

British push NATO to cross 'red line' in Caucasus

by Konstantin George

Although the Balkans War has barely ended, there is a new flashpoint at another crucial link in the Eurasian Land-Bridge region, the Caucasus. The attention of British geopolitical strategists to this region, which is rife with manipulated ethnic conflict, is on display in the Spring 1999 issue of the U.S. policy journal *Strategic Review*, where British Royal Navy Cdr. Michael C. Evans writes at length on "Europe's Strategic Role in the Caucasus and the Black Sea." He calls for the European NATO members to build up their military capabilities during the next decade, in order to defend their right of access to oil and natural gas reserves of the Caspian Sea region — whether Russia likes it or not.

In Moscow, some strategic analysts term the Caucasus a "red line," warning that NATO expansion into the territory of the former Soviet Union, in the Caucasus or in the Baltic, would bring on a new phase of confrontation between Russia and the West.

In the Caucasus theater, first of all, a new war around Chechnya in southern Russia cannot be ruled out. The Russian media are filled with the term "new Chechen War." On July 5, Russian Interior Ministry troops launched what Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and his protégé, Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo, called a "pre-emptive attack" against Chechen guerrillas in their bases, inside the breakaway republic of Chechnya. The operation marked the end of a two-year phase of purely defensive response by Russia to repeated attacks by Chechen gangs on Russian police and troop border posts, mostly along Chechnya's border with the autonomous republic of Dagestan. Since Jan. 1, 1999, more than 100 people, mostly troops and police manning border posts, have been killed in such raids; most of the deaths occurred between March and the end of June. Now, indeed, a "new Chechen War," being only one of several regional war triggers, with spillover effects throughout the Caucasus, cannot be ruled out.

The pattern reflects a London-driven strategic decision to replay, in geopolitical essentials, the game by which Russia was severely weakened and "contained" during 1815-54, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars until the outbreak of the Crimean War. In that period, Russia was bogged down in military involvement in the Balkans (when the British were playing the Ottoman Empire off against Russia), in wars in the Caucasus, including a 20-year war against the Chechens, and, finally, wars in Central Asia. Now, as then, the British aim has been to engage Russia in three theaters of protracted conflict: the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

As a senior Russian Orientalist told *EIR* July 5, behind the well-organized "Chechen" terrorists is the British oligarchy group of ex-Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Lord McAlpine, working with one of London's top global terrorist assets, Osama bin Laden. "Osama bin Laden . . . is creating troubles for us in Chechnya," he said. "His network in Chechnya is basically the same as that of Lady Thatcher and her friend Lord McAlpine, who have been mobilizing British capital for the purpose of creating a 'Caucasus Common Market.' Thatcher works with the people who work with bin Laden."

The buildup of the Caucasus Common Market apparatus, and its intersection with Chechen separatist operations, was exposed in *EIR* of Dec. 5, 1997, under the headline "British 'Do Business' in the Caucasus," published with Lyndon LaRouche's first major warning about the danger inhering in Zbigniew Brzezinski's "Grand Chessboard" approach to the Caucasus. LaRouche's article in that same issue was titled "Tweedle-Dum Goofs Again."

Bin Laden, the self-proclaimed mortal enemy of both the United States and Russia, finances the operations of the "Chechen" and "mujahideen" gangs operating from the territory of Chechnya. Close Russian attention to the activation of bin Laden's "Afghansi" guerrillas, veterans of fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan, inside southern Russia, is evident in

articles such as that of Dmitri Nikolayev, "A New Empire: Osama bin Laden and His Partisans Aim to Seize Power in the North Caucasus," in *Nezavisimoye Voyennoy Obozreniye*, June 18, 1999. Citing bin Laden's financial backing to the Chechen "field commander," the Jordanian citizen Khattab, Nikolayev wrote: "According to the plan of Osama bin Laden and his comrades-in-arms from the 'Green International,' an Islamic state should be established in the north Caucasus. It is initially expected that this will consist of Chechnya, Dagestan, and Ingushetia. Subsequent plans call for the boundaries of the state to be expanded to encompass the entire region."

Balkans war and Caucasus escalation

The present irregular warfare is not a "natural" phenomenon of "Chechens" against Russia. A wrong Russian response in the form of again sending forces into Chechnya, however, would touch off just such a conflict.

