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Russia and the Greater Caspian Basin:
Withstanding the US Challenge*Roger E. Kanet*

In the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union the US, while officially supporting the emergence of a democratic political system in the Russian Federation, also attempted to contain the potential reassertion by Moscow of dominant influence throughout the broad region of Central Asia and the Caspian Basin – a region rich in energy resources.¹ To some extent, through NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme, expanded bilateral relationships with the new governments of the region, and access to military bases in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks against the US in September 2001, the US was able to establish a presence throughout the region and to challenge Russia's role. The fact that the political elites of the new states of Eurasia were attempting to establish their sovereignty and to create some distance and autonomy from Moscow facilitated the pursuit of Washington's policy objectives. However, more recently, as the incompatibility of some US interests with those of local political elites became evident – for example, issues related to democratisation and human rights concerns – and as Russia, flush with new-found oil and gas wealth, began to assert its role as the dominant actor within its immediate neighbourhood, the weakness of the US position and of its challenge to the re-establishment of a dominant Russian role in the region became quite evident. By the time of the drafting of this chapter in spring 2009, the role of the US as a serious challenger to Russia throughout Central Asia and the greater Caspian region had already waned. The realities of geographic proximity versus distance, as well as the basic incompatibility of many US policy objectives with the interests of the political elites of the countries of the region, had become evident. The Russian Federation had survived the challenge from the US for influence and was well on its way to re-establishing its role as the dominant external actor throughout the region. Yet, as we will see, this shift was by no means permanent, or even stable, as local political elites played the Russian Federation and the US against one another in the attempt to expand economic, security or political gains. What has also become quite evident is the fact that in the new 'Great Game' for influence in Central Asia the local states are not mere

1 pawns in the hands of the 'Great Powers'. In fact, local leaders have been
2 able to use their command of energy resources, their location and other
3 factors to play off the outside states to their own advantage.

4 In the present chapter we will track the development of US efforts to estab-
5 lish a presence and influence in the Central Asian and Caucasian regions in
6 the post-Cold War era,² as well as the Russian responses to those efforts –
7 responses that, by spring 2009, appeared to have successfully warded off the
8 challenge, but only a few months later seemed marginally less effective.³
9 The argument will be developed in five stages. We will first survey briefly the
10 impact of the demise of the Soviet Union on Moscow's foreign policy, includ-
11 ing its ability to establish and determine what it viewed as its key interests.
12 We will then examine the efforts of the leaders of the post-Soviet states of
13 the greater Caspian region to balance their dependence on Moscow with
14 expanded economic, political, and security links with states from outside the
15 region. This discussion will lead to a third issue, namely early US efforts to
16 establish contacts with and influence in the greater Caspian region as part
17 of a broader policy of taking advantage of what many at the time viewed as
18 the permanent demise of Russia as a major power. The fourth segment of
19 the argument will outline the return of Russia as a major actor during the
20 presidency of Vladimir Putin and the overall deterioration of Russian–US
21 relations. The final section of the narrative will track the recent tensions
22 in US relations with key Central Asian states and the apparent success – at
23 least partial and possibly for the foreseeable future – of the Russians' efforts
24 to re-establish themselves as the dominant external influence throughout
25 the region. Included in this assessment, of course, will be a discussion of the
26 interests of local political elites and the various ways in which those interests
27 impact the new 'Great Game' for major power influence in the great swath
28 of land and peoples bounded by China in the east, Russia in the north, and
29 South Asia and the Middle East to the south.

31 **Russia and the Greater Caspian Basin under Yeltsin**

32
33 Initially, as the new Russian government focused on strengthening its ties
34 with the West and on being accepted as a full member of what Yeltsin
35 termed 'the civilized community' (Yeltsin, 1992), it paid relatively little
36 attention to its relations with other former Soviet republics that had also
37 just acquired independence. In part, this was a factor in the virtual revolt
38 among political elites in Russia against the foreign policy of President
39 Yeltsin that resulted in the policy shift in the mid-1990s, which included
40 emphasising the importance of Russia's relations with its near neighbours
41 and with countries in Asia, as well as with Europe. President Yeltsin issued
42 a decree that called for a reversal of the growing separatist trends already
43 present throughout the entire post-Soviet region (Blank, 2002, p. 150;
44 Roeder, 1997, p. 223).

1 By the year 2000, almost a decade after its creation, the CIS had failed in
2 any meaningful sense of the word to integrate the Soviet successor states.
3 On paper the Commonwealth was a forum for ambitious projects of coop-
4 eration; in reality it witnessed a diminishing base of collaborative activities
5 (Sakwa and Webber, 1999; Olcott, Åslund and Garnett, 1999). Stephen Blank
6 has noted the place that a revitalised CIS played early in President Putin's
7 intensified efforts to achieve one of the central objectives of Russian foreign
8 policy established by the mid-1990s: that is, preserving Russia's integrity
9 and restoring Russian primacy in an exclusive sphere of influence across
10 the CIS (Blank, 2002, p. 148). Yet even he soon discovered that bilateral
11 relationships were likely to be far more effective in rebuilding Russia's role
12 throughout the region. But the central issue concerns the fact that for much
13 of the first decade of existence of the Russian Federation Moscow devoted
14 relatively little attention to relations with its near neighbours to the south.
15 Not until President Putin committed his government to re-establishing its
16 central, even dominant, position in former Soviet space towards the end
17 of his first administration did the region re-emerge as a priority in Russian
18 policy. By then, as we shall see, Russia faced potential competitors for
19 influence – from the US, from China, as well as from both Turkey and Iran.
20 Added to this, local political leaders had become more adept of balancing
21 their relations with those outside powers interested in the region.

