

NEW US STRATEGY FOR ENCIRCLING RUSSIA

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George Friedman, 25 March 2014

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If the U.S. chooses to confront Russia with a military component, it must be on a stable perimeter and on as broad a front as possible to extend Russian resources and decrease the probability of Russian attack at any one point out of fear of retaliation elsewhere. The ideal mechanism for such a strategy would be NATO, which contains almost all of the critical countries save Azerbaijan and Georgia.

Since the rest of Europe is not in jeopardy, and European countries are not prepared to commit financial and military efforts to a problem they believe can be managed with little risk to them. Therefore, any American strategy must bypass NATO or at the very least create new structures to organize the region.

Estonia, Poland, Romania, and Azerbaijan share the common danger that events in Ukraine

could affect their national security interests, including internal stability. Because of this, and also because of their intrinsic importance, they must be the posts around which America should build a new military alliance.

At the far end of the alliance structure envisioned is Azerbaijan, bordering Russia and Iran. Should Dagestan and Chechnya destabilize, Azerbaijan -- with majority Shiite but secular -- would become critical for limiting the regional spread of jihadists. Azerbaijan also would support the alliance's position in the Black Sea by supporting Georgia and would serve as a bridge for relations (and energy) should Western relations with Iran continue to improve. To the southwest, the very pro-Russian Armenia--which has a Russian troop presence and a long-term treaty with Moscow--could escalate tensions with Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. Previously, this was not a pressing issue for the U.S. Now it is.

The security of Georgia and its ports on the Black Sea requires Azerbaijan's inclusion in the alliance. Azerbaijan serves a more strategic purpose. Most of the countries in the alliance are heavy importers of Russian energy. There is no short-term solution to this problem, but Russia needs the revenue from these exports as much as these countries need the energy. Developing European shale and importing U.S. energy is a long-term solution. A medium-term solution, depending on pipeline developments that Russia has tended to block in the past, is sending natural gas from Azerbaijan to Europe. Until now, this has been a commercial issue, but it has become a strategically critical issue. The Caspian region, of which Azerbaijan is the lynchpin, is the only major alternative to Russia for energy. Therefore, rapid expansion of pipelines to the heart of Europe is as essential as providing Azerbaijan with the military capability to defend itself (a capability it is prepared to pay for and, unlike other allied countries, does not need to be underwritten).

The key to the pipeline will be Turkey's willingness to permit transit. I have not included Turkey as a member of this alliance. Its internal politics, complex relations and heavy energy dependence on Russia make such participation difficult.

This is not an offensive force but a force designed to deter Russian expansion. All of these countries need modern military equipment, particularly air defense, anti-tank and mobile infantry. The U.S. should supply these weapons, for cash or credit. An alliance with Azerbaijan would be criticized, but if energy doesn't come from Azerbaijan it will come from Russia.

Russian power is limited and has flourished while the U.S. was distracted by its wars in the Middle East and while Europe struggled with its economic crisis. That does not mean Russia is not dangerous. It has short-term advantages, and its insecurity means that it will take risks. The United States has an interest in acting early because early action is cheaper than acting in the last extremity. This is a case of anti-air missiles, attack helicopters, communications systems and training, among other things. It is not a case of deploying divisions, of which it has few. The Poles, Romanians, Azerbaijanis and certainly the Turks can defend themselves. They need weapons and training, and

that will keep Russia contained within its cauldron as it plays out a last hand as a great power.

http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/estonia-azerbaijan-american-strategy-after-ukraine?utm_source=freelist-f&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=20140325&utm_term=Gweekly&utm_content=readmore

