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Central Asia- Caucasus Institute
Silk Road Studies Program

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASUS ANALYST

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KEY ISSUE: A short 75-word statement of your conclusions about the issue or news event on which the article focuses.

BACKGROUND: 300-450 words of analysis about what has led up to the event or issue and why this issue is critical to the region. Include background information about the views and experiences of the local population.

IMPLICATIONS: 300-450 words of analysis of the ramifications of this event or issue, including where applicable, implications for the local people's future.

CONCLUSIONS: 100-200 words that strongly state your conclusions about the impact of the event or issue.

Field Reports focus on a particular news event and what local people think about the event. Field Reports address the implications the event or activity analyzed for peoples' lives and their communities. Field Reports do not have the rigid structure of Analytical Articles, and are shorter in length, averaging ca. 700-800 words.

Those interested in joining *The Analyst's* pool of authors to contribute articles, field reports, or contacts of potential writers, please send your CV to: <scornell@jhu.edu> and suggest some topics on which you would like to write.

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A POINT OF NO RETURN? GEORGIA AND THE EU ONE YEAR AFTER THE AUGUST WAR

Oscar Pardo Sierra

One year after the August war between Georgia and Russia, the EU's profile in Georgia has strengthened. The most visible consequence is the presence on the ground of the EU Monitoring Mission, which aside from seeking to implement cease-fire agreements provides decision-makers in Brussels with first-hand information about developments in the country. Before the war, however, implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was patchy; key areas such as market reforms and regulatory convergence faced strong opposition in key circles of the Georgian government. This has changed after the war. However, a "Europeanization" scenario in Georgia will probably lead to more tensions with Russia, and more assertive Russian policies in the entire region.

BACKGROUND: One of the outcomes of the August war was EU involvement on the ground and growing support for the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The by EU standards quick deployment of the EUMM, which is now the

only international monitoring mission in Georgia, is highly appreciated among political circles and in Georgian society; it has undoubtedly increased the political profile and the visibility of the EU in the area. Less visible,

but with more far-reaching implications for the country's future, is progress in the implementation of the ENP and the prospects for deepening relations with the EU in the form of an Association Agreement in the context of the EaP. After the Rose Revolution and the expectations



created by the reform-oriented government led by Mikheil Saakashvili, the EU included Georgia and the rest of the South Caucasus in the ENP and prompted the pledge of US\$1 billion, of which US\$150 million were pledged by the European Commission, in a Donors Conference organized by the Commission and the World Bank in 2004. However, with the death of Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania in February 2005, Georgia not only lost a strong supporter of the integration with the EU, but power gravitated increasingly to the institution of the President and to Saakashvili personally. Between 2004 and 2008, Georgia was a paradigmatic example, praised by the World Bank for its rapid liberalization of the economy, and at the same time embracing a 'minimal state' strategy.

In spite of the pro-EU rhetoric of the Saakashvili administration since the early days of the Rose Revolution, implementation of the ENP stagnated and the EU lost its grip on the country's reform process. In fact, the path of reforms undertaken by the government after 2005 was at odds with the regulatory approach of the EU and the adoption of necessary parts of the *acquis communautaire*. Apart from making NATO membership an even more distant prospect, the August war also proved the limits of the U.S. influence in the region; in that sense, Georgia needs the EU. However, increased political and economic support from the EU can only come through a serious implementation of market and political reforms envisaged by the ENP Action Plan. That is the nature of the EU's external relations. In that sense, it seems that positions within the Georgian government regarding the implementation of the ENP have softened since the end of the war. Key supporters of the 'libertarian approach' such as former minister of economy Kakha Bendukidze and former Prime

Ministers Zurab Noghaideli and Lado Gurgenidze have also been replaced. Current Premier Nikoloz Gilauri is more pragmatic toward the implementation of EU-oriented reforms, especially regarding the long-standing issue of regulatory adjustment.

IMPLICATIONS: The potential leverage of the EU in Georgia has never been higher than now. In spite of the rhetoric, political circles in Georgia are well aware of the impossibility of reversing the situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia anytime soon. In this sense, an indirect result of the war and the need of more EU support and to keep the EUMM in Georgia is an opening of the political system and real power sharing beyond a facade of democratic institutions. This also means that Russia's policies can become more aggressive and, even worse from a European perspective, more unpredictable. The war increased anti-Russian feelings in the country, especially in the younger generation, and with the recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, Russia has lost leverage for influencing Georgian politics through its control of conflict resolution processes. The immediate effect for the current government, and most probably for the one to follow after Saakashvili, is that close cooperation with the EU and the U.S., and consequently support from international financial institutions, is the only policy available in their foreign-policy toolkit.

As a consequence, a more comprehensive implementation of reforms related to the ENP (and especially those that affect the country's economy in order to obtain a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement), the rule of law, media freedom, and power sharing giving more powers to the Parliament are likely to advance. This is the only way to obtain strong EU political and economic support, even

more so when divisions within the EU regarding Russia and policies towards the Eastern neighborhood show no signs of abating. The drawback is that starting a real process of Europeanization in the country will further increase tensions with Russia. In spite of concerns about NATO enlargement to the East, what Russia fears most is EU expansion: when a country joins the EU it is lost forever for Russia, hence the Kremlin's concerns, expressed by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov or President Medvedev in some occasions, about the Eastern Partnership.

CONCLUSIONS: The war showed political elites in Georgia that the country's security cannot only revolve around the U.S. and a hypothetical accession to NATO. In Brussels, some political circles have spelt out the possibility of a scenario of 'more EU, less NATO' in order to provide some security guarantees to Georgia without NATO membership. This year has seen a steadier

process of converging positions between the EU and Georgia, as talks on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, visa facilitation and Justice and Home Affairs have moved forward. However, the momentum has also been slowing down within the EU as divisions among member states in relation to Russia are deeper than ever. Georgia and the EU find themselves at a crossroads. More EU support and deeper relations with Georgia imply further political opening of the Saakashvili regime, involving risks for the current political and economic elites. For the EU, the Europeanization of Georgia would face regional implications. At least, this opens a window of opportunity is open for the democratization and stabilization of the country.

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THE SCO'S IRAN PROBLEM

Richard Weitz

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has yet to resolve the problem presented by Iran's efforts to become the institution's seventh full member. For the fourth consecutive year, existing SCO governments have declined to accept new full members or formal observers. Instead, the SCO has resorted to proliferating new categories of external association, producing a confusing hodgepodge of members, observers, "guests," and now "partners." Although SCO leaders say they are working on procedures to guide the organization's expansion, it seems that the SCO's major powers fail to agree on who should join and who should not.

BACKGROUND: The post-election turmoil in Tehran has presented yet the latest Iran problem for the SCO, which held its most recent leadership summit in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg on June 15-16. The current roster of full SCO members includes only those six states that joined the organization at its founding in 2001: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

The question of whether Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad would attend the summit despite his domestic political problems dominated foreign news coverage of the event. Ahmadinejad has participated in the annual SCO leadership summits every year since 2005, typically attracting much international attention for his confrontational remarks. The decision to delay his scheduled June 15 arrival led to widespread media speculation that Ahmadinejad would miss the summit to concentrate on winning the power struggle in Tehran. At the time, mass protests were occurring in the Iranian capital and elsewhere against his "dictatorship" and what many Iranians perceived as his falsified electoral victory.

When the Iranian leader did arrive at the summit the following day, he gave a classic speech that denounced the United States for its

allegedly flawed Eurasian policies. Despite the new administration in Washington, Ahmadinejad essentially repeated the charges that he had levied at previous summits about the supposedly ineffective and malign American policies in the region. Perhaps the only variation from Ahmadinejad's earlier speeches was that the June 2009 summit occurred in the context of an international economic crisis. The setbacks Russia and China experienced from this global slowdown stimulated their interest in using the SCO as well as other multilateral institutions such as the BRIC (Brazil-Russia-India-China) format to challenge American global leadership.

Ahmadinejad tried to deepen this interest by highlighting perceived U.S. weaknesses in his speech and urging the SCO to fill this alleged power vacuum by promoting a new world order no longer dominated by the United States or its allies. For example, he proposed establishing a SCO bank and using a single currency for trade and other commercial transactions among the member states. Ahmadinejad further advocated forming two SCO committees that could develop common political and economic strategies to address regional and global developments. The Iranian President expressed an interest in both deepening and broadening



Iran's cooperation with the SCO. Neither Ahmadinejad nor his colleagues mentioned his contested election victory nor the mass street protests then taking place in Tehran and other cities.

Iranian officials have lobbied for full membership since obtaining formal SCO observer status at the July 2005 leadership summit. They have sought to leverage the country's energy resources to bolster Tehran's candidacy for membership. At recent SCO summits, Ahmadinejad has called for creating a regional "energy club" among the member governments. These statements remind SCO members of the value of including Iran – which is the world's second largest natural gas producer as well as a major oil exporter – for

ensuring the success of any SCO project involving energy resources. By most estimates, Iran's entry into the SCO would result in the organization's seven members possessing approximately half of the world's proven gas reserves.

Furthermore, Iranian officials have offered to help the SCO members counter political extremism and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan. Representatives of the existing SCO governments cite Islamist-inspired and narcotics-financed terrorism emanating from Afghanistan as a major threat to their security. Ahmadinejad has also called for joint SCO investment and transportation projects. With regard to the latter, Iranian territory could serve as a gateway for SCO members, especially the

landlocked Central Asian countries, to access the energy resources and rich commercial markets of the Persian Gulf region. Certain Tajik, SCO, and Russian officials have sometimes made statements supporting Iran's membership aspirations, but the SCO has repeatedly deferred its application.

