Perfect Storm is Brewing in Georgia

It takes little imagination to understand that a perfect storm must be brewing when a shift in US foreign policy and a contested presidential election in another country occur at the same time. Add to the mix a dispute over who will be accepted as the next ambassador to that country and you have a geopolitical “accident” waiting to happen.

John Bolton, the US National Security, or better said, “Insecurity Advisor” to Donald Trump visited Georgia in late October, having also made quick visits to Armenia and Azerbaijan. He admitted that the purpose of this visit was to understand the “very significant geographical role” the countries of the region have “in dealing with Iran, dealing with Russia and in dealing with Turkey.”

John Bolton’s language does not speak of diplomacy but of engagement, provocation and closing ranks. Diplomacy has never been his calling card. He is perhaps one of the most unsavory characters ever to serve in a diplomatic role, even in the history of the US, and his reputation so far precedes him that even Time Magazine has rumbled him.

The visit should be seen within the context of the recent Georgian presidential election runoff, which produced an outcome which was not the most conducive to US foreign policy, and also something of a shock as it potentially upsets the “greater scheme of things” concerning Iran, Russia and Turkey.

It also came in the midst of a quiet but public debate over who will be the next US Ambassador to Georgia, with the most likely candidate already having her own basket of dirty laundry. Foreign Policy, a US based magazine, has already published an article which claims that “Georgia will not accept the nomination of Bridget Brink, a career foreign service officer with extensive experience in Europe and two past tours in Georgia, because of her alleged predisposition toward former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili” and her warmongering tendencies.
The Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs says that the above mentioned article in Foreign Policy, which states that the Georgian government itself has rejected Brink’s nomination, is “far from reality.” But the history of US Ambassadors to Georgia, previously outlined in this journal, speaks the truth in retrospect.

The Government of Georgia has seen so many US schemes come and go that if it DIDN’T object to Brink it would be a dereliction of duty. It may not have any power to reject the nomination in public, but it will be expressing these concerns in private, using every lever it may have.

And what now?

Brink paid lip service to the usual shibboleths about Georgia when previously working at the US Embassy in Tbilisi, and in other positions. Put simply, her position is that Saakashvili’s Georgia was the Beacon of Democracy in the region, but Georgians are too ignorant to be allowed to do anything for themselves, particularly when those things involve putting crooks in jail and exposing the crimes of their foreign friends.

Georgia is not better off as a result of this US “friendship”. It has been handed around like a drunken woman in a frat house on some US campus, from “advisor” to advisor, exploiter to exploiter and scheme to scheme, none of which have any relation to what the local population, in this so-called democracy, regards as it welfare.

Nevertheless, the US is determined to defend Saakashvili’s criminal legacy just as it once did that of Eduard Shevardnadze. All the comments made about Saakashvili since 2002 were once made about Shevardnadze, for the same reasons. Only when he showed himself cleverer than the Americans were did they decide he had to go, and a new and more compliant crook installed in his place, as the new saviour of the people from themselves.

All this makes Georgia a “loose cannon,” whichever direction it tries to go in. Those directions were narrowed to two by the US itself, which brought the Georgian Dream in to defeat Misha’s morons but subsequently offered Saakashvili’s UNM a way back by trying to cleanse it by association. A standard trick to keep unpopular rulers in power is to split the opposition. In this case the US did the opposite – tried to defeat popular rulers by uniting the UNM with most of its former opponents, who would never have touched it with a bargepole had they been able to make any impression on the electorate without it.

The UNM’s presidential candidate, Grigol Vashadze, who more than most of the others had been the focus of opposition hostility in Saakashvili’s time, was clearly defeated on Election Day. Part of the reason for that was that the old opposition members were often believed by the Georgian public to be just as bad as the UNM, and here they were proving it by supporting the UNM candidate to try and win at all costs.

The winner, Salome Zurabishvili, was also part of the old opposition. She was supported through gritted teeth by many Georgian Dream voters, who had known and ignored her pretensions for many years. But even such an unpopular candidate was considered better than the US choice, and the nomination of Brink for ambassador is an attempt to try and ensure the Devils the US Knows still have a way back.

The consolation the US has is that Zurabishvili’s victory is not a victory for Russia either. But by nominating Brink as ambassador at this time it is signalling that it thinks that an independent Georgia, however compromised one, is an even greater enemy.

Down for the Count

The US wasted no time in publishing a photo of a meeting between John Bolton and Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria. This accompanied a report in which the minister was quoted as claiming that Georgia was planning to obtain additional tactical weapons from the United States.

The Georgian Minister of Defence has publicly denied such media reports. But they appeared in such American publications as Investor.ge, the magazine of the American Chamber of Commerce in Georgia—as close as you can get to being the official mouthpiece of US policy, practically on the level of State Department briefings.

At present the UNM is down for the count. But its allegations of election fraud could still be used to stage another event—even an attempt at another Colour Revolution.

The Georgian Inauguration Day Protests on December 17th involved a number of cities across the country. But this in itself is suspicious. Even at the height of Misha’s power the country as a whole did not stage protests in his favour, or that of the opposition. Tbilisi saw protests, but other cities let the folks in the capital cause all the trouble. Are we really to believe that they are so concerned about this one issue they would spontaneously come out and support the
party which rigged more elections than any other?

What happens next will depend on the encouragement of those NGOs and activists closest to the United States Embassy.

As the joke goes in Georgia, “there are no revolutions in the United States because there are no US Embassies there.”

**Voting for no tomorrow**

Georgians are tired of not having any real choices when they vote. But they put up with that situation because they know they will never be allowed to have choices the US doesn’t want them to have. They understand that their country is like a cheap toy being fought over by children; and they know what usually happens to that toy - it gets broken.

They also realise that the US and some NATO partners would like to use Georgia as a forward operating base for operations against Iran, and are willing to stir up more problems in Georgia’s breakaway regions, (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), as was the case in 2008.

Many vote for the Georgian Dream not out of love or appreciation for what has come after Saakashvili but because they want stability in Georgia—no more wars or conflicts with Georgia’s neighbours, especially ones which would involve Iran and bring about the destruction of a fledgling democracy for being caught in the crossfire. Zurabishvili was one of the longstanding oppositionists which failed to offer that, but with GD endorsement some of that history was forgotten when the US didn’t want it to be.

Bolton, according to Radio Free Europe, is still claiming that it was Russia that was at fault for the 2008 Georgian-Russian war. “U.S. national-security adviser John Bolton says Washington had taken all necessary sanctions against Russia related to the war it fought against Georgia in 2008.” But the point is that he made this statement after Zurabishvili’s election, and she has previously claimed that it was Georgia who started that war.

As the neoconservative Jamestown Foundation, of all institutions, has pointed out, Bolton’s three-country tour has raised questions of whether the White House is interested in more seriously reengaging the region, which had been neglected under the previous US administration. But it is only too apparent, as discussed in the same Jamestown article, that the “Trump administration’s renewed focus on the South Caucasus is driven by concern over Iran.”

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