

## The Caucasus Region: New Security Challenges

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There is much remaining from the legacy of past turmoil and the present changing balance of power in the Caucasus-Caspian region, not only to foster current disputes but to promote further instability and conflict in this troubled and volatile region - hindering or even preventing the creation of the stable political environment which is essential for the security, welfare and development of civil society and the full realisation of the region's economic potential. However, this is not entirely a one way street because on the positive side there is much which requires a joint cooperative approach to these problems or situations, for instance, to name but two:

- Policing the Caspian Sea and preservation of the environment.
- The need for combined efforts to reduce drug trafficking.

It is perhaps inappropriate for me, as a visitor to the region, to dwell in detail on the heavy burden and legacy of history which to a large degree has led to outbreaks of conflict in the Caucasus over the last 14 years or so. However, I would like to make the point that history does colour the minds of people, their perceptions and attitudes which in some cases are indelibly printed in a nation or people's psyche for generations. I believe that this point must be understood by people from the West, where perhaps the emphasis on history is not so marked. What has been of benefit for some may well have been to the detriment of others.

In this context one should remember that the administrative status initially afforded to Abkhazia in December 1921 was one of equality with Georgia through the Treaty of Alliance, but it was downgraded in 1931 to that of an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR, sowing some of the seeds of the present situation between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Additionally, the anomalies stemming from the Treaty of Moscow (16 March 1921) between the Bolsheviks and Turkey, and the later Treaty of Kars (13 October 1921) could be held to have laid the foundations for the problems over Nagorno-Karabakh, the eruption of conflict and violence which came to haunt the ebb of Communist power in the late 1980s, provoking armed confrontation between Armenian and Azeri. The presence of elements of the Tsarist Army in Georgia at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century for defence against invasion from the south entailed the relentless establishment of the Caucasus Fortified Lines, to the detriment of the Chechen and other Muslim mountain peoples of the North Caucasus.

So, bearing the historical background to the region very much in mind, this short paper not only notes the security challenges which have been evolving and coming to the surface in the Caucasus-Caspian region since the late 1980s, but also identifies some of the new ones stemming from the events of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington, and the subsequent, ongoing, American led, global anti-terrorist campaign and its possible impact on the prospects for conflict

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settlement and cooperation in the Caucasus-Caspian region. In the words of Ariel Cohen, the “9/11 attacks changed the geopolitical calculus”.<sup>1</sup>

### The Caucasus-Caspian Region

Before looking at the possible effects and new challenges stemming from the 9/11 attacks and how they might have changed the geopolitical calculus, we should remind ourselves about some of the important factors pertaining to the Caucasus-Caspian region. In a geopolitical sense it is important to bear in mind that:

*“The North Caucasus and Transcaucasus must be considered as a part of a whole ‘security complex’ which includes: the southern oblasts and national republics of Russia; Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey and Iran. This is reflected in the fact that the North Caucasus continues to play a decisive role in the fate of the Transcaucasus and Caucasian security complex as a whole.”<sup>2</sup>*

Therefore, events which occur in the North Caucasus will have an impact on life in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia and vice versa. Moreover events in Central Asia will also have an effect in an east-west lateral sense as well. It goes without saying that a problem such as Chechnya has and will continue to affect problems in other parts of the Caucasus.

The Caucasus region, subdivided into the North Caucasus and Transcaucasus, interposed between the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea on the one hand, and the Caspian on the other, possesses geostrategic significance on account of the fact that it not only serves as a meeting place between East and West, namely Central Asia and Europe, as exemplified by the TRACECA project, but, perhaps, more importantly, on a North-South axis the land corridor of Transcaucasia facilitates contact or confrontation between European Russia and the southern regional powers of Turkey and Iran. On this same axis in a more general and scattered sense, there lies the division of influence between Christianity in its various forms and Islam.

