

Geopolitical Changes and Crises in the Caucasus

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Abstract

The Caucasus has seen numerous crises since the region gained independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some of these crises have not been resolved yet as evidenced by recent Russia-Georgia conflict. This paper seeks to analyze such crises within the framework of significant geopolitical changes unfolded by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The main thrust of the paper is that in the post-Soviet era, the Russians lost much of their control over the region due to their own domestic problems, but it seems that Moscow is not interested in withdrawing further from the region. The findings of the paper indicate that under current conditions, it seems that as long as all regional and extra-regional powers fail to consider the interests of other powers or try to pose threats to them, the crises will continue to unfold in the Caucasus, while there is no agreed dispute settlement mechanism in the region either.

Keywords: Geopolitical Changes, Crisis, Caucasus, Russia, Georgia, United States.

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Statement of the Problem

The Caucasus region is still considered one of the most important crisis-ridden regions in the world. The recent crisis in Georgia is the latest in the round of crises that has taken place in various historical periods in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although previous crises in Chechnya and Karabakh were managed to a considerable extent, there is no guarantee that they will not create problems again in the future.

These crises are undoubtedly related to significant geopolitical changes that ensued the collapse of the Soviet Union, but the main question is: "How did these geopolitical changes affect the emergence of crises in the Caucasus?" Geopolitical changes resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union have had a considerable impact on the region that is now called Eurasia. These changes have created more crises in the Caucasus than in any other region of Eurasia. The present article is an attempt to study the logic and mechanism of the impacts of these geopolitical changes on the dynamics of various crises in the Caucasus.

The present paper assumes that the geopolitical characteristics of the Caucasus, along with some mediating variables, such as energy resources and its ethnic composition, have increased the interest and potential influence of great powers in the region. In fact, the combined effect of political will and potential influence of great powers has prevented the Caucasus from peacefully overcoming the geopolitical changes that have resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union.

1: Geopolitical Consequences of the Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Unfolding of Regional Crises

Many analysts maintain that the two closing decades of the 20th century were a period of significant geopolitical changes which led to many crises. These developments undoubtedly stem from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the consequences of the Soviet disintegration have become more important than the collapse itself. One of the various consequences of the Soviet Union's collapse was the advent of many crises in different regions. This development was very important because of the human costs as well as the regional and international impacts they have had.

In the literature of international relations, "crisis" is defined as a

situation in which the traditional equilibrium of a system undergoes radical changes resulting from the involvement of new factors. As these new factors increasingly threaten the basis of the old system, the crisis is exacerbated. According to this definition, the system involves a hierarchy of subsystems. Hence, a crisis in a governmental system can lead to a crisis in the regional and even international systems. In this sense, if the crisis influences the regional and international systems, it is closely related its geopolitical context. Geopolitics is both influenced by the crisis and influences the intensity of the crisis. In the regions that are not geopolitically significant, crises seldom take on regional or international dimensions, while small crises in geo-strategic regions can quickly escalate (Vaezi, 2007: 28).

A cursory look at the nature of various crises would indicate that a geopolitical approach can contribute to the understanding of the causes and roots of crises and then pave the way for crisis management and their settlement as well. Crisis in geopolitical terms has various aspects depending on the conditions of the crisis and its intensity. Crises and geopolitical changes have a direct and dialectical relationship with each other. A crisis can lead to geopolitical changes, and conversely, geopolitical changes can spark new crises. On the basis of this approach, the collapse of the Soviet Union as one of the most important geopolitical events of the 20th century had different impacts on various regions. In some regions, such as the Baltics and to some extent, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, these geopolitical changes were overcome more easily, while in the Balkans and the Caucasus, these changes still create new crises. In general, the Soviet Union's collapse has been critical in creating new crises by influencing three arenas including the resurgence of national identities, bringing about changes in the geopolitics of power and bringing about changes in the economic importance and nature of various geopolitical zones in the former Soviet Union.