IMPLICATIONS: The stated reason why the SCO has not designated new members since its founding, or new formal observers since Iran's accession in 2005, is that, despite numerous attempts, the SCO governments have been unable to define the legal basis for such expansion. "We have discussed this issue and we all agreed that we need to accelerate the preparation of a draft document that will detail procedures for admission of new members to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," Russia's frustrated president, Dmitry Medvedev, said at a Yekaterinburg summit news conference. "The instruction has been given, but we need to complete this work and to prepare a regulatory procedural framework for the relevant steps."

Aside from the peculiar difficulties associated with Iran, the inability to agree on legal criteria for new members probably reflects several underlying membership problems. The enormous disparities in these countries' populations, geographic size, economic resources, military power, and geopolitical orientation have already complicated the negotiation, approval, and implementation of SCO initiatives. Adding new members could exacerbate these differences. Furthermore, none of the existing observer countries is an obvious choice for full membership. The SCO designated its first formal observer, Mongolia, in June 2004. At the organization's July 2005 summit in Shanghai, the existing members

awarded India, Iran, and Pakistan formal observer status as well.

The governments of Pakistan and Iran have lobbied most strongly for full membership status. Although Chinese officials would like to elevate the status of their ally Pakistan to that of full member, the other SCO governments still complain about Pakistanis' links with regional terrorist groups. Offering Pakistan full membership would probably also require granting India the same promotion, but Indian officials have thus far displayed only limited interest in the SCO. Iran's application presents its own special complications. The Iranian government's links with international terrorism movements, its support for anti-government groups in Lebanon and other countries, and above all its controversial nuclear energy program had made Beijing and Moscow seek to keep a certain distance from Tehran even before the recent election crisis.

Although other countries have subsequently expressed interest in becoming formal SCO observers, the organization has declined to expand this category either. Instead, the SCO has been inviting special "guests of honor" selected by the rotating hosting government of the annual SCO leadership summit. Afghan President Hamid Karzai has regularly attended SCO summits as a special guest of the host. Afghan officials have reportedly inquired about obtaining a more formal association, but some of the existing members have apparently objected that the country is presently too unstable for inclusion. Nonetheless, the growing number of SCO activities involving Afghanistan, including the special conference the SCO organized this March on the country, has clearly given Afghanistan a unique category within the organization. Medvedev related that, at Yekaterinburg, "There was not a single

speech at our summit that did not mention Afghanistan.”

The Yekaterinburg summit has now applied yet another affiliation category—that of “dialogue partner”—to countries that are neither full SCO members nor observers. In the past, the SCO had established formal partnerships only with other multilateral organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a Moscow-dominated military alliance of former Soviet states that includes all SCO members except China. The Yekaterinburg summit decided to award Belarus and Sri Lanka the status of “dialogue partner.” How these two countries will engage with the SCO, whose center of gravity clearly lies in Central Asia, remains uncertain. Belarus’ disruption of Moscow’s plans for the most recent CSTO summit, which met the day before the SCO’s Yekaterinburg meeting, suggests that Russian leaders might seek to limit Minsk’s role in the SCO for an indefinite probationary period.

CONCLUSIONS: A final complication is that the country that the existing SCO governments would most like to include in their membership roster, energy-rich Turkmenistan, remains non-committal about joining. President Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov attended the 2007 SCO summit as a guest, but he skipped the last two annual leadership meetings and his government has not pressed for further integration. In addition, Turkmenistan is not even a formal SCO observer or partner, so it would have to leapfrog over the existing candidates in order to gain full membership, a step the other membership aspirants, especially Iran, would not welcome.

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New Book:

The Guns of August 2008

Edited By Svante E. Cornell and S. Frederick Starr

M.E. Sharpe, New York, June 2009,
290pp

This book is designed to present the facts about the events of August 2008 along with comprehensive coverage of the background to those events. It brings together a wealth of expertise on the South Caucasus and Russian foreign policy, with contributions by Russian, Georgian, European, and American experts on the region.

IRAN, XINJIANG, AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN EURASIA: THE IMPACT OF RECENT UPHEAVALS

Stephen Blank

Iran's recent electoral protests and the more recent demonstrations in Xinjiang suggest that Eurasian societies are still fundamentally unsettled or possibly entering a new dynamic phase of political development. Both episodes underscore the inherent fragility of authoritarian societies and their susceptibility to internal violence. In Iran the government brazenly rigged its recent presidential election, then launched high-handed coercive efforts to strangle the ensuing protests. The world's view of Iran has nevertheless changed. In Xinjiang, the fruits of a policy best described as internal colonialism are visible, with the consequences of ethnic discrimination and a recourse to violence.

BACKGROUND: The Iranian government has made clear its determination to remain in power even at the cost of its legitimacy and authority. Thus it now stands on the brink of becoming a regime that relies exclusively upon force, fraud, and nationalist xenophobia rather than the domestic legitimacy it did previously enjoy to stay in power. Second, this domestic upheaval has fractured the unity of both the clerical establishment and the political elite. Consequently the actual ruling group is smaller and perhaps more cohesive than before, but the wider political class is more fragmented and the ruling elite's legitimacy has been undermined by its own actions, making it a more isolated group. That situation almost certainly implies a greater resort to force, repression, and nationalist xenophobia if the regime is to stay in power. That would also entail a likely acceleration, if possible, of Iran's nuclear program.

Consequently, by its no less high-handed efforts to blame the United Kingdom and the U.S. and its threats to put British diplomats on trial, Tehran has shown not just its abiding paranoia and willingness to blame foreigners

for its defects, it has also made clear the ruling elite's unwillingness to undertake genuine negotiations with the West on its nuclear programs, let alone stop them. Not surprisingly, officials in Washington if not elsewhere are beginning to realize that the Obama Administration's efforts to engage Iran directly on this program will probably fail. It should be clear that this election fraud did not occur exclusively for domestic reasons of staying in power: the regime's leaders do not want to engage in direct talks with Washington lest this expose the regime to Western influence or slow or stop the nuclear program. Indeed, there were signs that the opposition, led by Mir Hossein Mossavi, campaigned on the platform of negotiations with Washington and de-emphasizing Iran's nuclear project.

Both Iran's election crisis and the rioting in Xinjiang will have international implications going beyond the boundaries of their own countries. Unfortunately those implications are likely to be negative ones, at least in the short term insofar as prospects for greater liberalization, not to mention democratization, of these societies are concerned. The experience

of watching the Iranian elections and their aftermath as well as the rioting in Xinjiang will probably lead Eurasian rulers to conclude that they must act even more resolutely to ensure that future elections cannot under any circumstances lead to a change in regime. For example, Azerbaijan has limited state reporting of events there, possibly for fear that popular protests in Iran could impact the country. While the Azerbaijani government has urged the return of stability at the earliest possible date, opposition and independent media have concentrated on the challenge to the Iranian regime, clearly intending to use Iran as a stand-in for Azerbaijan.

IMPLICATIONS: This situation will probably replicate itself in other Eurasian countries where official media and the government will seek to restrict knowledge of events in Iran and Xinjiang, while regime opponents will use those events as symbols of what they are criticizing in their own governments. As in the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, we may

expect that authorities elsewhere will make sure that opposition candidates cannot run, mobilize popular support, or gain access to funding or media, and certainly that they cannot have any control over the actual counting of the votes. Moreover, in any case they will try to ensure beyond any doubt that the outcome is foreordained and then ratified as legitimate.

In practice this suggests several developments across Eurasia. First, increased interference with the operation of free media is to be expected, and especially a crackdown on the information technology of social networking. This can also include periodic or at least intermittent efforts to isolate countries from foreign media, including expulsions of foreign journalists, denial of visas to them, interference with the internet, and increased threats if not use of repression against news outlets and their reporters. This also means greater efforts to develop a “patriotic” media and mobilize popular support around those tamed and docile “house organs.”



Second, increased restrictions on opposition political movements are also likely. This repression will occur, not just in terms of their freedom of communication or access to the media, but also in terms of the right to assembly and publicly protest their condition. Invariably, this also entails heightened forms of repression. In Iran, the regime

has essentially blanketed the country with police forces and some officials have threatened the opposition with heavy jail terms or even with being labeled enemies of the state. In Xinjiang, the authorities have followed suit and threatened any demonstrators with the death penalty. This likely trend also means more show trials and repressions like that of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, which is currently taking place in Russia. Kazakhstan's efforts to ban the book written by Rakhat Aliyev and the current purge of former high-ranking officials on corruption charges also opens the door to the possibility of a larger campaign to stifle any potential political opposition. Similar phenomena can be expected and should not be ruled out in other Central Asian states, especially given a prolonged economic crisis that could shake the pillars of the state.

Along with the growth of repression and electoral chicanery we can also expect a growth in officially sponsored xenophobia. We already see a disturbing rise of ethnic violence in Russia as well as officially sponsored campaigns against the U.S. and the West. Since many leaders in these countries still accept the Leninist paradigm that their countries and governments are menaced by linked internal and external enemies, they regularly accuse NGOs of being in the employ of the CIA and claim that the so called color revolutions really represent U.S. efforts to undermine them. Therefore ethnic violence, directed against targeted minorities or just simply protracted repression and discrimination are by no means out of the question.

