

Eurasian War Threat Rises in Caucasus

by EIR Staff

As the international financial collapse worsens, the immediate threat of general war is spreading from the Mideast theater to the southern Caucasus; it is ignited by Western geopolitical factions determined to have Eurasian war, and not Eurasian Land-Bridge development of a new economic order.

Within the broader drive for Mideast warfare, aimed to engulf the Islamic world, provocations have recently targeted Iran: key to this is the U.S.-Azerbaijan Chamber of Commerce (USACC) of Zbigniew Brzezinski, Henry Kissinger, James Baker III, and Richard Armitage (see *EIR*, Aug. 10, 2001, "BP Provokes Iran To Attack Eurasia Progress"). This grouping of influential "geopoliticians" linked to British and U.S.-based oil interests, has transformed U.S. relations with the small former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, into a major source of Caspian Sea tensions. In addition, Turkey, with its economy and currency collapsed, has been pressured by the International Monetary Fund and United States to suspend its natural gas deals with Iran in an atmosphere of escalating bilateral tension.

The dispute within Iran which delayed President Mohammed Khatami's second inauguration, though given great play by Western media spin-doctors, was resolved in a constitutional manner and did not destabilize the country. That is threatened by economic problems arising from the global economic malaise, and by regional provocations of the "Eurasian war party" centered in the West.

New and Sharp Warnings

On Aug. 17, new warnings of worsening threats in the southern Caucasus region, came from two publications in Russia. *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, published by Russian "oligarch" Boris Berezovsky, headlined "World War III Could Begin in the Southern Caucasus." The report began by noting the escalating tension between Iran and Azerbaijan, over the last three weeks. Iranian warplanes have allegedly been regularly flying into Azerbaijan airspace, coming closer and closer to the capital, Baku, while, on the other side, Azerbaijan is threatening to push for a "unification" with the northern Iranian regions with largely Azeri ethnic population. The tension is aggravated by the strong pro-West stance of Azerbaijan, and its "special relationship" with Turkey. The history of conflicts and tension between Turkey and Iran, on the other hand, goes back for centuries.

Add to this, the crisis in the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh inside Azerbaijan, where Iran has been supporting Armenia, against a virtual naval blockade from the side of Turkey. And in the conflict over petroleum rights and transport corridors in the Caspian Sea region. Washington and Ankara are beating the drums against Tehran, and Turkish leaders have openly threatened their neighbors with military force. In this situation, the forthcoming Caspian Sea summit meeting in Turkmenbashi, organized by Russia, promises to be extremely difficult. If the summit fails, a disaster could ensue. A military blowup would threaten all international transport and energy projects in the region.

Also according to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, a new report by the U.S. Department of Defense concludes that "the probability of a full-scale war over Nagorno-Karabakh is extremely high." The Pentagon study allegedly claims that Azerbaijan and Armenia will never reach a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and that the resulting conflict will automatically bring a whole array of external forces into play.

This warning was seconded by the Russian business magazine *Ekspert*, which wrote, "The Caspian Sea is full of the noise of fighter planes and warships." *Ekspert* emphasized the lack of agreement about the legal status of rights to exploit the resources of the Caspian, as a potential trigger for regional war.

Prior to World War II, Iran and the Soviet Union reached two agreements on this subject, but since the Soviet break-up, instead of two, there are now five nations involved. Back in the 1970s, the Soviet government allotted jurisdiction over the Soviet-controlled Caspian Sea area among the governments of the Soviet Republics of Russia, Kazakstan, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, with Iran controlling the remaining 14%. After the split-up of the Soviet Union, Iran proposed a different division, which would give each of the five nations 20%, and also proposed joint exploitation.

But Azerbaijan has essentially refused to cooperate, insisting in particular on unilateral control over the Araz-Alov-Shart fields which lie in the area claimed by Iran. The recent escalation came when an Azeri ship, with a team of experts from British Petroleum, moved into the area to carry out geological investigations, without consultation with Iran, and was forcibly turned back by Iranian gunboats. *Ekspert* also concluded that if the upcoming Caspian Summit fails, a military escalation may be inevitable.