Russia is perilously close to falling into the trap. The cautious approach toward Chechen gang provocations by ex-Prime Minister Yevgeni Primakov, has gone by the wayside with his successor, Sergei Stepashin. This is not surprising, given Stepashin's profile. It is no secret to London (nor to the man on the street in Moscow), that Stepashin, along with his mentor, ex-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, played the decisive role in getting President Yeltsin to issue the order to send Russian forces into Chechnya in December 1994. The present danger is magnified by Yeltsin's proclivity for seeking pretexts, under which to impose a state of emergency, and thus prevent the scheduled Duma elections in December and the June 2000 Presidential elections. This may not happen, but Yeltsin is certainly open to the temptation of trying to extend his reign.

Now, less than two months since Stepashin has become Prime Minister, the fateful Russian counter-escalation has begun. The change in Russian policy is a dangerous, and potentially fatal response according to profile, to a dramatic escalation in British-steered irregular warfare, using Chechen and imported "mujahideen" assets, against the Russian Federation. The escalation can be traced back to March 1999, not coincidentally the month in which NATO formally expanded eastward, followed within days by the start of the NATO war against Yugoslavia.

The Caucasus escalation that began in March, was marked not only by a higher death toll and much higher number of kidnap victims (Chechen guerrillas now hold more than 200), but by a qualitative escalation, highlighted by two events: First, the kidnapping in the Chechen capital of Grozny of Russian Gen. Maj. Gennadi Spigun, the Interior Troop general who was formerly the assistant to then-Interior Minister Stepashin; and second, the most dramatic escalation to date of the British-steered irregular warfare, to points in the northern Caucasus beyond Chechnya, namely, to the autonomous republic of Northern Ossetia. In the Northern Ossetia capital of Valdivkavkaz, days before NATO aircraft began bombing

Yugoslavia, a bomb planted by Chechen terrorists went off in the central marketplace, killing 60 people.

As a result of this escalation, the Russian elite became convinced that "after the Balkans, the Caucasus is next." While the world's attention was fixed on Kosovo, this Russian conviction was translated into action through a quiet but hefty military buildup of Russian troops in the northern Caucasus, near the borders of Chechnya. Between March and the end of June, at least 17,000 Russian Interior Troops were brought into such pre-emptive strike positions, and Stepashin's hand-picked Interior Minister, Vladimir Rushailo, has stated that this force could easily be increased to 70,000. Already in the last half of June, these troops were buttressed with heavy artillery units.

The Russian counter-escalation

Two days before the attacks actually began, Rushailo had told the Federation Council (the Upper House of Parliament), on July 3, that Russia was ready to carry out such "pre-emptive attacks" against Chechen "criminal groups" which had been engaged in cross-border raids, murdering, kidnapping, and plundering in the neighboring autonomous republic of Dagestan. Referring to the nominal Chechen President and moderate, Aslan Maskhadov, Rushailo declared: "The leadership of Chechnya does not control a large part of the republic's territory." Rushailo said that the ever-growing guerrilla cross-border raids were for the purpose of kidnapping for ransom and for white slavery. "Meanwhile, human trade is developing. At the Grozny Market, you can find advertisements on sale of prisoners. Rich Chechens, building new houses for themselves, reserve special rooms to be used for containing prisoners."

With Stepashin standing at his side, Rushailo made it clear that Russia would from now on engage in a combination of hot pursuit and pre-emptive attacks into Chechnya, to try and contain the dangerous spillover before it goes out of control: "In case the Russian leadership changes the status of Chechnya, this will bring no result, as these gangsters have larger appetites. They want to tear off the whole Caucasus in order to transform it into a pseudo-Muslim criminal state. Shamil Basayev [a British-steered Chechen terrorist leader and opponent of moderate Chechen President Maskhadov] has built a heroin-refining factory, by which this operation is going to be financed."

One sees here a Russian version of the "Domino Theory," with the growing danger of a Caucasus quagmire.

Since the end of the war in Chechnya in 1996, although no major wars have yet erupted in the Caucasus, the region has been hit by non-stop irregular warfare conducted by British-pedigree "mujahideen" guerrilla bands, exemplified by the Basayev gang. These bands contain both Chechen and imported Arab and other "mujahideen" fighters, veterans of the Afghan War, now operating out of bases in Chechnya, who have regularly crossed borders to conduct murder, theft, assassination, and kidnap operations into the neighboring au-

onomous republics of Daghestan and Ingushetia, and into the Russian territory of Stavropol.

These operations escalated in March. Most shocking was the expansion of irregular warfare into the hitherto quiet northern Caucasus autonomous republic of Northern Ossetia. In contrast to all other northern Caucasus autonomous republics, this region has no history of conflict between Russians and the native ethnic group, because the great majority of Ossetians, like the Russians, are Orthodox Christians, and not Muslim, as are the other tribes of the northern Caucasus.

