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11

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS COUNTRIES AND THEIR SECURITY DIMENSION

The two unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus hang over Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia like the Sword of Damocles. As seen from every view point, Russia's influence, levers and policy toward conflicts resolution remain the key issues. As long as Moscow maintains a status quo policy and keeps the outside actors at arm's length from the region, the unresolved conflicts will continue to fester. The potential for a third conflict should not be underestimated, since all the necessary ingredients for an explosive situation are in place. The aloofness of President Barack Obama coupled with a politically divided and militarily impotent European Union makes conflicts resolution very remote, if it is at all possible. The continuing ambiguous position of NATO member states concerning the membership of Georgia in NATO makes things worse for Georgia and leaves it vulnerable to intimidation by Russia. Turkey's ambitions are well-known, but Turkey alone is no match for Russia in the South Caucasus. So, what can be done to change the situation?

Key words: Abkhazia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Caspian Sea oil fields, conflict, conflict resolution, European Union, Georgia, Iran, Nagorno-Karabakh, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Russia, South Ossetia, Turkey, United States.

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Unresolved and potential conflicts

1. Nagorno-Karabakh

It must be emphasized that Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – the three countries that constitute the South Caucasus - face similar security challenges. Very often when open sources talk of Armenia and Azerbaijan they refer only to the one not yet resolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Another potential conflict is discussed below. The unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains the only leverage that Russia can use against Azerbaijan in order to keep the latter from *unfriendly* actions. (Valiyev, 2011, p.143) These “unfriendly actions” refer to the desire of Azerbaijan for closer cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), something that

goes against the interests of Russia. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict allows Moscow to keep Armenia and Azerbaijan, to varying degrees, in its orbit of influence (Valiyev, 2011, p.135) and, as a result, deters the other parties such as Turkey and the United States (US) from engaging in conflict resolution. As long as Moscow maintains the position of status quo and is unwilling to change its stance there will be no resolution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.² As will be stated below, Moscow may change its position if and when it can gain something substantial from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution; such as for instance, extra leverage over the political and economic interests of Azerbaijan. According to Armenian government data, Russia currently ranks as Armenia's largest economic partner, with US\$3 billion worth of investments

in Armenia. Russian firms control 80 per cent of Armenia's energy resources, account for two out of three of its telecommunications companies and now hold a 30-year management contract for its railway. (Abrahamyan, 2011)

However, if and when the unresolved conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh flares up again, it may have a spillover effect, if the conflict takes place not just over Nagorno-Karabakh but also along the still non-demarcated border between Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Whether Russia is waiting as the spoiler in the wings for the right moment to get involved in such a conflict is not known to the author. However, such a scenario cannot be dismissed out of hand. President Vladimir Putin and his advisers assess every option very carefully and their pros and cons, including the most potential one. The author is certainly not privy to such highly classified information but it would be naive to assume that such an analysis does not exist.

2. Abkhazia and South Ossetia

As for Georgia and its unresolved conflict with Russia over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, little has changed since the end of the August 2008 war, which was disastrous for Georgia. The Geneva talks, or rather the round of talks that are ongoing, have broken no new ground. All the parties involved knew in advance that it is better to talk than fight. As a result, they all agreed to meet face to face in Geneva with an implicit understanding that no breakthrough would be achieved. (Kogan, 2009, p.35) The positions of the conflicting parties concerned, namely Russia and its so-called "independent states", Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, on the other hand, Georgia, are diametrically opposed. The two sides cannot reconcile their differences even if urged to do so by outside mediators, such as the EU, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the US and the United Nations (UN). Reconciliation means that Georgia accepts the reality that the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are lost. Full stop! Even for the current Prime Minister of Georgia, Bidzina Ivanishvili, it is hard to accept such a final result and to agree to it. This is exactly what President Vladimir Putin counts on – the gradual acceptance of the government of Georgia that it is the only possible result, and, ultimately, to consent to it.

Putin and his advisers are not in a hurry. They know that time is on their side. Furthermore, they know that as time passes officials in the EU and the US will only vaguely remember that a conflict between Russia and Georgia took place. They may remember the consequences of the conflict, but since Russia has not withdrawn its forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the West has nothing new to offer and cannot induce Russia to withdraw its troops. The West's repeated reminders that Russia should withdraw its military from Abkhazia and South Ossetia fall on deaf ears in Moscow. The statement by Hillary Clinton, the US Secretary of State at the time, that "[s]ince we strongly support the territorial integrity and independence of Georgia, and we do not recognize the secessionist areas"³ (Civil Georgia, 2012) does not change Russia's position. Russia has heard such statements since the end of the August 2008 war and is used to hearing them time and time again. With regard to Georgia's drive to join NATO, Moscow's position was and still is an unequivocal "No".⁴ (Brooke, 2012) In Prime Minister Ivanishvili's first post-parliamentary elections victory press conference he said that "I think that Russia's irritation at Georgia's potential integration into NATO was intensified by Saakashvili. I know that Georgia's integration into NATO would not be very pleasant for Russia, but I do not think it is a *strategic issue* [author's italics] for Russia." (Kucera, 2012a) The issue is not only strategic but it is also pivotal for Russian policy in the South Caucasus. Keeping the three South Caucasus states under its control was and still is President Putin's strategy. Prime Minister Ivanishvili's statement about Georgia's integration into NATO shows how short-sighted, and/or perhaps how amateurish, Ivanishvili is. We need to remember that Ivanishvili has neither background nor expertise in security policy.

