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RESEARCH ARTICLE
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Role of the External Powers of Russia-Georgia Conflict

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INTRODUCTION

Disintegration of Soviet Union has generated a range of international issues, which has larger implications on world politics. A new discourse on international politics has emerged with emergence of newly independent states after dissolution of Soviet Union. In this respect, three states on geopolitical map of disintegrated Soviet Union such as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in Transcaucasia have attracted the larger theoretical and academic debate.

Georgia is situated in the mountains of South Caucasus region of Eurasia, straddling western Asia and Eastern Europe between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea. Georgia's northern border with Russia roughly runs along the crest of the greater Caucasus Mountain range-commonly reckoned boundary between Europe and Asia. This is situated at the juncture of the Western Asia and Eastern Europe. It is bounded to the west by the Black Sea, to the north by Russia, to the south by Turkey and Armenia and to the east by Azerbaijan.

An important aspect of ongoing ethnic conflagration in the Transcaucasia has been the magnitude of interest displayed in it by the regional as well as the external powers. The strategic location of the region as a bridge between Europe and Asia on Russia's Southern periphery and the projected huge reserves of oil and natural gas in the Caspian basin, led to a virtual scramble among the regional powers to move their sphere of influence in the region. We need to scrutinize this external involvement, for it has a force remarkably influencing the course of events in the area.

In the article, the researcher priorities to assessment the role of the external powers in the Russia-Georgian conflict and their relations in the Caucasus regions. Particulars Russia Turkey, Iran, United States of America and European Union including the role of much talked about the conflict in Georgia and their interests in this region, oil rush or pipeline diplomacy in the context complexities that plagues the area.

Russia:

Russia's interests and stakes in the Georgia's territories are the result of a complex set of Geopolitical perceptions that have emerged since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Euro-Atlanticist of the initial years, primarily represented by then foreign minister Andery Koztrev and supported by President Yeltsin, led to a debilitating neglect of the newly independent states in the former Soviet space.

However, Russia was soon to realize the excessiveness of the one dimensional western oriented foreign policy, which sought closer links with the 'civilised west' and the adoption of the western politico-economic principles and values. West failure to bring Russia into the European security architecture and the restrictions and interference that came with the western economic aid was soon to change Russia's perception of the west. The situation was further compounded by the North Atlantic treaty organization (NATO) east and expansion, absorbing former members of the defunct Warsaw pact when there was no threat from Russia (Alcott 1995).

The lifting of the 'Iron Curtain from over the Georgia was soon to follow by the political diplomatic overturns

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from Turkey and Iran. This instruction into its 'Near Abroad' by the two major regional powers, seeking influence in the region, belatedly caught the eye of the Russian policy makers. It was increasing realized that the danger to the Russian state and its interests emanates not from outside but from the conflicts in its near abroad.

Russia perceived that the conflicts on its periphery might spill over into its own territory. The nature of conflicts in the Transcaucasia is such that the North Caucasus, which is a part of the Russian Federation, cannot escape from being influenced by it. There is an undeniable inter connection between the two due to the overlap of many ethnic groups between the two regions. The involvement of people from the North Caucasus in conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia was by no means covert. Their support to their struggling brethrens in Georgia was well apparent. In fact, in August 1992, Yeltsin issued an appeal to the people in the North Caucasus and South Russia 'to keep their emotions in check and not allow themself to be drawn into dangerous activities detrimental to the security of the Russian state (Allen, 1971).

It was believed that the separatist movements in the near abroad might have demonstrations effects on the volatile regions within the Russian federation. Here Chechnya is a case in point. Russia rigid stand against any alternation in the territorial boundaries or change in the political-legal status of the autonomies within the Transcaucasian states stems from the fear of similar demands emerging within its own territory. This seems to be a reason why Russia has been more interested in maintaining the territorial status quo in all conflict comes in the region. Russia is also worried at the prospects of external powers fighting in the troubled waters of the region. In this zest of build up their political and economic influence in the resource rich Georgia, the external powers might interference and manipulate the conflicts to their favour. The intense interest shown by rival regional powers in its supposed traditional sphere of influence has been much to the dislike of Russia. Both Iran and Turkey, vying for influence in the region, have exhibited active interest in the Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts. Iran even undertook a mediation effort on the Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts (Aves, 1996).

