. The diminishing geopolitics of hydrocarbons

The simplistic view of the numerous conflicts in the Caucasus as driven primarily by greed generated by the spoils of Caspian oil and gas is entrenched into much international security analysis since the early 2000s and up to 2012. Russia with its painful experience of two Chechen wars (1994-1996, and 1999-2005) was perhaps less inclined in the 1990s to share this single-explanation perspective, but its sharply increased dependence on petro-revenues deformed mainstream political thinking in the 2000s, becoming only marginally less petro-centric than the world view from Azerbaijan. Moscow, for that matter, remained remarkably relaxed about the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, which was seen in Baku (as well as in Ankara and Washington) as a spectacular geopolitical breakthrough. However, it later became truly obsessed with the tug-of-war between the *Nabucco* and *South Stream* gas pipelines.³ So more surprising and discomfoting for both Azerbaijan and Russia is the pronounced decline of political attention in the US and the EU to the multiplicity of questions concerning the reliability and diversity of oil and gas supplies underpinning the “energy security” agenda.

This decline in the energy-geopolitics agenda is the result on the one hand, of the US's suddenly achieved “energy independence” that has resulted from the “shale gas revolution”, and on the other, of the trap of economic stagnation and fiscal austerity, into which the EU has fallen and where energy matters are barely relevant.⁴ Russia is struggling to preserve its share of the European gas market and defend the price formula against the demands for “liberalization”. President Vladimir Putin is stubbornly proceeding with the *South Stream* project despite its shocking price tag, but the pressure on Azerbaijan to sell a major share of its expanding gas production to *Gazprom* has dissipated.⁵ The main beneficiary of this confusion is Turkey, which did not quite achieve its ambition of becoming a “gas hub” but has secured a key role in importing and transporting gas from Azerbaijan and keeps pushing for a trans-Caspian pipeline, far-fetched as this project is.⁶ As for Azerbaijan, its leader may confidently reject criticism from Washington and Brussels, but this hardly compensates for the diminished profile of what is no longer a key player in the not-so-great petro-game.

³ On the former, see S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, *The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West*, Washington, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Uppsala, Silk Road Studies Program, 2005, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/BTC.htm>; on the latter, see Pavel Baev and Indra Øverland, “The South Stream versus Nabucco Pipeline Race. Geopolitical and economic (ir)rationalities and political stakes in mega-projects”, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 5 (September 2010), p. 1075-1090, http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/International%20Affairs/2010/86_5baev_overland.pdf.

⁴ On the changing US energy worldview, see Alan Riley, “The Shale Revolution's Shifting Geopolitics”, in *The New York Times*, 26 December 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/26/opinion/global/the-shale-revolutions-shifting-geopolitics.html>; on the current energy intrigues in Azerbaijan, see Matthew Hulbert, “Why Exxon Is More Interested In The Caspian Than The Gulf Of Mexico”, *Forbes*, 21 September 2012.

⁵ On Russia's aggravating gas issues in Europe, see Konstantin Simonov, “Отставить панику!” (Stop the panic!), in *Expert* online, 21 February 2013, <http://expert.ru/2013/02/21/otstavit-panikui>.

⁶ See Vladimir Socor, “Turkey Sees Opportunity in Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline Project”, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 9, No. 164 (11 September 2012), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=39826](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=39826); Sohbet Mamedov, “Ашхабад играет на каспийской трубе” (Ashgabat plays on the Caspian pipeline), in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 14 February 2013, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-02-14/6_ashhabad.html.

2. The explosive mix of revolutions and Islam

A major emphasis in Russian foreign policy-making since the mid-2000s has been on countering the threat of the so-called “colour revolutions”, a goal which acquired renewed intensity with the rise of the protest movement in Moscow since late 2011. Georgia has been a key target of Russian efforts at exorcizing the revolutionary spectre, and while there is no space here for examining the vicissitudes of that conflict, it is essential to point out that Azerbaijan has been seen in Moscow as a natural ally in this counter-revolutionary struggle. Azerbaijan's ambivalent partnership with NATO is insignificant in this fundamental regime-survival perspective, and even the bitter rivalry with Armenia (which is Russia's sworn security ally) over Nagorno Karabakh is perceived by the Kremlin as a means to an end of turning the revolutionary tide. President Putin expects that the authoritarian features of Ilham Aliyev's regime will sooner or later generate tensions in Azerbaijan's hypocritical “petro-strategic partnership” with the West, whatever amount of money is spent by Baku on lobbying in Washington and self-advertising on CNN and *Fox News*. This would leave Russia as the only reliable partner in suppressing domestic opposition in Azerbaijan. The Obama administration's pronounced diversion of political attention away from Azerbaijan, particularly after the failed attempt to facilitate the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement in 2009, is seen in Moscow as a proof of this assumption.⁷