3. Caspian Sea oil fields

In addition to the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan faces another potential conflict with Iran over the Caspian Sea oil fields.⁵ (Kucera, 2013) The situation in that region is not as stable and predictable as it was several years ago. Even though, official statements originating in Baku dismiss such rumors or allegations - that Azerbaijan faces a belligerent Iran and that the relations between the two countries remain calm, friendly and peaceful, the reality might be a bit different.

Does this mean that the government of Azerbaijan is not interested in attracting too much attention to the potential conflict and prepares for the worse, and/or that the government is fully aware of the fact that the Azerbaijani military cannot match the military strength of the Iranian armed forces?

A set of *Wiki Leaks* cables from 2009 described military tensions between the two countries over oil explorations that seem likely to be related to the same field, which Iran considers to belong to it. In those cables, Azerbaijani officials bemoan the fact that their military are *unable* to challenge Iran on this issue.⁶ (Kucera, 2013) Since its 2008 maritime clash with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan has devoted considerable resources to a naval build up and the dual use of maritime facilities to protect its Caspian Sea oil fields. The Navy has 2500 personnel and 39 warships, the second largest fleet in the Caspian Sea after Russia, but ahead of Iran.⁷ (Weitz, 2012) Is that fact alone sufficient to deter Iran from becoming embroiled in a conflict with Azerbaijan? Will the Turkish military side with Azerbaijan in such a conflict or shy away from being dragged in? After all, Turkey with its “zero problems with the neighbors” policy may resist any attempt by Azerbaijan to bring it into unnecessary conflict with Iran. It can be said that the ingredients for the conflict are in place but much depends on whether Azerbaijan gives up or shows its resolve by standing firm.

Various Protagonists: Russia, US, EU, NATO and Turkey

As for the other actors involved, namely Russia, the US, the EU, NATO and Turkey, they have various vested interests in the countries of the South Caucasus and different ideas as to what exactly they would like to accomplish.

Russian interests: We need to remember that the interests of Russia and Russian ideas regarding the three countries differ from the interests and ideas of other actors. For Russian President Vladimir Putin the three countries were and still are in Russia’s sphere or zone of influence. Even though, Russian officials may dismiss the author’s claim outright, reality often shows that Russia and the West, including Turkey, do not see eye to eye about developments in the security realm in the three South Caucasus countries. However, and we need to emphasize this point, Russia’s muscular response to

Georgia back in August 2008 clearly demonstrated who is the master in Moscow’s backyard and it sent a chilling signal to other contenders for the South Caucasus region – “Beware of Russia”. Yes, Russia may no longer be the mighty military power that it was perceived to be during the Cold War and its military might be rusty, but when it comes to defending its interests in the South Caucasus, Russia treats these as seriously as ever. Even though, it is a fact that the West, divided politically and military impotent, has weakened over the years it cannot be entirely written-off. Despite internal divisions and the lack of an overarching policy toward the three South Caucasian countries, here the author makes some suggestions that may hopefully be of use. One thing we need to remember is that as long as President Putin knows that the West will flinch from taking decisive actions supported by military power, he will treat the reluctant West with scorn and a rueful smile. However, the West at large may still surprise Russia.

The American position: As the Obama administration has other urgent priorities on its international agenda, the South Caucasus has not really been at the top of President Obama’s agenda since he was first elected in 2008. It should be emphasized that President Obama is unlike his predecessor, George W. Bush, who cared about Azerbaijan and Georgia and encouraged the leaders of the two countries to pursue a joint agenda. Surprisingly enough, some people in Azerbaijan and Georgia continue to believe and stick feverishly to their beliefs that the current US administration should pay more attention to the region. For instance, Vafa Guluzade, a former senior foreign policy assistant to the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, said that “Baku needs more US involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh process.” However, Elkhon Shahinoglu, director of the Baku-based Atlas Research Centre, said that “Obama’s administration has *never* [author’s italics] paid much attention to the Nagorno-Karabakh problem.” “I do not think that it will change if Obama is re-elected in 2012.” (Grigoryan and Abbasov, 2012) As for the case of Georgia, there currently seems to be little interest from Washington in being a counter-balance to Moscow. (Shiriyev, 2012) As long as Putin remains the Master in Moscow’s backyard the US will not get involved in the business related to the fate of the three South Caucasus countries. The

author's analysis may seem cynical but it is based on reality and facts that show that if and when the West, including Turkey, wishes to play a game of strategic interests *on parity* with Russia it must bear the consequences – namely to be prepared to side militarily with Azerbaijan and Georgia versus Russia and not just talk about it. That is undoubtedly a tall order for the West.