Iran's Progress Embattled

These incited regional tensions clearly strengthen those forces within Iran which are not applying President Khatami's "Dialogue of Civilizations" approach to the Mideast conflict. Thus they also make more difficult, the urgent initiatives needed to stop a general religious war conflagration in the Mideast. Iran's crucial economic role in Eurasian Land-Bridge development is also targeted: It has been completing and developing the railroad links connecting landlocked Cen-

FIGURE 10

Southern Caucasus Region and Iran



tral Asian republics to the Indian Ocean, and Chinese western railroad corridors toward Europe. Iran is the “corridor” for Russia’s intended “north-south” Eurasian Transport Union bridge from European Russia to India.

What happened in Iran between Aug. 5 and 8, by comparison, was a relatively normal constitutional series of events. On the one hand, the pro-reform forces in the country, those lining up behind President Khatami, enjoy the support of an overwhelming majority of the population. This was expressed in Khatami’s first electoral victory in 1997, followed by his second victory this year, scoring 77% of the votes cast. The same fact is expressed in the majority now ruling in the Majlis (parliament), two-thirds of which is dominated by reformers. On the other hand, crucial institutions in the system of the Islamic Republic, still remain under the control of the opposition, conservative forces. These include the judiciary, intelligence, and security, and parts of the Armed Forces. The institutions still under conservative control are powerful enough to slow, or even thwart progress. Khatami, aware of the delicate balance existing in this paradoxical relation of forces, has insisted that progress must be achieved, within the parameters of the Constitution and its institutions.

Supreme Leader Khamenei postponed the Aug. 5 inauguration ceremony for President Khatami, because there was a

Constitutional “ambiguity.” The Majlis had been called upon to vote on two new candidates to the Guardian Council, an institution which oversees laws passed by the Majlis, to ensure they are in conformity with Islamic teachings and the Constitution. The candidates presented to the Majlis are proposed by the judiciary, which is firmly under control of the conservatives. The Majlis twice rejected the candidates presented them, leaving the Guardian Council with only ten members.

To break the deadlock, Supreme Leader Khamenei on Aug. 5 assigned the Chairman of the Expediency Council (Khatami’s predecessor, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani), to convoke an urgent debate of that body, for Aug. 6, to issue proposals to resolve the clinch between the Judiciary and the Legislative branches.

Rafsanjani’s proposal was presented to Supreme Leader Khamenei, and thereafter, another vote was held in the Majlis on the disputed candidates. This time, only a relative majority of votes were required, to confirm the candidacies. The Majlis this time handed in 160 blank ballots; of the remaining, small number of votes cast, fewer than 70, were sufficient to establish a relative majority, and elect the candidates.

Though the conservatives “won,” in that their candidates were elected in the end, and the Guardian Council remains in their hands, the most eloquent statement about the relation of forces, is to be read in the number of blank ballots cast.

The Economy Is Really the Issue

Once the technical impasse was broken, Khatami was formally inaugurated on Aug. 8 to his second term, swearing “not to give up to any pressures, in my capacity to defend the basic rights of the people, legitimate freedoms, liberal press as well as civil institutions,” and not to submit to any “violent currents.”

Most important, Khatami stressed his commitment to improve the economic situation. Iran has a population of 63 million, over half of whom are under the age of 30. Inflation is estimated at 11%, and unemployment at 13%. Foreign debts are said to be \$7 billion. Despite significant progress toward developing the non-oil sectors of the economy, Iran’s economy is still 80% dependent on oil revenues.

In his inaugural address, Khatami expressed his commitment to bring about a “political, cultural, social, and scientific development as a prerequisite for economic development.” Iran, he said, should exploit all its “abundant moral and material potentials” to overcome “chronic social, economic, and technical backwardness”; this will involve implementation of his reform plans both in government and in the public sector.

Khatami defended his first four-year term, citing the “big strides” being made, for example, in increased state revenues, declining unemployment rates, progress in banking, and payment of significant parts of the national debt. He struck an optimistic note, saying, “Although the problems of the country are enormous, I see hopeful prospects for the country.”