1.1: The Resurgence of National Identities

The ideology of the Cold War era and the atmosphere created by the rivalry between the two superpowers in the world had pushed many identity and ethnic aspirations under the rug. However, after the end of the Cold War and the removal of the ideological umbrella, the problems, which perhaps were previously of secondary significance, suddenly broke out and created many tensions. Therefore, historical claims or even historical rights and ethnic differences have become one of the most essential factors in shaping most of

the crises in recent times. Long after the end of the Cold War, this phenomenon appeared in Eurasia, especially in the Balkans, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Most of the tensions in these regions originated from ethnic differences. The quest of various ethnic communities for taking control of their homelands led to war and conflict. Many of these nations claimed that a part of their homelands, which had been separated by artificial borders, should be returned to them. Studying events of the post-Cold War era shows that nationalist motivations that lead to claims of statehood have been responsible for most tensions (Szayna, 2003: 145-147).

Ethnocentrism is not a new phenomenon. It existed in various parts of the world in the past and still exists today. Ethnic aspirations have always existed in the Caucasus, but after the Soviet collapse, special conditions caused these aspirations to take on a political dimension. Maslow believes that economic problems as well as the emergence of short-term and mid-term political and security crises may postpone the emergence of identity claims but do not completely remove them (Maslow, 1943: 380-396).

1-2: Change in the Geopolitics of Power

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of a power vacuum, geopolitical rivalries once again intensified in many regions. During this period, because of special conditions governing these regions, many political forces, whether domestic or foreign, were able to play a role. Moreover, many crises, such as the crises in Chechnya and Karabakh, which had their origins in the more distant past, broke out once again. In many cases, crises in Central Asia and the Caucasus paved the way for rivalries and the direct or indirect intervention of regional and trans-regional powers. The color revolutions, which occurred in three of the 15 former Soviet Republics, are some examples of this trend.

Given Russia's preoccupation with its domestic problems in the early years ensuing the disintegration of the Soviet Union, regional and trans-regional powers found an opportunity to compete with one another to realize their goals and to fill the power vacuum while having an eye on the geopolitical and geo-strategic values of different regions (Afshordi, 2002: 6).

Western powers, particularly the United States, which consider Eurasia as an important and strategic region in their foreign policies, attempted to establish the missing links on their Eurasian chain by creating new conditions and by establishing elbow-rooms to be present in these regions.

On the contrary, Russia, which considered these regions as part of its security zone, tried to prevent its adversaries from gaining complete control over them (Chayes and Chayes, 1997: 10-15).

The geopolitical significance of these regions has had two-fold consequences for regional countries. On the one hand, the attention paid by regional and trans-regional powers to these regions was an attempt to ensure these countries that Russia would not be able to retake control of them and that the conditions would not revert to the pre-Soviet collapse situation. On the other hand, the rivalries between the powers in this region created confusion for the leaders of these countries in the formulation of their foreign policies. Exercising a method of trial and error has led to close relations between the regional countries with either Russia or the West and the U.S. or their resorting to the collective collaboration with CIS countries or the countries outside the region.

1-3: Change in the Economic Importance and Nature of Various Geopolitical Zones in the Former Soviet Union

The collapse of the Soviet Union suddenly transformed the economic and geo-economic significance of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Countries with energy resources in Central Asia and the Caucasus gained special importance in international strategic equations as a new source for energy supplying.

Another natural and geographical implication of the collapse of Soviet Union has been the volatility of the situation of routes connecting the former Soviet Republics to the outside world. The land-locked situation of countries in Central Asia and Caucasus (except for Georgia), their lack of access to the high seas as well as the separation of some regions from their mainland (such as Nakhichevan) have had various impacts on the economic and political structures of the newly independent countries. To compensate for these geographical shortcomings, these countries have become dependent on some of their neighboring countries in order to access the high seas.

In addition to the land-locked nature of these countries, because of unfavorable geographical conditions, the existence of disputes in the region and rivalries among some of these countries' leaders, the transit of goods and energy has faced difficulties. This factor, along with political considerations, has provoked rivalries among the powers for constructing oil

and gas pipelines and communication routes. Although 15 years has lapsed this problem still remains. Various plans have failed because of the political and economic rivalries of the involved parties. Moreover, the determination of the North-South communication routes supported by Iran and Russia on the one hand and East-West access supported by the West on the other have always been subject to controversy because of differences and divergent political and economic priorities.

2: Why the Caucasus Region Is Unique and Important in Geopolitical Terms?

Strategic studies maintain that any region that attracts the interest of the great powers is of geopolitical and geo-strategic significance. However, these regions are divided into two categories: 1) regions that enjoy only strategic, geopolitical and economic advantages for the great powers; and 2) regions that are apt to pose threats to one or more of the great powers. Between these two categories, the second has greater potentialities for creating crises.

