

Chapter III

CONTESTED BORDERS IN THE CAUCASUS

Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region

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1. Introduction

In geopolitical terms, the demise of the Soviet Union has come close to a revolution. It is still very common to hear references to "the former USSR" or "the former Soviet republics" or "the post-Soviet space", although the unity of that space is no more. No longer will the Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Estonia and Armenia face the same problems, and therefore have to formulate like-sounding agendas. Whatever turbulence the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) suffers - some of it as a result of recent drives by a number of the new states towards re-establishing economic ties with one another, and most notably with Russia - their political divorce is likely to be final. A new Eastern Europe is emerging. The Ukraine, Belarus, Russia-in-Europe and the Central Asian countries are clearly becoming aware of their distinct identity, as the three Transcaucasian countries are on their way to forming a region in its own right.

The Russian presence is common to all the new geopolitical constellations. European Russia, naturally, is part of the new Eastern Europe. Central Asia, which includes Kazakhstan, contains a significant Eastern Slav element. Transcaucasia is inseparably linked with the Northern Caucasus, which is an integral part of the Russian Federation. Thus, if there is any one country which can still view the other fourteen ex-republics as its periphery (albeit not a homogeneous one), it is Russia. Even Moscow can ill afford to pretend that "near abroad", for all its inescapable implications, is some kind of an entity. While there are, inevitably, certain common elements in Russia's agendas on foreign and security policy for all the new regions, it is the distinguishing features which are progressively growing in importance.

The aim of this chapter is to examine Russia's post-Communist security

interests and the thrust and pattern of her policies in the whole of the Caucasus region, embracing, as it were, both its northern and southern portions. It begins with an evaluation of the legacy of the past, to the extent that this is still relevant today and will help shape things to come. It then proceeds to discuss Russia's present and future perceptions of its own security interests in the region. The conflicting attitudes to these interests are reflected in Moscow's often confusing policies on the many disputes on both sides of the main Caucasus range. Finally, this chapter attempts to present an outlook for the future of the region, and offers some conclusions.

2. Past Legacy

As Russia became a multinational empire, in the mid-sixteenth century, it began penetrating into the Caucasus. It took three centuries of relentless effort to incorporate the whole region into the mother state, following the well-known pattern of conquest by war and the extension of protection. Geopolitical and strategic interests, rather than trade and ideology, were the driving force behind that expansion. Most wars were fought against the two other major powers in the region, Turkey and Iran, and in the 18th and 19th centuries a dynamic of three-cornered, "great power" rivalry was established. This rivalry often led to confrontation in the area lying between the Black and the Caspian Seas. The Caucasus, and especially Transcaucasia, became both a "buffer zone" and a battlefield between the predominantly Orthodox Christian empire in the north and the largely Muslim powers in the Middle East. As Russia was moderately tolerant of non-Orthodox creeds, her "march to the South" never assumed the proportions of a crusade. The peak of Russian expansion in the Caucasus coincided with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the waning power of Persia. The Russians were therefore victorious in battle, although they had first to overcome stubborn resistance from their enemy of the day.

From the early 19th century onwards, the Russians established their hegemony in the region. Yet they always had to remember that their own domestic and international weaknesses would open a "window of opportunity" for their rivals, which the latter would not fail to exploit. Russia's weakness would also invite intervention by outside powers, such as Britain, Germany or the United States. With the aim of consolidating its hold on the Caucasus, Russia tried to foment hostility among the local players. In general, "divide and rule" was the preferred tactic to ensure imperial peace. Over the centuries, a pattern of client relationships was formed. This type of relationship put St Petersburg, and later Moscow, in the position of an arbiter to which all sides in any internal conflict had to appeal and whose judgment they had to respect. Having assumed that role, Russia then had to act in a flexible manner and display great pragmatism in the realm of conflict management. There were hardly any groups left which did not have a grievance of some kind against the Russians, although, paradoxically, all groups were heavily dependent on Russia. Occasionally, a few Caucasian communities were declared "enemies within" and were ruthlessly dealt with.

