

War in Caucasus risks becoming internationalized

by Konstantin George

On Sept. 8, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller arrived in Moscow for an urgent crisis summit with the Russian leadership on the Armenia-Azerbaijan war, which is on the brink of becoming internationalized, drawing in Turkey, Russia, and Iran. In the days before the Russian-Turkish summit, both Turkey and Iran had threatened, separately, military intervention to "help" Azerbaijan against "Armenian aggression." The Russian government countered by sending separate warnings to Ankara and Teheran, not to militarily intervene. It is this three-way configuration which makes the crisis so explosive.

While the prospects are very good for a Russian-Turkish understanding coming off the Ciller-Yeltsin summit, any agreements defusing the conflict could become unglued overnight by Iranian actions precipitating a Turkish intervention. That in turn could trigger a Russian response to protect Armenia, which is a member of the Russian-led CIS Defense Pact. The escalation danger could thus transform overnight the Armenia-Azerbaijan "regional" war into a major East-West strategic confrontation, which would begin by pitting Russia against a NATO member, Turkey.

Russia controls the Caucasus

Whatever happens, one fact will not change, namely that Russia all but controls the Caucasus and will cement its control in the near future. It controls Georgia and Azerbaijan through coups which brought to power two "former" KGB generals, respectively, Eduard Shevardnadze and Gaidar Aliyev. The Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade of Armenia has forced that republic to become a de facto Russian colony, a status most recently reflected in the Sept. 7 formation of the "ruble zone," of which Armenia is part. Under the terms of the ruble zone agreement, all members surrender to the Russian Central Bank control over economic, financial, and monetary policy.

The irony of the threatened Turkish intervention is that the object of its intended military assistance, namely Azerbaijan, has firmly declared its intention to rejoin the Russian Empire. Three days before the Ciller visit, Azerbaijan ruler Gaidar Aliyev arrived in Moscow for talks with the Russian government. The first result was an announcement by Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin that Azerbaijan intended to rejoin the CIS, and this would appear on the agenda of the Sept. 24 CIS summit. The second result was a grand announcement by the Russian government that Russia would sponsor a special "Caucasus" summit on Sept. 20 in Moscow, involving the heads of state of Russia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. All "non-Soviet" outsiders, Turkey included, were excluded.

Turkey threatens intervention

The immediate danger of the war becoming internationalized can be traced to a series of Turkish moves that culminated in threats of a Turkish military intervention against Armenia issued Sept. 4 by Ciller and the Turkish military leadership. The key passages of these threats reveal the truth concerning Turkish policy objectives in the Caucasus, as opposed to the myth widely supported by western media coverage of a "selfless" Turkey, intent only on "rescuing" its Azerbaijan "brother" from further defeats at the hands of the Armenians.

Ciller issued her threat via an interview in the leading daily, *Hurriyet*, where she thundered that "if even one thumb's breadth of Nakhichevan's territory is violated by the Armenian aggressors, I will summon the parliament to declare a state of war" between Turkey and Armenia. Ciller invoked the 1921 Russo-Turkish Treaty which made (Soviet) Russia and Turkey co-guarantors of Nakhichevan's status. Nakhichevan is the exclave of Azerbaijan sharing a long border with Iran, but also a 20-kilometer common border

with Turkey. It is separated from the Azerbaijan "mainland" by a thin strip of Armenian territory running down to the Iranian border. It was detached from Armenia under the terms of the 1921 Lenin-Ataturk Russo-Turkish treaty and given to Azerbaijan. It is also the place of refuge taken by the ex-President of Azerbaijan and Turkish asset, Abulfaz Elchibey, deposed in June by a Russian coup that brought to power "former" KGB general and ruler of Azerbaijan in the Soviet period, Gaidar Aliyev. That coup, much more than the so-called "Armenian aggression," stung Turkish leaders, who had thought that Azerbaijan was "theirs."

That being said, we return to Ciller's threat. In reality, there is and never has been an Armenian military threat to Nakhichevan. The Armenian leadership knows very well that Nakhichevan is Turkey's "Red Line" in the Caucasus, and has studiously avoided giving even the appearance of taking any action against the exclave. It is clear that Turkey is looking for a pretext, no matter how flimsy, to occupy Nakhichevan, as the starting point for restoring its shattered presence in the Caucasus.