The Caucasus has displayed both of the above characteristics in the post-Soviet era. On the one hand, this region has had strategic geopolitical and economic advantages for the U.S. and to some extent for Europe, and on the other hand, it has had the potentiality for posing threats to Russia. Zbigniew Brzezinski believes that Eurasia was the main arena for rivalries between the two superpowers during the Cold War era and will remain a scene for disputes among the great powers in the post-Cold War era. Based on the theory of neo-Mackinderism, two groups of countries exist in Eurasia. The first group comprises active geo-strategic actors, and the second group comprises geopolitical poles. Brzezinski suggests that in the geopolitical domineering game in Eurasia, we should pay attention to the roles of these two groups. Active geo-strategic actors are those countries that have the national capacity and the will for power projection or extra-territorial influence to change the geopolitical status-quo. The importance of the countries in the second group, which comprises geopolitically-oriented actors or geopolitical poles, does not result from their power or motivation rather their significance stem from their crucial positions and from their vulnerabilities affecting the behavior of active geo-strategic actors. Geopolitically-oriented actors are characterized by their geographical traits. These traits allow them to determine the access or lack of access by geo-strategic actors to important regions and strategic

resources (Cotamnine, 1999: 2).

Because the U.S. sees the region as strategically important and Russia believes the influence of its rivals in the region is a potential threat, both powers have tried to expand their influence in the region. This region has certain characteristics that have facilitated the two countries' influence and consequently leading the emergence of crises. These characteristics are enumerated and briefly explained below.

2-1: Absence of a Hegemonic Power in the Region

During recent centuries, the Caucasus has been considered one of the most contentious regions of the world, although the 70-year dominance of the Soviet Union over this region had restored stability for more than half a century. As Nicole Jackson observes, "Although Russia inherited many Soviet foreign policy institutions, the new government's information and expertise about how to formulate foreign policy concerning the fourteen states were limited. The formulation of policies was further complicated by the fact that Russia was undergoing its own economic catastrophe and domestic identity crisis following the sudden collapse of both communism and the empire" (Jackson, 2003: 1).

The Soviet government's long presence and influence in the Caucasus and the exercise of repressive policies of the communist era had cultivated a yearning for new models of governance. Every development in the regional balance of power first affects the immediate neighboring countries, such as Russia, Iran and Turkey. This limited circle then extends to include some other regional states. Therefore, the newly-independent countries are trying to fill the power vacuum resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union. To do this, they have involved themselves in the competition among regional and trans-regional powers to increase their own influence and to gain utmost leverage from the new situation.

2-2: Neighboring a Great Power such as Russia and the Region's Potential Threats against Russia

Given its historical background, the relationship between stability in the South Caucasus and North Caucasus, and the fact that out of 22 million inhabitants of the Caucasus, more than 2.2 million are Russian and 200,000 are Ukrainian and Belarusian. Russia paid special attention to the Caucasus

in its 1993 military doctrine, which was pursued by subsequent Russian governments. As in other regions in the CIS where Russians live, support for people of Russian descent is the responsibility of the Russian army (The Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 1993).

After the Soviet collapse, Russia's role in the aggravation or subsiding of crises points to the serious attention paid by Russia to this region. Russia is one of the main parties in the political equations and political developments in the Caucasus, and the resolution of major problems in the region will be very difficult without Russia's participation. One of the major reasons for Russia's opposition to every separatist attempt has been that the independence of or any change in the borders in the North Caucasus contrary to Russia's will has been considered a domestic threat to Russia's integrity and could spread to over more than 20 republics and autonomous regions and territories in parts of Siberia and the Far East within Russian borders. Although all these units (except for Tatarstan and Chechnya) have joined a federation pact with Russia on March 31, 1992, they are affected by the waves and successes of separatism in regions such as Chechnya (Goldenberg, 1996: 345).

At the same time, Moscow has always tried to obtain regional dominance in the Caucasus. Since the 19th Century, Russian politicians and strategists have regarded the Caucasus as a strategically important region for their country. After the Cold War, in the 1990s, Mackinderism attracted supporters in Russia. Many Russian thinkers thought that the victory of their country over the world would be the unavoidable result of history. Now, they look for this victory in geography rather than history. Because of the geopolitical changes in the Caucasus, Russia has adopted various policies during the past two decades to eliminate its security threats. Disputes in some republics and the crisis in Chechnya showed that as long as the near-abroad regions are located outside Russia's zone of influence, Russia's territorial integrity will be threatened. The formation of regional organizations, especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, can be explained along these lines.

