

US-Russia Pipeline Geopolitics: The War of Words over Energy

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Russia's appearance on the list of threats to U.S. national security is a curious event. It's not unexpected though, especially since Russia was placed there next to Iran and Venezuela.

U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney accused Russia of using oil and gas "to frighten and blackmail its neighbors" in May and called that policy unjustifiable. After Cheney's strongly-worded speech, there were several partial disavowals of it. By the time the [G8 summit](#) rolled around, Washington has somewhat moderated its views.

Three months passed and nothing changed. Cheney wasn't joking when he said that the U.S. was concerned about Russian policy and, moreover, considers it dangerous, no less than the policies of Iran and Venezuela.

Everything is clear about Iran and Venezuela. Those countries are waging a de facto energy war against the U.S. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, for instance, visited China last week and announced that he would increase oil deliveries to that country by reducing them to the U.S. Iran is even clearer cut. Iran controls the entire southern, Shiite, part of Iraq, where oil pipelines are being blown up. The U.S. expected that it is premeditated sabotage. The last blast occurred the day before yesterday. Eighty-two people were killed.

Richard Lugar made his speech after a tour of Russia's neighbors on the Caspian Sea. It seems that he came to the conclusion there that Russia is waging the same kind of energy war against the U.S.

The importance for the U.S. of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, whose route Lugar just traced, is no secret. It's Washington's intention that the pipeline play the same role as the North Sea did in 1973, that of dependable source of oil and counterweight to pressure from energy suppliers. There are even plans to include Kazakhstan in the pipeline. That's the kind of insurance Washington wants against any nightmares on the oil market. Russia's policy is an obvious attempt to pry that insurance out of its hands.

The current regime in Tbilisi is an important element for the pipeline. If Moscow comes out on top of its fight against Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, the pipeline the [Kremlin](#) hates so much that bypasses Russia may be rerouted. Then Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan will abandon America in a flash. If any one link in the pipeline fails, the U.S. loses everything in Central Asia. But Iran, covered by Russia to its north, will feel more secure. Apparently that is what Lugar realized when he was in the region.

Cheney said in his June speech that he did not believe that Russia was fated to become America's enemy. Lugar apparently does not share his optimism.

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