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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASS 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.

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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.

Svante E. Cornell

Research Director; Editor, Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst
Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University
1619 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, USA.
Tel. +1-202-663-5922; 1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785

RESURGENCE OF THE NAGORNO-KARABAKH CONFLICT – A RUSSIAN MOVE ON THE UKRAINE CHESSBOARD

Avinoam Idan

The return of open fire in the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict recently brought about a meeting between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia in Sochi, under the auspices of President Putin, on August 10, 2014. The growing tension in the conflict and the Sochi meeting take place against the background of the crisis in Ukraine. The Karabakh conflict serves as Russian leverage in influencing and promoting Russia's geostrategic aims in the Caucasus and beyond, and Russia's new initiative in the conflict meant to improve Russia's stance in its confrontation with the U.S. and EU and its hegemony over the gateway to Eurasia.

BACKGROUND: The NK conflict developed from an internal conflict to a war between two independent states in 1991, with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the establishment of Azerbaijan and Armenia as independent states. The cease-fire achieved in 1994 with Russia as mediator froze this conflict. Armenia, supported in the war by Russia, took control of the disputed territory as well as additional neighboring areas, in total about 17 percent of Azerbaijan's territory. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has been at the helm of international mediation efforts for years, in the framework of the Minsk Group, whose co-chairs are France, the U.S. and Russia, to no avail.

Armenia, landlocked and suffering from a weak economy and a precarious security situation, is entirely dependent on Russia, which has military bases deployed on Armenian soil. Azerbaijan, a country rich in oil and gas, is endeavoring to establish its own

military option in order to regain control of areas lost during the war. The rise in energy revenues, especially since the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in 2005, had allowed Azerbaijan to institute a defense budget greater than Armenia's entire annual budget.



(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

However, Azerbaijan is also landlocked, borders Russia and is in need of Russian good-will in order to sustain the regional stability needed for its energy export infrastructure. Both Armenia, dependent upon Russian support in the conflict, and Azerbaijan, whose military and policy options in the conflict are not obtainable as long as

Armenia enjoys Russian support, consider Russia a key state in any future settlement.

Both states are aware that U.S. and EU efforts to broker this conflict will come to nothing unless Moscow agrees. Under these circumstances, the conflict serves as effective Russian leverage in order to further its geostrategic objectives. The location of the Nagorno-Karabakh region in the Caucasus, and the location of the Caucasus as a vital bottleneck, underlines the conflict's geopolitical significance in Eurasia. As a result, the latest development in the conflict cannot be separated from the present crisis in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian crisis exceeds its local context and is an expression of the struggle between the West and Russia over hegemony in the Eurasian sub-continent. Therefore, one should consider the renewal of hostilities in Karabakh and the meeting between the heads of states of Azerbaijan and Armenia and the Russian president as a development connected to the intensification of the conflict in Ukraine.

IMPLICATIONS: Ukraine and Azerbaijan are two pivotal states in the Black Sea-Caspian region, strategically located at the gateway to Eurasia. U.S. geostrategic thinking defined them as geopolitical states of critical importance at the end of the 1990s. Moreover, Russia sees Azerbaijan as a target of high priority, whose subordination to Russia would help seal Central Asia off from the West. This attitude has been further validated since the Russian-

Georgian War in 2008, given that Russia established its position vis-à-vis Georgia, Azerbaijan's neighbor in the Caucasus.

The future of the conflict and the possible return of territory Azerbaijan lost during the war is of particular importance to Baku. Russia, which Armenia is entirely dependent upon, has decisive influence over these territories. In light of Russia's desire to improve its position in the current Ukrainian crisis, it now perceives the time to be right to use the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as leverage for influence over Azerbaijan. In parallel with Russia's actions in Ukraine, its latest complementary activities aim to tighten control over Azerbaijan. The renewal of tension in the conflict hence does not stem only from the bilateral relations between the two countries directly involved in the conflict, but should be seen as a combined Russian move, as part of the Ukrainian crisis.

The Ukrainian crisis erupted following the EU's initiative to promote the Eastern Partnership, intended to include Ukraine in the EU's framework. The source of Russia's reaction, therefore, is the perception of its most vital geostrategic interests coming under threat. In due course, Russia devised countermeasures by accelerating the establishment of the Eurasian Union. The inclusion of additional countries in the Eurasian Union from among the CIS countries is intended to consolidate the CIS members in a political and economic framework that would block EU and NATO expansion eastward.

The more entangled the Ukrainian crisis becomes, the more likely it is that Russia will make use of its options to exert leverage over countries in the region in order to block what Russia sees as a U.S. geopolitical threat in a region that it considers its own backyard. The current flare-up in Karabakh can be understood in this light. Using the conflict as leverage against Azerbaijan is a preventive measure on Russia's part to prevent a similar development of U.S. and EU tactics in the Ukraine.

Russia chose to take extreme steps in order to block, as it saw it, the West from taking control over one of the most vital pivotal states in the Russian sphere. Using Karabakh as leverage is meant to ensure that Azerbaijan will not join the EU framework, but also to convince it in the long term to consider joining the Eurasian Union. As long as the confrontation between the U.S. and Russia in Ukraine continues, we can expect the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict to intensify.