2-3: Ethnic Diversity and Complexities and the Willingness to Create Independent States

Under Soviet rule, political borders, particularly those in the Caucasus, were

not devised on the basis of the region's ethnic characteristics or the people's past history. Instead, Soviet leaders separated the region's peoples and placed them within the forced boundaries of political and administrative units. The result of this "engineering of nations" was a dangerous combination of diverse national, ethnic and tribal groups within various countries. Taking a look at the social conditions of different republics clearly shows that the influx of various ethnicities to other republics following the artificial drawing of borders in the region would easily lead to possible ethno-nationalist crises. This could disrupt the existing political balance found among and within the countries. The totalitarian and repressive nature of the former Soviet regime managed to bring ethnic elements and religious differences under control. However, during this period, no attention was paid to the destabilizing character of such factors, which ultimately became a factor responsible for destroying regional stability. Till date no effective mechanism has been considered for containing such a problem.

On tensions and conflicts among various territories with different cultures, Andre Fontain writes on the Caucasus question: "There is no area in the Soviet Union where the overlapping of nations and religions is so intense. There is no need to note that this overlapping was encouraged by both the Tsars and the Communists. They intended to curb inevitable centrifugal pressures. The inhabitants of the region, which resembles the Balkans, have never lived in peace except under a strong rule. Therefore, the weakness of the Soviet central government per se exacerbated the threat of inter-ethnic tensions. If undesirable economic conditions among the ethnicities inhabiting the Caucasus had not instigated tribal reactions, these tensions would not have become so widespread" (Fontain, 1993: 79).

Hence, the political units in the region can be viewed as a manifestation of politicized ethnicities rather than political units. It was originally presumed that the more homogenous the polities, the more stable they and consequently the entire region would be. Scrutiny of the delicateness arising from the distinction between ethnicity and politicized sect on the one hand and the political unit of nation-state on the other questioned the simplistic hypothesis that argued that only demographic homogeneity in a specific geographical area is the best path to the attainment of the ideal of establishing a nation-state. The past and present political developments in domestic and international arenas indicate that the countries that have been established solely according to ethnic or sectarian requirements have failed

to solve the fundamental dilemma of insecurity (Seifzadeh, 1999: 83-85).

Undoubtedly, this implies that the existence of ethnicities makes countries insecure. There are currently 120 multiethnic-multicultural countries in the world (Gurr, 1997: 54-59). The tendency to disintegration and politicization of identities is not observed in all of these countries; indeed most of them seek equal rights within the existing national institutions rather than searching for ethnic and sectarian mobilization (Gurr, 1994: *passim*).

2-4: Energy Resources

Many analysts believe that the existence of vast energy resources in the Caucasus and its location as the transit route of oil and gas from the Caspian basin and Central Asia account for the attention the great powers, particularly trans-regional actors, pay to the region. Many large oil companies are currently making efforts at gaining concessions for exploitation of the region's resources. Most of the regional countries and even trans-regional ones seek to acquire benefits from the transportation of the region's resources. According to the existing statistics, the Caspian basin's resources constitute only two percent of world oil reserves as well as three to five percent of world natural gas reserves. Azerbaijan Republic's proven oil reserves, for example, are estimated at around seven billion barrels, which constitutes 0.7% share of total (British Petroleum, 2008).

The Caspian energy and the significant status that most energy experts accord to the region in the world energy market perspective led this region to witness the interaction and confrontation of three types of actors:

- Caspian littoral states
- Countries that transport energy
- Regional and world powers

Because regional and world powers are mostly the main consumers of Caspian energy resources, they play a crucial part in the energy export cycle from the region to the consumption market through the countries that transit energy.

2-5: The Limited Nature of Regional Countries' Transportation Roads

The hefty costs of economic transformation that began in the Caspian littoral countries at the onset of independence made them – like other former

Soviet republics – sell their resources and raw materials in the world markets as soon as possible in order to address their foreign currency needs.