Even today, certain elements of this legacy remain. The "geopolitical imperative" is still very strong. In fact, the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of bipolarity have revived many of the traditional features of regional rivalry and internal strife. It is now feared that what will follow could be a replay of an episode earlier this century, when Russia, initially weakened by

the First World War and virtually torn apart by the Bolshevik Revolution, retreated from the region. As a consequence, the region was soon transformed into a battlefield. The Armenians fought the Azeris and the Georgians; the latter were also at war with the Abkhaz and the Ossetians; the Chechens took on the Cossacks while the Ingush fought the Ossetians. (This list is illustrative rather than exhaustive.) These conflicts stopped abruptly a few years later, when Russia returned to the area under a different guise, although in fact playing much the same role as before. Whether Russia and the peoples of the Caucasus are now doomed to go down the same path again will be the central question of this chapter.

3. Russia's Security Interests in the Caucasus

1991 marked a watershed in Russia's perceptions of her own identity and interests. Empire-building and Communist ideology both became discredited. In its desire to "dump" the other Soviet republics, the Russian political elite consciously precipitated the collapse of the USSR. It regarded the republics as a drain on Russian resources. Its actions were guided by a set of interests which could be summarized as "*back to the family of civilized nations*".

Security was no longer associated with global or regional balances of power, or sheer military might, but with the idea of belonging to a group of democratic - and affluent - countries. The leaders of the "new Russia" saw that the prime national security interest was to join NATO and the European Community, rather than restore the Soviet Union. For most of the other republics of the former USSR, this new attitude meant that the Russian government's policy was now one of benign neglect. The willingness to cut losses and withdraw - especially from areas of conflict, and in particular the Caucasus - was very strong. This new policy was backed by the Russian people, who were growing weary of the country's involvement in petty wars along the old Soviet periphery. Russians had paid a heavy price in terms of their servicemen (many of them conscripts) who had been killed, as well as material and financial resources.

Many of the early hopes can now be seen as nothing more than delusions in post-communist Russia. With the prospect of attaining affluence growing dimmer as the months passed, the fate of democracy and reform in Russia itself was appearing increasingly doubtful. 1992 saw a wide-ranging and heated debate on the Russian identity and national interests. Predictably, the initially pro-democratic, pro-Western agenda was gradually dismissed as inadequate or unrealistic, and raw geopolitics was rediscovered. 1993 saw a progressive "correction of the course", performed in many cases by the same people who had been espousing very different ideas just one year before. While the foreign policy concept emerging from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs in January 1993 still bore many birthmarks of the "civilized family" approach, the final version of the concept, developed by the Russian Security Council in April 1993, contained a fair dose of "realism". Finally, the military doctrine (adopted in November 1993) adopted a markedly more assertive attitude towards what the Russians started calling "near abroad", meaning the former republics of the Soviet Union.⁽¹⁾ withdraw now from the Caucasus, even if we wanted to", and it was "naive to call for that".⁽²⁾ As elsewhere, Moscow is primarily afraid of a security vacuum, lest other powers - whether regional players, like Turkey and Iran, or global ones like the United States - should fill it, to the detriment of Russia's own interests. Some Russian

middle-of-the road officials - including Yevgeni Ambartsumov, 1992-1993 Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supreme Soviet- proclaimed, in effect, a Russian version of the Monroe doctrine for the ex-USSR.