CONCLUSIONS: The future of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is not only in the hands of the two sides directly involved. From the very beginning, the outcome of the conflict has largely been dependent on outside players, predominantly on Russia and the U.S. The interests of these two powers are influenced by the competition between them, which transcends regional dimensions. The crisis in Ukraine is defined by competition between Russia and the West over preserving or changing the geostrategic balance of power in a

region of geopolitical importance. The reappearance of tensions in Karabakh at this time is closely connected to the crisis in the Ukraine. Russia is taking advantage of the conflict in order to solidify its hold on Azerbaijan and to improve its stance in the confrontation with primarily the U.S. over Ukraine. This confrontation, in effect, is over geopolitical superiority in the Black Sea-Caspian region, which is the key to the gates of Eurasia.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Avinoam Idan is a political geographer and a Senior Fellow with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, based in Washington DC. Prior to his academic career, he served in the Israeli Embassy in Moscow during the break-up of the Soviet Union.

CENTRAL ASIAN MILITANTS TARGET XINJIANG, SOUTH ASIA AND SYRIA BEFORE THE HOMEFRONT

Jacob Zenn

Despite concerns about the threat of Central Asian militant groups to their home countries after the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, these militant groups are currently focused on “winning” primarily in Afghanistan, secondarily on China’s Xinjiang Province and South Asia, and only then on their home fronts. Central Asians in Syria and Iraq, however, are receiving inspiration from the Islamic State’s self-declared Caliphate and military successes and are vowing that they will create a similar Caliphate in Central Asia. In the near-term, China, Pakistan and possibly India are within range of Central Asian militant groups, but the security crises in Central Asia that are most likely to emerge come from the region’s own internal weaknesses and vulnerabilities.

BACKGROUND: The largest Central Asian militant group operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). According to a Pakistani Taliban statement, the IMU played a key role in the attack on the Karachi airport in Pakistan that killed 36 people in June 2014. The IMU and Pakistani Taliban also coordinated the December 2012 attack at Peshawar airport and the Bannu Prison Break in April 2012.

The IMU is active in northern Afghanistan, especially in assassinations, but the IMU only occasionally expresses its plans to attack Central Asia from those northern Afghan provinces. For example, in one instance, after six IMU members, including two from Uzbekistan and one from Kyrgyzstan,

carried out a suicide operation on the governor’s office in Panjshir, Afghanistan in May 2013, the IMU said, “we hope from Allah that future conquests are very near in Mawarounnahr [the ancient name for modern-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan].” In contrast to this statement, however, the rhetoric from the IMU’s spiritual leader, Abu Zar al-Burmi, gives no hint that these “conquests” in Central Asia are the priority for the IMU.

In most of his video-taped sermons since 2013, al-Burmi avoided discussing Central Asia and instead threatened that China is the “next number one enemy” after the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan. He also promises revenge on his native Burma for its treatment of the country’s Muslim Rohingya people,

which al-Burmi says is part of a Chinese plot to evict the Rohingya from lucrative oil-producing regions. Al-Burmi also often appears in videos of al-Qaeda's as-Sahab media and with Uighur militants in videos of the Turkistan Islamic Party. In one video, al-Burmi said that the IMU plans to conquer lands in an operation called "Ghazwat-ul-Hind," which translates to the "military expedition of the Indian subcontinent."



(Source: Flickr)

Like al-Burmi, al-Qaeda is showing interest in South Asia. As-Sahab has in 2014 posted Urdu-language messages that are tailored to South Asian audiences under the brand of "As-Sahab Organization, Subcontinent." In January 2014, al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri also highlighted the victimization and "weakening of the Muslim *ummah* in the subcontinent" and called on South Asian Muslims to "confront the alliance" of India and the West.

The only Central Asians who appear to be focused on overthrowing Central Asian governments are those currently in Syria and Iraq. In 2013, for example, the Kazakh Abu-Mu'adh al-Muhajir issued a video to "Muslims everywhere, not only in Kazakhstan, who are living under tyranny, to emigrate from

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or any other country" and come to Syria. In later videos, they declared an intention to "restore the Caliphate" system in Central Asia. Some Central Asians who were in Syria have also returned home to Kyrgyzstan and Xinjiang, but according to government sources they were arrested before they could carry out attacks, including one intended for the Shanghai Cooperation Summit in Bishkek in 2014.

IMPLICATIONS: The messaging and trajectory of Central Asian militant groups is confused, with the majority of militants not focused on their home region. One of the major reasons for this is that Central Asia remains impervious to militancy, with the region's governments preserving political stability and cracking down on Salafist groups that are sympathetic to the militants, such as Tablighi Jamaat and Hizb al-Tahrir. Moreover, other regions of the world are more favorable environments for the militants to spread their propaganda and operations for the time being, especially Xinjiang and India, while Syria and Iraq continue to attract Central Asian recruits because of the Islamic State's military successes and influential propaganda campaign online.

If the Taliban comes to power in parts of Afghanistan, it will also need some modicum of legitimacy and economic cooperation from neighboring Central Asian countries, which makes it likely that the Taliban will encourage the IMU and Central Asian militants to void operations that would disrupt potential relationships with Central

Asian governments. In addition, attacking Central Asia involves difficulties for militants because the security forces in those countries speak the local languages, whereas in Xinjiang the majority Han Chinese security forces do not speak Uighur, and in both India and Xinjiang it is easier for Muslim militants to operate among their Muslims brethren.

Another reason why China and India face greater threats than Central Asian countries is that militant propaganda resonates more with Muslims when targeting Xinjiang and India. Although Central Asian governments are secular, they are still Muslim, while in China and India the militants call for the overthrow of the “Buddhist” or “Hindu” rulers, in addition to the fact that both countries are secular. Before 2001, China also had leverage over most Taliban factions through its “all-weather friendship” with Pakistan, but now that the Pakistani Taliban is a sworn enemy of the Pakistani government, it is unclear whether China can exercise leverage via Pakistan to contain them.