On the other hand, Turkey's proximity with Georgia has been growing since the last one decade. In facts Turkey has been the only country supportive of Georgia over the Abkhazia. United states attempt to build up a corridor of influence in the region through its Turkish all has been a serious cause of concern for Russia. Russia forceful view on keeping the external powers at part from its 'near Abroad' it best conveyed in the draft of Russian Foreign Policy concept. It clearly underlines the Urgency of protecting the 'commonwealth' outer borders. In very unambiguous terms it warns the external actors, regional or otherwise, that' Moscow will vigorously oppose all attempts to build up the political military presence of third countries in the states adjoining Russia (Baez, 1997).

For Russia, inclusion of the former regional defiance alliances is detrimental to its plans to create a 'single military-strategic space', which have been an important objective of Russia's foreign policy. Since conflict in the Trans-Caucasia has direct bearing on Russia security and interests, Russia's main concern in the foreign has been the restoration of peace. Indeed, it was much to Russia's diplomatic efforts that ceasefire agreements were achieved in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and along with the DSCE in Nagorno-Karabakh. These ceasefire agreements set the atmospherics for the conflict resolution process.

However, Russia policy towards the conflicts in the Abkhazia has been apparently contradictory and manipulative. Russia has been manipulating the course of conflicts to pressurize the governments of the Transcaucasian states to yield to its exclusionary demand in order to make the dissenting governments fall in line with its policy towards the region. Russia has been accused of supporting either of the warring parties at one time or the other (Cornell, 2001).

As regards Georgia and Azerbaijan, Russia had to coerce them into joining the CIS by adopting a 'carrot and stick' approach towards them. Russia is alleged to have played a dubious role in the Abkhaz conflict in order to pressure the Georgian leadership for acceding to the CIS, which Shevardnadze was forced to do in the face of imminent defeat of Georgian force in Abkhazia in 1993. In this context, Shevardnadze's statement that, "Nobody should think the mentality and reflexes of Russian imperialism as dead, 'Speaks of Half the Georgian perception of Russia's role in its conflict. In fact, immediately after the humiliated defeat of the Georgian forces a Sukhumi on 20 Sep 1993, Shevardnadze is known to have confused, that he did everything possible to create condition for Russian assistance to the faltering Georgian forces in Abkhazia, including agreeing to Georgia membership of the CIS.

The growing interests of United States and other western countries in exploiting Caspian oil and Natural Gas has been worrying Russia for long. However, Russia is determined to see that Caspian oil moves through its own pipeline networks. For Russia it is significant to note, the oil and natural gas deposits in the Caspian. Sea are not of much personal interest as it still has ample reserves on its own territories. But Moscow could exploit the triangle over the politico-legal status of the Caspian Sea propriety among the Caspian littoral states, as a lever to pressure its influence in the region (Coppieter, 1998).

However ever Russia as expected, did not recognized the deal and went on the raise the controversy relating to the status and ownership of the Caspian resources. Similarly, the signing of agreements between Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan for the 2.4 billion dollar 1730 km. pipeline, from Baku to Turkey's Ceyhan port via Georgia was met with severe criticism from Russia as it bypassed the Russian territories. However, in recent times Russia seems to adopting a more pragmatic approach towards its role in the Georgia. Russia would to like to play the role of a sincere mediator in the conflicts and thus preserve its traditional influence over the region. An even handed approach and respected for territorial integrity seems to be the emerging hallmark of Russia's interaction with the Transcaucasian states. But if Russia's influence is not recognised or rebuked by the Transcaucasian states in absolute favour of the other regional or extra regional powers, it is likely to continue its role of a manipulator, a troublemaker (Grigor, 1995).

Turkey:

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of this independent state in the former Soviet space, the international situation and role of Turkey was remarkably influenced. Turkey policy makers sought to spread Ankara's influence among the Turkey republics of the former Soviet Union and particularly Georgia in the Transcaucasia, who was supposed to be the closest relatives to the Anatolian Turks. Ankara's intense interest in Georgia is well displayed by the Feed that it recognized Tbilisi, almost a month before it granted recognition to the other former Soviet republics.

