

The Turkish-Iranian Rivalry in Central Asia and the Caucasus and Its Impact on Russia

By Michael Alguire

While the global news media has given extensive coverage to the geopolitics of energy resources in the former Soviet Empire, little attention has been paid to the competition between Turkey and Iran in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and its impact on Russia. Firstly, Russia's fear of a rising Turkic nationalism among its Turkic minorities has been one of the factors that have led Russia to seek an alliance of convenience with Iran. Secondly, while competition for spheres of influence in the Caucasian and Central Asian regions exists between all three powers (Russia, Turkey, and Iran), Turkey's alignment with the West on energy issues has served to create a common interest between Russia and Iran in preventing the emergence of Turkish and Western dominance over Caspian Sea energy resources. Finally, Russia appears to be using ethnic tensions in the Caucasus to secure its dominance of the region, and prevent the European Union (EU), the United State (U.S.), Turkey, and Iran from bypassing Russia in their quest for energy resources.

The origins of the Turkish-Iranian rivalry lie in the competition for hegemony in the Middle East between the Ottoman and Persian empires under Persia's Safavid (1501-1724) and Qajar (1795-1925) dynasties.¹ From the late 19th century onward, several new factors emerged that affected the nature of the rivalry. Firstly, during the late 19th and early 20th century, there was the emergence of the ideology of Pan-Turkism (which strives for the cultural and physical unity of all peoples of Turkic origins).² The second factor was the founding of the present-day Republic of Turkey as a secular state under the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in the aftermath of the First World War. The final factor was the Iranian revolution of 1979 that transformed Iran into an Islamic theocracy. All of these elements coalesced to define the renewed Turkish-Iranian rivalry that began with the formation of the states that compose the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS states) in the aftermath of collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Soviet Union's collapse left a power vacuum in Central Asia and Azerbaijan that was quickly filled by Iran and Turkey. The rivalry between the two countries has two-dimensions: firstly, each promotes its own form of government i.e. Turkey advocates secular democracy, while Iran promotes its model of Islamic government. The second dimension involves the exploitation of ethnic and linguistic ties. Turkey promotes Pan-Turkism, patronizing the Turkic-speaking populations of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan; Iran has attempted to extend its influence into Tajikistan, whose inhabitants are culturally Iranian and speak an eastern dialect of Persian.³ More recently, Turkey has

¹ Robert Olson, *Turkey-Iran Relations 1979-2004: Revolution, Ideology, War, Coups, and Geopolitics* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, Inc., 2004), xxi.

² Jacob M. Landau, *Pan-Turkism: From Irredentism to Cooperation*, 2nd ed., rev. and updated (London: Hurst & Company, 1995), 1.

³ William R. Keylor, *A World of Nations: The International Order Since 1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 326.

voiced its opposition to the Iran's alleged quest for nuclear weapons.⁴ This rivalry has multiple implications for Russia, particularly with regard to Turkey's position in this contest.

To begin with, the ideology of Pan-Turkism was created by Turkic groups like the Crimean Tartars living in Russia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to efforts by the Russian state to assimilate them into Russian culture.⁵ Russia feared a revival of this ideology after 1991.⁶ The present-day Russian Federation has significant Turkic minorities living within its borders, and an upsurge in Pan-Turkism could lead certain regions, such as Tataristan, Baskirdistan, and Yakutistan, to seek independence.⁷ Turkey is also a long-standing ally of the United States, and the U.S. has been trying to extend its influence into the former Soviet empire (and particularly the energy-rich Caspian Sea region), since the early 1990s.⁸ Furthermore, Turkey has also been working closely with the EU in efforts to create a natural gas pipeline running from Central Asia across the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan and Turkey into the Mediterranean, thereby reducing the EU's dependence on Russian energy pipelines. In 2006, the EU and Turkey announced the approval of Nabucco gas pipeline, which is scheduled to begin construction in 2008 and will route the gas of the Caspian region through Azerbaijan to Austria, via Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary. The pipeline is scheduled to start transporting gas in 2011.⁹

Yet Russia has managed to match this achievement. On May 12, 2007, the governments of Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan announced plans to construct a natural gas pipeline that will pump gas from Turkmenistan through Kazakhstan to Russia. Russia already buys Turkmen gas at below-market levels, and also effectively controls Turkmenistan's gas reserves through its network of Soviet-era pipelines owned by Russian energy giant Gazprom. Thus, this newest pipeline will both increase Russia's controls over Turkmen gas reserves, as well as allow Russia to continue exporting its own gas to Europe more profitably.¹⁰ While Russia has won an important victory in the competition for Caspian region resources, the struggle for these resources continues, particularly in the Caucasus. In that region, Russia, Turkey, and Iran either have used or appear to still be using ethnic tensions as a means to impede their competitors' ability to gain a solid handle on energy resources. These ethnic tensions have a complex history.