As a result, in it is unlikely in the short-term that Central Asian militants will pose a direct threat to their homelands while China and India may face more pressure from attacks. However, the pre-existing problems in Central Asia, including resource, ethnic and border conflicts, the lack of clear leadership succession plans, and the growing drugs and arms trafficking networks between Afghanistan and Central Asia are a vulnerability. If any crises emerge internally within Central

Asia, it could allow for militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan to exploit the unrest and enter Central Asia and connect with violent extremists active in the region. In the absence of any sudden change in the situation in Central Asia, however, the militants will likely continue to issue propaganda about Xinjiang and India as well as Syria and Iraq and carry out operations outside of their Central Asian homelands until the situation in the region becomes more favorable.

CONCLUSIONS: Central Asian militants, particularly in the IMU, continue to carry out major attacks with the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan – not in Central Asia. The rhetoric of Central Asian militants suggests they will focus on Xinjiang, China and South Asia in the years immediately following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Central Asian militants in Syria and Iraq, who focus on their homelands in their statements, may present a long-term threat to Central Asia if they return home. However, for the next several years they will mostly be occupied with the war in Syria and Iraq as part of the newly announced Islamic State and other factions. The key threat that Central Asian militants in Syria and Iraq pose to stability in Central Asia is therefore the ideology of “creating the Caliphate” that they are attempting to export and promote back home.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Jacob Zenn is an analyst of Eurasian and African Affairs for the Jamestown Foundation and non-resident research fellow of the

Center of Shanghai Cooperation Studies (COSCOS) in Shanghai. He testified before the U.S. Congress on Islamist Militant Threats to Central Asia in February 2013.

CHINA AND AFGHANISTAN – TIME OF DECISION

Richard Weitz

President Barack Obama's recent characterization of China as a global free rider certainly applies in Afghanistan. Although China has declined to join the NATO-led International Security Force in Afghanistan or even allow its members to use Chinese territory to supply their forces in Afghanistan, Chinese firms have been benefiting from the massive economic and security contributions of other countries to Afghanistan. But that time is ending and China and the West need to strike a new and more balanced bargain there. Chinese alarm about Afghanistan is rising as U.S. concerns and commitments are declining.

BACKGROUND: China has important though not critical economic and security interests related to Afghanistan. China's current interests in Afghanistan focus on security issues, particularly how developments in Afghanistan could promote instability in the neighboring countries of Central Asia, Pakistan, and China itself, especially its western province of Xinjiang. There are also lingering concerns regarding what the U.S. might do in the region. Although the Western military presence in Eurasia is declining, Sino-American security ties are worsening, leaving some Chinese analysts concerned about whether the Pentagon might try to keep some enduring U.S. military presence in China's strategic rear.

In the longer-term, China's economic interests in Afghanistan could grow more important than its security concerns. Through several major deals, Chinese companies have rapidly become the leading foreign investors in Afghanistan's natural resource

industry. The country is thought to have unexplored or underdeveloped reserves of oil, natural gas, iron, gold, copper, and other raw materials that China imports in abundance. Although Chinese firms have yet to develop many of these projects due to security, logistical, legal, and other challenges, as well as the availability of cheaper and more reliable alternative sources for these goods, an improved security environment in Afghanistan or a decrease in the reliability of alternative supplies could induce China to build on its strong position.



(Source: Office of the President, Afghanistan)

By acquiring these goods from Afghanistan and other western countries along the proposed new Economic Silk Road Belt, China could

further diversify its source of imports away from more distant world regions, whose products are transported to China along lengthy ocean shipping routes vulnerable to pirates, foreign navies, and other interruptions. Chinese policy makers consider these land-based import routes especially valuable since they do not come from the volatile Middle East or arrive via vulnerable maritime routes. Importing materials from Afghanistan and neighboring regions further permits Beijing to pursue a more geographically balanced process of internal economic development since it facilitates commercial activities in China's western provinces. Trade with Afghanistan also promotes the economic growth of Pakistan and the Central Asian republics, two other regions that have received considerable Chinese direct investment in recent years, and which Chinese strategists arguably see as more important than Afghanistan.

The continued growth in regional terrorism and instability emanating from Afghanistan threaten China's regional security and economic interests. The reestablishment of terrorist safe havens in Afghanistan could make it easier for foreign terrorists to operate in Xinjiang or elsewhere on Chinese territory. Since the advent of the Arab Spring, PRC officials and academics have worried that the political disorders in the Muslim Middle East could spread to Central Asia and Afghanistan since the regimes in these regions share important similarities in terms of political systems, religious affiliation,

and natural-resourced dependent economies.

IMPLICATIONS: The growth of the Islamic State and its direct threats to China's economic presence in the Middle East and the loyalty of China's Muslim minority have reinforced Beijing's fears. Furthermore, Afghan-related insecurity would discourage the economic investment needed to develop and disrupt oil and natural gas flows from and through Central Asian countries into China. PRC analysts can hope that building their new Silk Road belt through two routes that circumvent Afghanistan, proceeding from Xinjiang northwestward through Central Asia and southwestward from Xinjiang through Pakistan to Iran and the Persian Gulf will solve the problem. But they recognize that, if uncontained, severe instability in Afghanistan could impede progress along both routes.

PRC policy makers naturally wish to maintain their low profile in Afghanistan and limit their economic and security assistance to the Afghan and Pakistani governments, encouraging them to rely on Western aid instead, but such an option will probably not be available given the declining Western role in this region. They are now considering various options for promoting a favorable economic and security environment in Afghanistan even with reduced Western economic and military assistance.