The EU stance: It is clear at the moment and for the next three to five years at least that the EU with its policy of democratization and human rights agenda has failed and continues to fail to make a real breakthrough in conflict resolution. The EU's appeal of soft power without muscular military support leaves Azerbaijan and Georgia exposed to intimidation by Russia. EU-NATO member states are not yet willing to admit Georgia into the Atlantic Alliance, since any attempt will be met with Russia's resolve to solve the Georgian problem once and for all.⁸ (Shiriyev, 2012) As to whether they are capable might be a different story. Realpolitik analysts in Moscow, Brussels and Tbilisi know that NATO membership *is not going to happen* [author's italics] as long as 9000 or so Russians soldiers are firmly entrenched in Georgia's two secessionist territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (Brook, 2012) Tomas de Waal, a Caucasus expert at the Washington-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, suggested that "[w]e had a general reiteration of US support for Georgian NATO membership but Obama used the word 'ultimate', which shows that he believes it is far from imminent." (Kucera, 2012b) Despite the commitment by NATO made at the Bucharest Summit of 2-4 April 2008 to bring Georgia in, and despite the negative reaction and the small chance of Georgia joining NATO, the author makes some suggestions below that might be of use.

As a result, Georgia remains vulnerable and, like Azerbaijan, has to rely on its own military strength. Almost five years after the debacle of the August 2008 war, the Georgian government has fully realized that it has no real friends or allies that will fight side by side with it. It needs to be emphasized that such a brutally honest assessment may not be accepted and admitted by the Georgian officials.

The Turkish position: As for Turkey, even though local politicians aim to present themselves as full of ambitions and capable of solving problems on a global agenda, such a perception seems detached

from reality. Whenever Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan meets President Vladimir Putin, any frictions, disagreements and/or even concerns over the unresolved conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh or over the behavior of the maverick Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili are swept under the carpet until the next meeting. Furthermore, if and when Russia is presented with the opportunity to seed mistrust between Azerbaijan and Turkey, it does so unscrupulously and very successfully. For instance, the signing of the Road Map between Armenia and Turkey in April 2009 and the signing of the Protocols on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two countries on 10 October 2009 led to a deterioration of relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey. As a result, Russia skillfully used this development to increase its influence in the region and attempted to derail some regional projects. (Valiyev, 2011, pp.137-138) The deterioration of Azerbaijani-Turkish relations negatively affected the regional power balance and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ankara *union* came under threat. For years, these countries have been supportive of each other and most of the regional economic and political aspects have involved all three. (Valiyev, 2011, p.139) There is no doubt that Russian officials will dismiss the author's allegations out of hand. Furthermore, when it comes to assisting Azerbaijan should the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh be reignited, Turkish officials say that "Turkey could not resist the public pressure if there were an attack. We would be forced to send weapons. But *we are not talking about sending troops, fighting side by side* [author's italics]. We can't do that without NATO." (Crisis Group Policy Briefing, 2011, p.15) The latter is not going to agree and be dragged into the conflict. As a result, Turkey's leadership must carefully reassess its strengths, weaknesses and capabilities.

So, does this leave Azerbaijan and Georgia vulnerable to intimidation from Russia? It leaves the two in limbo with a very limited space for maneuver. For instance, Georgia is left in the cold, despite repeated statements from NATO-Brussels that Georgia will one day in the future join the Alliance. In the case of Azerbaijan, the government of Azerbaijan needs to understand that as long as President Putin see no personal benefits for him and his government in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution, Moscow will maintain the policy of status quo, which is best for its own interests. The other

parties, namely the co-chairs of the Minsk Group – France and the US – will do nothing to change the situation as long as it cannot change in their favor.⁹ The situation of Armenia compared with that of Azerbaijan and Georgia is even more precarious. The control of Russia over Armenia and Russian leverage in the case of the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are like tentacles that provide life support to the Armenian patient. Russia's policy in the South Caucasus at this stage leads Azerbaijan to drift, with Georgia, toward the West with the hope that the US and EU can be more reliable partners than their "great and mighty" northern neighbor. (Valiyev, 2011, p.143) Hope alone may not be a sufficient factor to lead Azerbaijan's drift toward the West. The West may not be sufficiently interested in partnering with Azerbaijan, despite Azerbaijan's interest and desire to wean itself from Russia's grip.