At the same time, Caspian oil and gas and its transit routes to markets have increasingly attracted the attention of great powers due to the world's growing dependence on the import of hydrocarbon energy resources, the growing of tensions in the Middle East and the rise of Russia as a major player in the energy politics of the 21st Century. Nonetheless, although great powers such as Russia, the United States and the European Union share political interests in preventing the Caspian Sea from becoming a crisis-ridden zone, these actors have behaved competitively in this region. For more than a decade, controversy over the transit routes of energy from the region has been one of the main areas of contest among some regional and trans-regional powers.

Currently, a set of pipelines transport Azerbaijan's and Caspian oil and gas to the world markets. The 1700-kilometer Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline with a capacity of one million barrels per day was inaugurated on May 25, 2005 with a \$4.2 billion investment. This pipeline was intended to bypass Iran, Russia and Armenia. Before the construction of this pipeline, another one transported oil from the Baku port to Supsa port in Georgia near the Black Sea. To build this 515-mile pipeline, which began in April 1999, nearly 600 million dollars were spent. The oil transported to Supsa is conveyed to Europe with vessels through the Black Sea and Bosphorus strait.

The Baku-Tbilisi-Erzrum gas pipeline with a capacity of 20 billion cubic meters transports Caspian gas to the West and Europe. Furthermore, railroads for the transit of crude oil from Tbilisi to the Puti and Batumi ports transport 100,000 barrels of crude oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to foreign markets. These two transit routes of oil and gas have turned Georgia to an important hub for energy transit, even more important than Turkey for Europe (Malaek, 2008: 7).

2-6: Proximity to Europe

The proximity of the Caucasus to Europe and European concerns about the spillover of possible insecurity of the region into Europe have led the European Union to engage the region with particular interest and to become an influential actor under certain circumstances. For instance, by concluding partnership and training agreements in various fields with countries such as

Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, the EU and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have tried to take steps in order to tackle domestic challenges of these countries.

Europe maintains numerous economic interests in the Caucasus that include access to Caspian oil and gas for diversification of needed fuel, as well as the expansion of transportation and communication corridors between Europe and Asia. Economic interests along with security concerns have attracted significant European attention to the region (Rettman, 2006: 2). Since 2003, the EU has been a security player in the region, particularly in Georgia, and has made utmost efforts to resolve many regional conflicts. In this respect, the Minsk Group's¹ mediation and French mediatory efforts at resolving the Karabakh crisis can be mentioned. Europe also appointed a special representative for the South Caucasus in order to initiate the European Security and Defense Policy operations. It also created the Rapid Reaction Mechanism Commission to support democratization processes following the Rose Revolution in Georgia.

The most important steps taken by the EU towards the countries whose memberships in the Union will not take place in the near future include the adoption of the "European Neighborhood Policy" instrument, which took effect on March 11, 2003. The Instrument granted preferential benefits and relations in all dimensions, especially concerning access to the European market and the protection of investment in these countries (European Neighborhood Policy, 2004).

The EU is also an important trade partner, specifically for Armenia and Azerbaijan. Half of Azerbaijan's trade is conducted with the EU. In 2006, 33% of Azerbaijan's exports and 66% of its imports were undertaken with EU member states. The EU has been Armenia's biggest trade partner in 2005. At the same time, the National Indicative Program initiated its work in 2005 to support legal and administrative reforms in the region in order to address the social consequences of transition and economic development.

2-7: The Presence of Weak States

The Caucasian states have faced numerous challenges on their path towards independence, stability and dealing with severe economic problems. Most of

¹ - The Minsk Group was established under the provision of the OSCE and worked to mediate the settlement of the Karabakh dispute for many years.

these problems are inherited from the former Soviet system and the results of its disintegration. Indeed, as Christoph Zurcher indicates, "The emerging post-Soviet Caucasian polities were open to violent conflicts because they were caught in power struggles between old and new elites, were engaged by mobilizing ethnic groups, were seriously restricted in their ability to provide public goods, and lacked an established monopoly on the legitimate means of violence" (Zurcher, 2007: 2).

The weakness of these countries causes the role played by national groups to increase in domestic politics. This, in turn, will pose threats to these countries' stability and territorial integrity in the future. Perhaps the most salient factor threatening the stability of the Caucasian states in the long run is the lack of viable mechanisms for addressing concerns and the inevitable economic, ethnic or political aspirations. None of these countries has been able to create a power-sharing arrangement among major elite groups or opposition parties. Some of these countries have identified primitive mechanisms for the transfer of power. Existing dissatisfaction along with totalitarian regimes are not promising signs for achieving stability, while the absence of political space for training a new generation of leaders and for democratic transformation will further complicate the process. In addition, in most of these countries, the continuity of the Soviet government's racial policies concerning national preferences, which led to stability in the short term, endanger stability in the long run by instigating ethnic, tribal, political and economic dissatisfactions (Rand Corporation, 2002: 4-5).