CONCLUSIONS: This increased xenophobia will invariably reinforce preexisting disposition

to display a hostile attitude towards the U.S. on issues of foreign policy concern like Iranian proliferation or Russian foreign policy in the CIS, and Russian policy towards Iran. Indeed, intensified efforts are likely toward still more collaboration on the part of these governments to set up not just an alternative value system and ideology concerning democracy and international relations more generally, but also counters to organizations like the OSCE. The CIS' use of member states' election monitors to verify the "democratic procedures" of their elections and thus make a mockery of the OSCE and democracy will probably grow in frequency. Russia is already calling the Iranian election "an exercise in democracy."

Therefore more resistance should be expected to the U.S.' calls for democratization and human rights, which, in fact, have been attenuated under the present Administration. It makes no sense to demand that states like Turkmenistan conform to human rights obligations while simultaneously refusing to press China or Russia, the latter being a signatory of the Helsinki treaty, to uphold their treaty commitments. Since Russia is in many ways an alibi for other Eurasian states, this makes pressing it doubly important even if Moscow does not like to hear it. Refraining from doing so only tells Russian leaders that the West is not serious in its commitment and that they can therefore disregard the West with impunity.

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MEDIATORS PROPOSE INTERIM STATUS FOR NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Haroutiun Khachatryan

The U.S., Russia and France, the three mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process, have presented an amended version of the Madrid document, based on Armenian and Azerbaijani proposals. The core of the amendments initially proposed in November 2007 is that Nagorno Karabakh will receive an interim status – legalizing the status quo and hopefully pushing the peace process ahead. New difficulties may nevertheless arise connected to the attitude of the enclave’s leadership.

BACKGROUND: In recent weeks, the representatives of the mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process, the so-called co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, made optimistic statements about the continued process. The U.S., Russia and France made a joint statement on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict at the presidential level during the G8 Summit on July 10 in L'Aquila, Italy. Then, the representatives of the three co-chairs acknowledged progress in agreeing on the basic principles for a settlement after a meeting in Krakow, Poland, on July 25-26. Finally, in a speech on August 7 in Tsakhkadzor, Armenia, the outgoing American co-chairman, Matthew Bryza, presented some important details on the basic principles, which are an updated version of the Madrid document presented in November 2007. During the following period, this document has been extensively discussed and amended as a result of Armenian-Azerbaijani top level dialogue, as presidents Serzh Sargsyan and Ilham Aliyev had six meetings (the latest taking place in Moscow on July 17). The presidents themselves have abstained from making optimistic statements, and the co-chairs do recognize that several details of the basic principles, though minor ones, are still to be agreed. In his August 7 speech, Bryza expressed hope that this will be

achieved in September and a document about the basic principles will be signed by the two presidents as a first step toward reaching a peace agreement later. Meanwhile, the optimistic statements of the mediators, as well as details officially disclosed by them, are evidently aimed at pressuring the parties and preventing them from backtracking on what has been achieved. Evidently, preparing the public opinion of both countries for concessions is also among the mediators' goals.

The current basic principles were first proposed by the mediators in November 2007 as the so-called Madrid document (hence the term “Madrid principles”). As outlined by the July 10 statement of the three presidents in L'Aquila, “the Basic Principles call for inter alia:

- return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
- an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
- a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
- future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
- the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and

- international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.”

Thus, the principles resulting from the recent negotiation rounds contain only one major addition, which was lacking in the initial version: the provision of an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh during the settlement process. If accepted, this document will create a new situation in the negotiation process, with new possibilities and new challenges.



IMPLICATIONS: The Nagorno-Karabakh peace process is likely to reach a turning point, through including the *de facto* leadership of the enclave in the settlement process. This is evidently a compromise on Azerbaijan’s part, which has always opposed such recognition. Bryza said in his Tsakhkadzor speech that “the basic idea of the agreement is that Nagorno-Karabakh will receive an interim status – which will be a legalization of the status quo... Status quo will maintain security for the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh and the residents of Nagorno-Karabakh will elect their leaders, manage their economic affairs, will be in charge of their own lives, and all feeling their own destinies”.

Nevertheless, a controversy is present regarding the status quo. As understood by its current inhabitants, the status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh is that of an independent state named the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR), which was founded on September 2, 1991, and approved by a referendum held three months later. Ethnic Azerbaijanis, which at that point constituted roughly a quarter of the enclave’s population, rejected to participate in the vote, and Azerbaijan has never recognized its legitimacy. Nevertheless, the NKR is recognized by its current Armenian population (the region’s Azerbaijani population was expelled during the war in 1992-94), and the leaders of the region have since been elected as those of the NKR. Since 1991, eight national votes were held in the unrecognized republic, including presidential and parliamentary elections and a constitutional referendum. Hence, if the *de facto* leaders of the region are involved in the process, as prescribed by the “updated Madrid principles,” they are expected by these principles to defy their own mandates as the leaders of NKR based on the 1991 December referendum and to organize another vote in the future to determine the status of Nagorno-Karabakh again. Another controversy is that, according to the Constitution of the NKR, the occupied regions of Azerbaijan around Nagorno-Karabakh are declared a “Security Zone” of the republic. Under the “Madrid principles,” the NKR is expected to give up these territories against the promise of unspecified “international security guarantees”. There are numerous other factors which would make the Armenian parties, both Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, cautious in accepting the above-mentioned basic principles, especially as these principles are still very loose and leave room for conflicting interpretations. They mainly arise from the lack of trust between

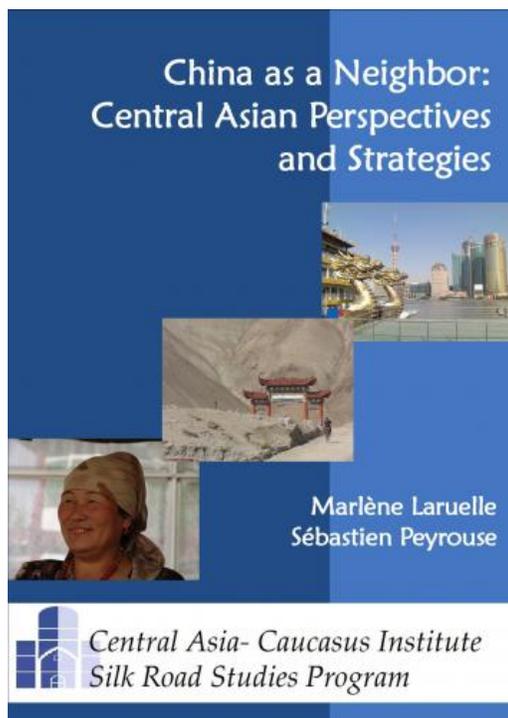
Armenians and Azerbaijanis, which is regularly enhanced by the bellicose rhetoric of their leaders.

In addition, conflicts may arise between the positions of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and the leadership of Armenia may not have enough influence on the Karabakh leaders to force them follow the path Yerevan chooses. Finally, President Serzh Sargsyan will evidently be under pressure of domestic political opposition claiming that he was conceding too much to Azerbaijan. Such criticism is frequently voiced by the Dashnaktsutiun party, a former member of the government coalition, which left it in April as a protest against Sargsyan's policy toward Turkey.

CONCLUSIONS: The three mediators of the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process so far seem

successful in pushing Armenia and Azerbaijan toward a compromise. The parties are expected to sign a framework document later this year as an initial step of a long settlement process. In particular, the participation of the Nagorno Karabakh de-facto authorities in the process is proposed via providing them an "interim status" before the final settlement of the conflict is reached. However, heavy obstacles are still ahead, mainly caused by lack of mutual trust between Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Domestic political issues, especially in Armenia, could also create obstacles to the process.

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FIELD REPORTS

HIGH-PROFILE DEATH RAISES QUESTIONS IN TAJIKISTAN

Alexander Sodiqov

On July 11, 2009, Lieutenant General Mirzo Ziyoev, formerly a prominent rebel turned government minister was killed. A joint statement by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) and the National Security Committee (GKNB) released the next day suggested that militants led by Shaykh Nemat Azizov, “an active member of the international terrorist group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)”, killed Ziyoev. According to the statement, Ziyoev joined Azizov’s band comprised of former opposition fighters and foreign drug traffickers in late June 2009. The group planned to take control of the Tavildara District in eastern Tajikistan, an opposition stronghold during the civil war. When Tajik security forces captured Ziyoev on July 11, he agreed to show where the militants hid their arms caches and to try to negotiate their surrender. Later that day, Ziyoev was killed and members of Azizov’s band allegedly wounded several security officers.

Ziyoev (also known as Mirzo Jaga) was the military commander of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) forces during the civil war in 1992-97. As part of the post-war power-sharing arrangement, Ziyoev was made Minister of Emergencies. Although Ziyoev had been dismissed from the cabinet in 2006, he remained one of the most influential figures in Tajikistan. Following the death of Islamic Revival Party (IRPT) chairman Said Abdullo Nuri in 2006, Ziyoev was seen as the only person who could unite the Tajik Islamic opposition and count on support from Islamic forces abroad in challenging the regime of President Emomali Rahmon.