23 **The search for identity separate from Moscow**

24
25 The leadership of the new Central Asian states that emerged after the implo-
26 sion of the former Soviet Union had played no role whatsoever in the breakup
27 of the USSR. The meeting in Belovezha, near Brest, on 8 December 1991 that
28 resulted in the decision to disband the Union was attended only by the heads
29 of the three Slavic republics. Only after the leaders of the other republics
30 learned of the decision and demanded that they be included in planning the
31 political and economic future of what would soon be former Soviet space were
32 they included in discussions about the establishment of the CIS.

33 The very first task that faced the leaders and political elites of the new
34 sovereign states that emerged in Central Asia and the Caucasus was to
35 create viable new political systems, a sense of political identity among the
36 population, and the foundations for a national economy (Anderson, 1997,
37 pp. 79–165). Added to this was the need to establish the institutions of
38 national security, if these states were to emerge as truly sovereign political
39 actors. Moscow's initial inference that Russia's interests lay predominantly
40 in the West was, in part, a call for these new leaders to look beyond Russia in
41 its initial search for political and economic partners. The presence of oil and
42 natural gas reserves in much of the region, as well as ethnic and religious
43 factors, meant that Turkey, Iran, the EU, China, and even the US all demon-
44 strated an interest in establishing ties with these new countries and, thus,

1 provided their leaders with the opportunity to reduce their dependence on
2 the Russian Federation.⁴

3 Moreover, Moscow's initial focus on relations with Europe and the US
4 and its seeming indifference to developments in the region, along with the
5 numerous multilateral agreements within the context of the CIS, meant that
6 locally dominant states used the emerging multilateral institutions in the
7 attempt to achieve their own goals, while the smaller states attempted to
8 use them to constrain the larger ones (MacFarlane, 1997, p. 59; Kay, 2003,
9 p. 125). Throughout the 1990s the security collaboration between Russia and
10 the Central Asian and Caucasian states was just as ineffectual as collaboration
11 within the CIS more generally. Of the many agreements signed within the
12 context of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty few were ever implemented
13 and by 1999 the treaty was effectively moribund (Berryman, 2007).

14 As Martha Brill Olcott (2005, pp. 20–51) has noted, the region suffers
15 from serious divisions on issues ranging from the distribution of natural
16 resources, including water, to differing views on policy choices. The fact
17 that all countries shared common political and economic experiences under
18 both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes does not mean that their current issues
19 and problems or their approaches to dealing with them are identical.

21 **Expanding US involvement in Central Asia and the Caucasus**

22
23 During the 1990s and especially after the terrorist attacks of September
24 2001 the US became an active participant in the politics of Central Asia
25 and the Caucasus. Stated objectives of US policy in the region were the
26 removal of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan and more broadly across the
27 region democracy-building, free market economies, regional cooperation,
28 and integration into the international system (Weinthal, 2000). With the
29 decision to establish NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme in 1994
30 in partial response to demands for full NATO membership by countries in
31 Central Europe and as a means to begin the process of extending US and
32 Western influence across post-communist space from Central Europe to
33 Central Asia, the US established its first major contacts with the countries
34 of the region (Dannreuther, 2000, pp. 151–2).⁵ The withdrawal of Russian
35 forces from Central Asia throughout the first decade of post-Soviet Russian
36 existence mentioned above occurred at a time of the active expansion of
37 NATO's PfP programmes throughout the region. First, NATO invited all the
38 former communist states to participate in a newly established organisation,
39 the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC), which was meant to pro-
40 vide a forum for consultation with former Cold War enemies. The Central
41 European countries responded almost immediately and joined in December
42 1991; the post-Soviet CIS members joined in spring 1992 (Rivera, 2003,
43 p. 82). However, by early 1994 the NACC evolved into the PfP programme,
44 which for the Central European and Baltic countries became a fast track

1 to full NATO membership. For the Caucasian and Central Asian states and
2 other former Soviet republics it has remained a means of collaborating
3 with Western militaries in upgrading training and equipment, modernising
4 militaries, engaging in joint military manoeuvres, and related activities.⁶ By
5 the end of the first decade after the disintegration of the USSR, therefore,
6 the US had established, via NATO, a very modest military presence and
7 involvement in a region that until then had been for more than a century
8 an integral part of the Russian and Soviet states.

9 In addition to initial US political and security involvement in Central Asia
10 and the Caucasus, of course, must also come the US concern for petroleum
11 and natural gas, in particular as related to the objective of limiting the re-
12 establishment of a dominant position throughout the region by the Russian
13 Federation. In fact, after the removal of nuclear weapons from Kazakhstan in
14 1995 and until the US military intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001, they
15 were probably the dominant US goals in the region. It was not merely the
16 fact that the countries of the Greater Caspian Basin represented additional
17 energy resources for the major European allies of the US, but also the fact
18 that the existing delivery system of both petroleum and natural gas from
19 the region to Europe crossed Russian territory.⁷ Expanded deliveries of oil
20 and gas to Europe meant the potential increase of European dependence on
21 Russia for crucial energy supplies and, thus, an enhancement of the Russian
22 Federation's ability to reassert influence in European affairs. Thus, the US,
23 and US oil companies, became actively involved in the attempt to negotiate
24 access especially to the gas fields of Central Asia and to the construction of
25 pipelines to deliver that gas to the West that would skirt Russian territory.