It must not be forgotten that the North Caucasus, marking the southern boundary of the Russian Federation, and the former Transcaucasus buffer zone, now more aptly and commonly known as the Southern Caucasus, remain areas of direct and vital concern to Moscow - in particular to the military mind, whose perceptions both in the historical past and now, remain ever sensitive to penetration by influence, be it Islamic extremism or by the possibility of actual threats to the territorial integrity of Russia: not only those posed by the other two regional powers, Turkey and Iran, but also as seen by Moscow, from any form of interference by the West. Specifically, NATO expansion, increased Western activity in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the Caspian littoral states, have in turn been perceived

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.civil.ge/cgi-bin/newspro/fullpnews.cgi?newsid1014385500,25939> Civil Georgia – Pankisi Crisis, 22 February 2002, “Ariel Cohen: I don’t see the Operation with Russian Involvement”.

<sup>2</sup> Eduard Ozhiganov in roundtable discussions, “NG Religii”, No 6 (18), 17 June 1998, “Faktoy destabilizatsii religiozno politicheskoy situatsii v Dagestane” by Maksim Shevchenko and Aleksey Malashenko.

by Russia in the past to run counter to her own vital interests, such as the choice of oil pipeline routes.

However, the Caucasus region as a whole remains a matter of intense interest and relevance to Turkey and Iran. The strategic importance of the Caucasus attains additional weight not only from the fact that the sheer scale of oil from the Caspian Basin according to some estimates is regarded as a “Second Kuwait”, but that oil from Baku or elsewhere from the Azerbaijani shelf, or even from Kazakhstan, has to pass through the region or adjacent parts of the Russian Federation on its way to world markets in the West.

Moreover, it is important not to lose sight of the wider global context when focussing on the Caucasus and to remember that far from still being imprisoned within the rigid, restrictive confines of Soviet Communist power, the Caucasus-Caspian Region, of which the Russian North Caucasus is very much a part, is now emerging from the shadows and is fast becoming the focus of global attention and interest.

In acquiring an increasing geostrategic significance in which not only do the interests of the United States, Western Europe, Russia, Iran and Turkey have the potential to cut across one another at a regional level, in particular noting the impact that a choice of pipeline route could have on the influence of the players involved, on a wider plane the global dimension is emphasised and illustrated by companies representing a world-wide diversity of states ranging from Argentina and Japan, the dichotomy of interest expressed by Afghanistan, Pakistan and India in wishing to obtain future benefit from this energy resource on the one hand to the impact and possible implications of Caspian oil on other oil producers, particularly the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States on the other hand. There also stands the recent activity of the People’s Republic of China in taking ‘fills’ of Kazakh oil and negotiating for Turkmen oil and gas from the eastern littoral of the Caspian to augment future serious shortfalls in domestic supplies.

Within the Caucasus-Caspian Region and the immediate periphery, one sees the following challenges, some old and some new ones:

- Nagorno-Karabakh.
- Javakheti.
- The ongoing second Russo-Chechen conflict itself.
- The cross-border connection between Chechnya and Georgia – the Kodori gorge and the allegations concerning the Pankisi gorge.
- Georgia, the Abkhaz and South Osetian questions. The position of the Georgian government was and remains particularly vulnerable for “*it not only does not control the situation in Abkhazia and Pankisi, but neither in Ajaria nor Javakheti*”<sup>3</sup> and of course, there are still elements among the population in Mingrelia which mourn the demise of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.
- Future government in Georgia and Azerbaijan when Presidents Shevardnadze

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<sup>3</sup> <http://gazetasng.ru/article.cgi?id=30007>, GazetaCNG.RU:Vse o Sodruzhestve Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv, 27 February 2002, “*Pankisi kak orudiye informatsionnoy voyny*” by Aleksandr Orlov.

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and Aliyev depart.