China's preferred solution is that the international community would collectively support Afghanistan's security and economic reconstruction.

This scenario would establish a more favorable environment for PRC investment in Afghanistan (an option Beijing is eager to exploit), reduce some sources of regional terrorism and narcotics trafficking, and facilitate use of Afghanistan's territory as part of the Afghan-Pakistan-Central Asian "Silk Road" connecting China's trade and investment with the rest of Eurasia and Europe beyond. Chinese policy makers would prefer that the Taliban have as little influence as possible in Afghanistan, but if the Taliban again becomes an influential actor in that country, then Beijing will likely rely on their Pakistani contacts to influence the Taliban to respect PRC investment in Afghanistan and not support Uighur or other anti-Beijing terrorism. The PRC might rely on the SCO to bolster regional security and containment against the further spread of militant Islam in Central Asia, but would prefer to share that burden with NATO as well as Russia.

The opportunities for cooperation between China and the U.S. are limited. China will not substitute for the decreasing Western economic and military support for Afghanistan in any comprehensive way. Thus far, Chinese policy makers consider their stakes in Afghanistan modest and perceive the dangers of adopting a much higher profile in that country as exceeding the possible benefits.

Given China's limited stakes in Afghanistan and the many obstacles to Sino-American and China-NATO security cooperation, opportunities for

much improved cooperation regarding Afghanistan are small.

At best, Western governments might be able to induce Chinese agencies to provide more training of Afghans in various technical skills helpful for the country's economic recovery. The PRC also has the capability, even if it does not want to send its own military policy to Afghanistan, to train more Afghan police forces, an area where the EU has encountered difficulty. China might also want to join Russia and other countries in helping train and equip Afghan counter-narcotics personnel given the PRC concern about Afghan-origin narcotics entering their country.

China's policy toward Afghanistan cannot be considered in isolation. It must be placed in context by looking at the domestic, regional, and global context. For example, the two countries might cooperate better in multilateral institutions, especially on economic issues, rather than bilaterally on security issues. In addition, China and the U.S. could find it easier to collaborate on Pakistan or overlapping Afghan-Pak issues rather than on Afghanistan alone. Their security stakes are potentially higher in Pakistan, better aligned, and both countries share the frustration of lacking success in influencing Pakistan's broad policies.

CONCLUSIONS: It is imperative to avoid mirror imaging. Chinese and U.S. views and interests regarding Afghanistan differ in important respects, even though threat assessments are aligning more closely.

Chinese analysts have traditionally held less alarmist threat assessments than the U.S. and other countries that have sent their combat forces to the country and considered Afghanistan the main battlefield for the war on terror or the future of NATO. But Chinese alarm about Afghanistan is rising, due to the growth of terrorism in and near China and the NATO military drawdown, as U.S. concerns and commitments are declining. Nonetheless, several factors will make Sino-American cooperation especially difficult in the next few years. In particular, Chinese policy makers see the U.S. as weak and withdrawing from Afghanistan. This makes them think that Washington is trying to trap them into pulling U.S. chestnuts out of the fire and, conversely, that they do not need to pay much heed to U.S. views due to its declining capacity and interest in the region.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dr. Richard Weitz is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at the Hudson Institute.

CAUCASUS EMIRATE SUFFERS HIGHER CASUALTIES UNDER NEW LEADERSHIP

Huseyn Aliyev

The recent change of leadership in the North Caucasus' Islamist insurgency – the Caucasus Emirate – after Doku Umarov's death appears to have weakened the insurgents' ability to launch an effective spring/summer offensive on the ground. Recent reports on the number of conflict-related deaths in the region suggest that since the end of Umarov's leadership, the Caucasus Emirate is more fragmented and militarily weaker than ever. Amidst the failures of the insurgents to successfully target government forces and the controversial claims by the new leader of the Caucasus Emirate to refrain from suicide bombings and attacks on civilians, local jama'ats (insurgent groups) began re-grouping and posing a challenge to the Emirate's central leadership.

BACKGROUND: The end of the harsh winter months across the North Caucasus traditionally signals the start of a spring/summer offensive, marked by an increase in the number of insurgent attacks on government installations and personnel across the region.



(Source: YouTube)

Peaks in the number of incidents and casualties as a result of the armed insurgency usually occur from the beginning of spring and continue until late summer. Ever since the end of large-scale military operations in the

Second Chechen War and the spread of a low-level Islamist insurgency – under the command of the Caucasus Emirate from 2007 – across the North Caucasus, the region saw the highest levels of recorded insurgency-related violence in the late spring and summer months (from May to September).

The melting of snow in the mountain passes and the appearance of foliage provide cover for insurgents in the mountains. But warmer weather also produce other advantages of, such as better logistics. For years, these conditions have allowed for a doubling of insurgent attacks across Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya and the rest of the region, as well as occasionally in other parts of the Russian Federation. However, the spring and summer of 2014 show a complete reversal of this trend.

The death of the Caucasus Emirate's founder and a self-proclaimed leader Umarov in late 2013 resulted in the selection on March 18 of the Emirate's new *amir* (head): the Dagestani militant leader Ali-Askhab Kebekov (aka Abu Muhammad).

In a bid to legitimize his authority among the militants and to improve the image of the organization among the local population, Kebekov denounced violence against civilians and recommended militants to focus their efforts entirely on targeting government and federal law enforcement and military personnel. The video message was circulated on Jihadist websites and posted on YouTube in June. He also officially forbade the use of female suicide bombers and the employment of females in military operations. This was Kebekov's only public appearance since he assumed leadership of the Emirate.