Such expectations have acquired even greater currency with the spread of political turmoil across the North Africa and the Middle East, and while the “Arab spring” has hardly produced any direct impact on the stability in the Caucasus, its indirect influence is growing. A key channel of this influence is the rise of political Islam in the smouldering Arab world, which makes a big difference for both Azerbaijan, and the North Caucasus, where a low-intensity civil war is pulsating.⁸ The underground Islamic networks in Dagestan and other republics of the North Caucasus were persecuted only two-three years ago as terrorist organizations and “al-Qaeda franchise”, but now they are able to claim new legitimacy as messengers of the ascending “pure” Islamic forces that sweep away corrupt governments.

3. The dead-end of Nagorno Karabakh

The Russian leadership apparently presumes that it is positioned just perfectly for taking the lead in managing the longest post-Soviet conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh. In fact its ambivalent position increases the risk of a new explosion of hostilities. Dmitri Medvedev was persistent in mediating a series of meetings between Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders during his interregnum presidency, succeeding only in reducing the Minsk group mechanism to a tool of managing but not resolving the

⁷ Sharp criticism of this neglect is found in Stanley Weiss, “Iran, the US and Azerbaijan: The Land of Fire”, *Huffington Post Blog*, 5 December 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stanley-weiss/iran-the-us-and-azerbajja_b_2241045.html; see also Stephen Blank, “US should work to strengthen relations with Azerbaijan”, *The Hill's Congress Blog*, 2 November 2012, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/265427-us-should-work-to-strengthen-relations-with-azerbaijan>.

⁸ See Alexey Malashenko, “2020: The last chance for the North Caucasus?”, in Maria Lipman and Nikolay Petrov (eds.), *Russia in 2020: Scenarios for the Future*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011, pp. 435-456.

conflict. In retrospect, his efforts appear to be driven not only by futile personal ambitions but also by the desire to prevent a committed US attempt at finding a solution following the promising initiative at promoting the rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey in 2009.⁹ Medvedev's initiative had exhausted itself by early 2010, and Putin has shown scant interest in sustaining good offices in the South Caucasus since the start of his third presidency. He is counting on the personal chemistry with Ilham Aliyev to dissuade him against delivering on his many promises to recover the lost territories by force, if diplomacy yields no results.¹⁰

The major and irreducible fault in Moscow's mediation, from Azerbaijan's point of view, is the plain fact that Russia and Armenia are military allies. No amount of reassurances by Putin of Russia's security impartiality and even readiness to sell modern weapon systems, including the S-300 surface-to-air missiles, to Azerbaijan can alter this strategic connection. And this must - Baku suspects - translate into bias at the negotiation table.¹¹ Putin's irritation with Aliyev's insistence on shutting down the Gabala radar station (more on which later) is seen as evidence of this bias. From the Armenian perspective, the legal framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) looks highly unreliable. Furthermore, Russia's commitment to protect Armenia from external threats is weakened by the difficulties in moving any emergency supplies through the strategic lines of communications that run across Georgia. The only guarantee for Armenia comes from the 3,000 Russian troops permanently deployed at the 102nd military base at Gyumri. This "lost legion", however, has to rely on local supplies and recruitment, and so has to all intents and purposes "gone native", as witnessed by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu during his first visit in this capacity to Armenia.¹² Russia, which made the parties to the conflict agree on a ceasefire in Nagorno Karabakh in mid-1994, has no reliable information on the situation in the zone of suspended combat operations and very little capacity for influencing the activity along the incident-prone front-line. Russia's prime concern appears to be that no other external "manager" would gain such capacity.

4. Turkish connections

Seeking to position itself as Azerbaijan's "friend of last resort", Moscow cannot fail to see that the place of "best friend" has been occupied by Turkey, which has converted the value of cultural ties into a dense web of political and economic connections. Russia is ill at ease with this phenomenon: on the one hand, the growth of Turkey's

⁹ On Medvedev's experimental mediation, see Sergei Minasyan, "Quest for Stability in the Karabakh Conflict", in *Russia in Global Affairs*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (January-March 2012), <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Quest-for-Stability-in-the-Karabakh-Conflict-15508>.