What can be done to change the situation in the face of the entrenched interests of Russia in the South Caucasus region?

1. The signing of the Road Map between Armenia and Turkey in April 2009 and of the Protocols on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the two countries on 10 October 2009 was badly conceived, since it assumed from the outset that in direct bilateral talks there would only be a win-win situation. The reality proved to be different because the bilateral talks ignored the interests of four other actors: Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran and Russia. If Turkey was willing to lead the new initiative towards Armenia it must enlist the support of Azerbaijan, Georgia and the tacit support of Iran against Russia. Neither the EU nor the US will move a finger at the initial stage, since they are not yet convinced that Turkey is capable of organizing and leading such an initiative. In other words, both the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense need to think through and assess very carefully various options and/or scenarios pertaining to both the positive and negative developments.
2. The EU member states need to stop their internal bickering and finally realize that Moscow's policy of dividing them into various camps and marginalizing the Union's smaller and lesser powerful countries will always lead to the same negative outcome – impotence and powerlessness.

Russia respects strength and resolve and these are exactly the qualities that the EU must show that it possesses.

3. NATO cannot play the game of ambiguity any longer. It needs to decide whether it is ready to offer membership to Georgia and then stand by its decision even if it means confrontation with Russia. Any flinching will be met by scorn and a rueful smile from President Vladimir Putin. It is indeed correct to say that NATO failed Georgia, but thus far Georgia has not failed NATO. NATO member states need to remember this. The formula - "One for All and All for One" - is not just a shallow motto but a motto with substance.
4. The EU standing together against Russia, and Turkey doing the dirty work, may bring the US from its sheltered cocoon to side with its allies, but we cannot take this for granted.
5. The Armenian government needs to realize that its utter dependence on Russia puts it in a very vulnerable position. Russia will not give up its control over Armenia and risk losing the whole South Caucasian game. Russia will further increase the sense of mistrust in Armenia and its close neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkey. As presented above, Russia successfully manipulated this phobia among the Azeri leadership.
6. The most difficult task is to convince the government of Azerbaijan to give up on Nagorno-Karabakh for the sake of peaceful co-existence and ultimately reducing Russia's influence in and leverage on the South Caucasus region.

Endnotes

- 1 This text represents the author's own personal view and in no way the views of the Center for International and European Studies (CIES) at Kadir Has University, Istanbul.
- 2 The author's assertion is supported by Anar Valiyev. See Valiyev, 2011, pp. 135, 137.
- 3 See also Markedonov, 2012.
- 4 See also *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2012.
- 5 For an earlier article on the issue, see Lindenstrauss and Celniker, 2012. For a recent article on the issue, see Goble, 2013.

- 6 For the poor state of the Azerbaijani military, see Eurasianet.org, 2010. See also Abbasov, 2010. Yashar Jafarly, an army Colonel (in Reserve) and director of the Public Union of Officers in Reserve, said that “since the 1994 ceasefire with Armenia” over Nagorno-Karabakh “about 15 to 20 per cent of Azerbaijan’s 3500 army deaths have been related to combat causes [author’s italics].” See Abbasov, 2011. In other words, almost 80 per cent of deaths have been related to non-combat causes. That is an appalling number of non-combat deaths. For the latest death of the non-combat private, see Lomsadze, 2013.
- 7 For the recent dispute between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan around the Caspian Sea oil fields, see Abbasov, 2012.
- 8 See also the excellent piece written by Jgharkava, 2012. For earlier pieces, see Talev and Bedwell, 2012; Wilson, 2011.
- 9 In support of the author’s argument, see Benedikter, 2011, pp. 162-163.

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Its areas of research and interaction include EU institutions and policies (such as enlargement, neighbourhood policies and CFSP/CSDP), cross-cutting horizontal issues such as regional cooperation, global governance, and security, inter alia with a geographical focus on the Black Sea Region (including the Caucasus), the Mediterranean, Southeastern Europe, Turkish-Greek relations, and transatlantic relations.

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The *Neighbourhood Policy Paper* series is meant to provide the policy, research and professional communities with expert input on many of the important issues and challenges facing, in particular, the Eastern neighborhood of the European Union today as they are written by relevant experts. The analysis provided along with the relevant policy recommendations strives to be independent and not representative of any one particular perspective or policy. Most of these papers are also translated into Russian so that they are accessible to the Russian speaking world in an attempt to enlarge the scope of the dialogue and input on neighborhood-related issues. The key priority is to maintain the focus of the policy debate on the Black Sea Region and the wider region including its interaction with the Mediterranean South.

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