IMPLICATIONS: The beginning of spring season in the North Caucasus, which roughly coincided with the announcement of Kebekov as the new leader of the Caucasus Emirate, however, did not result in the traditional spring/summer offensive. According to the reports compiled by the independent news agency *Caucasus Knot*, 146 (96 dead and 50 injured) people became victims to the armed conflict in the North Caucasus from April 1 to the end of July 2014, compared to 296 (118 dead and 178 injured) casualties in 2013. Among 96 deaths, 71 (59 in 2013) were members of militant groups, 13 (34 in 2013) members

of law enforcement agencies and 12 (25 in 2013) civilians. This data shows that not only has the Caucasus Emirate suffered significantly higher losses these spring-summer months than during the same period last year, but the militants were also able to cause fairly limited casualties to the counterinsurgent forces.

The increase in numbers of militant casualties follows a reduction in civilian casualties – promised by the leader of the Caucasus Emirate – as compared to previous periods. However, the record-low numbers of conflict-related casualties in the North Caucasus region demonstrate the militants' failure to launch the traditional spring/summer offensive against their favorite targets – members of local law enforcement agencies, local police and federal troops. In fact, this data on conflict-related casualties during the spring-summer of 2014 is not significantly different from the data on conflict-related victims during the winter months (February to March), when the level of fighting is usually low. In 2014, only 84 people were killed and 49 sustained injuries.

It is noteworthy that the highest number of deaths among the militants (39 people) and civilians (11 people) occurred in Dagestan – Kebekov's native republic – where only five law enforcement personnel were killed during the spring and summer months of 2014. In that republic, despite the militants' desperate attempts, the majority of insurgent attacks on government personnel and facilities resulted in fiasco. For instance, a bold

militant attack on the Center for Combating Extremism on August 1, involving militants firing rocket-propelled grenades at the building, resulted in no casualties among the Center's employees.

While the militant activities remained fairly low in Ingushetia, causing few casualties among both militants and counterinsurgents, Kabardino-Balkaria's militants lost 18 of their members this spring and summer while managing to kill only one member of the security forces. The activity of Chechen militants was similarly low, causing only 14 casualties to law enforcement agencies as compared to the spring/summer of 2013, when 27 members of the security forces were killed or injured.

The failure of the spring/summer offensive coincided with a meeting of the Chechen militant commanders in July, which was the first of its kind since 2011. The formal pretext for the meeting was to pledge their allegiance to the Caucasus Emirate's new leader, which many of those present at the meeting had already done. Nevertheless, it appears that Amir Tarkhan, one of the most influential of the few high-ranking Chechen militant commanders still alive, used the meeting to strengthen his position within the Chechen militant ranks.

The very occurrence of the meeting, attended by the majority of existing Chechen commanders on Chechen territory, is unique owing to the high level of counterinsurgency activity in that republic, posing extreme security risks to the participants. While the

support granted by Chechen *jama'ats* to the Caucasus Emirate's central command under the Dagestani native Kebekov appears to be unshaken, the meeting demonstrates the tendency among Chechen commanders to seek stronger leadership among ethnic Chechens, as provided by Amir Tarkhan.

CONCLUSIONS: For the first time since its creation, the Caucasus Emirate appears to be in decline militarily. The militants' failure to launch a spring/summer offensive as in previous years reflects not only the weakening of the organization's central command but also signals the decline of local militant *jama'ats*. Moreover, the local level networking and regrouping, as seen during the meeting of Chechen militant commanders this July, are the first signs of de-centralization of the Emirate's leadership. The appearance of local centers of power, which may pose a challenge to the integrity of the Emirate. The data on conflict-related casualties presented in this article suggests that even in Dagestan, the long-time hotbed of the North Caucasus insurgency and the power base of its current leader, militants have for the first time in many years begun to lose ground. Provided that the militants, particularly in Dagestan, fail to reverse the tide before the start of winter season (early October), a further weakening and ensuing de-centralization of the Caucasus Emirate are likely to follow.

AUTHORS' BIO: Huseyn Aliyev has recently completed his Ph.D. in Politics at the University of Otago,

New Zealand. His recent articles appeared in the *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Demokratizatsiya* and *Ethnopolitics Papers*.

MIXED RECEPTION OF SOCHI TALKS IN AZERBAIJAN

Mina Muradova

The Sochi talks on settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict initiated by President Vladimir Putin has not met the hopes of many Azerbaijanis for a [break](#)through in peace negotiations. The meeting reached only its immediate aim – a decrease in deadly skirmishes on the line of contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops, which resulted in the deaths of at least 20 soldiers in early August. Many in Baku believe that the clashes were provoked by Moscow to justify its influential position in the region.

According to Yerevan, the fighting was a result of repeated small-scale Azerbaijani attacks to which Armenia responded. Baku for its part said that Azerbaijani troops forcibly prevented provocations by “Armenian sabotage groups.”

The recent clashes were the gravest since the 1994 ceasefire agreement was signed between the two sides with mediation of the Kremlin.

“The nature of the clashes is totally unprecedented,” said [Lawrence Sheets](#), a Caucasus analyst told Bloomberg. “What has changed is that over the past weeks, we have seen the first instances of the use of high-caliber weapons, not just small arms as had previously often been the case. The verbal threats have also hit an unprecedented peak.”