Security, whether external or internal, is undoubtedly the overriding Russian interest as far as the Caucasus is concerned. The reasons for this are manifold. The most important one appears to be the inherent unity of the Caucasian region, to which the now independent Transcaucasia - like the Russian Northern Caucasus - belongs. This region is composed of largely mountainous non-Russian republics, within the Federation. The indigenous population is closely linked, both culturally and ethnically, to their brethren in the south of the Greater Caucasus and the predominantly Russian-populated plains. The unity of the Federation is therefore at stake. To stop the spill-over effect and prevent conflicts from raging in the area, Russia saw that a process of building stability in Transcaucasia should prevent conflicts there. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh has generated tension throughout the whole of the Caucasus, sending thousands of ethnic Armenians to the southern Russian provinces of Krasnodar and Stavropol, and also to Moscow.⁽³⁾ This migration exacerbated inter-ethnic relations in these regions. Instability created a demand for arms and ammunition. This in turn led to the establishment of an illicit arms transfer network, resulting in the emergence of numerous illegal armed formations on Russian territory. These formations, ranging from self-styled national liberation armies to overtly criminal bands, found a training ground in the most prolonged conflict in the area.

The conflict in South Ossetia had dramatic repercussions in the Republic of North Ossetia, within the Russian Federation. The Abkhazian conflict generated tension in the ethnically related Adyghe Republic. These conflicts have created difficult problems for the federal authorities in Moscow. On the one hand, the Federation cannot ignore the interests of its members without running the risk of alienating them. On the other, Russia has an interest in keeping the territorial integrity of all states within the region intact, otherwise it is Russia that will suffer most.

The Russian government cannot ignore the fate of ethnic Russians living beyond the borders of the Federation, even if the protection of these minorities is often cited as a pretext for engaging in imperialist adventures. The internal, rather than the external, aspect of that problem is creating more tension. Before the break-up of the USSR, Russians did not form an important minority in any of the Transcaucasian republics. None of the Transcaucasian governments has so far pursued an anti-Russian policy: in fact, they would prefer "their" Russians to stay. They fear that an exodus would create massive problems for their national economies, especially in the industrial, scientific, information and health services, where the Russians significantly outnumber the indigenous employees in real terms. This is especially the case in Georgia, Azerbaijan and even Armenia.⁴

The conflicts within the region have driven thousands of Russians to emigrate, many to the north, e.g. to Rostov. Although there were very few ethnic Russians in Nagorno-Karabakh, ethnic tensions in Baku culminated in the anti-Armenian pogroms of 1990. These pogroms and the "Azerbaijanization" of professional and social life, coupled with the burden of a protracted war, have resulted in a flow of immigrants into Russia. 70,000

Russians lived in Abkhazia. As a result of the war in this part of Georgia, about 1,000 of them were killed and 30,000 fled.⁵ Many of these people have the option of being Russian citizens under a law passed in 1992. So far, the Russian government has not been very successful in providing relief for them. In the autumn of 1993, the Federal Immigration Service estimated that some 400,000 immigrants would arrive from Transcaucasia within the following two years.⁶ If this forecast is correct, by the turn of the century there will be very few ethnic Russians left within the area.

The internal aspect of the "Russian Question" concerns the situation of the Russians in the Northern Caucasian republics, who have largely been given priority over the titular ethnic group. There is also a problem involving the Russian Cossacks, who are creating a backlash by pursuing their traditional goal of becoming a borderland community. And there is an inter-ethnic problem between the Cossacks and their old adversaries, such as the Chechens. Stabilizing inter-ethnic relations within its own borders is a challenging task which the Russian government must face.

Secondary to Russia's geopolitical interest in the Caucasus are its economic interests. In the days of the Soviet planned economy, certain industries were exclusively developed in only a few locations across the USSR. The break-up of the Union and the resulting disruption of long-standing co-operative links has damaged the Russian economy. Russia is still dependent on the Transcaucasian countries for a number of goods: two-thirds of the oil-drilling equipment it requires is produced in Azerbaijan; the Sukhoi 25 fighter-bombers are assembled in Tbilisi, and several components for other military equipment are made exclusively in Armenia. Vazghen Manukian, a former Defence Minister in Armenia, referred to the "huge number of military industrial enterprises" (MIEs) which his country inherited from the former USSR. Armenia has no real need of the goods produced there and had been exporting them to Russia, "without interruption, despite the blockade".⁷ Interestingly, Hikmet Gaji-zadeh, Azerbaijan's former Ambassador to Russia, claimed that even under the Popular Front government Azerbaijan's MIEs continued to work to fill Moscow's orders.⁸ Iran-Turkey route as its solution to the problem.