Turkey not only emphasized its closer historical and Ethno linguistic links to the Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union, but also projected itself as a role models of a westernized, secular, market oriented, modern democracy to these. The abundance of energy resources and prospect of a large market for Turkish products were the other significant considerations. However, with the end of Cold War and dissolution of Soviet Union Turkey grew increasingly apprehensive about its geo-strategic value as an ally of the West. Ankara's primary concern was that with the decline of a Soviet threat to the Western Europe its value as a deterrent or a regional bulwark against the Soviet Union is dissipates and this might reduce the importance of Turkey to the West and the NATO (Gvosdev, 2000).

Thus, exploring a new role which, would answer west continued interest in Turkey became the main challenge for the Turkish policy makers. In keeping with the above challenge, Turkey decided to presence its geo-strategic value b promoting its role as a 'bridge' between the west and the resource rich Turkic republic of the former Soviet Union. Thus, Ankara's bid to expand its influence in the region was to an extent a part of its overall strategy to heighten its relevance in the eyes of the West.

Turkey in many respects has a comparatively advantageous position than other states bordering the Southern region of the former Soviet Union. Firstly due to its strategic location it controls the access of all the Black Sea States to the Eastern Mediterranean as well as the land and the air routes between the Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Secondly, it enjoys viable political and commercial links with Europe and the United States America. Thirdly, Turkey is in a much better economic position that the other countries in the region. It is self-sufficient in food and has adequate supplies of nearly as the basic industrial raw materials. Other than oil and natural gas, fourthly, it enjoy the membership of the NATO with provides it with protective umbrella against any external aggression (Koheler, 2003).

Through Ankara's geopolitical interests in the post-soviet Transcaucasia were set primarily keeping in terms with its desire to extend Turkish influence in the region, but a strong security element also pervaded Ankara's thinking. The outbreak of bloody ethnic strife in areas close to its borders was a cause of concern for Turkey to the Turkish policy makers. The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has the potential to involve all the regional powers leading to a wide scale conflict having for reaching consequences (Cornell, 1998).

There are several factors that restrain Ankara from making any direct intervention in the Georgia South Ossetia conflict. The doctrine of Kremlins with constitutes the core principles of the Turkish foreign policy

prohibits any kind of adventurism abroad, except for two ceases, the Turks in Cyprus, and perhaps the Mosul area of Northern Iraq, which are considered to be morally belonging to Turkey.

Since the inception of the modern Turkish republic in 1923, all the successive governments have stick to it. Turkey has also unwilling to risk its relations with Russia for the sake of active unilateral support for Georgia in the Abkhazia war. Turkey depends on Russia for the supply of natural gas, which is vital source of pollution free fuel. Apart from this, Turkey has huge private business relations with Moscow which is very vital for its own economy. Turkey is also interested in arms purchase from Russia in order to broaden its source of weaponry. Turkey has been cautions with regard to its policy towards Georgia. Turkey is well aware of the influence that the large Georgian Diaspora enjoys in the west, especially in the US congress. Further, direct Turkish intervention in the South Ossetian conflict might be taken as a Muslim-Christian confrontation that Turkey as a secular state wishes to avoid (Lynch, 2000).

Turkish petroleum joint stock Company has been involved in the development of the Chirag, Gunashly and Azerbaijani oil reserves in the Caspian Sea in agreement Azerbaijani International oil Consortium (AIOS), which was signed at the instance of Aliter in September 1994. The recent signing of an agreement between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey for laying down a 1730 Km. long oil pipeline from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan via Georgia, evoked a strong protest from Moscow. Thus, conflicting interests in the exploitation of Caspian resources have been a major source of friction between Moscow and Ankara. Russia does not want her position to be under mined by other competitors in the Transcaucasia (Mandelbaum, 1998).

In the absence of any political dispute with Tbilisi, Ankara's relation with Georgia has been cordial. Turkey has adopted a non-interventionist approach towards the ethnic strife going on in Georgia and has recognized Georgia important role as a regional counter balance to Russia-Armenia alliance. Turkey and Georgia have been working in tandem to explore the possible routes for transporting Caspian oil to the Mediterranean. Ankara wants to limit Russian's influence in the region in order to have greater maneuverability for furthering its politico-economic interests in the region. Ankara also wants to participate in the Georgian oil - production and would prefer the transportation of Georgian oil through its territory.