Over past weeks, images of military vehicles and equipment most likely

headed toward the frontline have spread in social networks. Controversial information about serious and deadly clashes gave rise to aggressive rhetoric from both sides, even in the virtual world. On Facebook, a number of Azerbaijani users called on the authorities to show “all our military power to Armenian side.” One Baku resident posted: “Now it is time to demonstrate all our military power. Our military aircraft have to destroy all territories along the line of contact, where the ceasefire was constantly violated in order to demonstrate Armenians how serious we are....”

Before President Ilham Aliyev left for Sochi, around 60 tweets threatening Armenia were posted via his official account. “We will restore our sovereignty. The flag of Azerbaijan will fly in all the occupied territories, including Shusha and Khankandi [in Nagorno-Karabakh],” he wrote. “Just as we have beaten the Armenians on the political and economic fronts, we are able to defeat them on the battlefield”.

Although Azerbaijan seems to the side that is most interested in changing the status-quo in the conflict, many in Baku believe that Armenia, a strategic ally of Russia in the South Caucasus, provoked clashes at the behest of the Kremlin. The theory is that Moscow wanted to use the situation in order to change of Vladimir Putin’s image from

an [intriguer](#) and aggressor to a peacemaker in the region.

Vafa Guluzade, a former state advisor on foreign policy, said that Putin wanted to show that “Russia still plays a decisive role in the South Caucasus,” and therefore, Putin called for a summit on August 10 with his Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts in order to show the world his “peaceful, mediating face.”

Guluzade also noted in an interview to Interfax that the Kremlin tried to force Azerbaijan to join the Moscow-led Customs Union, an economic entity that Azerbaijani officials have declined to join. “The meeting with Putin’s mediation was organized just for show, demonstrating that Russia is a key actor in settling the Nagorno-Karabakh problem ... Russia tried to compel Azerbaijan, up to the last moment, to join the Customs Union. But Azerbaijan today is a confident and military strong country, so it gave no result,” Guluzade added.

While the presidents were watching a sambo tournament in Sochi following the trilateral meeting, Armenian and Azerbaijani troops continued breaching the ceasefire agreement and taking hostages.

After the summit, President Aliyev said “We discussed the settlement of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Karabakh which has been going on for too long and needs to be resolved.” The president stressed that the main mission of the international mediators was to settle the conflict, not to freeze it or strengthen the confidence-building process. “I believe that the latest events

will stir international mediators into action,” he said. “Azerbaijan wants peace, the neither war nor peace situation can’t last forever.”

Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told reporters that the talks with Aliyev and Sargsyan, were “useful,” with both presidents reaffirming their commitment to seeking a solution exclusively on the basis of a peaceful approach. “There are only few uncoordinated aspects of the conflict settlement, the overwhelming majority of agreements are already clear.” According to Lavrov, several specific points will be finalized: “As they say, the devil is in the details, and the most complex issues are not solved yet.”

After Sochi, the rhetoric coming from Baku and Yerevan became even louder. Sargsyan stated that his country had missiles with a 300-km-radius, which could turn Azerbaijani towns into “Aghdam” referring to the ruined Azerbaijani city under Armenian control. Aliyev stated on August 30 that “...The position of Azerbaijan in Sochi sounded even stronger, thanks to the courage of the heroic Azerbaijani soldiers and officers and the enemy was dealt a devastating blow that they still can’t get over ... Of course, Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani army is strong, and heroic Azerbaijani soldiers are a constant source of fear for them.”

According to Lawrence Sheets, “With all the current violent upheavals in the world, from Ukraine to Iraq and beyond, unfortunately some are not taking the current major escalation between Azerbaijan and Armenia

seriously enough ... This is a war, and we are now only a step away from any of the sides deciding to resort to the use of highly destructive and sophisticated missile systems they have acquired, capable of causing massive casualties and destruction.”

The U.S. called on Yerevan and Baku to take steps in order to reduce tensions and respect the ceasefire. U.S. Ambassador to Armenia John Heffern delivered a video message stressing that threats and militant rhetoric will not help resolve any conflict. Heffern repeated that there can be no military solution to the Karabakh conflict and called on the parties to start talks, since revenge and further escalation will make it difficult to achieve peace. “The best way to honor the memory of those killed is to stop clashes right now,” - he noted.

ABKHAZIA'S NEW LEADER INSISTS ON DEEPER TIES WITH MOSCOW

Eka Janashia

On August 27, Abkhazia's newly elected president Raul Khajimba met with Russian President Vladimir Putin to discuss the possibility of signing a comprehensive cooperation treaty between Moscow and Sokhumi.

The meeting took place three days after the snap presidential elections on August 24, when Khajimba eventually became Abkhazia's de facto leader after three failed attempts since 2004. His predecessor Alexander Ankvab stepped down on July 1 in response to street protests by Khajimba-led opposition groups in late May, 2014.

Khajimba was able to oust Ankvab and narrowly avoided a runoff by gaining 50.57 percent of the votes. The former head of the state security service Aslan Bzhania was second with 35.91 percent, followed by former defense minister Merab Kishmaria and former interior minister Leonid Dzapshba with 6.4 and 3.4 percent respectively.

Before the elections, Abkhazia's parliament declared the "Abkhaz passports" held by most ethnic Georgians residing in the region illegal, preventing 16,411 residents of Gali, 5,504 of Tkvarcheli and 872 of Ochamchire districts from participating in the elections (see the [06/18/2014 issue of the CACI Analyst](#)).

Reportedly, one of key reasons for Ankvab's departure was controversy over the "passportization" issue.