The purely military interest which Russia has had in the Caucasus appears to have receded in importance in comparison with the Imperial or Soviet periods. It is now essentially defensive in nature and precludes any large-scale strategic penetration, including the supply of military assistance, arms supplies, etc., to any third party. To prevent any potential Turkish opportunism at the time of the Soviet Union's disintegration, Marshal Shaposhnikov, then Commander-in-Chief of the Joint Armed Forces of the CIS, warned of a "Third World War" if Turkey were to interfere militarily in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. In March 1993, General Grachev, Russia's Defence Minister, made Russia's own military co-operation with Turkey conditional on Ankara's discontinuing its military assistance to Baku.

Russia intends to keep its military forces permanently stationed within the region, to prevent the dreaded "security vacuum". The Russian military have, in fact, never left Armenia. The Armenian government has consistently welcomed them as a useful deterrent, not so much against Azerbaijan as against Turkey. Notwithstanding all the conflicts in Abkhazia, the Russian military have remained in Georgia and they returned to South Ossetia soon

after they had left, although this time as peacekeepers. Having evacuated from Azerbaijan in mid-1993, the following autumn they began putting pressure on Baku to allow Russian border troops to return to the Iranian frontier. If there is going to be a peace to keep around Nagorno-Karabakh - as there has been, since June 1994, in Abkhazia - most of the peacekeepers are likely to be Russian.

A genuine Russian interest is to secure and maintain its borders (cf. Tajikistan). Only Soviet borders were, and are, properly demarcated, equipped and manned - Russia's new borders with the former republics of the USSR are often not much more than imaginary lines, and not very clear ones at that. Erecting new border infrastructures appears to be too costly and time-consuming. It is therefore in their own interest to keep the "external borders of the Commonwealth", especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus, under joint (i.e., predominantly Russian) control. According to the commanding officer of Russia's 127th MRD, which is deployed at Gyumri, Armenia, his unit's mission is "to defend Russia's interests, to guard the borders of the former Union".⁹

Russia has thus some vital interests in the Caucasus, starting with geopolitics and covering the economic, military and social spheres. Russian leaders have grown more determined, over time, to protect and defend these interests.

4. Russian Policies in the Caucasus

Russia's policies in the Caucasus between 1991 and 1994 were often inconsistent and confused. This was partly due to the identity crisis which affected the Russian political elite immediately after the demise of the USSR. The domestic political struggle in Russia led to the formation of two roughly equal camps, with almost opposite foreign policy agendas. Each of these two groupings was in possession of a branch of government and attempted to carry out its own policy regardless of the other. This situation of "dual power" compounded the inevitable bureaucratic "turf battles" over the control of foreign and security policy. Lastly, but perhaps most importantly, the decomposition of the Soviet regime and the USSR's Armed Forces resulted in civilian officials and military commanders of all ranks taking a more independent stand and serving their own individual interests. The end result was that the decision-making process lay in tatters.

It would be true to say that it was the military who played the most prominent role in Transcaucasia. Their forces were stationed throughout the area and they had access to all the important politicians. They also controlled the most vital assets in any conflict situation, namely weapons, ammunition and infrastructure. General Grachev, the Defence Minister, could speak confidently on a wide range of issues relating to the situation in the Caucasus without fear of being overruled by his President. Indeed, on several occasions the President trusted him to be a mediator in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh. Very importantly, the Russian military established close contacts on virtually all levels with their counterparts in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. General Grachev's "special relationship" with Tenghiz Kitovani, Georgia's defence minister (1992-1993) and Eduard Shevardnadze's powerful rival, is well known. In the spring of 1994, Georgia took the unprecedented step of appointing as its defence minister a Georgian-born deputy commander of the Russian forces in the republic. The militarization of Caucasian politics,

however, led to the politicization of the Russian military in the area.