The official version of the prominent ex-minister’s death contains several major flaws. First, there is no

evidence that insurgents killed the general. Speaking to journalists on 22 June, Tajik Minister of Internal Affairs Abdurahim Kakharov said an expert examination carried out on the scene of the murder revealed that Azizov’s fighters killed Ziyoev. Meanwhile, a western expert working with Tajik law-enforcement agencies, who asked not to be named, suggested that police units in Tavildara did not have the technical capacity to carry out such an examination. Besides, there was not enough time for any meaningful effort to investigate the murder as Ziyoev was buried early the next morning.

Secondly, there are major reasons to question the official timing of Mirzo Ziyoev’s death. Tajik security forces reported that he had been captured on July 11 and killed later that day. However, according to the regional news website www.centrasia.ru, which was first to bring the news of the murder, Ziyoev was killed in the night between July 10 and 11.

There are also other reasons to question the official account of Ziyoev’s death. People who knew the former rebel suggest he was committed to preserving stability in the country. Ziyoev himself in an interview to the Asia Plus newspaper on May 27, 2009, pledged to help maintain security in eastern Tajikistan amongst speculations of Islamic militants infiltrating into the country from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The general secrecy that surrounds the large-scale military operation carried out by Tajik security forces in eastern Tajikistan only adds to the mistrust of the official version of Ziyoev’s death. In May, the Tajik government deployed sizeable police and military units to the Rasht Valley reportedly as

part of an annual counter-narcotics operation. However, the extent and location of the operation, as well as unexplained casualties among the Tajik military, led many observers to believe that it was something other than an effort to tackle narcotics trafficking. Tajik and Russian media cited unnamed sources in Tajik security agencies suggesting that the military and police were hunting civil-war era warlord Mullo Abdullo, who had returned to Tajikistan with a large group of Islamic militants after spending the last nine years with Taliban allies in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although the Tajik authorities first denied the reports of the infiltration of Islamic militants into the country, they arrested several former associates of Mullo Abdullo and later announced that he had proclaimed a jihad against the government. This had led some observers to suggest that Ziyoev might have been killed by Tajik

security forces, which feared that the influential former rebel could serve as a unifying figure for resurgent Islamic insurgency in the country.

Ziyoev's murder came less than a month after another high-profile death, that of Lieutenant General Mahmadnazar Salikhov, a powerful ex-Minister of Internal Affairs. Tajik security services maintain that Salikhov committed suicide when the General Prosecutor's Office issued a warrant for his arrest on charges of "abuse of office." However, the ex-minister's relatives as well as Tajik opposition activists abroad insist that Salikhov, who had once belonged to President Emomali Rakhmon's inner circle, was murdered after criticizing the President. It will now be difficult for the Tajik authorities to argue that the deaths of two influential ex-ministers were something other than an effort to eliminate potential opponents of the regime.

UZBEKISTAN CONCERNED OVER RUSSIAN MILITARY BASE IN FERGHANA

Erkin Akhmadov

On August 1, during the summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Kyrgyzstan, the presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev signed a Memorandum "On the intentions of the Russian Federation and the Kyrgyz Republic to further develop and enhance the bilateral legal base regulating the presence of Russian military forces on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic, and the dislocation of additional Russian military forces on the territory of the Kyrgyz Republic". The Memorandum provides the framework for setting up a new military unit in Osh, Ferghana, under the aegis of the CSTO, which would include up to a battalion of military staff as well as an educational center for the preparation of Russian and Kyrgyz soldiers. On August 3, Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement expressing decisive disagreement with Russia's intentions. The Uzbek authorities

explained that a Russian base in the Ferghana Valley could cause increased militarization in the region as well as nationalistic confrontation. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied that the presence of Russian military forces on the territory of the CSTO member-states aims to maintain stability and security in the region from the threats of international terrorism. While it seems that there would be no serious reasons for Uzbekistan to worry about the presence of a CSTO ally on the territory of its neighbor, several speculations about Uzbekistan's increased discontent with these plans have circulated in local media lately.

One of Uzbekistan's major concerns is that Russia want to place the unit in an area that is "quite complicated and hard to predict", where the borders of three Central Asian states come together. Indeed the Ferghana Valley is one of the most problematic areas in the region, famous for its high population

density, huge shortage of resources and propensity for the emergence of extremist groups. Therefore, Uzbekistan fears that the base could cause increased militarization, a rise of nationalistic attitudes, as well as an increase of extremist forces that could cause serious destabilization in the region. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs replied to these concerns that the unit's location was not yet finalized. However, it seems that Uzbek authorities not only worry about the location of the Russian military base, but also about the intensified Russian military presence in the region.

Uzbekistan views Russia's plans to deploy a military unit to the Ferghana Valley as an expansion of Russian military influence in the region. As U.S. political scientists Andrew Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson stated, Uzbekistan does not trust Russia, especially after the actions of the Russian army in Georgia in August 2008 that "made a strong impression on the Uzbek politicians, strengthening their feeling of vulnerability". Drawing similar parallels, some experts assume that an increased Russian military presence in the region would create obstacles for Uzbekistan to bully its neighbors.

Vladimir Anohin, Vice-president of the Geopolitical Issues Academy, identified Uzbekistan's open opposition as a "political game" by which it signals to the U.S. and NATO that it is capable of confronting Russia. Evgeniya Voyko, a foreign policy expert of the Political State of Affairs Centre, noticed elements of "political jealousy" in the statement of the Uzbek authorities. She states that Uzbekistan aspires to have a special role in Central Asia, especially concerning Afghanistan. Therefore, it seems to be disgruntled that the Kyrgyz Republic seeks to contribute and take on an important role." Moreover, it may be interpreted as a signal from Russia that it does not consider Uzbekistan as its favored partner in the region.

The agreement between Russia and Kyrgyzstan was concluded as a part of the CSTO cooperation.

Uzbekistan is still a member of the CSTO, and therefore no measures could be taken against it. As the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted: "The Russian military presence is of a defensive nature, and is in no case directed against other states". Uzbekistan, however, has been a slack CSTO member lately, providing plenty of reasons for expecting its coming withdrawal from the block. For instance, it rejected to join the Common Rapid Response Forces (CRRF) initiative under the CSTO. Thus, many experts assume that the present situation may serve as yet another reason for Uzbekistan to leave the CSTO.

Last but not least, a development that may shed light on the current situation may lie in the fact that Uzbekistan appears willing to adopt "peaceful negotiations" instead of military strategy concerning Afghanistan. This was mentioned for the first time during the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008 and then repeated at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Yekaterinburg in June this year. Specifically, President Karimov proposed to establish a new international mechanism - a "six plus three" Contact Group under the aegis of the UN. The group would consist of the six states that border Afghanistan plus Russia, the U.S., and NATO. Thus, by opposing the deployment of the Russian military unit in Kyrgyzstan, it is possible that Uzbekistan is articulating discontent not with the presence of Russia in the region as such, but the method that was chosen to ensure stability and peace.

Even though Russian authorities agreed to review the location of the Ferghana military base following Uzbekistan's protests, the Kyrgyz authorities have recently stated that they will insist that the base is established in its south. Therefore, Uzbekistan can be expected to either present more serious reasons for why the base in Ferghana is inappropriate, or react more harshly to the issue, for example through withdrawing from the CSTO.

THE PROBLEMATIC TAJIKISTAN-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

Suhrob Majidov

As a result of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to Tajikistan, Moscow and Dushanbe agreed to "equal rights military cooperation". This means that from now on Russia will pay for its military base in Tajikistan, which is the largest in the region with 6,800 servicemen. In turn, Russia will sell arms to Tajikistan at market prices and conduct military trainings for Tajik soldiers for a certain payment.

The main reason for the visit was the signing of an act on the completion of the Sangtuda-1 hydropower station on the Vakhsh River in the south of Tajikistan with a capacity of 670 megawatts. The value of this joint project is estimated to around US\$720-800 million and is owned to 75 percent by Russia and to 25 percent by Tajikistan. The relationship between Moscow and Dushanbe in this sphere seems quite problem-free. Both sides term Sangtuda-1 a vivid example of successful cooperation between the two countries. As Dmitry Medvedev announced during the visit "a number of new projects in the energy sphere between Moscow and Dushanbe are under development".

Nevertheless, problems do exist between Russia and Tajikistan. Tajikistan insists that Russia must change the format of military cooperation between the two countries and change the status of the 201st Russian military base in Tajikistan. As was confirmed by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, the conditions for hosting the Russian military base can be changed. As a result of negotiations between Medvedev and his counterpart Emomali Rahmon, all documents on the new status of the base should be prepared in two months, before a planned meeting of the intergovernmental commission on military cooperation.

Simultaneously with Tajikistan's proposal to change the status of the Russian military base to that of a commercial base, Moscow in turn promised to establish military-technical relationships with Tajikistan on the basis of market principles. The

Russian President's Advisor Sergey Prikhodko declared that the deployment of Russian military bases in Tajikistan and the provision of Russian defense technologies and arms to Tajik Forces should be treated as one complex issue. Consequently, Russia will provide military equipment to Tajik Forces only at market prices. Furthermore, Prihod'ko reiterated that "almost 100%" of the arms possessed by Tajikistan are of Russian production. According to unofficial sources, the amount of subsidies received by Tajik forces from Russia during the last decade are estimated to "tens of millions of U.S. dollars".