26 This attempt to contain Russia's future economic and political role in
27 Central Asian and European gas markets was, in fact, part of the US com-
28 mitment to maintain its global position in relationship with the Russian
29 Federation. Although US officials have denied that this was a goal of US
30 policy, their Russian counterparts, especially Mr Putin, have complained
31 bitterly about what they have perceived as a continuation of the US contain-
32 ment policy. This aspect of American policy in the region can be found in
33 efforts since the mid-1990s to provide CIS member states with alternatives
34 to continued dependence on Russia and strengthen their ability to resist
35 Russian domination. In the case of the countries of the Caspian Basin this
36 included the attempt to reduce Russia's ability to exert influence over the
37 expanding oil and gas production of the region by locating pipelines so that
38 they skirt Russian territory (see Ebel and Menon, 2000; Ziegler, 2005).

39 Despite the various US initiatives throughout the Greater Caspian region
40 during the 1990s, it was not really until after the terrorist attacks in New York
41 and Washington of September 2001 that the US expanded its policy interest
42 in the area. These attacks represented the turning point in US involvement
43 in the Central Asian and Caucasus states. The US acquired temporary basing
44 facilities in response to a changing security environment, as Uzbekistan,

1 Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan became frontline states in operation 'Enduring
2 Freedom' (Wishnick, 2009, p. 1). Although other goals, such as democrati-
3 sation and transformation of the economy, still retained their importance,
4 anti-terrorism became the central element of US policy both in the region
5 and globally.⁸

6 Although Russia extended its support to the US in their joint fight against
7 terror and, in fact, played an active role in facilitating the initial expan-
8 sion of US military involvement in Central Asia, the Russians soon became
9 concerned about long-term US involvement in its 'backyard'.⁹ Despite the
10 brief improvement in Russian–US relations immediately after 9/11, it was
11 not long until President Putin's Russia reoriented its policy towards one of
12 Russian resurgence as a great power, Russian unilateralism in pursuing its
13 interests, and a form of revisionism aimed at reversing what Russian leaders
14 view as geopolitical disasters of the 1990s.

15 16 **A resurgent Russia and renewed Russian–US divisions**¹⁰

17
18 At the very outset of his presidency Vladimir Putin made clear his commit-
19 ment to re-establishing Russia's position as the pre-eminent regional power
20 and as major international actor. Essential preconditions for the fulfilment of
21 these objectives were the internal political stability and economic viability of
22 Russia (Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, 2000). Putin moved
23 forcefully and, in most cases, effectively to reassert central governmental
24 control in Russia. The economy rebounded from the depths of the financial
25 crash of 1998 (Central Bank, 2001) and high growth rates continued – not
26 merely in the oil and gas sector, but across broad sectors of the economy (The
27 World Bank in Russia, 2008). These political and economic gains, however,
28 occurred along with growing disregard for the civil liberties and democratic
29 processes to which Putin's government was nominally committed.

30 In the foreign policy realm Putin continued to seek allies who shared
31 Russia's commitment to preventing the global dominance of the US, which
32 represents, in the words of the 'Foreign Policy Concept', a threat to interna-
33 tional security and to Russia's goal of serving as a major centre of influence
34 in a multipolar world. Most of the issues on which Russia and the US
35 disagreed already in the mid-1990s continued to plague that relationship.
36 In other words, until the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001 there
37 was little evidence that the disagreements dividing Russia and the US during
38 the 1990s would disappear soon – in particular since they derived from core
39 elements of their respective foreign policy commitments. In fact, after a very
40 brief hiatus immediately after 9/11, those issues re-emerged and continue to
41 undermine Russian–US relations in 2009.

42 However, President Putin's success in dealing with the major domestic
43 problems challenging the Russian state meant that Russia increasingly
44 faced Europe and the US from a position of stability and strength. Putin's

1 reassertion of central control over the territory of the Russian Federation – by
2 eliminating the election of provincial governors, by suppressing domestic
3 opponents and critics (especially the independent media) and by playing on
4 the fears of Russian citizens of domestic terrorism, crime, and general chaos –
5 played an important role in strengthening the Russian state, which under his
6 predecessor at times seemed on the verge of collapsing. Besides rebuilding the
7 foundations of the Russian state at great cost to political liberty and demo-
8 cracy as a precondition for Russia's ability to reassert itself as a major power,
9 Putin and his associates benefited greatly from the exponential rise in global
10 demand for gas and oil – at least until the global economic collapse of late
11 2008 – and the ensuing revitalisation of the Russian economy. This, in turn,
12 has contributed to Russia's ability to pursue a much more active and assertive
13 foreign policy. It is yet to be seen what the longer-term impact of the collapse
14 of the global economy since late 2008 will have and how the dramatic drop
15 in energy prices will affect the Russian economy and Russia's ability to pursue
16 an assertive foreign policy.

17 Thus, Putin was quite successful, and fortunate, during the eight years of
18 his presidency in establishing the economic and political foundations for a
19 strong centralised state as the prerequisite for Russia's reasserting itself as a
20 major player in international political and security affairs, in part to reverse
21 the results of what former President Putin himself termed 'the greatest
22 geopolitical catastrophe of the century', namely the collapse of the USSR
23 (Putin, 2005). This comment was followed early in 2007 by Putin's broad
24 attack on virtually all aspects of US policy delivered at an international
25 security conference in Munich, which made clear Russia's new assertive and
26 nationalistic approach to foreign policy, beginning with its relations with
27 the US (Putin, 2007). The rhetoric emanating from Moscow after the mili-
28 tary incursion into Georgia, in particular that of President Medvedev, con-
29 firmed the image of Russia as a revisionist state intent upon re-establishing
30 its dominant role, at least along its periphery, and one that simply will no
31 longer deal with the rest of the world on any other terms except those that
32 it sets (Levy, 2008).¹¹ It is important to note that from Moscow's perspective
33 its policy goals are not revisionist, but rather are intended to re-establish
34 Russia's legitimate position in the aftermath of the West's having taken
35 advantage of Russian decline in the immediate post-Cold War period.

