

Full Plate for Medvedev's Baku Visit

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But what lessons will he get in the South Caucasus? President Dmitry Medvedev addressing pupils at the presidential cadet school in Orenburg on Sept. 1, the first day of the school year. **Mikhail Klimentyev**

When President Dmitry Medvedev arrives in Azerbaijan for a two-day visit Thursday in yet another bid to strengthen the Kremlin's influence in the South Caucasus, he will face all the unsolved problems that have troubled the region since the Soviet breakup.

The seemingly intractable Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resurfaced this week when Armenia and Azerbaijan traded accusations over a deadly clash on the rebel region's cease-fire line.

Azerbaijan said two of its soldiers and three Armenians were killed when Azeri forces repelled an attack Tuesday from the unrecognized republic controlled by Armenian separatists. The Armenian side claimed an Azeri assault in which one of its soldiers was injured while the attackers suffered unspecified losses. This was the second bloody incident this summer. In June, four Armenian soldiers and one Azeri died in what analysts believe was an Azeri attack.

Medvedev might also face criticism for signing a controversial protocol with Armenia earlier

this month.

The protocol, which extends the lease for Russia's military base in the Armenian town of Gyumri until 2044, says Moscow assumes responsibility for ensuring Armenia's military security and equipping its army.

Analysts say such a commitment could aggravate Russia's relations with Azerbaijan, which has periodically threatened to resolve the conflict with Armenia over Karabakh with military means.

Both governments played down any conflict in the run-up to Medvedev's visit.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said the document does not change the existing status quo. "The protocol prolongs the bases' lease for another 49 years. Nothing else," he said [in comments](#) released on the ministry's web site last weekend.

Azeri Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov said the protocol should not affect ties with Moscow. "This is a thing between those two countries, and we see no reason for concern," he said in an interview published in Wednesday's *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*.

Instead, both presidents will sign a treaty that defines the border between Russia and Azerbaijan for the first time since 1991. Both sides have been working for years on the document, which will also include an agreement about water rights along the Samur River, Lavrov said.

Northern Azerbaijan borders Dagestan, currently Russia's most violent North Caucasus republic. The mountainous border cuts right through territories inhabited by the Lezgins, a Sunni Muslim people who form a minority in predominantly Shiite Azerbaijan.

The territorial dispute became prominent in 2008 when two Lezgin villages in Azerbaijan declared themselves to be Russian exclaves. It was unclear Wednesday where they would be placed under the new treaty.

A Lezgin separatist movement called Sadval appeared in the 1990s but has fissured since.

Alexander Krylov, an analyst with the Academy of Science's Institute of World Economy and International Relations, said the border agreement had wider effects on the region. "Armenia would also profit from more stability in Azerbaijan," he said by telephone.

He noted that military cooperation between Baku and Moscow already works in the case of the Gabala radar station.

The lease for the Soviet-built base in central Azerbaijan, which covers all of Iran and much of the Middle East, runs out in 2012, and there are talks to prolong it. Moscow championed Gabala as a site for a joint U.S.-Russian radar during the dispute over Washington's missile defense plans in Europe.

A key element in Medvedev's talks will be energy.

Azerbaijan controls vast natural gas reserves in the Caspian and is seen as a key player in the

rivalry between the U.S.-backed Nabucco pipeline project and the Russian-backed South Stream.

During his last visit to Baku in June 2009, Medvedev oversaw the signing of a deal that gave Gazprom first rights to Azeri gas.

Both sides will sign an additional protocol to this deal, the Kremlin said in a statement released late Wednesday.

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