According to the expert Arkadiy Dubnov, the issue of military cooperation is not the only stumbling block in Russian-Tajik relations. For instance, the superficially successful cooperation in the energy sphere also has its stumbling blocks. Tajikistan still owes Russia the funds for its 25 percent share of the Sangtuda-1 hydropower station. Moreover, Tajikistan's debt is growing since Dushanbe is not fully refunding payments for energy coming from Sangtuda-1. According to different sources, Tajikistan's debt to Russia amounts to US\$18-30 million. Another delicate issue is the Rogun hydropower station project, which despite years of delays remains a distant dream for the Tajik government. Finally, Russia is very displeased with the new draft of the Law on state language which is now under consideration of the Tajik Parliament and which will lead to the complete removal of the Russian language from official use in Tajikistan.

Arkadiy Dubnov terms these "very delicate, critical and uneasy problems in the Moscow-Dushanbe relationship, where any issue of cooperation could cause a domino effect. While considered the closest partners in CIS, the whole cloth of Russia-Tajikistan relations could easily tear apart and in practice seems far from problem-free". The expert claims that although both Presidents are seeking to

mollify problematic issues in their official statements, the problems are far from being solved.

All in all, unresolved problems in the Moscow-Dushanbe relationship could potentially cause significant changes in the cooperation between the two countries. According to Russian experts, Moscow could adequately respond to Dushanbe's demarches with corresponding measures. For instance, Tajikistan's proposition for Russia to pay for the accommodation of the military base may result in the introduction of restrictions on accepting Tajik labor migrants or, even worse, the introduction of a visa regime between the two countries. On the other hand, Russia seeks to avoid a worsening its relationship with Tajikistan, as

Moscow needs the support from Dushanbe for establishing and structuring the Common Rapid Response Forces in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Furthermore, Russia still considers the Central Asian region, and particularly Tajikistan, as a strategic region in its foreign policy. The same goes for Tajikistan, which is highly dependent on Russia since hundreds of thousands of Tajik labor migrants are thought to be working in Russia. Therefore, despite some experts' predictions and unresolved issues it is hardly to be expected that Moscow and Dushanbe would bring their strategic relationships to a standstill.

ELECTION IN KYRGYZSTAN: BAKIYEV AGAIN

Nurshat Ababakirov

On July 23, President Bakiyev was re-elected for a second term with 76 percent of the vote, while his major opponent from the united opposition, Almazbek Atambaev, former prime minister, received 8 percent. Bakiyev's victory was hardly a surprise. It was quite firmly believed from the outset of the election campaign that President Bakiyev enjoyed a greater popularity than the other five candidates. However, his victory highlighted that Bakiyev's popularity rested less on the economic situation, and more on the ostensible political stability and the opposition's weakness.

And yet, although there was no strong opposition to pose a serious challenge to his regime, administrative resources were used nationwide, ballot stuffing and multiple voting occurred, and supporters of the opposition candidates were intimidated and threatened on several occasions. The ruling party, Ak Zhol, was closely and wholeheartedly engaged in the campaign. Many budget workers, including university and schoolteachers, formed a "cheap, obedient army" of pro-Bakiyev activists.

At some universities in the southern region of Osh, classes were reportedly extended into July so that the students would be present on the day of elections. Pro-governmental media outlets spearheaded by the national state channel, NTRC, provided extensive coverage of Bakiyev both as a candidate and the incumbent, while often running contentious video materials degrading the image of Almazbek Atambaev, representing the United People's Movement as a single candidate.

The OSCE election observation mission stated that, "the presidential elections failed to meet key OSCE commitments for democratic elections, including the commitment to maintain a clear separation between party and state," in short, evaluating the conduct on Election Day as a "disappointment."

The issue of possible public protests scarcely seems to be a headache for the government, with its new regulations for holding peaceful rallies passed in 2008. No less importantly, the population displayed a general apathy towards politics, kindled by the opposition's weakness and cemented by a growing awareness that Bakiyev, unlike his predecessor, is

ready to defend his regime by harsher means. It is worth noting that a military facility was used for detaining about 40 participants of the opposition's protest march, organized on July 29 in Bishkek to protest the election results. Bakiyev's opponents hardly represented a genuine challenge.

Bakiyev's confidence was reinforced by the recent profitable deal as a result of his maneuvering between the U.S. and Russia over the Manas air base, which his opponents in vain tried to term "incompetence" on the president's part. However, the main concern of Bakiyev's team vis-à-vis the elections was a low turnout, which could essentially show a low level of legitimacy for his regime. In this respect, the use of administrative resources was crucial. In addition, a low turnout could technically trigger a second round of elections or, at worst, instigate a cycle of failed elections. The Electoral Code stipulates that at least 50 percent of the eligible voters must participate in an election for it to be valid, and if no candidate receives an absolute majority, a second round is held with the two candidates that earned most of the votes. The OSCE election observation mission stated that, "this [50 percent] requirement increases the risk of potential electoral malfeasance..."

It is also worth mentioning that the election was held in the middle of summer, a period of high mobility of the population. Many people travel for a summer break or to work abroad as seasonal workers. Official estimates suggest that about 75,000 people would visit or work at sanatoriums on the shores of the Issyk-Kul Lake alone. However, it is harder to estimate the larger group of people consisting of average visitor and internal migrants that come to Issyk-Kul for seasonal works or vacation.

Another inaccuracy was related to the number of voters that were out of the country on the Election Day. The Central Election Commission (CEC) registered 140,000 eligible voters abroad, and 2,7 million within the country. Nevertheless, the actual

number of labor migrants is still disputed, with unofficial estimations putting the figure close to one million. Indeed, most of them are eligible voters. But scattered throughout different regions of Russia and Kazakhstan and engaged mostly in menial labor, they are difficult to locate and they themselves may well have limited information on the election. Nevertheless, the turnout of those abroad reached 84 percent. It is also noteworthy that even though Batken oblast sends the largest portion of the labor migrants in comparison with other regions, the CEC announced that its turnout reached 90 percent.

Changes were made to the Electoral Code in January 2009. New provisions did not require inking of voters' fingers, which could have been effectively used to prevent multiple voting. Also, voter registration no longer required a court order for voters to cast their ballot at a different polling station. During voting, unique ID numbers were not recorded, except for basic information such as name, date of birth, and address. As voters list were not available for public display, the final number of voters remained unknown until the polls were closed. And, according to the OSCE observation mission, no crosschecking of voters list was conducted regionally or nationwide.

Bakiyev obviously does not embody the goals of the March 2005 events, but the general apathy towards politics, the high ambitions and disunity among opposition leaders, and the growing belief that the Bakiyev regime is ready to resort to any means to defend itself, made Bakiyev the best choice so far. Whether voluntarily or not, the governmental structures certainly played a key role in his landslide victory. It undermines democracy and the principles of free and fair elections. Resulting despair and lack of finances will definitely push more opposition members to give up political activism or enter government bodies, unless an opposition with upgraded structure and strategy emerges.

NEWS DIGEST

IRAN, RUSSIA CONDUCT NAVAL EXERCISE

30 July

Iran and Russian launched their first-ever joint maritime operations in the Caspian Sea touted as part of an effort to enhance security in the region. The joint operation was launched from the northern Iranian port city of Bandar Anzali under the slogan of "clean and secure Caspian Sea depends on regional interaction," reports the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting network. Ali Taher Abadi, the managing director of the Ports and Navigation Organization in Iran, said the operation included measures to stem environmental pollution in the Caspian Sea. Lawmakers with an environmental party in Azerbaijan complained recently that activity related to the energy sector in the Caspian Sea was creating financial difficulties as a result of environmental pollution. Saeed Izadian, who oversees the naval operation for Iran, said 30 advanced boats, 2 Iranian helicopters and around 500 military forces will take part in the exercise alongside their Russian counterparts. He said the strategic emphasis of the operation was meant to train forces on search and rescue operations, adding the exercise fell within the framework of international obligations. Claims to the Caspian Sea are contentious among the littoral states, which are at odds over a 1921 treaty that divided the region between Iran and the Soviet Union. Only Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan have settled their territorial claims in the Caspian Sea, leaving Iran and Turkmenistan with frustrating differences. (UPI)

CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OF KYRGYZSTAN RECOGNIZED RESULTS OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS LEGITIMATE

30 July

The Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan has recognized the presidential elections legitimate and having been held in conformity with the Constitution of the country, the agency reports citing the press service of the Constitutional Court of Kyrgyzstan. Central Election Committee of Kyrgyzstan directed on July 27th the results of the presidential elections of Kyrgyzstan to the Constitutional Court. According to the Code on Elections, the court must confirm the results not later than seven days after the last election day. Today, the Constitutional Court recognized the presidential elections of the country legitimate. According to the legislation, the elected leader of the state will take the oath to the people of Kyrgyzstan in the presence of deputies of Parliament within 30 days. According to the President's Administration, inauguration is planned for August 2, 2009. The current head of the state, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, has received 76.12 % of votes. 1 million 772 thousand 849 people voted for K. Bakiyev. (Kazakhstan Today)