Khajimba-led ultra-nationalists blamed Ankvab for deliberately distributing "Abkhaz passports" to ethnic Georgians in efforts to secure their support. Khajimba insisted that districts predominantly populated by ethnic Georgians were a menace to "Abkhaz statehood." Such rhetoric proved effective both in ousting Ankvab and in preventing a sizeable part of the region's population from casting ballots.

Whereas the EU, NATO, and the U.S. Department of State condemned breakaway Abkhazia's presidential elections, Putin was quick to congratulate Khajimba on the election victory and restated his readiness to buttress "friendly" relations with Abkhazia.

Khajimba has been the Kremlin's favorite candidate for almost a decade. In the mid-1980s he graduated from Minsk's KGB academy and served at Tkvarcheli's KBG unit in Abkhazia until 1992. Moscow actively promoted Khajimba during the 2004 presidential elections, where he was nevertheless defeated by Sergey Bagapsh. To eschew an anticipated political crisis, Khajimba took the post of vice president with direct support from the Kremlin. In the 2009 elections, Bagapsh repeated his success while Khajimba scored only 15.4 percent of the votes. Finally, Ankvab gained a landslide victory over Khajimba in the 2011 polls.

Khajimba eventually became Abkhazia's new leader after the political standoff in May, and almost immediately declared the need for signing a comprehensive cooperation treaty between Moscow and Sokhumi in order to elevate bilateral cooperation to a substantially new level and ensure "clearer" security guarantees for "Abkhazia's independence."

According to Khajimba, one aspect of the treaty could be the establishment of joint command over Abkhaz forces and Russian military bases in Abkhazia. "The new document should take into consideration those difficulties which Abkhazia and Russia now face on the international arena, which exist in relationship with Georgia, Europe and the United States," he said.

This statement reflects several political shifts taking place locally as well as regionally. Locally in Abkhazia, the results of the recent elections should be perceived as a long-expected victory of a Kremlin favorite who, unlike previous leaders, will be more amenable to the Kremlin's interests. In early May 2014, the Ankvab-led government strongly condemned the proposition for a formal association with Russia aired by the head of the International Association of the Abkhaz-Abazin People, Professor Taras Shamba. Abkhazia's foreign ministry claimed that such a move would rid Abkhazia of the "signs of an independent state."

What happened next was the overthrow of Ankvab's government and the political deactivation of ethnic Georgians, which considerably limits

the number of voters who would oppose Abkhazia's accession to Russia.

These local changes mirror the regional convulsions triggered by Russia's annexation of Crimea and its military escalation in eastern Ukraine. In this broader spotlight, regime change in Abkhazia might imply a tactical move on Moscow's part to prepare the ground for a complete absorption of the region or at least to gain additional levers there. In Moscow's perspective, bringing Khajimba to power in Abkhazia will imply fewer risks of unexpected clashes and weaker objections to the region's direct integration with Russia. Unlike in South Ossetia, independence is a critical issue for large parts of the Abkhaz population, which pushes the Kremlin to proceed more cautiously. The Kremlin's success, however, hinges on its ability to maintain at least its status of a regional power in Eurasian geopolitics.

BORDER DISPUTE AT THE CENTER OF TAJIK-KYRGYZ MEETING

Oleg Salimov

The governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reported significant progress in consultations on border demarcation and delimitation during their recent meeting in Bishkek. They also announced that an agreement was reached on economic, social, and other forms of cooperation intended to stimulate neighborly and mutually beneficial relationships. At the same time, people living in the border regions of both countries continue to engage in violent clashes and shootouts. A peaceful resolution of the conflict over long-disputed territory will test the political maturity of these Central Asian republics. The outcome of this conflict can predetermine the future development and stability of the region.

The last week of August was marked by multiple meetings between various committees, delegations, and officials from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in Bishkek. The topics of discussion revolved around border issues, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural exchange and assistance. The border dispute delegations met on August 26, the Tajik - Kyrgyz intergovernmental committee had its session on August 27-28, and Kyrgyzstan's Prime Minister Joomart Otorbayev met Tajikistan's Deputy Prime Minister Azim Ibrohim on August 28.

The sides discussed the border problem and numerous proposals for increasing

bilateral cooperation. As reported by the Kyrgyz government, the border dispute delegations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reached an agreement on the simultaneous construction of a road and two bridges, which will connect the Tajik enclave Vorukh on Kyrgyz territory with Tajikistan. The agreement includes provisions on relocating border patrol stations and establishing favorable conditions for timely construction. The delegations endorsed a proposal from the joint investigative committee for impartial examination of all border-related incidents taking place since January 2014 in the disputed territory. The sides exchanged maps with layouts of the border and agreed to intensify the process of delimitation and demarcation.

The session of the Tajik - Kyrgyz intergovernmental committee proved to be the most productive among these meetings. The committee devoted a significant amount of time to discussing issues relating to electric energy. Thus, agreements were reached on mutual assistance in emergency situations in the countries' electric systems, possible transit of Tajik electricity to Kazakhstan through Kyrgyzstan in 2015, and continued efforts to realize the "CASA - 1000" project. This project foresees the expansion of electric energy trade in Central Asia and South Asia with

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan exporting up to 1000 megawatt of electric energy to Pakistan and Afghanistan for up to 15 years. However, as of June 2013, the project's main investor, the Asian Development Bank, withdrew from the project that must be completed in 2017, citing political instability in Afghanistan. While Russia, the World Bank, and the Islamic Development Bank expressed their interest, the prospects of the project remain unclear. The other resolutions of the committee included water allocation, facilitation of transit impediments, educational exchange, and cooperation in healthcare, culture, and art.