¹⁰ On Aliyev's suspicions regarding Putin's motives, see Shahin Abbasov, "Azerbaijan: Is the Kremlin Up to Old Tricks?", in *EurasiaNet*, 12 March 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66677>.

¹¹ The deployment of the S-300 missile system by Azerbaijan is the main source of risk in Armenia's plans for re-opening the airport in Stepanakert. See Vladimir Muhin, "Карабахская противовоздушная рулетка" (The air defense roulette in Nagorno Karabakh), in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 January 2013, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2013-01-30/1_karabah.html.

¹² On Shoigu's visit see Elizaveta Orlova, "У безопасности - реальные гарантии" (Security has real guarantees), in *Krasnaya zvezda*, 29 January 2013, <http://redstar.ru/index.php/newspaper/item/7164-u-bezopasnosti-%E2%80%93-realnyie-garantii>.

influence in the Caucasus brings back the historical memories of dozens of wars fought over hundreds of years; on the other hand, Moscow is keen to cultivate its own strategic partnership with Turkey, in which personal relations between Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are a key element.¹³ Ankara is demonstratively sensitive about Russia's concerns, first of all regarding the North Caucasus, and carefully downplays the security dimension of its de-facto alliance with Baku. That makes it possible for the Russian leadership to assess this "axis" separately from the problem of Azerbaijan's partnership with NATO, which has been an irritant and is now perceived as seriously damaged by the so-called "Safarov affair".¹⁴ Putin assumes, not without reason, that Erdoğan has so many pressing security concerns in Turkey's immediate neighbourhood that he is reluctant to take on any new responsibilities in the Caucasus, first of all in Georgia, but also in "brotherly" Azerbaijan.¹⁵

In Russia's energy-centric political thinking, the main driver of the overstated Azeri-Turkish entente is not cultural affinity but the export and transit of oil and gas, and since oil production is on a declining plateau, this channel is set to become weaker. What matters most in this picture is that Russia supplies 4-5 times more gas to Turkey than Azerbaijan and has proven its readiness to increase deliveries in case of urgent need. At the same time, *Gazprom* does not want to compete with SOCAR in this market because its key interest lies in ensuring that as little gas from Azerbaijan reaches European consumers as possible.¹⁶

Moscow is also attentive to the hidden tensions in the Turkish-Azeri relationship stemming from the clashing political ideologies between Erdoğan "moderate Islamist" majoritarian democracy and Aliyev's secular dynastic autocracy. Another fissure is created by Erdoğan's active support for, and involvement in, the so-called "Arab spring", which Aliyev perceives not as a series of uprisings against despotic and corrupt rulers but as dangerous turmoil.¹⁷ Azerbaijan has refrained from backing Turkey in the confrontation with the al-Assad regime in Syria (and tends to share Russia's opposition to external intervention), so Moscow can count on the unspoken Azeri unease regarding Turkey to strengthen its hand.

¹³ One noteworthy Iranian view on these personal relations is Ali Valigholizadeh, "On the Background of Putin-Erdogan Friendship", in *Iran Review*, 30 December 2012, <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/On-the-Background-of-Putin-Erdogan-Friendship.htm>.

¹⁴ Russian media emphasized the deliberate choice of President Aliyev to grant Raul Safarov a hero's welcome home. See Yuri Roks, "Цена свободы офицера Сафарова" (The price of officer Safarov's freedom), in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 3 September 2012, http://www.ng.ru/cis/2012-09-03/1_safarov.html; Aleksander Reutov, "Венгерский имидж оценили в €3 млрд" (Hungary's image is priced at 3 billion euro), in *Kommersant*, 3 September 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2014123>.

¹⁵ On the tensions in Georgian-Turkish relations, see Thomas de Waal, "Worrying About the Wrong Neighbor", in *The National Interest online*, 16 November 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/worrying-about-the-wrong-neighbor-7742>.

¹⁶ For a recent examination of the political profile of this gas trade, see Rémi Bourgeot, "Russia-Turkey: A Relationship Shaped by Energy", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 69 (March 2013), <http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=7593>.

¹⁷ One speculation on this topic is found in Stanislav Tarasov, "Укроет ли Путин Алиева от цунами 'арабской весны'" (Can Putin Protect Aliyev from the Tsunami of Arab Spring?), in *Regnum*, 26 August 2012, <http://regnum.ru/news/1564738.html>.