RUSSIA, KYRGYZSTAN SIGN BASE DEAL AT CSTO SUMMIT

1 August

The Russian and Kyrgyz presidents have tentatively agreed to establish a second Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and his Kyrgyz counterpart Kurmanbek Bakiev signed the deal on the second day of an informal summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, a regional security grouping dominated by Moscow. The three-day summit opened on July 31 at the Kyrgyz lakeside resort of Cholpon-Ata. Under the joint memorandum, Kyrgyzstan allows Russia to establish a military base on its territory for a period of up to 49 years. The document states that Russian forces will be charged with "protecting Kyrgyz

sovereignty" and repelling attacks by international terrorist groups. Moscow has said the planned base would operate under the umbrella of the CSTO. A definitive agreement detailing the status of the proposed base is due to be signed by November. This would be Russia's second base in the mountainous ex-Soviet republic. It already operates an air base in Kant, about 20 kilometers east of Kyrgyzstan's capital, Bishkek. The memorandum said the size of the contingent could be up to a battalion but gave no specifics on the location of the new base. Media reports suggest it could be deployed to Batken Province, near the border with Uzbekistan on the edge of the Ferghana Valley, a region that spreads across Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and has become a hotbed of Islamic militancy. One potential obstacle to that location might come from Uzbek President Islam Karimov, who is thought to be opposed to the idea of having a Russian base close to his borders. While Moscow may seek to turn an existing military facility near the southern city of Osh into its base, impoverished Kyrgyzstan reportedly wants the military base to be built from scratch using Russian money. (RFE/RL)

IRAN MUST WARM TO U.S. BEFORE NABUCCO

3 August

Iran is in a position to play a role in the Nabucco gas pipeline to Europe, though it needs to establish ties with the United States first, analysts say. Turkey hosted regional and international supporters in July for the signing of a milestone intergovernmental agreement on the \$10.3 billion Nabucco project. Nabucco is seen as the foundation to European efforts to diversify an energy sector dependent on Russian natural gas. Despite political support for Nabucco, the project lacks financial backing and firm commitments from supplier nations. Janine Mitchell, a research fellow at Columbia University, told an audience at the Center for Strategic Studies under the president of the Republic of Azerbaijan that Iran must first meet with Washington on the issue, the Trend news agency reports. "To ensure Iran's involvement in Nabucco project, it is necessary to restore friendly relations between Iran and the United States," she said. Iran was not specifically included in the provisions of the Ankara agreement in order to win the explicit backing of Washington. The language

of the Ankara agreement, however, was crafted in such a way that Iran may still play a role. (UPI)

AZERBAIJAN AND KAZAKHSTAN WILL DISCUSS PROSPECTS OF BILATERAL RELATIONS IN BAKU IN OCTOBER

3 August

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev and his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev discussed over telephone the implementation of agreements reached in the negotiations in Moscow in July, 2009, and preparations for Nazarbayev's upcoming visit to Baku, the official website of the Kazakh president reported. The presidents discussed the current state and prospects of bilateral relations, particularly, issues of economic cooperation in energy and transportation of hydrocarbons, during the conversation. The presidents also discussed the development of multilateral cooperation in the Caspian region. Both leaders reached an agreement to continue bilateral high-level contacts also as part of official visits and informal summits. According to initial data, Nazarbayev will pay an official visit to Azerbaijan on Oct.1, the Azerbaijani embassy in Kazakhstan told Trend News. "The visit will be held as part of the next summit of Turkic-speaking countries, which is scheduled in Baku on Sep.30 - Oct.1. We have invited Kazakhstan, but have not yet received confirmation," the same source said. (Trend Capital)

RUSSIA BOOSTS READINESS OF TROOPS IN SOUTH OSSETIA

4 August

Russia said it was putting its troops in South Ossetia on alert after it warned Georgia it had the right to use force in the breakaway region over which Moscow and Tbilisi fought a war a year ago. "Provocations from the Georgian side ahead of the anniversary of the August events last year are not stopping," Andrei Nesterenko, a spokesman for Russia's Foreign Ministry, said in a statement. "In connection with this, we have stepped up the combat readiness of Russian troops and border guards." South Ossetia accused Georgian forces of firing mortars at the rebel territory last week, underscoring simmering tension in the region. Tbilisi denied the charge and monitors from the European Union said they have seen "no evidence" to confirm any shelling. (Reuters)

ENERGY OVERSHADOWS CASPIAN BORDER DISPUTES

5 August

Demarcation of disputed waters in the Caspian Sea between Ashgabat and Baku should not delay potential joint development of oil and gas fields, officials say. Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov ordered a national investigation to examine Azeri claims in the Caspian Sea with the intent on taking the matter to the International Court of Arbitration. Berdimuhamedov claims Baku started developments at oil and gas fields and plans to explore additional deposits in disputed waters. Sabit Bagirov, the former president of the State Oil Co. of Azerbaijan Republic, said it is unlikely the dispute will be resolved at the international level, the Trend news agency in Azerbaijan reports. Bagirov notes that Baku has come forward with offers to jointly develop several fields in territorial border regions despite the disputed claims. Baku offers a durable infrastructure with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and its related arteries, which may help Ashgabat overcome technological setbacks, he said. Meanwhile, development of major Caspian fields, notably the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli complex, by international energy majors positions the region as a vital energy partner. The Caspian border row could present another challenge to the \$10.3 billion Nabucco gas pipeline for Europe. The project reached a milestone this month with a signing ceremony in Turkey, though the pipeline lacks firm commitments from potential suppliers. Though Azerbaijan appears ready to supply gas to Nabucco, Turkmenistan is expected to provide the bulk of the 1.1 trillion cubic feet of gas slated for the pipeline each year. (UPI)

ABKHAZ OPPOSITION RESISTS ETHNIC GEORGIAN "CITIZENS"

5 August

Opposition groups in Abkhazia are calling on the breakaway Georgian republic's leader to veto legislation that would grant some 50,000 ethnic Georgians Abkhaz "citizenship," RFE/RL's Georgian Service reports. The People's Unity Forum of Abkhazia, the Arua war veterans movement, and the Akhatsa civic movement in a joint statement on August 4 called on Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh to reject an amendment to

the citizenship law that would allow ethnic Georgians who reside in the southeastern Gali district to gain Abkhaz citizenship. The amendment, passed by the Abkhaz parliament on July 31, would allow Georgians who returned to the Gali district before 2005 to be able to get "Abkhaz citizenship." There are about 50,000 such residents in Gali, and granting them "citizenship" would alter the ethnic balance to make the republic roughly half ethnic Georgians and half ethnic Abkhaz. Abkhazia has had de facto independence since a brief war with Georgia in 1992-93. It was recognized as an independent country by Russia and Nicaragua last August after the Russian-Georgian war over South Ossetia. (RFE/RL)

UZBEKISTAN OPINION TO BE CONSIDERED IN AGREEMENT ON RUSSIAN MILITARY BASE IN KYRGYZSTAN

6 August

Russia and Kyrgyzstan will consider Uzbekistan's opinion while preparing the agreement on opening of the military base of the Russian Federation in the territory of Kyrgyzstan. The CSTO Secretary General, Nikolay Bordyuzha, informed journalists, the agency reports citing RBC. "Certainly, taking into account that CSTO considers opinions of all states, the Russian and Kyrgyzstan leadership will consider the statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan and will, probably, hold corresponding consultations with Uzbekistan," he said. According to N. Bordyuzha, the management of two countries is ready to address those concerns expressed by the Uzbek party. As informed earlier, on August 1, the Presidents of the Russian Federation and Kyrgyzstan, Dmitry Medvedev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, signed, during the informal CSTO summit, the memorandum of intention on location in the territory of the Republic of an additional Russian military contingent for training of Kyrgyz and Russian military men. (Kazakhstan Today)

TURKMENISTAN INVITES UZBEK PRESIDENT TO VISIT COUNTRY

6 August

Turkmen President Gurbangulu Berdimuhamedov invited his Uzbek counterpart Islam Karimov to pay a visit to Turkmenistan at

any time of convenience during a telephone conversation. Karimov accepted the invitation. The terms of the visit will be coordinated through diplomatic channels, the governmental said. Turkmenistan initiated the conversation. The large multinational energy project connects two neighboring countries. The Turkmenistan-China pipeline project, which will pass through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, close to completion, Berdimuhamedov said. With this regards, Karimov was invited to take part in the opening ceremony. Under the project, design capacity of the new pipeline will be 40 billion cubic meters of gas and its opening is scheduled for early 2009. "Gas pipeline is a bright symbol of friendship and cooperation between the neighboring nations," Karimov said. Heads of States emphasized that the transnational project is intended to become an effective factor in the socio-economic development of project participant-countries. (Trend News)

TENSIONS ENDURE ON ANNIVERSARY OF GEORGIA-RUSSIA WAR

7 August

Georgia and Russia on Friday mark a year since the outbreak of their war amid enduring tensions and international concern over instability in the volatile Caucasus region. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was to make an address to the nation late Friday following a day of ceremonies, including a nationwide minute of silence, to commemorate the victims of the war. Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia region, which was at the heart of the conflict, was also to mark the day with a memorial procession, a moment of silence and a speech by rebel leader Eduard Kokoity. The anniversary follows a week of rising tensions around South Ossetia and accusations from both sides of small-scale attacks and "provocations". The United States and European Union have raised concerns about the tensions and called on all sides to tread carefully. In an article headlined "Russia and Georgia Play their Trump Cards", the daily Kommersant said Moscow and Tbilisi were ready to meet the anniversary of their war with an information battle targeting Western diplomats. "One year after the August conflict, Russia and Georgia start a new war -- an information war. The prize is to win the good opinion of the West," it wrote. Violence has also flared in the run-up to Friday's anniversary, with

