



News from the Nations

Former Soviet republics

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, its former republics have attempted to take different political directions. Most came together in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which is still led by Russia. The Baltic nations joined NATO and the European Union in 2004. After the invasion of Georgia, former members of the USSR face an inescapable truth: you cannot run from geography. Try as they might to move closer to Europe, many are now nervously eyeing a resurgent Russia on their borders, as reported from a briefing in *Time*. The Baltic republics—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—are thriving, technologically advanced democracies with prickly relationships with Russia. Regarding the Eastern European states of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova, Russia has held a grudge against Ukraine since the 2004 pro-democracy Orange Revolution, Belarus has kept particularly close ties with Moscow, and Russian troops are currently stationed in a semi-detached Moldova territory. The Caucasus, with its nations, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, is a vital region for the West, which has high hopes of the benefits to be gained from an oil pipeline through Azerbaijan. Tiny Armenia, which borders Turkey and Iran, readily accepts Russian protection. The Central Asian nations of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are wedged between Russia and China. Several are resource-rich and endure varying levels of autocratic rule, some have let NATO use land for bases.

IRAN THREATENS TO CLOSE GULF OIL ROUTE

Iran has threatened to halt all shipping in the Gulf, thereby restricting oil supplies, as it defies pressure to close down its nuclear programme in return for international assistance. Teheran sought to shore up its diplomatic position by claiming it had expanded its arsenal in the Gulf region by developing a "unique" ground-to-ship missile with a range of 180 miles. General Jafari, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard, said the missile would put Iran on a more even footing with its enemies, by implication the US Navy, which dominates the oil artery. The general said that Iran was ready to force the closure of the Gulf, a development that would push oil prices much higher. Recent missile tests had displayed Iran's ability to close "the Strait of Hormuz easily and on an unlimited basis", he said.

Moscow making new friends

After a face to face meeting, Venezuelan President Chavez and Russian President Medvedev said their countries would work more closely together on energy and foreign policy. This has dismayed US officials, who have watched Chavez trade access to his country's vast oil supplies for influence in Central America and farther afield, according to *Time* magazine.

Iran uses Turkey visit to attack Israel

Iranian President Ahmadinejad seized the opportunity of visiting Turkey to launch fierce attacks on Israel. His visit caused diplomatic tensions between Israel and Turkey, which enjoy close relations. Asked about Turkey's efforts to mediate between Israel and Syria on their conflict over the Golan Heights, Mr Ahmadinejad said the 'Zionist régime' must leave all the territories. Mr Ahmadinejad's views on the Arab-Israeli conflict differed sharply with the policies of Turkey, which not only maintains good ties with Israel but has also tried to mediate between Israel and other Arab countries. There was no official reaction in Ankara to the Israeli protest, but the Turkish press reported that there was embarrassment in Turkish official quarters over the anti-Israel attacks by Mr Ahmadinejad.

Israel-Jordan 'Peace valley' project cancelled

The joint launch of the 'Peace Valley' project by President Sarkozy of France and President Peres of Israel was cancelled in June. According to Peres' office, the Jordanians had cooled on the idea and told the French they were not interested because of the "situation". Palestinian and Arab pressure on King Abdullah of Jordan has brought the Dead Sea canal project to a standstill, according to Israeli sources. According to a senior source close to Peres, King Abdullah told the president in Amman that he was under pressure from Palestinians in his kingdom and other Arab leaders not to enter such a large project with the Israelis.

Israel's alarm over Lebanon

According to a report in the *Jerusalem Post*, "Israel is sounding the alarm, the fragile balance of forces in Lebanon is unravelling and the world is playing deaf. The Israeli-Lebanese relationship is reaching another critical turning point, and not just over how Lebanon and Hizbullah are melding into a single new entity, with Beirut set to formally confer upon Hizbullah the right to 'liberate or recover occupied lands', meaning any territory it defines as 'occupied', whether Mount Dov, the Shaba Farms or Galilee . . . The even more immediate crisis is that unless Hizbullah's runaway arms-smuggling is checked, the Islamists may soon possess weapons that could force Israel into pre-emptive military action to protect their country's deterrence".

US and Poland rush to sign missile deal

Poland and America have signed a deal to build a controversial missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, the Polish prime minister said recently. The agreement highlights how Russia's invasion of Georgia has prompted a swift reappraisal of the region's security and alliances. The US and Poland have been talking about the missile shield for a year but rushed to cement their alliance in the wake of the recent conflict. The Polish defence minister, Bogdan Klich, said there were fears of a resurgent Russia, widespread in the former Eastern Bloc, and that every installation of the Western world on the Polish territory has its meaning because it anchors Poland more deeply to the West. The European Security Editor of *Jane's Defence Weekly* said, "With Russian tanks rolling into Georgia, there's a feeling among former Eastern Bloc states that the tanks could roll over their borders too, There's a certain urgency now".

Georgia not a safe route for oil and gas

Oil and gas transported through Georgia by pipeline was supposed to free Europe from Russia, but not any more, according to a report in Newsweek, which says, "Russia's invasion of Georgia threatened a major transit corridor for oil and gas from the Caspian Sea, raising questions about Western energy security. Major pipelines through Georgia supply Europe with more than 1 million barrels of oil per day and 26 per cent of the continent's natural gas. At the height of the fighting more than 50 Russian missiles targeted the most important oil pipeline, called BTC because it runs from the Azerbaijani port of Baku, near Tblisi, the Georgian capital, to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, Turkey . . . Completed only three years ago, BTC is the culmination of a Western campaign to free Europe from energy dependence on Russia". Newsweek quotes a specialist on the former Soviet Union at the Eurasia Group as saying, "Russia's military has changed risk perception around Georgia as a transit route". Newsweek continues, "The pipelines through Georgia mostly feed Europe . . . Doubts stirred by the Russian invasion also threaten a proposed trans-Caspian gas link between Turkmenistan and the South Caucasus pipe, which would send central Asian gas through Georgia. Even Azerbaijan—which is deeply invested in the success of the Georgia corridor because those pipes originate in Baku—may look instead toward Russia as an energy outlet, for the right price. Its state oil company is seriously considering a bid by Moscow to buy the entire national gas output, meaning that Russia would control the gas that the West had worked so hard to get from another source. 'It's clear Russia wants to maintain a monopoly on gas exports from the former Soviet Union into Europe', says Katherine Hardin, a senior director at Cambridge Energy Research Associates".

Russia reviews ties with Cuba

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin made a surprising announcement, recorded in *Newsweek*, in early August that his country would seek to "re-establish" ties with the Soviet Union's old allies in Havana. This came in the wake of a three-day visit to Cuba by a high-level Russian delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, and reports about the possibility of the Russian military's using the Caribbean island as a fuelling station for its Bear bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons. Putin and Russia in general are quite upset about the Bush Administration's decision to establish a "missile shield" in the Czech Republic and Poland that would theoretically be a protection from all parties, but is seen from Moscow as a threat to Russia. Sending a delegation to Cuba and talking up the possibility of nuclear bombers landing or being stationed on the island appears to be a classical countermove.

SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD VISITS MOSCOW

According to the Jewish Chronicle, President Bashar Assad of Syria visited Moscow to discuss expanding military ties with Russia. "Weapons purchases are very important", Assad said, "moreover the West and Israel continue to put pressure on Russia".