Iran:

The disintegration of Soviet Union and subsequent emergence of independent states in its north was viewed by Iran with both optimism and apprehension. In the pre-Gorbachev era, Iran believed that it has no problem with it northern border and that attention is required on the other three frontiers - with Iraq and west Afghanistan it the east and Persian Gulf in the South as its borders with the Soviet Union were defined since the Second World War.

In fact terms like greater Iran or Iran-i-Bozorg had begun to use to be used by the late 1980s in historical cultural and possible economic sense. Situated as a land bridge between Transcaucasia and central Asia on the one hand and the middle East and the Persian Gulf on the other hand, Iran sought to play an important role as a transit route for the Caspian oil, natural gas and other products of the land locked Caspian littoral states into the Persian Gulf. However, Iran was also to need to the security problems that arose with the Soviet breakup (Nygren, 2007).

For Iran the Russia domination over Georgia was a recent and transient phenomenon, as the zooter Russian influence over the region contrasts with 3000 years of Iranian influence in the region. The withdrawal of Soviet authority from the Georgia was a cause of concern for Iran. Iran was apprehensive about the possible increase in Turkish influence over the region to Add to its concern was the further possibility of an active Western role, particularly the USA, with Turkey acting as a conduit to it. It was the Common objective of keeping Turkish and western influence out of the region which often brought Tehran and Moscow together on various issues, particularly the one relating to the status and ownership of the Caspian resources. However, Iran's attitude in this period of transition was that of cautions restrain. On the Abkhazia issue, Iran adopted a neutral position and stood for a peaceful settlement of the issue. It opposed any attempt to alter the territorial boundaries by force and was also again the forceful explosion of populations. Iran was equally condemned of the actions of both the warring sides. In a semi-official Tehran times editorial in March 1990 both the warring groups were blamed for the continuous unrest in the region (Nygren, 2007).

However, Iran has been cautiously avoiding any direct involvement in the conflict on Abkhazia or in the

internal politics of Georgia. Iran has been careful in not over stretching its intrusion into the Transcaucasia politics for fear of drawing Russia's ire. It cannot afford to antagonize Russia by trying to encroach in its sphere of influence, for Iran is increasingly looking for the receipt of Russian military hardware and technology in the face of stiff sanctions from the USA. Apart from it, Iran and Russia have converging geo-political interests in both Central Asia and the Transcaucasia. In fact, Tehran has very little influence in the region as there was never any strong pro-Iranian sentiments in Transcaucasia instead a secular modern Turkey was projected as the role model.

Iran has maintained cordial relations with Georgia since its emergence as an independent status Iran's presence in the Georgia, specially in energy, industry and consumer goods, is particularly strong. In the last two years, direct but unofficial economic relations have also been established between Georgia and Iran. Today could find shops Georgia full of mostly Iranian goods and large trucks with Iranian license plates could be seen on a regular basis. Meanwhile Georgia has been repeatedly calling for Iran's mediation in the Abkhazia dispute (Pottier 2001).

United States of America:

With the outbreak of Georgia-Abkhazia conflict and subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, not only the regional powers but the world in general and the West in particular began to assess its potential interest and rule in the Caspian region. There has been a growing western interest in the Caspian oil and natural has and its transportation to the world market.

In fact, the production and transportation of Caspian's energy resources has been declared to the US government, as a foreign policy priority. The Caspian Basin has become so important to US strategic interests that in July 1998 US President Bill Clinton created the office of the special advisor to the president and secretary of State for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy. Therefore, as regards Transcaucasia, US has been mainly concerned with Georgia.

In order to realize its objectives in the region, US will have to counter Russia's influence in the region and develop its own sphere of influence. But this is a difficult task as Moscow regards Transcaucasia its sphere of influence on control the access routs for the region's resources. Almost all of the pipeline and railway which transport the regions oil, gat metals and cotton pass through the Russian territories. Thus, United States objectives and interests in the region and Russia's determination to preserve its influence in the region has set the two on a collision course (Shireen, 1994).