5. The Iranian conundrum

The global conflict centred on preventing the weaponization of the Iranian nuclear programme has produced a distinct resonance in the Caucasus, first of all in the Russia-Azerbaijan-Iran triangle. Moscow remains firmly set on the course towards finding a political solution to this conflict and rejects any further sanctions, arguing that unilateral steps taken by the US and the EU in this regard breach the consensus position adopted by the UN Security Council. Azerbaijan had maintained a cautious "good-neighbourly" stance toward its deeply troubled historic kin-state, which is home to an Azeri minority estimated at 12-13 million people. However, since March 2012, tensions in Azeri-Iranian relations have sharply escalated.¹⁸ The presidential elections in Iran scheduled for June 2013 might generate new issues perturbing the Azeri communities divided by the 600 km long state border, even if the departure of firebrand Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is eagerly anticipated in many international quarters.

Russia has been careful not to step too hard on the sensitivities of Azeri-Iranian relations, but has exploited the oil-and-gas controversies so that the conflict over the delimitation of maritime borders in the southern part of the Caspian Sea remains deadlocked. Moscow's key position was to strongly object to establishing any US military presence in Azerbaijan that could be even indirectly geared toward executing a military operation against Iran, hypothetical as this proposition may be.¹⁹ At the same time, the Russian leadership had gone to great lengths in negotiating a series of extensions for the lease of the old early-warning radar station at Gabala, until Ilham Aliyev communicated his irritation with this blemish on Azerbaijan's sovereignty exceedingly clear. Hence, in December 2012, Russian troops shut the station down and quietly left.²⁰ Tehran is probably relieved that the far-fetched plan for a joint US-Russian modernization of this intelligence-gathering facility has not materialized, but Moscow is left with few instruments for checking or at least monitoring the escalation of a hugely dangerous conflict in its immediate neighbourhood - and Baku is perfectly aware of that.

6. What comes after stability?

The top strategic priority for the Russian and Azeri regimes is self-preservation, which cannot be reduced to winning the next elections (Azerbaijan is due to hold presidential elections in October 2013), but requires the effective suppression of the opposition and careful monitoring of elite intrigues. Both Aliyev and Putin are thus firmly set to preserve the *status quo*, but this task is becoming harder and turns into a mission

¹⁸ One insightful evaluation of these tensions is Anar Valiyev, "Azerbaijan-Iran Relations: Quo Vadis, Baku?", in *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 244 (September 2012), <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/azerbaijan-iran-relations-quo-vadis-baku>.

¹⁹ See on this David M. Herszenhorn, "Iran Iran and Azerbaijan, Already Wary Neighbors, Find Even Less to Agree On", in *The New York Times*, 5 June 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/06/world/middleeast/iran-and-azerbaijan-wary-neighbors-find-less-to-agree-on.html>.

²⁰ On the intrigue leading to the closure of Gabala, see Viktor Litovkin, "Gabala radar station: Geopolitical decisions of cosmic proportions", in *Valdai International Discussion Club*, 18 December 2012, <http://valdaiclub.com/defense/52780.html>.

impossible in the fast-changing global economic turbulence and Eurasian geopolitical turmoil. It is in Russia that the delegitimization of the grossly corrupt and ideologically impotent regime has reached a tipping point, and the economic slowdown reduces available resources used for the purposes of populist manoeuvres. One possible move by the Kremlin towards regaining political momentum is dissolving the deeply compromised State Duma. But this may be insufficient insofar as many factions in the political and business elite have started to see Putin himself as a key part of the problem, fitting the long Russian/Soviet tradition of palace coups.²¹ The situation could easily turn from seemingly calm to highly volatile but what is relevant for this analysis is that the leadership in Moscow has no option of defusing the crisis by launching a “small-and-successful” war in the Caucasus, primarily because its military capabilities are limited and highly unreliable.²²