- The scourge of drug trafficking.
- The attitude of Russia; the composition of the Russian Federation, in particular in the North Caucasus.
- Pipeline competition, where in the context of rivalry between Russia and Turkey a pipeline is seen as the guarantor of influence; competition between TRACECA and the Super-Magistral.
- Abrupt changes of government in Caucasus and Central Asian Republics could bring their own particular instabilities and affect durability of contracts; in these republics internal instability could ensue as a result of 'wishful thinking', unrealistic time frames and the inability of these governments to realise the economic dream due to:
  - The price of oil in the world market.
  - The high cost of transportation by whatever means.
  - The over-estimate of hydrocarbon deposits not meeting expectations – more gas than oil with a longer realisation time.
  - The restriction of OPEC quotas.
  - The future orientation of Turkey. Should the European Union continue to delay membership, Turkey's energies might well find another outlet under the aegis of Islam, pan-Turkism and the Great Turan occupying a Turkic space from Eastern Kazakhstan to the Black Sea.
  - Security and reliability of hydrocarbon transit.
- The need to rethink and develop a more positive future relationship with Iran. Iran's geostrategic position is central to the Caspian and development of Central Asian Republics: is the USA being shortsighted in its present policy to Iran?
- The need to alleviate the scale of poverty in the North Caucasus and Transcaucasus, remembering that radical Islam or Islamic fundamentalism feed on poverty, lack of opportunity and unemployment.
- The urgent need to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Nagorno-Karabakh raises the problem of inviolability of territorial integrity, arbitrary state boundaries and commercial exploitation by corporate business versus the wishes of a nation or peoples.
- Policing the Caspian Sea.

## Dangers of Miscalculation & Collision

Before the 9/11 attacks and even before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the dangers of miscalculation and collision had increased in this troubled and fractious region which looked set to undergo considerable transformation and turmoil over the next two decades. Working at six mutually inter-related and overlapping levels in very broad terms were and still are:

- **First**, a weakening of Russian power and influence.
- **Second**, the legal confusion over the definition of the Caspian Sea's status and the inability to obtain agreement by all the five riparian states.
- **Third**, the emergence of historic, regional, power rivalry which is taking shape in a more subtle, but none the less ruthless form between Russia and Turkey, Turkey and Iran, and to a lesser extent between Russia and Iran, together with the possibility of proxy manipulation by minor players which may have the potential to attract major power interest, either on account of their hydrocarbon and mineral deposits or due to the suitability of their territory for the transport of oil or gas.
- **Fourth, the Focus of Global Attention**, the emergence of the Caucasus-Caspian Region on to the world stage and with an ever-increasing cast of actors can only increase the potential for miscalculation and collision in the region, in particular, not only from existing and probable pipeline routes, but also the presence and location of states, such as Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Israel bordering the southern periphery of the region with the potential to destabilise the whole of the Middle East and further afield.
- **Fifth**, Relations between Russia, Islamic and Islamic Fundamentalism.
- **Finally**, the no-less serious questions raised with regard to environmental and ecological issues, the plight of the Caspian sturgeon, the decline in the Caspian fishing industry to some extent caused by the negative effects of oil exploration in conservation areas and the real concerns generated by the rising sea level of the Caspian which already has not only affected the low-lying coastal areas, particularly in Azerbaijan, but in the future could affect a multitude of onshore oil installations, anchorages and moorings.

## Effects of 9/11

The rapprochement between Russia and the USA on the need to counter global terrorism has inevitably changed the global picture somewhat. This was illustrated by President Putin's call for an end to the Chechen conflict on 24 September 2001, though there has been little since in the shape of political moves to end the conflict. There is still a dangerous tendency to lump all the factions fighting the federal forces in Chechnya as Islamic extremists - this is not the case. All Chechens fighting against Federal armed intervention are not fighting simply as Islamic extremists. This misguided simplification has led to claims that Pankisi is a nest of Al Qaeda operatives, which is far from being the case.

In the short term US support in training and equipping Georgian law enforcement subunits may well be a good thing, but the danger then arises if this support

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remains too long - will the situation become a repeat of previous history?

The global terrorism operation will undoubtedly delay the much-needed rapprochement between the USA and Iran. As I have said before Iran is crucial for the development of the region.

Not only are Russia, the sovereign states of the Southern Caucasus, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, the regional powers of Iran and Turkey having to meet the challenge of change, but the West too has to face a challenge of change which is not clearly defined. Perceptions, particularly in view of the events of 11 September, the subsequent scale of military operations in Afghanistan and the possibility of undertaking new military operations by the USA and its allies, are bound to be varied and even deeply contentious - hardly helpful to the peaceful development of the region.

One of the challenges for the West is to try to understand the importance that history and family play in the lives of the people who live in the Caucasus region, to offer help if it is needed, not to destroy the good and to remember that many of the countries there have much older civilisations than those enjoyed in the West.

### Disclaimer

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