

CIS pullout from Nagorno-Karabakh opens new phase of Transcaucasus war

by Konstantin George

The next Azerbaidzhani offensive to obliterate the Armenian presence in the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh has become a certainty, with the withdrawal of the last Community of Independent States (CIS) forces from that region. These forces had formed the only shield protecting the Armenian population, not from the murderous destruction visited on the Karabakh capital of Stepanakert by Azeri rocket and artillery barrages, but at least from an all-out Azeri ground offensive, aimed at physically eliminating or expelling *en masse* the Armenians of Karabakh.

Addressing the United Nations on March 3, Armenian Foreign Minister Hovannisian declared that if the international community doesn't intervene, then "a tragedy threatens with the worst consequences for the region and the world." Speaking on the same day, Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian deplored the CIS withdrawal as "a bad decision, not well thought out," which would pave the way for general war. One day later, Armenian Defense Minister Sarkisian warned that Azerbaidzhan was preparing new and larger offensives against Karabakh.

By March 3, western correspondents based in the Azerbaidzhan town of Agdam, just northeast of the border with Karabakh, were reporting large numbers of Azeri reinforcements moving into Agdam, both from the newly formed Azerbaidzhan Army and militia units of the extreme nationalist Azerbaidzhan Popular Front, units equipped with heavy tanks, light tanks, and armored personnel carriers.

Despite the tragic consequences of the move, and against the vehement protests of Armenia, the withdrawal of the personnel from the last CIS unit, the 366th Motorized Rifle Regiment, took place March 2-3. In a further blow to the Armenian defenders of Karabakh, according to a March 4 announcement by the CIS command in Moscow, stocks left behind in Karabakh, which would have been useful for Armenian self-defense, will be flown out by Mi-26 helicopters to bases in the Republic of Georgia, the republic containing the headquarters of the CIS Transcaucasian Military District, which covers the territory of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaidzhan.

The withdrawal of CIS troops marked the continuation of a Russian government policy tilted in favor of Azerbaidzhan. As we have noted, the 366th Regiment was the last

unit to leave. All other CIS Army units and Interior Troops had already been withdrawn in the period September-December 1991. In the final withdrawal, to provide effective escort for the departing troop convoys, airborne troops sent by Moscow arrived on March 1 to secure the Stepanakert-Agdam road, the route of withdrawal.

According to Gen. Col. Valery Patrikeyev, commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, the 366th Regiment will proceed to the Azerbaidzhan city of Kirovabad, and from there relocate to Georgia.

Smokescreens hide real slaughter

The Russian withdrawal was based on a two-level policy determination. First there is the tactical level, where Moscow had no real choice, with nearly 1 million Russian civilians living in the cities of Azerbaidzhan, who now have become hostage to the policies of the Mutalibov regime in Baku. The turning point was a March 1 statement by Azerbaidzhan President Ayaz Mutalibov, accusing CIS forces of having committed "genocide" against Azeri civilians in Karabakh. This statement created a very ugly anti-Russian mood in Baku and other Azerbaidzhan cities. The operational capability for organized pogroms against a Christian minority inside Azerbaidzhan had been repeatedly demonstrated in the repeated outrages committed against the Armenian communities in the cities of Sumgait, Kirovabad, and Baku, 1988-90.

The Azeri charge of "genocide" was based on accusations by Baku that after Armenian forces captured the Azeri village of Khodzhalay inside Karabakh, they killed 1,000 Azeri civilians. The "massacre" story has been accepted at face value by the western media, and has been used to prevent any international mobilization on behalf of the starving, surrounded Armenian civilian population of Karabakh, numbering some 250,000, who actually are faced with being butchered.

While there probably were civilian casualties in the Armenian seizure of Khodzhalay, the "massacre" story is very fishy. In the initial accusations, Azerbaidzhan spoke of "hundreds of corpses" including "many women and children," and said the same concerning alleged "massacres" in the Agdam District. Then, on March 4, the spokesman for Azerbaidzhan President Mutalibov accused Armenia of having

“gotten rid” of the corpses, to “hide the evidence” of the “massacre.”

Geopolitical factors: the role of Turkey

The deeper consideration behind the CIS withdrawal is that Russia feels it needs to work with Turkey, as part of an overall strategic relationship with the United States to contain Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim republics of the former U.S.S.R.