2-8: Differences in and Clash of Cultures

Cultural tendencies, though not a geopolitical element in theory, can have a direct impact on geopolitical elements. In this respect, the sympathy or antipathy of the Caucasian people towards Russia, Iran and Turkey as countries that in different historical eras dominated the region is one of the factors influencing regional countries' political and international outlooks.

Currently, peoples of the region are divided between those who have a favorable view of Russia and those who do not; the Armenian population, which harbors a negative attitude toward Turkey because of historical differences; and certain ultra-nationalist currents in Azerbaijan that have influenced bilateral relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is while the most significant instrument of Iran's influence in the region has been a fairly positive feeling among a large segment of the public.

3: The Impact of Geopolitical Traits on the Formation of Crises in the Caucasus

The aforementioned traits have appeared in the region with the collapse of the Soviet Union or have reemerged as a result. However, the main question is, "Why have the geopolitical repercussions of the Soviet disintegration persisted in the Caucasus and still play a role?" As noted in the beginning of the paper, it is presumed that the convergence of these factors had led great powers like Russia, the U.S. and Europe to show more interest in exerting influence in the region, and the current situation provides them with the possibility to do so. The result of the clash of such different demands as well as the region's geopolitical traits has so far given rise to a variety of crises in the region. The behavior of great powers in the Karabakh, Chechnya and the recent Georgian crises as well as certain other recurring crises supports this hypothesis.

3-1: The Crisis in Karabakh

Although the crisis in Karabakh originated completely in ethnic policies adopted by the Soviet Union, immediately after the Soviet collapse, this issue became a pretext for some regional and trans-regional powers to gain influence in the region and to shape events based on their interests. Under these conditions, existing governments in the region could not assume impartiality thus were caught in the crossfire of competing forces.

With the increasing political challenges created by the Karabakh dispute the involved parties did their best to manipulate events in their own interests. This happened to such an extent that the confrontation between Armenians and Azeris was replaced by a political rivalry between the powers, which sought to mold the region as they wished. Levon Terpetrossian, the former Armenian president, believed that "Disagreement between Russia and the Minsk Group is the main obstacle causing the failure of mediation in this long crisis. Today, establishing peace does not depend on the involved parties. Instead, it depends completely on mediators. Now the war has transferred from the battlefield to the arena, where two mediators struggle with each other" (Abrar Newspaper, 1994: 16).

For the Russians, the Karabakh conflict did have a major impact on their national security and could lead to the interjection of outside powers in their backyard. Therefore, Russia adopted a multi-faceted approach for reaching a

settlement, the main elements of which were: having good relations with the three involved parties and influencing their decision-making processes; unilateral management of the Karabakh dispute; maintaining the right of annulling agreements through various means for itself (Tabatabaei, 2003: 84); and at the same time, participating in multilateral activities, such as the Minsk Group, for resolving the dispute.

Given the overall Russian thinking about the Karabakh issue, it can be said that the most important ingredients of Russia's approach in managing the Karabakh crisis were the maintenance of a strategic balance in the Caucasus, preventing regional and trans-regional rivals from being successful in settling the dispute, and minimizing the influence of these parties, especially the U.S., in the region. On the other hand, America's increasing influence in the developments in the Caucasus has been one of America's priorities. Accordingly, the U.S. has prevented Moscow's exclusive role by assuming a role in regional crises resulting in a perpetual competition between Russia and the U.S.

The OSCE, which began its efforts for ending the Karabakh dispute in 1992, has opposed Russia because of fundamental differences in strategic outlook for the region. However, despite the intensity of the OSCE's efforts, these measures have failed because of Russian policies (Freire, 2003: 79-82).

The former U.S. representative in the Minsk Group found the reason for this in nationalist policies pursued by Russia. Mariesco believes that America's active role is breaking the balance struck by Russians and offering enough confidence-building for making a compromise acceptable to the involved parties (The Christian Science Monitor, 1994: 26).