Finally, the meeting between Otorbayev and Ibrohim was mainly dedicated to the problem of demarcation and delimitation of the border between the two countries. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan organized an intergovernmental committee on resolving border disputes in 2001. Out of 971 kilometers of the border, around 500 are disputed. The lack of compromise is compounded by the differences in interpretation of Soviet era maps and Soviet officials' motivations during Central Asia territorial delimitation in 1924. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan also have simultaneous border disputes with Uzbekistan. All three have enclaves populated by ethnic minorities in the Fergana Valley where their borders connect and interlock. Two Tajik enclaves, Vorukh and Chorku, and two Uzbek enclaves, Sokh and Shakhimardan, are located in Kyrgyzstan, whereas Uzbekistan has the Kyrgyz enclave Barak and the Tajik

enclave Sarvak. Besides recent tensions in the Vorukh, Kyrgyzstan experiences frequent conflicts in the Uzbek Sokh enclave. The most recent took place in spring 2013 when a Kyrgyz border patrol was taken hostage by Sokh residents.

While Tajik and Kyrgyz officials were meeting in Bishkek, the situation on the border remained highly volatile. On August 25, right before the Tajik delegation arrived in Kyrgyzstan, five Tajiks were wounded when confronting Kyrgyz authorities on the border of Tajikistan's Sughd province, increasing the casualties in the territorial dispute. Still, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are ought to find a compromise and overcome the existing disagreements on borderlines. The observed, during the last official meetings, employment of such factors as mutual economic dependency, membership in the same regional organizations such as SCO and CSTO, and common cultural and historic heritage indicate the willingness of both players to prioritize long-term benefits of peaceful coexistence over questionable short-term territorial gains.

TURKMENISTAN'S GOVERNMENT CALLS FOR CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Tavus Rejepova

During the first session of the Commission on Improvement of the Constitution of Turkmenistan on August 6, President Berdimuhamedov stated a need to amend and introduce new articles to the country's constitution.

Speaking during the session, the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan's chairman Kasymguly Babayev noted that a constitutional reform is a "historical necessity" and assured that the members of his party will run a full scale public awareness campaign on the issue.

The last time Turkmenistan's constitution was amended under the current administration was in September of 2008, when Turkmenistan's 2,500 member legislative body, the Khalk Maslahaty (people's council), was abolished and its powers were transferred to the president and the *Mejlis* (parliament). In addition, amendments were made to reflect the country's commitment to market economic principles, various types of property ownership and principles of democratic development.

In May 2014, President Berdimuhamedov signed a decree "On establishment of the Constitutional Commission and its composition for improvement of the Constitution." The Mejlis Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva said the creation of this commission on

constitutional reform has gained wide support among the population. Nurberdiyeva pledged that the Members of Parliament will hold meetings and seminars to solicit public opinion on the constitutional reform. "With the development of market economic relations and private entrepreneurship, there is a growing necessity to improve issues of ownership and property relations to bring them up to modern methods and standards," Nurberdiyeva said.

President Berdimuhamedov noted that the Constitution, adopted in 1992, has successfully passed the test of time and that the deep socio-economic transformations or changes the Turkmen nation is undergoing over the course of the latest years need to be written down and regulated by law. "The new articles in the Constitution will not only reflect today's political, economic and social issues, but also address the directions of the near and distant future," said the president. He called for a need to bring the Constitution up to contemporary world standards and noted that the upcoming constitutional reforms are aimed at step-by-step development of socio-political relations and drawing clear lines among the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the government.

The Mejlis will be the main state body responsible for organizational issues

and necessary documents in connection with the upcoming constitutional reform. The President suggested that the Parliament creates two inter-sector committees. The first committee, to be established by the Mejlis' decree will receive, study and categorize the public recommendations to the Constitutional Reform Committee on improving the constitution. While the draft reforms are being prepared, the second committee or Mejlis Working Group will consist of scientists, representatives of ministries, public organizations, and experts and will do a political, legal evaluation on the draft project. The president mentioned that the deep meaning and purposes of the constitutional reform should be explained to the public.

Though the government has not released any timeline for the suggested constitutional reform, some sources claim it will be completed sometime close to the session of Yashulyar Maslahaty (Council of Elders) scheduled for October 20, 2014. Once the reforms are prepared, the draft constitution will be published in all state newspapers and internet websites for public discussion and input. Maysa Yazmuhamedova, Deputy Chairwoman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Turkmenistan covering culture, TV, and the press was tasked to raise the public awareness through mass media in ways easily understandable to the public.

President Berdimuhamedov also gave specific directives to various ministries in support of the upcoming constitutional reform. Turkmenistan's

Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its International Relations Institute, and the Turkmen National Institute for Democracy and Human Rights under the President of Turkmenistan, were tasked to study whether the upcoming constitutional amendments meet the UN Human Rights Conventions to which Turkmenistan is a signatory, and also suggested that these agencies raise the public awareness of the constitutional reform abroad.

Deputy Chairmen in the oil and gas sector, trade and economy were told to create special working groups that will study the public input related to their respective portfolios. Deputy Chairman Annamuhammet Gochyev covering economy and finance will provide financial support for conducting the constitutional reform and also prepare a proposal for the President's consideration on any possible additions to the constitutional amendments deriving from the economy, banking and finance sectors.

The president also recommended seeking the expert views of the local offices of international organizations on the new constitution draft. Satlyk Satlykov, the Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers who covers the transportation and communications sectors in the government, was tasked to make Internet communication widely accessible in receiving public opinion on the draft constitution and Deputy Chairman Sapardurdy Toylyev was tasked with seeking the input of the scholarly community.