36 By May 2008, when Putin turned the presidency over to his successor
37 Dmitry Medvedev, Russia had re-emerged as a major player in European
38 economic and political affairs and the dominant actor in most of post-Soviet
39 space. The foundation of this new role has been Russia's semi-monopoly
40 over the extraction and distribution of natural gas and oil across much of
41 Eurasia, and the growing direct influence that this semi-monopoly provides
42 over the economies of neighbouring states. The gas war between Russia and
43 Ukraine in January 2009 and its implications for European consumers of
44 Russian gas make clear both the importance to Moscow of its control of oil

1 and gas exports in the pursuit of foreign policy objectives and its willingness
2 to use that leverage.¹²

3 Before turning to a more detailed discussion of specific developments in
4 Russian relations with the US in the recent past as they concern Central Asia,
5 it is important to note, at least briefly, the relationship between the growing
6 assertiveness in Russian foreign policy and domestic political developments.
7 As Russia's leaders abandoned the halting efforts at democratisation that
8 characterised the first decade of the Russian Federation and increasingly
9 re-established the institutions and policies of a traditional authoritarian
10 state, they have also seized upon economic growth and Russian nationalism
11 as the foundations on which to build support from broad segments of the
12 population. The economic boom of the past decade that resulted in more
13 than doubling the gross domestic product per capita of the Russian popula-
14 tion has been an important element in the popularity of former President
15 Putin and in the support for his policies. However, the question arises
16 about the Russian people's willingness to continue to support an essentially
17 authoritarian regime in a period of serious economic downturn, such as the
18 one that engulfed Russia at the end of 2008.

19 Public opinion polls, as well as anecdotal information, indicate widespread
20 public support for the return of Russia to great power status; more specifically
21 Russians overwhelmingly supported the Kremlin's decision to invade Georgia
22 in August 2008 (Barnard, 2008; 'Half of Russians', 2008). Related to this broad
23 sense of nationalism, the Putin–Medvedev leadership has increasingly focused
24 on the dangers to Russia presented by foreign enemies, of which the US is
25 virtually always listed first. The most recent version of the Foreign Policy
26 Concept (FPC) issued by President Medvedev in late July 2008, immediately
27 prior to the intervention in Georgia, represents a break with earlier versions of
28 the Concept, even though it in effect merely codified changes that had already
29 occurred over recent years. First, unlike the Concept issued at the beginning of
30 the Putin presidency, it focuses on external, rather than internal, challenges to
31 Russian security – with US global dominance at the very top of the list. In line
32 with the extensive discussion of 'sovereign democracy' in Russia, the Concept
33 stipulates that global competition is acquiring a civilisational dimension,
34 which suggests competition between different value systems and development
35 models within the framework of universal democratic and market economy
36 principles. The new FPC maintains that the reaction to the prospect of loss by
37 the historic West of its monopoly in global processes finds its expression, in
38 particular, in the continued political and psychological policy of 'containing
39 Russia' (Foreign Policy Concept, 2008). The document emphasises through-
40 out Russia's independence and sovereignty as the foundation on which all of
41 Moscow's relations with the outside world must be built.

42 A resurgent nationalism, integrated with an almost paranoid concern
43 for security,¹³ underlies Moscow's current approach to the outside world.
44 As both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have repeated on numerous

1 occasions, Russia is a major power whose interests have simply been ignored
2 by the West, especially a would-be hegemonic Washington. With the return
3 of Russia's power base – especially in economic terms – Russia simply will
4 not stand by and permit those interests to be pushed aside. It will not permit
5 itself either to become a dependent supporter of US policy initiatives or to
6 be shunted aside into the 'dustbin of history'.
7

8 **The return of Moscow to the Greater Caspian Basin** 9

10 This assertive approach to relations with neighbouring countries, and the
11 world more broadly, has characterised recent Russian policy in the Greater
12 Caspian Basin, as well. The clearest example has been Russian policy towards
13 Georgia, which, long before the August 2008 invasion, was characterised by
14 economic coercion and threats of military action (Nygren, 2007a, 2008).¹⁴
15 An integral part of Russia's commitment to regain great power status dur-
16 ing the past decade has been the focus on bilateral relations with other
17 CIS member countries, including those of Central Asia and the Caucasus,
18 incorporating the strengthening of the latter's economic dependence on
19 Russia.¹⁵ These have largely replaced the CIS as a functional approach for
20 Moscow to manage its relations with these countries. In addition, however,
21 two new regional organisations have evolved in the past decade that sup-
22 plement the bilateral relationships, namely, the Collective Security Treaty
23 Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).
24 The former was created in spring 1992, soon after the collapse of the former
25 USSR and has included most of the former Soviet republics (with the excep-
26 tion of the Baltic states) as members. Although Russia is clearly the domi-
27 nant member, it is not able to impose its will on the others, as was seen
28 after the Georgian war when Moscow was unable to secure a statement of
29 support for its actions. In fact, in the aftermath of the military intervention
30 in Georgia Moscow has found it increasingly difficult to get its views on the
31 development of a collective security force implemented in the organisation
32 (McDermott, 2009).