The companion threat issued by the Turkish military leadership illustrated that a seizure of Nakhichevan was not the end goal, but a springboard for further military actions. Turkish General Staff spokesman Colonel Silahcioglu declared that the Armed Forces are ready, if so ordered, "to secure Armenia's withdrawal from the territory of our friend and brother Azerbaijan." To achieve this, the Turkish Army must secure an overland connection from Turkey to the areas of southwest Azerbaijan held by Armenian forces. This can only be done by crossing and seizing Armenian territory. In military terms, the final Turkish goal is to advance eastwards from Nakhichevan to grab the strategically crucial strip of Armenian territory along the Iranian border separating Nakhichevan from Azerbaijan.

These threats did not come out of the blue. They were preceded in the first days of September by a large Turkish troop buildup on the border with Nakhichevan, and along the long Turkish-Armenian border. They were also preceded by months of dangerous and ludicrous anti-Armenian war propaganda in the press and media, which reached a peak of hysteria in the first days of September. A prime example on both counts, with added emphasis on the ludicrous, was the Sept. 2 front page of Turkey's leading "moderate" daily, *Milliyet*, with a huge multi-colored map of the crisis region, showing red-colored tanks poised in Armenia, with their gun barrels pointing over the border into Turkey. Were one to take the Turkish media seriously, then "mighty" Armenia was about to descend on Turkey. A similar wave of outrageous nonsense about the alleged "threat" posed to Turkey's existence by little Cyprus (population 500,000) preceded the 1974 Turkish invasion of that island republic.

The crisis is compounded by the parallel threat of an Iranian military move into Azerbaijan, something which Turkey cannot tolerate. The summer Armenian offensives have

seized nearly all of southwest Azerbaijan, driving a flood of 200,000 Azeri refugees eastward along the Araks River, which forms the border between Iran and Azerbaijan. Ethnically, the Araks River divides Azerbaijan from Iranian Azerbaijan, where 10 million Azeris live, 3 million more than in the whole of Azerbaijan. This has made Teheran nervous to the extreme. The last thing Iran wants are hundreds of thousands of Azeris descending into Iranian Azerbaijan. Armenia, sensitive to Teheran's concerns, has deliberately halted its forces short of the Iran-Azerbaijan border, allowing an "escape corridor" in Azerbaijan territory for the refugees.

In part because of the refugees, but also on account of the Turkish threat, Iran at the beginning of September also conducted a large military buildup along the border. As the Turkish threats were being issued, small contingents of Iranian troops crossed into Azerbaijan and occupied two dams along the Araks River, an action that Teheran had confirmed. On Sept. 8, as Ciller was arriving in Moscow, Iran announced that it was sending "10,000 helpers" into Azerbaijan to construct tent cities to house 100,000 war refugees during the coming winter.

With Ciller's arrival in Moscow, the crisis had reached a critical inflection point. It could either explode into a war, or see a diktat imposed on Armenia and Azerbaijan by Russia and Turkey, establishing a new division of influence in the Caucasus, a sort of Caucasus "New Yalta." Under this, Russia would accommodate minimal Turkish, or western demands, though the agreement would reflect Russia's overall dominance in the area.

On the Turkish side, Ciller will propose an agreement that would secure without a military intervention the goal of the threatened intervention, namely, a continuous overland link between Turkey and Azerbaijan. This would involve a "settlement" of the Armenia-Azerbaijan war based on exchange of territories and populations. Concretely, Azerbaijan would surrender Karabakh and the territory between it and Armenia, to Armenia. Armenia would pay a terrible price for this: It would surrender to Azerbaijan the strip of its territory along the Iranian border.

From an imperial standpoint, such an agreement would also favor Russia, which, since the June coup that brought Aliyev to power, has come close to completing its de facto reconquest of the Caucasus. With the loss of its only non-Russian controlled overland link to the outside world, Armenia would move from near-total to total dependency on Russia. With the acquisition of Armenian territory to "compensate" for the "loss" of Karabakh, Moscow agent Aliyev would be become an "Azeri hero" in time for the Oct. 3 elections for President and Parliament in Azerbaijan, where he could duly "legalize" his dictatorship.

This outcome is likely, but by no means assured. There are too many players, and one provocative move by any one of them could easily explode any agreements or understandings reached.