

South Caucasus: World's Next Full-Blown War?

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Is there yet another crisis on the horizon of South Caucasus?

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TBILISI: South Caucasus, after the Balkans and North Africa, is presenting itself as a hotbed for another crisis which may well involve all the three nations in the region and players from the outside.

Ethnicity-related territorial disputes that have arisen during and after the Soviet era are the direct causes of the South Caucasus crises long in the making.

Such disputes have caused a flash conflict between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 in the north of the region and triggered on-again-off-again border sniper warfare between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the south, which claimed thousands of victims.

The three Caucasian countries combined cover an area of slightly over 186,000 square km, accounting for 0.12 percent of the global land area. Yet on this strip sandwiched between the major and minor Caucasus mountain ranges, there are other dormant conflicts.

For example, there has been a genocidal conflict between Armenia and Turkey, but the "football diplomacy" between the two nations has done a lot to ease the tension.

Local players aside, outsiders with energy, security and strategy interests in this region are also trying to take advantage of the situation there, further complicating the Caucasus chaos.

NATO, for one, is a big player in this region. To cash in its Bucharest Summit promise of eventually allowing Georgia into the military alliance, it may have to reset and perhaps even reinvent its relations with the former Cold War nemesis, not only in the South Caucasus but in all those areas where NATO and Russia have their respective interests to claim and verify.

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Middle East for NATO, once U.S.-led international forces pull their troops out of Iraq at the end of year.

The trans-Caucasian pipeline is already starting to serve as a counterweight diversion of energy to Europe, and the European Union needs the tally to bargain with Russia for pricing as well as for supplying its own natural gas and oil to the West.

Russia, another big player in the region, now has its farthest outpost to attend to after Georgia decided in the middle of this year to shut its airspace for Russian transport to its military base in Armenia.

Even though it may use the bypass via Azerbaijan or Iran or even Turkey, Russia will have to sacrifice or at least trade some of its key interests to secure the passable air route to Armenia, its major ally in the region.

This year saw another variable in the South Caucasus: Georgia, the one and only of the 153 World Trade Organization members up to now which has barred Russian accession. Yet now Georgia has signed an agreement with Russia which facilitated the conclusion of Russia's 18-year efforts to get into the world trade club.

The West, be it the European Union or NATO or the United States, may have used quite a few IOU's to get Georgia to sign the accord with Russia in Geneva in November.

And when the time has come to pay back these debts, and when the timing is not right nor convenient, things can go wrong.

The scheduled elections in South Caucasus are a case in point.

Both Georgia and Armenia will hold their parliamentary elections next year and presidential elections the following year. For the election campaigns, both the ruling and opposition parties may resort to strong rhetorics and even symbolic acts, which may also lead to turmoil in the region.

During his brief visit to South Caucasus in October, French President Nicolas Sarkozy brought forth something which may be the South Caucasus part of his foreign policy manifesto for his French presidential election campaign.

The "take-for-granted" policy toward the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region may cause another round of heated arguments between Armenia and Azerbaijan and renewed sniper border skirmishes.

Though Azerbaijan held its parliamentary elections in late 2010, the country will still hold its presidential elections in 2013, which will have to have the incumbent president and potential vying opponent align their foreign policy in and outside the region to strive for a better footing on both regional and international issues.

No matter what happens as responses to whatever provocations, the South Caucasus crisis can remain a mere regional battle or develop into a full-blown war.

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