This policy materialized during the little-noticed Feb. 4-5 visit to Ankara by Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, which inaugurated, in his words, “a new era in Russian-Turkish relations,” and where Kozyrev welcomed Turkey’s involvement in the Muslim republics of Central Asia. The visit was climaxed by an announcement that Russian President Boris Yeltsin will visit Turkey later this year. The Kozyrev visit was coordinated with the Washington summit one week later of President Bush and Turkish Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel, and the talks held in Baku with the Azeri leadership by U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, talks that set the stage for Azerbaidzhan’s onslaught against Karabakh.

Since the Kozyrev visit, Russia has granted Turkey extraordinary favors, aimed at countering Iran’s influence in Central Asia. Turkish merchant ships may now transit from the Black Sea, over Russian territory, via the Don River, Don-Volga Canal, and Volga River, into the Caspian Sea, breaking the Iranian monopoly on non-Russian seagoing trade with Azerbaidzhan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan.

The global strategic dimensions of this new Russo-Turkish dynamic were evident in statements in Moscow, Feb. 25, by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner, declaring that the “rise of Islamic fundamentalism” in Central Asian republics is against the “interests of NATO” and Russia. Thus, with NATO ally Turkey as the wedge, the West is trying to co-manage, with Russia, the entire “southern tier” of the former U.S.S.R.

The U.S.-Turkish policy to fuel crises in this southern belt, as levers to increase the influence of Washington through its Ankara surrogate in the region, has been sharply denounced by Iran. Speaking in Teheran March 2, at an international conference of academics on “The Transformation of the Former Soviet Union and its Implications for the Third World,” Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati accused the United States and Turkey of working against Iran in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, by fueling hot spots. Speaking just after his unsuccessful mediation tour of Azerbaidzhan and Armenia, Velayati condemned “those who pretend to care, but are not willing to see another country [i.e., Iran] solve the problem. Many western countries and some countries in the region [referring to Turkey and Saudi Arabia] don’t care to see Iran put out the fire. They are not happy that it is not them or someone in their bloc. Many are attacking our motives in this region, but we are used to being attacked. We will carry on and do what we think is right. . . . Sources

of instability in these republics can pave the way for the growing American influence in the region.”

Expect new ‘mediation’ efforts

Moving into the second week of March, the next round of internationally coordinated efforts to discredit Armenia, following the insidious effect of the “massacre” stories, will be in full bloom, this time under the rhetorical guise of “mediation” and demands for “unconditional cease-fire.” The big mid-March “mediation” effort will be made by Douglas Hogg, a minister in the British Foreign Office, who will travel to Moscow, Baku, and Yerevan. Public statements made to date by Hogg, putting the blame on “both sides” for the war, foretell a repeat of the same British support for aggression, under the cover of pseudo-objectivity, that had occurred regarding former Yugoslavia through the “peace mission” of Lord Carrington.

Hogg stressed, in a March 3 statement, his support for the next “mediation” mission being a Russian-CIS effort. Within 24 hours, Azerbaidzhan President Mutalibov welcomed the Hogg mission and any Russian-CIS mediation. Besides the pro-Azerbaidzhan tilt of Russian policy, one must not forget that anything labeled “CIS” is stacked in Azerbaidzhan’s favor, as six of the 11 CIS republics are Muslim and pro-Azerbaidzhan. Any “cease-fire” agreements, if not minimally augmented by ironclad clauses banning any Azeri troop reinforcements and movements near the borders of Karabakh, will be, as in former Yugoslavia, the mere breathing space preceding the next offensive by the aggressor.

Baroness Cox warns of slaughter in Karabakh

by Mark Burdman

On Feb. 28, the office of EIR Nachrichtenagentur in Wiesbaden, Germany received a chilling briefing by telephone on the situation in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, from Britain’s Baroness Caroline Cox. Baroness Cox, a member of the House of Lords, has been very active in trying to bring the world’s attention to the plight of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. She has visited that enclave five times in the past 10 months, most recently in mid-January. Specialists on the Transcaucasus region regard her as a reliable source of “on-the-ground” readings about what is happening in Karabakh. In the last days of February, she traveled to Germany and Switzerland, attempting to rally parliamentarians, Christian groups, humanitarian agencies, and others, to take urgent action to save the population from genocide.

In her view, the situation in Karabakh threatens to become a slaughter, unless action is taken within the next days