Russia, for instance, in the Karabakh conflict contributed to the prolongation of the crisis by providing military support to Armenia as well as by obstructing Iran's mediation endeavor in the crisis. As Pataraiia and Darchiashvili have pointed out, "Azerbaijan's security concerns deepened even more after it was disclosed that Russia had secretly transferred armaments to Armenia in 1993-96, while the Armenian Defense Minister Serzh Sarkisian claimed 'over the last two years we have doubled our defense capacity at no cost to the budget'." (Pataraiia and Darchiashvili, 2003: 155).

3-2: The Chechen Crisis

Although the Chechen crisis was considered an internal Russian problem, this did not mean the West's non-intervention in the crisis. The West

frequently sought to undermine Russia and to destabilize it. The opportunity created in Chechnya could realize their traditional aspiration, which was the second stage of disintegration. With some differences in the method and objective, the United States, Europe and even some regional states saw the Chechen crisis as a suitable ground for pursuing their own strategic interests (Ozhiganov, 1993: 23).

The U.S. administration held that the Chechen crisis could pave the way for pursuing its strategic interests in order to link the Caucasus to its political, economic and military concerns. The U.S. ultimate goal and that of a number of its regional allies was to drive Russia out of the Caucasus strategic region, to cut off its hands from the Black and Caspian Sea ports, control the Caspian energy resources and their transit routes, and force Russia to return to its 16th Century boundaries, namely the boundaries of Ivan IV period. Hence the United States has tried to create strips of smaller states surrounding Russian boundaries by supporting separatist movements in the region, thus providing the ground for further breakup of the country in the long run. As Craig Nation aptly observes, "The United States has been drawn to the window of opportunity to forward a policy of reducing Russian influence and promoting the sovereignty of the new independent states and "geopolitical pluralism" within the post-Soviet space; assuring access to the resources of the Caspian; and securing regional allies and potential military access (over-flight and potential basing), extending its strategic reach into Inner Asia" (Craig Nation, 2007: 5).

In contrast, Russians frequently accused the U.S. and some other European states of financially and militarily supporting Chechen militants. In the last instance, on April 22, 2008 one of the principal Russian TV channels, Channel One, aired a program in which Western security services were accused of an attempt to promote Chechnya's secession from Russia. They mentioned U.S. State Department involvement in the process (Western Secret Services Plotted Separating Chechnya from RF, 2008).

Russia also does not make a secret of its strongly suspicious attitude towards the prospects of military cooperation between South Caucasian states on the one hand, and Turkey and the U.S. on the other (Pataraiia and Darchiashvili, 2003: 165). Then Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov also declared the United States responsible for instability in the North Caucasus and claimed that the United States seeks to take advantage of the chaos (Khordad Newspaper, 1999: 7).

As Russian authorities claim, by destabilizing Russia's vital areas around

the Caspian Sea (Daghestan and Chechnya), which are a transit route for the country's oil and gas pipelines and one of the significant routes for transporting the Caspian energy resources to the oil markets, the United States and Turkey are trying to cut off Russia's important oil artery, providing the ground for the passage of the region's oil and gas pipelines through Turkey.

After September 11th, the U.S. policy of 'global war on terror' changed existing priorities. The interventions in Afghanistan and the fight against al-Qaeda required Russian assistance for which the United States had to be more accommodating to the Russians vis-à-vis the Chechen crisis. The Chechen crisis has been defused, but the reemergence of the crisis cannot be viewed as unlikely in the future.

3-3: The Crisis in Georgia

The crisis in Georgia is undoubtedly Russia's harshest and most important response to a series of attempts made by the West against Russia's international and regional interests since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The crisis was sparked in the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. At this summit, France and Germany opposed the U.S. plan for accepting the membership of Ukraine and Georgia in NATO, but it was agreed that an operational plan for these two countries' membership would be ratified the following December.

What is now happening in Georgia has been predictable since for some time, and even following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the conflict between the interests of Russia with those of the West was unavoidable. In fact, Russia's weakness in the early years of the independence of the former Soviet republics prevented it from pursuing a more aggressive policy in holding back the West's encroachment in their backyard. The U.S. and the West therefore continued their efforts to expand their influence in Russia's security environment through NATO's enlargement to the East and ignored Russia's protests.