⁴ Jason Athansiadis, "Turkey Feels Iran chill," *Asia Times Online* (Hong Kong: Asia Times Online Ltd., 24 January 2006). available from http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/HA24Ak02.html. Accessed 26 May 2007.

⁵ Landua, *Pan-Turkism*, 7-9.

⁶ Keylor, *A World of Nations*, 326.

⁷ Kamer Kasim, "The Nagorno-Karabkh Conflict, Caspian Oil and Regional Powers," in *The Politics of Caspian Oil*, ed. Bülent Gökay (Houndsmills, Basingstroke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave, 2001), 187.

⁸ Keylor, *A World of Nations*, 364.

⁹ No author given "Nabucco gas pipeline approved," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 27 June 2006; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/5121394.stm>; Internet; accessed 26 May 2007.

¹⁰ See: No author given, "Russia clinches gas pipeline deal," BBC News (Asia-Pacific) Online, last updated 12 May 2007; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6649169.stm>; Internet; accessed 26 May 2007; Ian MacWilliam, "Analysis: Russian pipeline deal," BBC News (Asia-Pacific) Online, last updated 12 May 2007; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6649469.stm>; Internet; accessed 26 May 2007.

After taking power in late 1917, Vladimir Lenin appointed Joseph Stalin as the Commissar of Nationalities, responsible for carrying out the new government's policies towards the former Russian empire's numerous nationalities. Both Lenin and Stalin were committed to retaining as much of the empire as possible,¹¹ and Stalin adopted the policy of "divide and rule," setting boundaries of the Soviet republics in such a way as to leave large ethnic minorities in each republic, separating ethnic groups across two or more republics. These minorities would then serve as fifth column inside these republics, preventing a particular republic from separating from the Soviet Union in order to avoid potentially harsh treatment under a particular independent republic's ethnic majority.¹² Such was the case with the three breakaway regions in the Caucasus: Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan.

Abkhazia was incorporated into Georgia in 1931 by Stalin, and in 1992 the Abkhaz began fighting for independence from Georgia (allegedly with Russian assistance), which they declared in 1993.¹³ A CIS peacekeeping force composed mostly of Russian soldiers has been stationed in the region since 1994, and Russia continues to use a military base at Gudauta, despite a 1999 treaty that committed the Russians to abandoning the base.¹⁴ Russia has made it easy for residents of Abkhazia to obtain Russian passports, which most people now hold. In addition, the Russian ruble is widely used in the region.¹⁵

South Ossetia, the other region which has broken from Georgia, was originally part of a united Ossetia that was divided between the Georgian and Russian republics by the Soviet authorities in the 1920s. The Ossetian struggle for independence from Georgia began in 1989, ending in 1992 with an agreement for the deployment of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian peacekeepers in South Ossetia. Russian peacekeepers remain in the region today, although the Georgian parliament has called for them to be replaced with an international force.¹⁶ As in Abkhazia, most South Ossetians have Russian passports and the Russian ruble is commonly used in trade.¹⁷ In January 2006, the Georgian government accused Russia of orchestrating several explosions on a gas pipeline in North Ossetia, thereby sabotaging Georgia's main gas pipeline. The Georgians claimed that this operation was carried out in response to the Georgian

¹¹ Stephen Blank, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Stalin as Commissar of Nationalities, 1917-1924*, Contributions in Military Studies, no. 145 (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), 11.

¹² Alvin Z. Rubinstein and Oles M. Smolansky, eds., "Preface," in *Regional Power Rivalries in the New Eurasia* (Armonk, NY and London: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), ix.

¹³ No author given, "Regions and territories: Abkhazia," BBC News (Europe) Online; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3261059.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

¹⁴ Vladimir Socor, "Russia's Retention of the Gudauta Base—An Unfulfilled CFE Treaty Commitment," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* [journal on-line], 22 May 2006; available from http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371105; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

¹⁵ No author given, "Regions and territories: Abkhazia," BBC News (Europe) Online; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3261059.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

¹⁶ No author given, "Country profile: Georgia," BBC News (Europe) Online, 4 March 2007 (last updated); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102477.stm; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

¹⁷ No author given, "Regions and territories: South Ossetia," BBC News (Europe) Online; available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/3797729.stm; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

parliament's demand that Russian troops be removed from South Ossetia. Russia claimed that the explosions were carried out by pro-Chechen insurgents.¹⁸ Russia has also pressured Georgia to sell its pipeline network to Gazprom.¹⁹ The Russian military presence in Georgia proper will end in 2008, when Russia will vacate its two remaining military bases inside the country.²⁰ However, so long as Russia maintains its troops in these breakaway regions and supports their separatist governments, it will be able to preserve its sphere of influence in this part of the Caucasus as well as compete with the United States (which is providing training and support to the Georgian military)²¹ and Turkey (which serves as an exit point for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that transports oil under Georgia).²² Russia will also be able to counter any Iranian initiatives in the area.