The United States was well aware of the magnitude of ramification that its involvement in Georgian Conflict might have encouraged its regional ally Turkey's involvement in the region. But its restricts Turkey from any threat intervention as it might lead to a widening of the conflict which again is not favourable for exploiting and transporting the Caspian vast energy resources. In a speech at the central Asia institute at the John Hopkins University, Deputy secretary of State Stroh Talbott that Clinton administration is seeking a 40% increase in foreign assistance funds for the nations of the Caucasus Central Asia. Thus, the main trust of the Western approach to the Georgia's lies in developing the vast energy resources of the Caspian sea. Several plans are underway to extract and transport the Caspian oil and gas by pipeline to the Turkish poor of Ceyhan and from there to the Western Markets.

However, intensive negotiations have been going on between the US, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan to build a main exporting corridor for Caspian energy to the West. Finally, an agreement was signed between Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan in November 1999 to build a 1730 km long main Export pipeline (MEP) from Baku to the Turkish port of Ceyhan via Georgia Both Russia and Iran have strongly criticized the proposal as its by bypasses both of them. AIDC and Turkey are willing to guarantee the cost of the project. The pipeline is still in its early stage and lot needs to be sorted out before its implementation (Zbigniew, 1996).

Thus, competing agendas of Russia and the Georgia-Armenian alliance with regard to the control over with regard to the central over Caspian energy resources has set the two against each other. Though USA has kept away from an direct involvement in the ethnic conflict of the Georgian region but it has been well involved in the Caspian oil politics and pipeline diplomacy. It would like to undermine Russian influence in the region so as to have a greater maneuverability in resource rich Caspian region. It seeks to transport Caspian oil and natural gas to the west by a network of pipeline bypassing Russian and Iranian territories (Braun, 2008).

The role of the EU:

In Brussels and other European capitals, the

European Union is also seen as being a weak player in the South Caucasus, as compared to the US or Russia. But this is for very different reasons from those given by the various players in the region itself. Balance of power considerations are not absent from EU policies, but they are seen as subordinate to the establishment of a dense network of institutions throughout the whole of Eastern Europe, capable of guiding and assisting the post-communist countries through their process of domestic transformation.

The EU's concern to ensure energy security dictated its support for a Western pipeline and a policy of diversification of transport routes for oil and gas. But compared with the US, it does not have such a keen desire to contain Iran's influence on the South Caucasus. The EU and Russia have divergent views on the future of the region - but they are low on their bilateral political agenda, and are not conceptualized by the EU within the framework of a balance of power (Jervaldze, 2006).

In the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, the capacity for using these incentives is available to the EU only to a limited extent. It is present insofar as the Georgian political elites view some form of closer association with the EU -or even EU membership, in the long term -as a strategic objective, and are keen to enhance their political status through their membership of the European framework organizations.

Unlike with the US, however, this has not led to a strong energy policy, despite the deep and long-term involvement of private oil companies from EU countries in the Caspian region since the beginning of the 1990s.21 The perception of the South Caucasus as a conglomerate of weak and failing states, authoritarian regimes, poor and corrupt economies and unresolved border and secessionist conflicts makes it additionally difficult for the EU to design a coherent strategy (Baranovsky, 1997).

Secondly, the EU has traditionally spoken with several voices in the peace processes in the region. It is represented among the Friends by three EU member states. It also speaks with the many voices of its constantly rotating presidencies. Among the various countries which were holding the six-month presidency of the EU in recent years, only Sweden and Greece were prepared to regard the South Caucasus as an EU priority.

The EU would in principle be able to deploy a set of powerful economic resources in the Georgian-Abkhaz mediation efforts that are not available to individual EU states or international organisations. Closer coordination with European framework organizations on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and direct involvement in mediation efforts would, however, require it to take on direct political responsibilities, where it now has only a supporting role (Bower, 1997).

The practical difficulties of achieving such direct participation by the EU have to be overcome, if it aims for optimal efficiency through a direct linkage between its potential economic and political support for the conflict transformation process and political responsibility for the negotiation management process.

Furthermore, where the role of the EU in a settlement of the conflict and in post accord reconstruction is concerned, much depends on its capacity to engage the Russian Federation in a long-term policy of conflict management, to support a policy of conflict transformation in Georgian-Abkhaz relations and to design an institutional perspective that would link post-conflict rehabilitation with the increased integration of the whole Caucasus region - including the North Caucasus - into European structures

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