Any escalation of the political crisis in Moscow is certain to generate far greater resonance in the Caucasus than the so-called “Arab spring”, which has had a remarkably moderate impact, and it is in Baku that this resonance might reach the highest magnitude. Oil revenues can buy Aliyev only that much “love” in his deeply divided society with strikingly high levels of inequality and massive exposure to the discontent rising in Russia. The carefully constructed balance of geopolitical stakes and counter-weights can be easily upset.²³ Facing the risk of a Tahrir-type uprising in the overcrowded boom-and-bust Baku, Aliyev might opt for re-directing societal angst toward the easily ignitable confrontation with Armenia. After many failed mediation attempts and repeated warnings about an imminent escalation of this smouldering but carefully isolated conflict, regional actors, including Russia and Turkey, could be taken by surprise with an actual outbreak of hostilities.²⁴ The fact of the matter is that the concentration of military forces in the conflict zone has reached a critical level, and the top brass in Azerbaijan starts to believe (despite US warnings) its own claims that the newly-rebuilt army is actually capable of winning back at least some lost territories, while a probable counter-strike aimed at disrupting Azeri oil- and gas-pipelines could get Armenia into serious international trouble.²⁵

A breakdown of the fragile ceasefire in Nagorno Karabakh might appear deceptively familiar and the combat operations could be limited and containable, but what makes a huge difference is the accumulation of massive conflict potential in the wider area from

²¹ I have elaborated this scenario in Pavel K. Baev, “Putin Looks for an Escape from the Dead End of His Presidency”, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 40 (4 March 2013), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40537](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40537).

²² One competent evaluation of Russia's defense posture is Roger N. McDermott, *The Reform of Russia's Conventional Armed Forces. Problems, Challenges and Policy Implications*, Washington, The Jamestown Foundation, 2011; see also Roger McDermott, “Moscow Plans Rapid Reaction Forces and Professional Soldiers - Again”, in *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 10, No. 46 (12 March 2013), [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40584](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40584).

²³ On this predicament, see Thomas de Waal, “The Azerbaijan Dilemma”, in *The National Interest online*, 2 April 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/azerbaijan-dilemma-6714>.

²⁴ One convincing prediction is Georgi Derluguian, “All Quiet on the Karabagh Front?”, in *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, No. 66 (September 2009), <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/all-quiet-karabagh-front>.

²⁵ On Russia's risk assessment see Andrey Areshev, “Нагорный Карабах: нерадостные перспективы” (Nagorno Karabakh: Worrisome prospects), in *Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie*, 1 March 2013, http://nvo.ng.ru/wars/2013-03-01/1_karabah.html.

Syria to Afghanistan, where the interplay of local conflicts are set to generate high degrees of volatility. The single most important “unknown” in this dense tangle of conflicts is the fall-out from a US strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities, whereby risk-reduction mechanisms seem to be degenerating with the US and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the US departure from Iraq. Russia may applaud this geopolitical retreat but it is by no means ready to step up its stability-reinforcing efforts.

Conclusion

One major impact from the evolving political crisis in Russia is the much reduced attention span of its leadership, which is particularly unfortunate in the trouble-overloaded Caucasus. Moscow pays far too little attention to the mutating civil war in the North Caucasus, and tends to miss new conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus, assuming that its old risk assessments remain relevant. What the Kremlin courtiers find hard to comprehend is how false Putin’s pretences for leadership in a counter-revolutionary campaign now look in the eyes of autocrats from Minsk to Tashkent to Baku. Moscow’s policy-makers may infer that NATO’s disappearing “footprint” in the Caucasus and the US’s diminishing engagement grant Russia the dominant position, but in fact, its ability to influence political developments and manage inter-linked conflicts in the region is on a declining track.

Azerbaijan is caught in the web of inter-linked uncertainties and cannot reverse the trend of its weakening and worsening geopolitical positions. Baku is upset about the diminishing attention from the West, caused by the shrinking role of Caspian oil and gas exports, but also resents the interference into its authoritarian order-enforcement. The support from “brotherly” Turkey cannot be taken for granted as Ankara faces massive security challenges emanating from Syria and Iraq. Iran’s capacity for making trouble is increasing in parallel with its propensity for such behaviour. That leaves Russia as Azerbaijan’s most important external partner by default, and Aliyev is attentive to Putin’s message on his readiness to come to the rescue in case of domestic disturbances. He also assumes that such disturbances are more probable in Moscow than in Baku, while the political wisdom of the Aliyev dynasty warns that Russia’s intentions and promises cannot be trusted. All parties in the highly unstable geopolitical equilibrium in the wider Caucasus appear to be waiting for the first weak link to break, expecting to strengthen their hand by exploiting this calamity. Far more probable, however, is a failure to contain the first breakdown that could trigger chain reaction of conflicts.

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Istituto Affari Internazionali

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 00186 Roma
Tel.: +39/06/3224360 Fax: + 39/06/3224363
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