Finally, there is the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh, a de facto independent region that is surrounded by Azerbaijan's territory. Like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Soviet authorities established the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region within Azerbaijan in the early 1920s as part of a policy of "divide and rule." The Region was populated predominantly by Armenians, and Armenian discontent with this situation smoldered throughout the Soviet period. Ethnic Armenian-Azeri frictions exploded into further violence in the late 1980s. As the violence escalated, the ethnic Azeri population fled Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia, while ethnic Armenians fled the rest of Azerbaijan.²³ Outside powers used these ethnic tensions to their advantage.

Both Russia and Iran were angered by the staunchly pro-Turkish stance which the Azeri government adopted in its foreign and domestic policies following independence, policies which were formulated on the basis of the Azeris being a Turkic ethnic group. Russia wished to maintain its long-standing influence in the country. Iran wished to use a common religious heritage (both Azerbaijan and Iran have Shi'a Muslim majorities) to influence the country. It also strove to prevent the rise of a strong Azerbaijan that could push for unification with Iran's own large Azeri population. In pursuit of these goals, both Iran and Russia provided encouragement and financing to ethnic communities inside

¹⁸ No author given, "Gas explosion standoff continues between Russia and Georgia," Pravda.ru [newspaper on-line], 23 January 2006; available from http://english.pravda.ru/accidents/21/96/382/16782_gas.html; Internet; accessed 27 May 2006.

¹⁹ No author given, "Guide to Russia's major energy clients," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 11 July 2006; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5167062.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²⁰ No author given, "Guide to Russia's major energy clients," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 11 July 2006; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5167062.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²¹ No author given, "Country profile: Georgia," BBC News (Europe) Online, 4 March 2007 (last updated); available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/1102477.stm; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²² Hydrocarbons-Technology.com, "Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) Pipeline," SPG Media Limited; available from <http://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/bp/>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²³ No author given, "Regions and territories: Nagorno-Karabakh," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 6 March 2007; available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/3658938.stm; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

Azerbaijan that were resisting the government's policy of "Turkification."²⁴ To a certain extent, this included the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabkh.²⁵ The Nagorno-Karabkh conflict ended in 1994 with the signing of a Russian-backed ceasefire that left Nagorno-Karabkh under ethnic Armenian control. Sporadic fighting has occurred since the ceasefire,²⁶ and in December 2006 the territory held a referendum in which 98% of the voters supported a constitution that declares the region to be sovereign state that is completely independent of Azerbaijan.²⁷ This development is interesting in light of the fact that Russia still operates a military base in Armenia itself. Furthermore, in April 2006, Russia purchased Armenia's pipelines and a power plant in exchange for setting domestic Armenian gas prices at half of European levels until 2009. This deal also gives Russia control of a pipeline which runs from Iran into Armenia,²⁸ allowing Russia further influence over Iranian policy in the Caucasus. The Armenians welcome the Russian military presence as a counterweight to its western neighbor and diplomatic foe, Turkey.²⁹ Thus, given that Armenia is already a diplomatic ally of Russia, and in spite of Azeri government's insistence that the referendum was illegal,³⁰ a resolutely independent Nagorno-Karabkh could serve as a client state for the Russians inside Azerbaijan, in the same way that Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear to be serving as its client states in Georgia.

All of these separatist regions allow Russia to maintain its influence throughout the Caucasus in absence of the direct territorial control it enjoyed in the Soviet era. This apparent policy of "divide and conquer" may eventually lead to Russia gaining near complete control of the energy resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea. Thus, while the Turkish-Iranian rivalry has helped to make Russia and Iran allies of convenience, Russia's policy of "divide and conquer" in the Caucasus could lead to Iran losing the battle for definitive control of the Caspian region's energy resources.

²⁴ Nazrin Mehdiyeva, "Azerbaijan and its foreign policy dilemma," *Asian Affairs* 34, no.3 (November 2003).

²⁵ Brenda Shaffer, *Partners In Need: Strategic Relationship of Russia and Iran*, Policy Paper no. 75 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), 46-48.

²⁶ No author given, "Regions and territories: Nagorno-Karabakh," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 6 March 2007; available from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/country_profiles/3658938.stm; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²⁷ No author given, "Karabkh voters back sovereignty," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 11 December 2006; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6166497.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²⁸ No author given, "Russia to control Armenia's gas," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 7 December 2007; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4888012.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.

²⁹ No author given, "East Meets West in the Caucasus," BBC News (Programmes BH) Online, last updated 22 July 2001; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/bh/1451057.stm>; Internet; accessed 28 May 2007.

³⁰ No author given, "Karabkh voters back sovereignty," BBC News (Europe) Online, last updated 11 December 2006; available from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6166497.stm>; Internet; accessed 27 May 2007.