33 In many respects the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has been
34 more active and more successful than the other multinational institutions
35 that include both the Russian Federation and the states of the Greater
36 Caspian Basin as members. The SCO has its roots in the late 1990s when
37 both Russia and China were looking for ways to consolidate their opposi-
38 tion to and to challenge what both view as US global dominance. It was
39 officially formed in 2001 and includes besides China and Russia all the
40 Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, but none of the Caucasian
41 countries. Despite its political role of challenging US global domination,
42 its major security operations focus on anti-terrorist activities, including
43 the improvement of border controls and mutual assistance in fighting
44 drug trafficking and international crime. Yet, the SCO has not become

1 an effective instrument for Russia to impose its policy preferences on
2 the smaller members of the organisation. It is primarily through bilateral
3 relations with the countries of the region that Moscow has attempted to
4 accomplish its overall objectives.

5 As noted earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks of
6 September 2001 and at a time when Putin had not yet embarked upon a
7 unilateralist approach to achieving Russia's foreign and security objectives,
8 Russia in effect facilitated the expansion of the US and NATO's military
9 presence in Central Asia. As the Russian leadership responded to the Bush
10 Doctrine, including the US decision to invade Iraq, and to Russia's changing
11 political and economic fortunes, they concluded that a semi-permanent US
12 military presence in Central Asia, in addition to the continued expansion
13 of NATO and EU into what President Medvedev (2008a) was to refer to as
14 areas of 'privileged interest' and US-led efforts to 'divert' Central Asian gas
15 away from Russian pipelines, would undermine Russian national interests.
16 The result, since about 2003 has been a concerted effort by Russia along
17 several lines. First, Russia has expanded its efforts to integrate the future
18 exploitation and delivery of Central Asian gas into the Russian production
19 and delivery system in competition with US plans to reduce the dependence
20 of these countries on Russia by expanding alternative delivery routes that
21 do not cross Russian territory and, thus, would reduce Russia's ability at
22 some future date to use energy as an instrument to influence, even coerce,
23 European support for Russian policy preferences, as they have tried to do
24 on numerous occasions in recent years with some of their near neighbours
25 in the West (Nygren, 2007b, 2008). The second aspect of the Russian policy
26 response has been to support the Central Asian leaderships when the
27 latter have been criticised by the US, to encourage them to terminate the
28 agreements with the US for basing rights, and to push forward bilateral and
29 multilateral efforts for expanded cooperation in the security realm.

30 A central instrument of foreign policy almost from the inception of the
31 new Russian Federation, but especially during the past decade, has been
32 control over energy. Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, and Ukraine have all suffered
33 the cut-off of gas and/or oil flows – usually in mid-winter and usually as a
34 result of political disagreements. For example, the source of the Russian–
35 Ukrainian confrontation over gas deliveries in January 2009 was the issue
36 of Ukraine's defiance of Moscow's preferences across a broad range of issues
37 and not simply disagreement over the price of gas exported to Ukraine. Ever
38 since the 'Orange Revolution' relations had soured. Most recently Ukraine
39 had insisted on the Russian removal of their Black Sea Fleet from its bases
40 in Sevastopol, currently scheduled for 2017. The Ukrainian government
41 had also made clear its interest in joining NATO, and the US under George
42 W. Bush had pushed for Ukrainian and Georgian membership.¹⁶ Until
43 the Russian military incursion in Georgia economic pressures, especially
44 related to energy, were among Russia's major tools for influencing Tbilisi's

1 policies – along with threats of military intervention to support separatists
2 in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹⁷

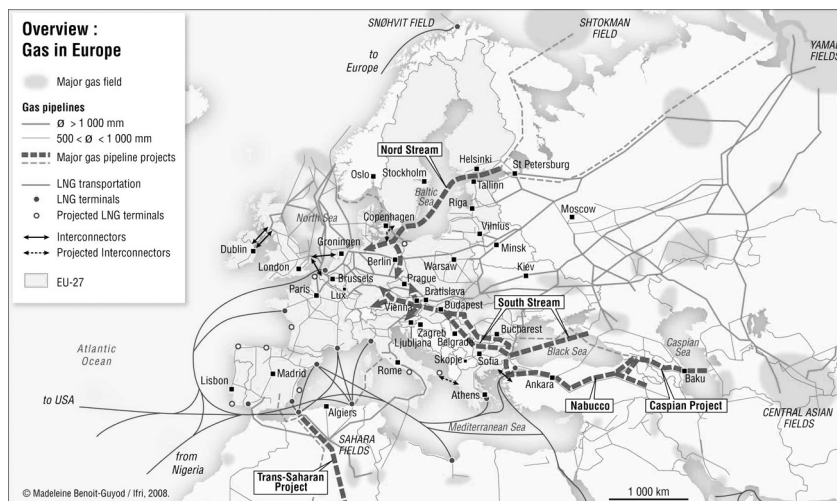
3 The major security concern that the US, as well as a number of the new
4 Central European members of the EU and NATO, have raised relates to the
5 growing European dependence on Russian energy and the possibility that
6 Russia might deal with EU member states as it has dealt with its immediate
7 neighbours – including EU and NATO member Estonia in 2007 at the time
8 of the so-called cyber-war over the moving of the grave of the unknown
9 Russian soldier.¹⁸

