

# Anxious neighbours

## The concerns of former Soviet states

FROM UKRAINE TO Central Asia, the shock waves from Russia's intervention in the war in Georgia, and its subsequent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are still being felt. Russia's actions signalled to its neighbours that it was ready to defend its interests – by military means if necessary. Moscow increasingly sees NATO enlargement and Western military presence in the region as 'red lines' and is ready to respond assertively.

Regional states, particularly those most vulnerable to Russian pressure, are reviewing the assumptions behind their relations with both Russia and the West. The largely rhetorical Western response to Russia's use of force has undermined hopes that partnership with the United States, NATO and the European Union could help post-Soviet states to maintain their territorial integrity.

This article discusses the implications for Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Central Asian states.

### The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

The war in Georgia has further destabilised the Caucasus region, which had already experienced five wars since the disintegration of the Soviet Union. There is a risk that the Georgian war could stir up unresolved conflicts, the most dangerous of which would be that over Nagorno-Karabakh.

This conflict began in the final days of the Soviet Union when the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, then part of the Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) of Azerbaijan, tried to join the Armenian SSR. Azerbaijan objected, and Azeri-Armenian clashes spread into Azerbaijan and ignited a war inside Nagorno-Karabakh, in which some 30,000 people were killed and a million displaced.

A ceasefire was agreed in 1994, but the conflict remains unresolved. Azerbaijan claims that Armenia occupies around 18% of its territory and insists on its restoration. Meanwhile, Nagorno-Karabakh is a de facto state, which has set up institutions, as in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Unlike those two regions, however, its residents do not hold Russian passports, nor are Russian peacekeepers stationed there.

Mediation is being conducted by Russia, the US and France, as co-chairs of the Minsk Group formed in 1992. But there are increasing calls, particularly in Azerbaijan, for a military solution. Azerbaijan and

### Prospects for Ukraine

Russia's recent actions indicated it was no longer prepared to tolerate NATO enlargement to states with which it shared a long history and a long border. Like Georgia, Ukraine was a candidate for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at NATO's Bucharest summit in April. This was rejected, but on American insistence Ukraine was told it would become a NATO member. President Victor Yushchenko's resolve to keep pushing for membership could lead to confrontation with Russia.

Relations between Russia and Ukraine deteriorated after the 'Orange Revolution' of 2004, which brought to power a Western-leaning government headed by Yushchenko, who vowed to bring the country into the EU and NATO. The Kremlin, having backed Yushchenko's rival, Victor Yanukovich, tried to paint the revolution as a Western project directed not only at Ukraine but also at Russia, threatening its sovereignty and challenging its economic and geopolitical rise. Improved relations between Russia and the US began to sour at this point. Russia cancelled preferential rates for energy exports to Ukraine and, during a pricing dispute, cut off gas supplies for a few days in January 2006.

As Yushchenko's popularity waned and Ukraine entered a period of domestic political instability, Moscow tried to influence Ukrainian politics by supporting pro-Russian constituencies in eastern Ukraine. Nevertheless, in January 2008 the government submitted a request to NATO to be granted a MAP.

The issue of NATO membership has split Ukrainians. A public opinion poll by the Kiev-based Sofia think-tank in May 2008 showed only 21% were inclined to support NATO membership, and 53% welcomed the April failure to secure a MAP. The principal worry was that membership would damage relations with Russia.

Moscow has warned that steps towards membership will be seen as a threat and will provoke responses ranging from the introduction of visas

to targeting of missiles at Ukraine. Both the foreign ministry and the parliament have hinted that Moscow might even lay claim to Crimea, which was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. Under a 1997 treaty, Ukraine leased the Black Sea fleet's Crimean base to the Russian navy until 2017. So Russia's concerns about Ukraine joining NATO include the potential loss of the port of Sevastopol for its Black Sea fleet.

Yushchenko had already told Russia he would not extend the Sevastopol lease. When Russia sent troops into Georgia, he expressed strong support for Georgia and vowed to review the rules for Russia's Black Sea ships – restricting their ability to conduct operations near Georgia without Ukraine's approval. He appealed to the West to protect Ukraine against possible Russian pressure. But his position failed to win majority support in parliament. Even Orange Coalition members, including the party of Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, refused to endorse it. As a result, three days before US Vice President Dick Cheney arrived in Kiev to support Ukraine's NATO membership, the coalition collapsed, leaving Yushchenko isolated.

Many Europeans believe that Ukraine's domestic political instability makes it too early to grant it a MAP. A delay would buy time and avoid confrontation with Moscow. The counter-argument is that Moscow should be sent a strong signal that it cannot achieve its goals by interfering in neighbours' domestic affairs.

With the Ukrainian economy dependent on imports of Russian gas, Russia has indicated that it is likely to more than double the price, potentially causing an economic crisis. It could also escalate threats to denounce the 1998 bilateral friendship treaty, which recognised Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Before NATO ministers meet to consider the issue in December, Moscow will work to dissuade Ukraine from pushing for a MAP, and thus put off the issue indefinitely.