Georgia and South Ossetia accusing each other of carrying out several small-scale attacks with mortars, grenade launchers and machine guns. No one was reported injured in any of the attacks. Russia said it had put its forces in South Ossetia on high alert and warned in a startling statement Saturday that it reserved the right to use force in case of Georgian "provocations". It has also accused Georgia of aggressively re-arming and the United States of quietly supplying Tbilisi with arms. The European Union issued a statement calling for calm and US President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden called Moscow and Tbilisi, respectively, shortly before the anniversary to urge restraint. The EU's 225-strong monitoring mission in Georgia also said Thursday it was intensifying its patrols because of "heightened tension" surrounding the anniversary. "Our patrols are working day and night to monitor the situation on the ground, with the aim of maintaining security and stability," the mission said in a statement. (AFP)

U.S. TARGETS AFGHAN DRUG LORDS TIES TO TALIBAN

10 August

The United States has placed 50 suspected Afghan drug traffickers with ties to the Taliban on a Pentagon target list to be captured or killed, "The New York Times" reported on August 10, citing a Congressional report to be released this week. Major drugs traffickers with proven links to the Taliban have been given the same target status as insurgent leaders, and can be captured or killed at any time, two U.S. generals serving in Afghanistan said in interviews with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is releasing the report. "The New York Times" said the generals told Senate staff members that there are about 50 major traffickers who contribute money to the Taliban on the list. The pursuit of Afghan drug lords reflects a major shift in U.S. policy and is likely to raise legal concerns from some NATO countries that have troops in Afghanistan, the newspaper said. U.S. military commanders have told Congress they are convinced that the policy is legal under the military's rules of engagement and international law, the report said. They also said the move is an essential part of a new plan to disrupt the flow of drug money that is helping finance the Taliban insurgency, the "Times" reported. Several people

suspected of ties to drug trafficking have already been captured and others have been killed by the U.S. military since the policy went into effect earlier this year, the "Times" reported, citing a senior military official with direct knowledge of the matter. Pentagon spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Ryder, would not comment on the Senate report nor directly address the existence of the target list, the newspaper said. However Ryder said it was "important to clarify that we are targeting terrorists with links to the drug trade, rather than targeting drug traffickers with links to terrorism." (Reuters)

KYRGYZSTAN UIGHUR LEADERS DETAINED AFTER PROTEST

10 August

Kyrgyzstan's police detained two Uighur community leaders after they accused China of "state terrorism" at a rally today and called for an independent investigation of last month's clashes in neighbouring Xinjiang. About 500 Uighurs gathered at a building on the outskirts of the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek with photographs posted to the walls showing what they said was abuse of their kinfolk in China. The pictures portrayed people being beaten up and held at gunpoint as well as unconscious or dead people lying in the streets. "The Chinese started mass pogroms on June 26, scores of people have been killed, but the Chinese government is concealing those facts," Dilmurat Akbarov, the head of local Uighur society Ittipak (Unity), told a meeting. "We demand that those responsible are punished." People in the crowd chanted "Freedom to Uighurs" and banners reading "We accuse China of state terrorism against the Uighur people" hung on the walls. The police did not interfere but detained Akbarov and his deputy Zhamaldin Nasyrov after the protest was over. Kyrgyzstan's ombudsman Tursunbek Akun, who was present at the rally, told reporters Akbarov and Nasyrov were held for staging a rally not sanctioned by the government. (Reuters)

TWO KAZAKH CITIZENS SENTENCED FOR PUBLISHING STATE SECRETS

10 August

The owner and editor of a Kazakh independent weekly and a fellow defendant have been sentenced to jail terms in connection with the publication of

state secrets, RFE/RL's Kazakh Service reports. The Almaty-based "Alma-Ata Info" weekly's Ramazan Esergepov was ordered by a court in the city of Taraz to spend three years in jail for publishing state secrets, while local businessman and fellow defendant Sultan Makhmadov received a seven-year sentence for tax evasion, illegally obtaining state secrets, and revealing them via media. Esergepov's wife, Raushan, told RFE/RL that the verdict was pronounced behind closed doors and neither defendants' relatives nor their lawyers were allowed to be present in the courtroom. Kazakh authorities first tried to arrest Esergepov in December, but he entered the U.S. Consulate in Almaty and hid out there for several days. He later left the consulate and was hospitalized with heart problems. On January 6, Esergepov was officially arrested in Almaty and transferred to the city of Taraz. He told journalists on August 8, when escorted from the courtroom by police, that the case represented a test of freedom of speech and that he was going to fight it to the end. Sultan Makhmadov was under house arrest while investigations continued, but he managed to escape on August 6 and was apprehended in Bishkek in neighboring Kyrgyzstan later the same day and returned to Taraz. The press secretary of the Committee of National Security, Kenzhebulat Beknazarov, accused Sultan Makhmadov of running an illegal shadow business and trying to discredit that committee by publishing classified information through Esergepov's newspaper. The chairwoman of Kazakhstan's Journalists in Trouble NGO, Rozlana Taukina, told RFE/RL that Esergepov was merely doing his job as a journalist and therefore was not guilty of revealing any secrets. (RFE/RL)

INGUSH LEADER RECOVERS TO FIGHT REBELS, CORRUPTION

10 August

Ingush President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, seriously wounded in a suicide bomb attack, has made his first public appearance, pledging to step up the fight against rebels and corruption among his own officials. The 46-year-old former paratrooper general was unconscious for many days fighting for his life after suffering head injuries, burns, and damage to internal organs when a car loaded with explosives wedged into his motorcade on June 22. Russian television showed Yevkurov walking with

a stick and dressed in a black suit as he spoke to the media before leaving a Moscow hospital on August 10. "The policy will largely remain the same, although it may become slightly tougher, including towards those involved in corruption," Russian news agencies quoted Yevkurov as saying. Yevkurov, nominated for the job by the Kremlin last October, has said he believes it is not only militant Islamist propaganda but also widespread poverty aggravated by deep-rooted corruption that push many young people to join the rebels. "If I could catch that suicide terrorist, I would have probably forgiven him," Vesti-24 channel showed Yevkurov telling reporters. "I have no intention to take revenge." "But I repeat once again -- those who surrender will be prosecuted by the law.... The ones who do not lay down weapons and do not surrender will be destroyed -- this is the law, this is not my whim, and everyone must understand that." Human rights activists say that apart from poverty and corruption, tough official methods also push locals to take up arms and join the insurgents. (Reuters)

ARMENIA, AZERBAIJAN "COMING CLOSER" TO PEACE

11 August

The top U.S. official for Nagorno-Karabakh talks insists that Armenia and Azerbaijan are moving closer to a framework agreement over the disputed territory, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. Ending a two-day visit to Yerevan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza also downplayed the significance of recent changes made to the peace proposal principles formally put forth by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group in Madrid in November 2007. He told RFE/RL that the "fundamental formulations that are in the Madrid document remain, and what has changed is a few slight technical points that are important, of course, but they are technical and in no way disadvantage either side." Some opposition politicians in Armenia claim that the newly revised version of the "Madrid Principles" disadvantages the Armenian side, requiring it to make more concessions to Azerbaijan on key issues. Bryza dismissed those claims as "ridiculous" and "empty." The "updated version" of the peace plan was devised at a July meeting of the Minsk Group in Krakow, Poland. Bryza said Armenian and Azerbaijani

leaders agree on the "fundamental concepts" of the proposal but that a final solution is still a long way off. (RFE/RL)

U.S. OFFICIAL HOPES SARKISIAN VISITS TURKEY

12 August

A U.S. official says he hopes Armenian President Serzh Sarkisian will visit Turkey in October to continue the fence-mending "football diplomacy" between Yerevan and Ankara, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza also acknowledged, though, that the U.S.-backed dialogue between Turkey and Armenia has stalled recently and that he is less optimistic about the chances for the normalization of relations. He told RFE/RL that, "I do have some hope that that will happen, but I can't predict how quickly or what can be agreed." Sarkisian has been invited by Turkish President Abdullah Gul to watch the October 14 World Cup qualifying match between the two countries' national soccer teams. But Sarkisian has made it clear that he has no intention of attending unless Turkey takes steps to reopen the border with Armenia. Sarkisian has expressed frustration with Ankara in recent months, implicitly accusing the Turks of renegeing on agreements reached during yearlong negotiations with his government. (RFE/RL)