And there is yet another crisis brewing within this overall area: the Transcaucasus, where the republics of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are located.

Crisis-plagued region

The present danger in the northern Caucasus is resumption of the Chechen war, with a spillover effect into the entire northern Caucasus. The Caucasus contains two politically defined regions. First is the region formed by two territories (Krasnodar and Stavropol) and a chain of autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, each of which is home to the ethnic group that gives the autonomous republic its name, and each of which has an ethnic Russian population.

One of these republics, Chechnya, exists in the Russian Federation only on paper, and has been de facto independent since August 1996, when Russian troops pulled out in the context of a "peace" agreement which left open the final status of Chechnya till 2001.

The second region is the Transcaucasus, which, since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has existed as three newly independent republics: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The region was the scene of heavy military conflict in 1992-94. This Armenia-Azerbaijan war, was fought over the ethnically Armenian region of Karabakh, located inside Azerbaijan. In that war, where Armenian forces, with heavy Russian support, triumphed, Karabakh and the Azerbaijani territory between Karabakh and Armenia was, in effect, annexed to Armenia, and the mountainous "high ground," plus additional territory to the north, east, and south of Karabakh, was seized by Armenian forces, who have held it since then. The war produced 1 million Azerbaijani refugees, persons displaced or driven out from the 25% of pre-war Azerbaijan which is now occupied by Armenia. The failure to resolve the problem of 1 million displaced persons, in a poor country whose total population is about 7 million, is the reason why the manipulation and blandishments by NATO, and the opportunistic leadership around Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev, have been both successful and popular.

Since early this year, Aliyev, through his foreign policy adviser, Vafa Gulizade, has been calling for the United States and/or Turkey to establish bases in Azerbaijan, and for a U.S.-Turkish-led NATO intervention to restore to Azerbaijan the territory seized by Armenia. Gulizade's latest statement on this, given to Agence France Presse on July 1, said: "I believe

that a NATO operation in the Caucasus would be desirable. Azerbaijan has undergone its own ethnic cleansing. Thanks to a NATO operation, the Kosovo refugees are returning home. I think that if NATO forces were brought into the region, the Armenians would be forced to leave our occupied territories."

Here, one can see the dangerous turn of events in the aftermath of the NATO war against Yugoslavia. Virtually all Azerbaijanis firmly believe that "we are the Kosovo Albanians of the Caucasus," and cherish the hope, or rather, illusion, that NATO will next ensure the return of the displaced Azerbaijanis. For this reason, the population gives support to the dangerous moves by the Azerbaijani leadership for some form of membership or association with NATO. In one of many recent examples, Murtuz Aleskerov, Azerbaijan's Speaker of Parliament, announced on Iranian Radio on June 29: "Today, over 20% of Azeri soil is being held by Armenia, so we demand NATO to settle our dispute. That is the main reason that our country seeks to become a NATO member state."

What the Azeri people do not know — although their leaders do — is that three parties, namely, Russia, Iran, and, of course, Armenia, could not simply look on should NATO intervene, but would tend to respond militarily.

The war in Kosovo also gave rise to the same syndrome of national illusion in Georgia, that NATO could also ensure the return of 200,000 "ethnically cleansed" Georgians from the region of Abkhazia, a formerly autonomous republic of Georgia along the Black Sea coast, which, with Russian military support, broke away from Georgia after a bloody war in 1992-93. As a consequence, the entire Georgian population of Abkhazia fled — or was driven out. Another festering sore is the former Georgian autonomous republic of South Ossetia, effectively separated from Georgia since the early 1990s, and, like Abkhazia, patrolled by "Commonwealth of Independent States," that is, Russian peacekeeping forces.

The comparison of Abkhazia to Kosovo was made by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, and on July 1, Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagharishvili told journalists, "Georgia's goal is to completely integrate into European economic, political, and defense structures," adding that "European security structures" would better guarantee Georgian security than the CIS Collective Security Treaty, where Georgia will not renew its membership. On the same day, Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Burduli told a journalist from *Svobodnaya Gruzija* that Georgia had requested membership in NATO. Although nothing will come of this soon, or even down the road, it illustrates the ease with which these republics can be manipulated by Western oligarchical forces.

In any case, the question of formal expansion of NATO is purely tertiary. As the Balkans war has shown, NATO has become an alliance of members, "protectorates," and willing client-states. In the category of protectorates, NATO has added three since March: Kosovo, Albania, Macedonia. In the third category, client-states, the list is open-ended.