# Anxious neighbours

Armenia have for years been preparing for a new confrontation. Azerbaijan has taken advantage of oil and gas export revenues to increase its defence budget and to train and re-equip its military. Armenia, with smaller economic resources, is seeking security guarantees from Russia as a member of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). It also hosts Russian military bases.

For the US and Europe, Azerbaijan is strategically important: its oil and gas is exported to Europe in pipelines that bypass Russia. There are also plans for Azerbaijan to play a greater role in bringing Central Asian gas into Europe through the planned Nabucco pipeline. This is seen in Europe as a key project to ensure energy security.

It remains unclear which lessons the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have drawn from the recent war. Advocates of a military solution could be discouraged by the fact that Georgia's effort to assert itself in South

Ossetia backfired, provoking a military response and the loss of control over the two regions. Another lesson could be the inability of the West to deter Russian intervention. Both Armenia and Azerbaijan will therefore be seeking to get Russia on their side.

Russian–Azerbaijani relations have been improving, after several years of tension over pipelines and other energy issues. Immediately after his inauguration, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev hosted a high-level Azerbaijani delegation and visited Baku.

Russia's Gazprom has offered to buy part of the country's gas, and Baku has indicated it might be willing to sell, in spite of opposition from the US and Europe. When US Vice President Dick Cheney visited Baku on 3 September, he was surprised to find that Azerbaijani leaders remained committed to developing closer energy ties with Moscow, despite recent events.

Armenia has been seeking to balance volatile relations with Moscow

by developing closer ties with the EU and even NATO. Russia, in turn, has been irritated by Armenia's refusal to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the basis that it could do so only after Moscow had recognised the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Armenian position played an important role in preventing agreement on the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia at a summit of the CSTO on 5 September.

The Georgian crisis showed the potential for the rapid escalation of such disputes. No foreign peacekeepers are deployed along the ceasefire line that separates thousands of Azerbaijani and Armenian troops, on which thousands have died in exchanges of fire or from mines. Only a few unarmed OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) monitors are allowed along that line. A larger international monitoring mission could be helpful, as well as an international plan to help prevent or contain escalation.

## Central Asia's fears

Russia's military intervention in Georgia and its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia caused anxiety in Central Asia. Regional leaders initially kept silent. Their policy choices were limited by economic links to Russia and the fact that most of their populations read and watch Russian media. They sought to avoid joining Russia in its diplomatic isolation, while at the same time keeping Russia engaged on friendly terms.

Central Asian states waited until the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on 28 August to issue a common statement. They resisted calls by Russia to recognise Abkhazia and South Ossetia, leaving it to China, which opposes any form of separatism, to deliver the message to Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The SCO supported Russia in its criticism of Georgia's attack on South Ossetia, but called for the implementation of the six-point cease-fire plan and reaffirmed its opposition to separatism.

Among Central Asians' concerns after the Georgian crisis was that they themselves could become the objects of Moscow's assertiveness. Their countries have large Russian communities. Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, derive significant economic benefits from remittances sent back by their nationals working in Russia. Moscow has been

stepping up pressure in various ways in support of its interests, maintaining a military presence in some states, gaining access to lucrative economic projects, and seeking to preserve a monopoly over energy export routes.

A second worry was that their foreign-policy options could become more limited. Most Central Asian states have

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tried to avoid making a choice between Russia and the West.

Uzbekistan was alone in moving away from close ties with the US to allying itself firmly with Russia. This occurred after it came under international scrutiny over the deaths of civilians in a government crackdown – most infamously during a rally in the town of Andijan in 2005. Uzbekistan responded to this scrutiny by closing a US military base in 2005 and pursuing closer ties with Russia. However, Uzbekistan has not received greater economic benefits from Russia

and therefore has been trying to mend relations with the West.

A third concern relates to border disputes. When they were part of the Soviet Union, the borders of Central Asian states were arbitrarily drawn by Stalin in a manner that left the potential for ethnic conflict in many areas. For example, the Tajik cities of Bukhara and Samarkand were included in Uzbekistan, while Uzbek communities in the Ferghana valley were brought into Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, many experts predicted that Central Asia, rather than the Caucasus, would be the post-Soviet tinderbox. In the event, disputes were contained, and regional leaders worked to consolidate their states and develop relations with neighbours. However, many disputes remain unresolved. Hence, it is understandable that Central Asian leaders should refuse to recognise the breakaway states Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even though their relations with Russia are at stake.

Central Asian states are confronted by an increasingly aggressive and unilateralist Russia on one hand, and a divided and weakened transatlantic community on the other. Closeness with Russia is unappealing, as is closeness with the West. Therefore, they are increasingly looking to China and Gulf states as key economic partners. □ IISS