10 As noted earlier, the US has been actively involved since the mid-1990s
11 in the development of alternate gas and oil distribution routes to Europe
12 from Central Asia and Azerbaijan, to reduce Russia's ability to gain a semi-
13 monopoly over the distribution of Eurasian energy resources by calling for
14 the construction of oil and gas pipelines that would avoid Russian territory.
15 ¹⁹ Yet Russia has effectively outmanoeuvred the US in its relations with
16 the oil- and gas-producing countries of Central Asia. Although several pipe-
17 lines have been completed that avoid Russian territory, Moscow has been
18 successful in recent years in re-establishing solid political and economic
19 relations with the authoritarian regimes of Central Asia. They have signed
20 new agreements with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and other major energy
21 producers that will result in expanded supplies of gas and oil destined for
22 European consumers through the existing and planned pipeline network
23 that crosses Russian territory (Hahn, 2007; Kramer, 2007; see Map 4.1). **AQ:1**
24 In the period surrounding the Russian intervention in Georgia Moscow
25 signed new agreements with Central Asian producers for the expansion of
26 their gas exports through Russia, rather than via southern pipelines favoured
27 by the US (Bhadrakumar, 2008; People's Daily Online, 2008).²⁰

28 Russia has also signed agreements with major European countries,
29 operating outside any common EU policy, to construct new pipelines that
30 will avoid the territory of Ukraine, Belarus, and Poland and, thus, any abil-
31 ity of those countries to use Russia's dependence on them for delivery to
32 Europe of petroleum and gas for political purposes.²¹ These new pipelines are
33 meant to expand Russia's domination over the gas markets of Europe, while
34 reducing the possibility of countries such as Ukraine, Belarus or Poland dis-
35 rupting those flows (*The Economist*, 2008). Overall, with its new contracts for
36 gas deliveries from Central Asia and the agreements to build new pipelines
37 to Europe, Russia has seemingly positioned itself effectively to control the
38 production and distribution of energy across almost the entirety of former
39 Soviet space and, thus, to Europe as well, as part of former President Putin's
40 commitment to establish Greater Russia as a major global actor and, thus,
41 undercut an important element of US policy concerning Eurasian energy
42 (see Table 4.1).

43 The second important aspect of Russia's response to the perceived chal-
44 lenge to Russian interests represented by expanded US involvement in

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Source: Nies (2008), p. 5. Reprinted with the permission of Institut français des relations internationales

Table 4.1 Major recipients of Russian natural gas exports, 2006–7

Rank	Country	2006 Exports (bcf/y)	2007 Exports (bcf/y)	2006 % of domestic NG consumption
1	Germany	1,300	1,378	36%
2	Turkey	703	827	84%
3	Italy	756	742	25%
4	France	353	346	20%
5	Czech Republic	261	247	79%
6	Poland	272	247	47%
7	Hungary	272	226	54%
8	Slovakia	240	223	100%
9	Austria	233	191	74%
10	Finland	173	166	100%
11	Romania	180	138	28%
12	Bulgaria	113	120	96%
13	Greece	95	113	82%
14	Serbia & Montenegro	74	74	87%
15	Croatia	35	35	37%
16	Slovenia	25	18	64%
17	Switzerland	14	11	12%
18	Macedonia	4	4	100%

(Continued)

Table 4.1 Continued

Rank	Country	2006 Exports (bcf/y)	2007 Exports (bcf/y)	2006 % of domestic NG consumption
	Sales to	Baltic and	CIS States	
1	Ukraine	2,085	2,240	66%
2	Belarus	724	763	98%
3	Baltic States	173	243	78%
4	Azerbaijan	141	0	35%
5	Georgia	67	36	100%

Source: 'Domestic Consumption', *EIA International Energy Annual*, 2007; 'Exports 2006 and 2007', Gazexport, as cited by Energy Intelligence, March 2008; 'Sales to Baltic and CIS States 2007', *CIS and E. European Databook*, 2006 from Gazprom Annual Report. Available online at <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/Russia/NaturalGas.html>.

Central Asia and the Caucasus was the focus on strengthening military–security ties with the countries of the region, as well as influencing their leaderships to terminate the arrangements for US access to military bases across the region. The strengthening of bilateral security relationships, as well as the expansion of efforts to expand multilateral security operations, under Russian leadership, within the context of the CSTO were an important aspect of Russian policy towards the region by 2005 and later (Berryman, 2007; Ziegler, 2009). Most important was the announcement in November 2008 of the creation of a joint rapid reaction force by the CSTO,²² which, in the words of its secretary-general, would be able to repel any military intervention from outside the area (Zhussip, 2008; Najibullah, 2008).

However, despite these agreements the Russians are finding that dealing with their Central Asian neighbours is no easier than it has been over the course of the past two decades. By spring and summer 2009 it had become clear that not all of those who had signed on to the rapid reaction force interpreted the agreements in the same way as Moscow. Serious differences have become evident, for example, Uzbekistan's apparent reluctance at deploying 8,000–15,000 troops across the southern portion of Central Asia (Felgenhauer, 2009; Stratfor, 2009). Overall, despite the problems that the US has had in maintaining its relations with several of the Central Asian countries, Russia has discovered, as well, that despite – perhaps, because of – the long and strong historical Russian ties to the region and its overwhelming geopolitical and geo-economic role in the region, it often cannot achieve its objectives. The key issue is the fact that local political elites are simply unwilling to commit to dependency relationships with any major state and are willing, and able, to use their position, their command over resources, and other factors to play major powers off against one another.