RUSSIA'S PUTIN VISITS REBEL ABKHAZIA

12 August

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin went to Abkhazia on Wednesday on his first visit to the breakaway Georgian region since Moscow recognised it as an independent state last year. Putin had announced earlier that Moscow would spend almost half a million dollars in boosting its security presence in Abkhazia, in a sign of Russia's commitment to the lush mountainous region on the Black Sea coast. He started his visit by laying a wreath at a memorial to the victims of the 1992-1993 war between Abkhaz separatists and the Georgian government after the break-up of the Soviet Union, an AFP reporter said. "Thank you for your bravery and steadfastness," Putin told the local onlookers, who in turn thanked him for Russia's support. Donning a white coat, he was then shown round a maternity ward alongside Abkhazia's rebel leader Sergei Bagapsh, where two male twins had been

born minutes before his arrival. In honour of Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev, the pair were named Vladimir and Dmitry. "This is his first visit" to the region of 250,000 since Russia recognised Abkhazia and fellow breakaway Georgian region South Ossetia as independent following the five-day war with Georgia last August, a spokesman for Putin said. Sukhumi lies just south of the Russian city of Sochi which is to host the 2014 Winter Olympics in a major event for Russia's prestige. Moscow is keen to prove the region's stability to the world ahead of the Games. Russia caused an outcry from the West when it recognised pro-Moscow Abkhazia as independent after the August war with Georgia. Only distant Nicaragua has so far followed the Kremlin's move in recognising South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Putin's visit came just days after Russia marked the first anniversary of the Georgia war amid rising tensions between the two countries along the de-facto Georgian border. Medvedev had for his part made a high-profile visit to South Ossetia at the weekend. In an interview with Abkhaz media before his visit, Putin announced that Russia intended to boost its security presence in the region amid continued tensions. "Russia will deploy forces in Abkhazia. We will build a modern border-guard system.... All these measures are additional serious security guarantees for Abkhazia and South Ossetia," Putin said. "All this will cost about 15-16 billion rubles" (463 million dollars/328 million euros, he added. Putin said he could not rule out another conflict in the tense Caucasus region as long as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, Moscow's arch foe, remained in power. "Given today's Georgian leadership it is impossible to exclude anything," he said. (AFP)

EU STATEMENT ON PUTIN'S ABKHAZ VISIT

13 August

EU's Swedish presidency said in a statement on behalf of the bloc's member states on August 13, that it did not consider Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's visit to breakaway Abkhazia "helpful for the international efforts to stabilise the region." "The European Union notes with concern that the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, has paid a visit to the Georgian region of Abkhazia, without prior consent of the Georgian authorities," the statement reads. "The

EU does not consider this visit compatible with the principle of territorial integrity nor helpful for the international efforts to stabilise the region. The EU reiterates its support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Putin visited the breakaway region on August 12, month after President Medvedev paid a visit to Georgia's another breakaway region of South Ossetia. A statement, similar to this recent one, was made by the EU's Swedish president month ago in connection with Medvedev's visit to breakaway South Ossetia. (Civil Georgia)

BY QUITTING CIS, GEORGIA DOES NOT LOSE ANYTHING ECONOMICALLY, BUT GAINS POLITICALLY: STATE MINISTER **17 August**

Georgia will not have an economic damage as a result of quitting the CIS, Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili told Trend News. "Leaving multilateral agreements under the CIS, we could conclude bilateral agreements with the CIS member countries in 2008, so the losses will be minimal," he said. The State minister emphasized that in political terms, "Georgia could get out of a fictitious post-Soviet space, which is dominated by Russia." "For us, this is a chance to develop towards democracy and integration with NATO and the EU which is our country's geo-strategic choice," emphasized Yakobashvili. The state minister stressed that strive in these organizations and membership in the CIS does not meet priorities of the Georgian foreign policy. On Aug. 18, Georgia officially leaves the Commonwealth of Independent States, when one-year term of the application for withdrawal expires. Georgia decided to quit the CIS last year after the occupation of its territories. (Trend News)

GEORGIA DETAINS CARGO VESSEL EN ROUTE TO SOKHUMI

17 August

Georgian coast guard detained a Turkish cargo vessel en route to breakaway Abkhaz capital Sokhumi on August 17, the Georgian and Abkhaz sides reported. The vessel was carrying 3,000 tones of petrol and 775 tones of diesel fuel, according to the Abkhaz Shipping Company, Apsnipress reported. According to the Georgian Border Police, crew members include 13 Turkish and four

Azerbaijani citizens. According to the Abkhaz side it was the third case this year when the Georgian coast guard seizes Turkish vessels carrying cargo en route to Abkhazia. (Civil Georgia)

SUICIDE BOMB KILLS 20 AT INGUSHETIAN POLICE STATION

17 August

A suicide bomber in a truck packed with explosives has left at least 20 people dead and 80 wounded in Russia's volatile republic of Ingushetia, RFE/RL's Russian Service reports. Ingushetian presidential spokesman Kaloy Akhilgov told RFE/RL that the suicide bomber drove a Gazel mini-truck through a gate and into the courtyard of the city's police headquarters, where police officers were gathering for their morning assignments. Akhilgov said the vehicle had been reported stolen. The police station was severely damaged and 20 police cars were destroyed by the explosion of the equivalent of 50 kilograms of TNT, Interfax reported, citing a law enforcement source. Several nearby apartment buildings also sustained heavy damage, and 11 children are reported to be among those wounded. Ingushetian officials announced three days of mourning in the republic. No one has claimed responsibility for the rare suicide-bomb attack, but the terrorist group Riyad-us Salihin (Gardens of the Righteous) Martyrs Brigade -- which was led by Chechen rebel commander Shamil Basayev until his death in 2006 -- is suspected of involvement. Before this latest attack, 25 police officers had been killed in Ingushetia during the first six months of the year. Prime Minister Rashid Gaysanov noted last week that there had not been a single attack on police in Ingushetia during the first 10 days of August, however. Ingushetian President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov was badly injured in June when a suicide bomber attacked his car. He left a Moscow hospital last week and is expected to return to his post in the coming weeks. (RFE/RL)

TOP US GENERAL VISITS UZBEKISTAN FOR SECURITY TALKS

18 August

Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov met Tuesday with US General David Petraeus, the US embassy said, underlining that the strategic Central Asian state seeks closer ties with Washington. In a statement, the US embassy said Petraeus discussed

with Karimov "key regional security issues" focusing on the situation in nearby Afghanistan, but did not provide details. Petraeus also met senior officials from Uzbekistan's national security council and the ministries of defence and foreign affairs here, the statement said. Karimov said afterwards that Uzbek-US ties were improving. "Uzbekistan attaches great importance to further development of relations with the United States and is ready to expand constructive bilateral and multilateral cooperation based on mutual respect and equal partnership," he was quoted by the state news agency UZA as saying. Speaking on state television later, he added: "Relations between our countries are developing in an upwards direction. The fact we are meeting again shows that the both sides are interested in strengthening the ties." Uzbekistan possesses extensive railway links to Afghanistan and earlier this year permitted the United States to use its territory for delivery of non-military and humanitarian cargo to US forces in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan allowed the United States to open an airbase near the Afghan border to support action against the Taliban following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States. The Uzbek leadership however subsequently evicted the United States from the base when relations with Washington became strained over criticism of the Uzbek government's handling of an armed uprising in the eastern city of Andijan. The United States and Russia have in recent years vied for influence in Uzbekistan and Tashkent's relationship with Washington has recently begun to warm again while ties with Moscow have waned. Uzbekistan recently blasted a proposal from Russia to set up a second military base in neighboring Kyrgyzstan near the Uzbek border, saying such a move would upset the balance of power in the vital region. It was a stinging rebuff for the Kremlin from a one-time close ally and former Soviet republic, and experts say diplomatic tension between Uzbekistan and Russia is presently at levels not seen in years. (AFP)

EXPERTS NOT BELIEVE IN QUICK SOLUTION OF CASPIAN STATUS

19 August

The issue of defining a legal status of the Caspian Sea will not be solved in the near future, experts believe. "One can expect intensification of the talks on this issue in the near future, but it is too early to

wait for a final decision and adoption of a convention on this matter," Chief Editor of the Kommersant newspaper Azar Mursalov told Trend Capital in a telephone conversation from Moscow. This week the Russian president at a meeting on the Caspian cooperation has urged to intensify negotiations on the status of the Caspian Sea. He said "Russia is vitally interested in the fact that the Caspian Sea will continue to be a zone of good-neighborliness, stability and mutually beneficial cooperation, and in this regard, it is necessary to intensify the negotiating process to define the legal status of the Caspian Sea." Mursalov said this statement is not the first by the Russian President. It is possible to adopt this kind of an agreement only with agreement of all parties, he said. "But as practice shows, it is too difficult for the five countries to agree on this issue," said Mursalov. The coastal countries do not need to resolve the status of the Caspian Sea, Russian experts said. An interim solution to this issue has already been found - that the bilateral agreement between Russia and Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, said Mursalov. That is, a "working model" exists. But the issue of adopting the improved and profitable models can be discussed for years. The countries' positions on the Caspian Sea are not only far, but also fundamentally contradict one another. It is too difficult to convince Iran, and the country will not concede its position, Mursalov believes. (Trend Capital)

ARMENIAN OPPOSITION CALLS PRESIDENT'S PLANNED TURKEY VISIT 'IRRELEVANT'

19 August

he main Armenian opposition group says a possible visit by President Serzh Sarkisian to Turkey in October would be "irrelevant" to the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations, RFE/RL's Armenian Service reports. Levon Zurabian, the central office coordinator for the Armenian National Congress (HAK), told RFE/RL that Sarkisian has committed "irreversible mistakes" in his policy of rapprochement with Turkey. "Those mistakes cannot be rectified by his going or not going to Turkey," Zurabian said. Sarkisian has been invited by his Turkish counterpart Abdullah Gul to the Turkish city of Bursa on October 14 to watch the return match of the two countries' national soccer teams. Gul made a historic trip to Yerevan to watch the first match last September. Sarkisian made it clear in July that he will continue this "football diplomacy" only if Ankara takes "real steps" to reopen the Turkish-Armenian border. The HAK's top leader, former President Levon Ter-Petrosian, and other opposition members have repeatedly denounced Sarkisian's Turkey policy as a failure, even though many in the West have welcomed it. (RFE/RL)