Compared with the military, who relied on physical presence for their power, the Russian Foreign Ministry were at a distinct disadvantage as they were quite new to the area. They had to rely on a precious capital of human contacts and independent intelligence capabilities. One consequence of having no embassies, experts or contacts was that this reduced diplomatic activity to bilateral talks in Moscow and occasional visits to the area by a Minister or his deputies. It was only in late 1992 and early 1993 that Russian diplomats established their presence south of the Main Caucasus Range. Special envoys were designated to mediate between the Georgians and Abkhazians and between the Armenians and Azeris. With a growing realization in the Foreign Ministry that Russia had a role as a great power, there was then more co-operation between diplomats and soldiers.

The Russian head of state intervened only occasionally, usually at the final stage of a negotiated Russian-mediated truce, such as the ones between the Georgians and the Ossetians in 1992 and between the Georgians and the Abkhazians in 1992, 1993 and 1994. Domestically, the President remained a mere arbiter, generally letting his foreign and defence ministers formulate policies (which were not always in harmony with each other).

In the Northern Caucasus, it was the Prime Minister who - as the one responsible for socio-economic policy - was the most important bureaucratic player. The republican and regional authorities were often cast in the role of clients. From November 1992 onwards, Moscow appointed chief administrators in North Ossetia and Ingushetia, inside the state of emergency areas. Their authority was backed by the troops of the Ministry for Internal Affairs, which were in turn supported by the army.

On issues of substance, the following pattern may be discerned. Unlike Soviet Russia in 1920, Russia did not attempt to block the marches to independence by Armenia, Azerbaijan or Georgia. It was content to leave its warring and disintegrating neighbours to their own devices. Soon, however, Moscow dropped this laissez-faire attitude in favour of more direct involvement. Russia's aim appears to have been to try to restore its influence throughout the region, on all sides, in every conflict, in order to prevent developments from slipping out of control and so opening the floodgates to outside interference. Moscow has been relatively satisfied with the Armenian authorities under President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, as they stood firmly by their strategic alliance with Russia, which is considered to be the guarantee of national survival. Georgia's Zviad Gamsakhurdia, for all his idiosyncrasies and anti-Russian rhetoric, did not seriously challenge Russia: he managed to insulate his country rather than invite foreigners in. He also appeared to be malleable to Moscow's pressure, when it was applied in a cruel and resolute manner in August 1991. In December 1991 and January 1992, the Russian military nevertheless chose to support Gamsakhurdia's enemies, having probably lost patience with the Georgian President's increasingly irrational actions.

The Russian political elite may have had a role to play in the subsequent return to Tbilisi, in March 1993, of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Communist Party chief in Georgia and former Soviet Foreign Minister. However, when Shevardnadze, in near despair over the loss of Abkhazia,

appealed for military help to the West (including NATO), he was put under heavy military pressure by Abkhazian separatists, the Zviadists in Western Georgia, and under political pressure by Moscow. It looked as if he were either about to resign or to be replaced. Instead, he survived - to take Georgia into the CIS, in late 1993, and, in February 1994, sign a treaty with Russia which provided for Russian military bases in Georgia and established defence co-operation.

When Azerbaijan's President Ayaz Mutalibov was swept from office in 1992 by the Popular Front, Moscow had to accept a government whose policies were less favourable to its interests. Abulfaz Elcibey tried to forge an alliance with Ankara, but he was constrained in his efforts by the unfortunate war over Nagorno-Karabakh, which Azerbaijan was continuing to lose, and by popular disillusionment with the Front's domestic policies which led to internal political challenges. Reports have suggested that Moscow was indirectly involved in the chain of events which ultimately led to the replacement of Elcibey and the installation of Geidar Aliyev, another former Communist Party chief and Politburo member.

