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Nagorno-Karabakh: The April Fool's War

By Justin Raimondo
April 3, 2016

Last Thursday US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Azerbaijan's dictator Ilham Aliyev in Washington and called for "an ultimate resolution" of the decades-old conflict in the disputed province of Nagorno-Karabakh. On Friday, as the hereditary Azeri despot was on the plane back to Baku, Azeri troops were already launching an offensive against the breakaway Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. One of the first casualties was a 12-year-old Armenian boy.

Naturally, the Azeris claim they were attacked first, but this seems unlikely. The front lines in the simmering conflict have been pretty stable since the conclusion of the post-Soviet war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which ended in victory for the former and de facto independence for the primarily Armenian region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Already in possession of the disputed territory, the Nagorno-Karabakhians had nothing to gain by restarting the fighting — and it seems more than coincidental that fresh hostilities commenced immediately upon Kerry's rather absurd pronouncement.

Absurd because the "crisis" has already been resolved — today Nagorno-Karabakh is an independent state, in spite of the refusal of the United States to recognize it, and it has enjoyed this status since 1994, when the last Azeri troops were driven from the territory. That the Secretary of State would choose to intervene at this point seems, at best, highly suspicious. Did Kerry give the green light to the Azeris?

I wouldn't be the least bit surprised. After all, the US has consistently stood with the Azeris no matter which party is in the Oval Office. Washington's reasons are two-fold: geopolitics and money, not necessarily in that order.

The geopolitical factor involves the US policy of encircling Russia. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, Washington has sought to extend its sphere of influence deep into the territory of the former USSR by courting the Oriental despots, like the Aliyev clan, who rule over these former communist "republics." Which brings us to the second, albeit no less influential factor: money. The central Asian states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, etc. are a rich source of Caspian Sea oil, where huge deposits have been discovered. The problem is how to transport the oil to European and US markets – without pumping it through Russian pipelines.

The solution: the BTC (Baku to Ceyhan, Turkey) pipeline. In 1994, Ilham Aliyev's father, Heydar, announced what he called "the Contract of the Century" in a speech to the Harriman Institute in New York City. His government had just signed an agreement with a consortium of oil companies and investment bankers, giving the biggest oil companies in the world – Amoco, Pennzoil, British Petroleum, Unocal, McDermott, Statoil, Lukoil, and the state-owned oil companies of Turkey and the Saudi Kingdom – exclusive rights to Azerbaijan's oil and gas reserves. A few years later, Aliyev senior was at the White House with Vice President Al Gore presiding over a ceremony announcing a contract with Chevron, Exxon/Mobil and Azerbaijan's State Oil Company (SOCAR).

The Clinton administration took up this project with alacrity: in the summer of 1998, Bill Clinton created the Office of the Special Advisor to the President and the Secretary of State for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy – a portentous title for what was one of the most brazenly mercantilist US government projects since the Export-Import Bank. Morningstar started off his career as a corporate lawyer and rose to become President and CEO of Costar Corporation, a maker of plastics and other oil-based byproducts. Clinton appointed him to head up the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, another crony capitalist slush fund, and he went on to become Undersecretary of State on Assistance to the New Independent States of the Former Soviet Union and US Ambassador to the European Union. His background as a crony-capitalist and committed internationalist certainly suited him for the Caspian Basin gig, during which time billions of taxpayer dollars were doled out to Big Oil and attendant contractors to fund the BTC pipeline. He was appointed US Ambassador to Azerbaijan by President Barack Obama, in 2012, stepping down in 2015 for a job at Madeleine Albright's Stonebridge-Albright Group.

Morningstar's career outlines the corporate and political interests that have been manipulating governments and juggling the fate of nations along the so-called Great Silk Road – the southern Caucasus region that promises great riches to whoever can control it. Long a crossroads of conquering armies, it is today the scene of simmering ethnic and religious conflicts that threaten the best laid plans of the most powerful men on earth – the national aspirations of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh being only one of them.

The original – and cheapest – route for the BTC pipeline went through Armenia, but this was vetoed by Aliyev, and so a more circuitous (and expensive) route was charted: Aliyev gloated that Yerevan would be "isolated." Yet the pipeline snakes just a few miles from Nagorno-

Karabakh, and it isn't hard to see that this fresh outbreak of violence might endanger operations – and the US government's hefty investment. It's not hard to imagine the renewed conflict triggering that old standby of the interventionists: "American interests" (i.e. the financial interests of major corporate donors to the war chests of political candidates) are "threatened"!

Washington has consistently sided with the Azeris in their claim to Nagorno-Karabakh. As I wrote in 1999:

"The US State Department's tilt toward Azerbaijan on the Nagorno-Karabakh issue was expressed, albeit rather obliquely, in a recent statement: "Armenia's observance of international law and obligations and OSCE commitments in this respect has been marred by the ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Karabakh Armenians, supported by the Republic of Armenia, now hold about one fifth of Azerbaijan and have refused to withdraw from occupied territories until an agreement on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is reached." But Azerbaijan is a Soviet fiction, created by Stalin who fixed its border to keep the Armenians down and the Azeris fully occupied. But the idea that the borders of the phony Soviet "republics" are permanent, and represent anything even approximating justice, is absurd. Yet this is the position the US government has taken in the past, and continues to take."

The US position has been consistent to this day, with the State Department demanding the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabakh and the deployment of Western-backed "peacekeepers" to make sure the Armenians don't get out of hand with impudent demands for self-determination. The referendum held in 1991 – in which the locals voted for secession from Azerbaijan — is contemptuously disdained by US officials, just as the Crimean referendum in which voters overwhelmingly chose secession from Ukraine is denounced as "illegitimate."

Indeed, the Crimean analogy fits Nagorno-Karabakh to a tee. As in Ukraine, which Soviet despot Nikita Khrushchev rewarded with Crimea in 1954, so in the Caucasus, where Joseph Stalin – before his rise to absolute power – handed Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, with Lenin's approval. As the Soviets marched into Central Asia, subjugating Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Communists decided that it would be better to placate Kemal Ataturk's regime in Turkey than to allow the Nagorno-Karabakhians the right to set up their own autonomous "republic." The Stalinist policy of divide and conquer – splitting up the Armenian-populated areas so as to tamp down "anti-Soviet" nationalist sentiment – persisted until Communist rule imploded.

In Ukraine, the US government insists on the legitimacy of Khrushchev's decision to sever Crimea from Russia and make a gift of it to Ukraine: in Nagorno-Karabakh, they uphold the legacy of Stalin and Lenin, who sought to keep the Armenians in line by making them live under Azeri rule.

Like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, part of Washington's reason for this latter stance is to placate Turkey, which unequivocally takes the side of their "Turkic" allies, the Azeris. The current conflict is just another dimension of the unfolding Russo-Turkish conflict, which started in Syria and is now being extended into Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia, for its part, is aligned with Russia). The ultra-nationalistic Turks, whose ideology of "Pan-Turkism" foresees Turkey as a rising superpower expanding its influence all the way across Central Asia until it reaches the

border of China (!), are involved in this up to their eyeballs. And remember: Turkey is a NATO member. In any conflict between Turkey and Russia, the US is obligated by treaty to come to their defense.

Now there's yet *another* reason why Donald Trump is right about NATO being "obsolete."

What did Kerry say to Aliyev Junior that precipitated this crisis? We'll never know for sure, but of one thing we can be certain: Washington's meddling in this mess can only result in disaster. Will the April Fool's War, otherwise known as Kerry's Provocation, go down in history as yet another blundering intervention by the Americans in a troubled region where they have no business interfering?

I'd bet the ranch on it.