An interim assessment

The purpose of this chapter, as noted at the beginning, is to track the efforts of the US to establish itself as a major actor in Central Asia and the Caucasus and the response of a reinvigorated Russian Republic to those efforts. Perhaps the major finding to emerge from this discussion, however, concerns the leaders and governments of the region themselves and their commitment to pursuing, insofar as that is possible for them, policies that meet their interests and strengthen the stability of their countries and their rule. The US government has seemingly learned that not all of its objectives can be met simultaneously – for example, when the government of Uzbekistan expelled the US from its air base in 2005 because of the latter's criticisms of its crackdown on political dissidents at the same time that both Russia and China expressed their support for the government of President Karimov in the struggle against the forces of separatism, terrorism, and extremism (Blank, 2005).²³

However, despite the growing evidence as recently as spring and summer 2008 that Russia was generally successful in re-establishing its position in the region, such as the new gas and oil agreements and the expulsion of the US from military facilities in Uzbekistan and potentially in Kyrgyzstan, the situation is much more complex than this. Local elites are not simply pawns moved on some geopolitical chessboard by the major powers. The US has seemingly learned that, if it is going to play an important role in developments in the Greater Caspian region, it is going to play, in part at least, by rules established by local political elites.

But, the Russians are learning this lesson, as well. Despite all their efforts aimed at tying the Central Asian states, their security and their economies, to Russia, the latter continue to resist Russian initiatives and to pursue their interests in relations with outside actors such as the US and China. Recent examples of this include the refusal to provide the Russians with the type of backing that they wanted after the latter's military intervention in Georgia; the reversal of the Kyrgyz government's decision, initially made with Russian encouragement, to expel US troops from the military base at Manas;²⁴ the signing of new gas exploration deals with European states; and the problems that the Russians currently have in getting its neighbours to implement agreements for a combined security force agreed to within the context of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation of the CIS.²⁵

Notes

1. The focus of this chapter will be on the five countries of Central Asia, plus Azerbaijan – with only occasional reference to the two western Caucasian countries of Armenia and Georgia. These are the countries of central concern to the US because of the command of energy resources as well as their geographic location *vis-à-vis*

- 1 Afghanistan and their role in the 'war on terror'. The author wishes to express
2 his appreciation to Maria Raquel Freire for her critical comments on an earlier
3 version of this chapter.
- 4 2. The author has made an explicit decision not to examine the role and the politi-
5 cal and economic activities of China in Central Asia and the Caucasus, although
6 he is well aware of the importance of those relations in strengthening the ability
7 of local elites to balance their relations between major external actors.
- 8 3. The author is referring to the complex negotiations, discussed in some detail
9 below, over the announced expulsion of US troops by Kyrgyzstan, with Russian
10 encouragement, from the base at Manas, followed several months later by the
11 announcement of an extension of the base agreement. It is important to note, as
12 Stephen Blank, Bertil Nygren, Maria Raquel Freire, and others have emphasised in
13 other chapters in this volume, that the US–Russian competition for influence in the
14 region is part of a complex set of political, economic, and security relationships
15 that include the countries of the Greater Caspian region themselves; other major
16 national and international political actors, such as the EU, the OSCE, and China;
17 important regional actors such as Iran and Turkey; as well as multinational
18 corporations and other non-governmental organisations. The 'Great Game' for
19 influence of the early twenty-first century makes that of late nineteenth century
20 between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire look simple, by comparison.
- 21 4. Among the numerous studies that examine the early years of independence of
22 the countries of the region with a focus on their foreign and security policy, see,
23 in particular, those by Allison and Jonson (2001); Anderson (1997); Aras (2002);
24 Dawisha and Parrott, eds (1997); Menon, Fedorov, and Nodia, eds (1999); and
25 Olcott, Åslund, and Garnett (1999).
- 26 5. For an excellent assessment of the restructuring of the NATO alliance system,
27 see Aybet (2000). Christopher Layne (2006, ch. 5) argues that this decision
28 to maintain and expand NATO in post-Cold War Europe was part of a long-
29 term US commitment to maintain its dominant position in European and
30 world affairs. For a current overview of NATO's involvement in Central Asia,
31 see Ziegler (2009).
- 32 6. According to the official NATO website, 'Cooperation focuses in particular
33 on defence-related work, defence reform and managing the consequences of
34 defence reform, but touches on virtually every field of NATO activity, including
35 defence policy and planning, civil-military relations, education and training,
36 air defence, communications and information systems, crisis management, and
37 civil emergency planning'. <http://www.nato.int/issues/pfp/index.html>. By 2005,
38 or so, both Ukraine and Georgia had become, with the support of the Bush
39 Administration, active applicants for full NATO membership. This effort was an
40 important element in the drastic deterioration in their relations with Russia that
41 led, in the case of Georgia, to military confrontation in August 2008.
- 42 7. For excellent discussions, including maps, of the various pipeline systems that
43 supply Western Europe, see Nies (2008), Barysch (2008), and Mankoff (2009). See
44 also Nies (2009).
- 45 8. In testimony to a newly created Senate Foreign Relations Sub-Committee on
46 Central Asia and the Caucasus in December 2001, Assistant Secretary of State
47 Elizabeth Jones (2001) emphasised three sets of long-term interests that the US
48 would continue to pursue in the region: (1) preventing the spread of terrorism;
49 (2) assisting the Central Asian states with economic and political reform and the
50 establishment of the rule of law, and (3) ensuring the security and transparent
51 development of Caspian energy resources.