While it would certainly be wrong to claim that either Eduard Shevardnadze or Geidar Aliyev was installed as a puppet of Moscow, it cannot be denied that both men were, under the circumstances, the best available choices for Russia, which assisted their return to the region. Moscow's "personnel policy" was not, of course, confined to the top echelons of the Transcaucasian leadership. Moscow also established direct lines of communication with people like Vladislav Ardzinba in Abkhazia, with the independent-minded Ajarian leader Abashidze, with the authorities of South Ossetia and Karabakh and with Geidar Aliyev, when he was leader of the autonomous republic of Nakhichevan, which is semi-independent from Baku.

It is Russia's economic leverage, however, which is the basis of her influence in the area. Some 60 per cent of Armenia's budget revenue comes from Russia in the form of loans.⁽¹¹⁾ The country's food and fuel dependency on Russia is even higher. Georgia, too, relies heavily on Russian fuel supplies. Only Azerbaijan is self-sufficient in this respect, although Nagorno-Karabakh uses Russian oil to keep its forces fighting the Azeris.⁽¹²⁾

In other areas, Russian peacemaking efforts have been less successful. Posting Russian military observers along the Azeri-Armenian border in 1991 contained the conflict but did not affect the fighting in Karabakh. Despite strenuous efforts, in the spring of 1994 Moscow failed to persuade the Azeris to accept Russian peacekeeping troops in Azerbaijan. Between 1992 and 1993, the Russian troops in Abkhazia (sometimes referred to as "peacekeepers" by the media) did not always observe the officially proclaimed neutrality. Rather than disciplining those responsible, the Russian military command was reported to have aided the Abkhazians. As a result, Russia's credibility as the guarantor of the Sochi agreement (signed on 27 July, 1993) was severely undermined.

Russian policy in the Caucasus drifted from abandonment and "withdrawalism" in 1991-92, through chaotic involvement in 1992-93, to a new assertiveness in 1993-94. Russia's problems lie not so much in the resources at her disposal - these are still formidable, if not as abundant as before - but in political will and unity of action, which it has found more

difficult to muster. Even then, however, the trend of Russian policy has been clear enough: to give up direct control, except on strategic issues, but to retain some kind of influence.

5. Outlook

Will this assertiveness lead to the restoration of an empire? Since the parliamentary election in December 1993, both the ultra-nationalists and the "unionists" in Russia have seen their influence grow. It would be unwise to rule out any possibility that a xenophobic and imperialistic regime could come to power in Russia, posing a mortal threat to the newly-independent neighbouring states, including the three in Transcaucasia. Nevertheless, it would be equally wrong to see this as the most probable scenario. The relationship between the Caucasians and the Russians has been more complicated than simply an attempt by Moscow to restore hegemony, and the obvious concern of Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi to resist this.¹³ In the current situation, the Russian political elite faces two alternatives: either to work towards the restoration of the U.S.S.R. ("total integration"), or to adopt a more moderate policy, aimed at preserving the political independence of the new states, thereby maintaining Russia's advantages over the former "sister republics". In other words, the choice is limited: exercise direct control or try to play a leading role.⁽¹⁴⁾ Russia's interests would suggest the latter, her traditions, the former. With a lack of adequate resources and the disappearance of so many traditions, it may be that her interests stand a slightly better chance of winning the day.

Footnotes

1. Cf., respectively, 'Kontsepsiya vneshnei politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii', *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, 1993, January, Special issue; *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 April 1993; 'Osnovnye polozheniya voyennoy doktriny Rossiyskoy Federatsii, *Krasnaya Zvezda*', 19 November 1993.
2. *Moskovskie Novosti*, 1992, No.40, 4 October 1992.
8. Interview with *Izvestia*, 9 July 1993.
13. *Transcaucasia: 'Hell is Other People'*, Strategic Survey 1993-1994, I.I.S.S., London, 1994, pp. 89-98.

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