

YEARENDER: U.S., RUSSIA VYING FOR BIGGER SWAY IN SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Strategic Interests

Washington has long been trying to squeeze out Russian influence in the Caucasus nations of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia - all former Soviet republics - while Russia views the region as a "buffer zone" for NATO eastward expansion and sees the region as having a direct bearing on its efforts to maintain stability in its troubled North Caucasus.

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Meanwhile, the United States is using its strategic location to increase pressure on Iran and assist its operations in Afghanistan. It is also eyeing the region's abundant oil and gas reserves, which could help it reduce its dependence on energy from the Persian Gulf.

Oil-rich Azerbaijan has played a central role in regional energy projects. One of the projects, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which runs through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, is viewed by the West as an important move to break Russia's monopoly on oil and gas exports to Western Europe.

Washington has gained access to the Baku airport for fueling stops by U.S. military aircraft and

Azerbaijan's airspace for over flights during its war in Afghanistan.

Moscow, meanwhile, is also forging closer ties with Azerbaijan. Earlier this year, Russia sought to extend a lease agreement with Azerbaijan for the Gabala radar station and has also strengthened energy cooperation with the country.

West-Leaning Georgia

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in August 2008 when Tbilisi tried to retake South Ossetia, which, together with Abkhazia, broke away from central rule in the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Tensions escalated when Moscow recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states two weeks after the conflict ended. Georgia severed ties with Russia in September 2008 and quit the CIS this year.

Shortly after the war, Washington announced a 1-billion-U.S. dollar economic aid package for Tbilisi to help with its war relief.

During his visit to Georgia in July, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden described the country as an "important strategic partner" and said Washington will not sacrifice Georgian interests to mend its ties with Moscow.

Biden said the United States would continue to offer comprehensive support to the Caucasus country, including its entry into NATO.

Russia's position on the issue has been vastly different. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in August that Russia intends to continue giving "total political and economic support to both South Ossetia and Abkhazia."

"Russia will not permit any reprisal attempts or any repeat of military ventures in this region," he said.

Armenia, Turkey Mending Fence

In October this year, Armenia and Turkey signed a historic deal on normalizing ties and reopening their borders. Observers said the United States has played a crucial role in bringing them together.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton helped mediate the deal when signing of the accord was delayed more than three hours by last-minute disagreement between the two countries over the wording of a statement.

Turkey and Armenia have been bogged down over a century-old row over the killing of 1.5 million Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. Turkey denies Armenia's charge of a genocide.

And Turkey has sided with Azerbaijan in its territorial dispute with Armenia over the Nagorno-

Karabakh region. In 1993, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia in a gesture of support for Azerbaijan.

Analysts noted that reconciliation between the two long-time rivals will help Washington's strategies for Iran and Afghanistan and ensure the safe supply of Caspian energy.

Meanwhile, thawing ties between Armenia and Turkey will make it difficult for Russia to justify its military base in Armenia as the base was allegedly intended to maintain stability on the Armenian-Turkish borders.

Yet, Russia still maintains close ties with Armenia both bilaterally and within the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a post-Soviet security bloc which consists of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Analysts noted that substantial improvement of ties between Armenia and Turkey seems likely in the near future, but the settlement of outstanding issues concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh region and Georgia's breakaway regions will take more time, and as such, the South Caucasus region will remain a focus for rivalry between Washington and Moscow.