- 1 9. On Russia's initial support for US military presence in Central Asia after 9/11,
2 see Jonson (2005).
- 3 10. The following discussion draws from Kanet (in press).
- 4 11. See, also, President Medvedev's (2008b) State of the Nation address in November
5 2008.
- 6 12. One should be careful to note that in the Ukrainian–Russian confrontation over
7 gas supplies, as in the Georgian–Russian military conflict in summer 2008 over
8 South Ossetia, Russia alone was not at fault. The leaders of both Ukraine and
9 Georgia contributed significantly to the confrontations. On European reactions
10 to the policies of these countries, see Taylor (2009). For a perceptive analysis of
11 the Ukrainian–Russian gas war, see Petrovič (2009).
- 12 13. It is important to recognise that the US decision to pursue a policy of de facto
13 containment of Russia beginning already by the mid-1990s, as noted elsewhere in
14 this chapter, has reinforced Moscow's concerns for security and for its future role
15 in areas adjacent to Russian territory and viewed as crucial to Russia's long-term
16 interests.
- 17 14. Andrei Tsygankov and Matthew Tarver-Wahlquist (2009) provide a careful and
18 nuanced assessment of the confrontation between Georgia and Russia that
19 focuses on the importance of honour and prestige on both sides and attributes
20 Russian policy, in large part, to the sense of betrayal at the hands of the US and
21 NATO in the post-Soviet period.
- 22 15. Bertil Nygren (2007b) argues most persuasively that, since the revival of Russia
23 early in the decade, economic tools have been especially important in Moscow's
24 relations with neighbouring states. For an excellent discussion of the current role
25 of the CIS in Russian policy, see the chapter by Richard Sakwa in this volume.
26 For an analysis that questions both the neo-imperialist nature of Russian policy
27 under Putin and the effective use of 'soft power', see Tsygankov (2006).
- 28 16. For more detail on the areas of disagreement between Russia and Ukraine, see
29 Berryman (2009).
- 30 17. In Georgia Russia acquired substantial ownership of energy production and distri-
31 bution facilities to cover the costs of outstanding debts and as a precondition for
32 continued discounted prices on Russian gas. In 2003 the Russian firm UES obtained
33 75 per cent ownership in a Georgian electricity distribution company and man-
34 agement control over several power plans, as well as 50 per cent ownership of a
35 nuclear power plant. Gazprom acquired control of Georgia's main gas pipeline in
36 2005 in return for a restructuring of the latter's debt. In other words, Russia now
37 directly controls much of Georgia's energy production and distribution and still
38 serves as the primary source of gas, even after the opening of the new pipeline from
39 Azerbaijan in late 2006. See Khachatryan (2003) and Torbakov (2003).
- 40 18. In 2007, after the Estonian government decided to move a Soviet war memorial
41 from the centre of Tallinn to its international military cemetery, Russians, in both
42 Estonia and in the Russian Federation, mounted attacks on the Estonian govern-
43 ment in Tallinn and its embassy in Moscow. This was followed by the cutting
44 off of Russian oil and coal deliveries, and a massive cyber attack that virtually
closed down the information technology sector of this former Soviet colony. See
Dempsey (2007), 'A Cyber-Riot' (2007), and *The Economist* (2007).
19. The first of these, the Baku–Ceyhan oil pipeline, from Azerbaijan on the Caspian
via Georgia to the Mediterranean coast of Turkey, opened in May 2005. At the
same time, however, a gas pipeline from Russia to Turkey under the Black Sea also
began operating. Sultanova (2005); Arvedlund (2005); and Lantier (2008).

- 1 20. The dramatic drop of gas and oil prices in 2008 associated with the global
2 financial collapse has meant that under the terms of long-term contracts Russia
3 is now paying more to Central Asian producers than it can charge to the ultimate
4 consumers in Europe. This development will undercut both short-term profits
5 and longer-term investment possibilities (Kramer, 2009).
- 6 21. The planned Nord Stream pipeline under the Baltic Sea directly from Russia to the
7 coast of Germany and the South Stream pipeline that will run under the Black Sea
8 from Russia directly to Bulgaria, will expand Russia's domination over the gas mar-
9 kets of Europe, while reducing the possibility of countries such as Ukraine, Belarus
10 or Poland disrupting those flows (*Intelligence Brief*, 2006; Isachenkov, 2008). In an
11 open letter to President Barack Obama twenty-two former presidents, prime minis-
12 ters, and other officials from Eastern Europe voiced their concern that they might be
13 sold out as the US improves its relations with Russia (Kulish, 2009; Bosacki, 2009).
- 14 22. Currently the CSTO membership includes, besides Russia, Armenia, Belarus,
15 Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.
- 16 23. In an interesting thesis on the role of the US military in Central Asia Leon
17 Dockery concludes that, if the US is truly interested in bases in the region, it
18 cannot expect to impose its view of governance on the host state: 'It is ideologi-
19 cal haughtiness (or foolishness) to expect a regime to change just because the
20 United States is present. The desire for security, or stability, in the region has to be
21 stronger than the push for democracy. Security is cemented in control' (Dockery,
22 2006, pp. 72, 78).
- 23 24. The announcement in early 2009 by the government of Kyrgyzstan that it would
24 not renew the lease to the US for the continued use of the airbase at Manas and
25 that Russia had provided a large new loan, reportedly to encourage the Kyrgyz
26 decision, was the most recent evidence of both Russia's concern about the con-
27 tinued US presence in Central Asia and its apparent growing influence (Barry
28 and Schwartz, 2009; Abdrisaev, 2009). However, negotiations continued over the
29 following months and in June – with Russian approval – a new agreement was
30 signed that more than triples the rent paid by the US and will provide substantial
31 additional monetary assistance to the Kyrgyz government (Pannier, 2009). In
32 other words, the Kyrgyz have played the Russians against the Americans and the
33 Americans against the Russians and, in the end managed to get much greater
34 financial commitments from both of them.
- 35 25. In an especially interesting article Ellen Barry (2009) concludes that 'Russia's
36 strategy for consolidating support in neighboring capitals can hardly be called a
37 strategy'.

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