With the emergence of the 2003 color revolution in Georgia, a pro-U.S. government came to power. This development in Georgia, called 'The Rose Revolution', led to the removal of President Eduard Shevardnadze from power and the coming to power of Mikheil Saakashvili in the same year (Socor, 2005: 3). The new government did not hide its pro-Western orientation, including NATO membership. In August 2008, while deep

differences emerged in the relations between Russia and the West, Georgia's attack on South Ossetia sparked a major conflict.

Furthermore, according to a report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Georgia has the world's highest rate of growth in defense expenditure. Despite the country's overall poverty, its defense ministry's budget has increased 50 times since 2002, expanding from \$18 million to 900 million. Moreover, during the NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin warned that giving NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine would be a direct and serious threat against Russia's security (Erlanger, 2008: 5). In addition to these developments, the EU's recognition of Kosovo's independence, contrary to the agreement made after World War II to respect borders on the European continent to prevent disputes, Russia perceived the situation as dire and unbearable and felt that when neither Europe nor the U.S. shows any flexibility to Russia's aspirations, even within its own security zone, confrontation is inevitable. Strobe Talbott, a former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State and director of the Brookings Institute said on August 18, 2008: "Russia's efforts are similar to what the West did in 1990 in the Balkans for getting back what they have unexpectedly lost" (Talbott, 2008: 2).

The question is whether Russia has changed its policy on the unchangeability of borders. It seems that it has because Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on August 17, 2008 that Georgia's territorial integrity must be forgotten, and Abkhazia and Ossetia cannot be annexed to Georgia by force. The disintegration of Georgia seems highly probable. Georgia will not be able to return the separated regions to its territory. In fact, it does not have the necessary political and military means to do so. Lavrov declared on August 19 that the U.S. and NATO must choose between cooperating with Russia or with Georgia (Russia Hits back at NATO Warning, 2008). Russia believes that Georgia's membership in NATO and the organization's long-term presence and influence in the Caucasus would be a threat against Russia's territorial integrity and a warning of its likely disintegration. If Georgia enters NATO, Russia's room to maneuver will become increasingly limited.

Under these circumstances, America's involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan and its failure to open a new front in Georgia, as well as America's need to Russia's cooperation in Iran's nuclear dossier and Europe's need for Russia's gas, have persuaded the Russians that they can act more aggressively in dealing with the settlement of the problems in Georgia.

A few days after Russia's attack on Georgia, the political analyst George Friedman wrote: "The Russian invasion of Georgia has not changed the balance of power in Eurasia. It simply announced that the balance of power had already shifted. The United States has been absorbed in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as potential conflict with Iran and a destabilizing situation in Pakistan. It has no strategic ground forces in reserve and is in no position to intervene on the Russian periphery" (Friedman, 2008: 3).

Most American officials believed that it was possible to pressure Russia through international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), by opposing its membership in OECD or by expelling it from the G-8. These actions would deal a blow to Russia's economy and prestige. However, Europe felt an increasing need for energy; indeed Europe needed Russia's gas more than Russia needed to sell gas.

American analysts have also expressed various views about the dispute in Georgia. In an interview with Bloomberg on August 12, 2008, Brzezinsky said, "We obtain the oil of Azerbaijan and the gas of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea through Georgia. Therefore, Georgia is an important asset for the West." In his 1997 book, *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzezinsky emphasized that the Russians must be driven out of the Caucasus in order to maintain a secure energy route to the West (Brzezinsky, 1997).

For Europe, too, the crisis in Georgia has created many security concerns. For this reason, Europeans have focused their efforts on settling the crisis as quickly as possible. Contrary to U.S. expectations, Europe did not actively support Georgia. Rather, it declared its dismay over Russian actions and tried to mediate. However, this crisis has affected European security structures, such as the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe.

4: Security Dilemma and Prospects for Security in the Caucasus

The Caucasus is a region that has been historically a place for the clash of great powers' interests and most of the developments in the region have been overshadowed by the clash of competing interests. Although in geographical and geopolitical terms, this region possesses a historical and recognizable identity, in security terms, the Caucasus is faced with numerous complexities and uncertainties. In order to decode the security dilemma in the Caucasus, one can start from the definitional consensus in the field, which conceives the region as a 'security complex' using Buzan's conceptualization. He defines security complex as a complex that a set of

units whose major processes of securitization, de-securitization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another (Buzan, 2003: 95).

For most analysts, various linkages between the security issues of the Caucasian states are understandable, but beyond this definition, there are many questions as to which countries are included in the Caucasus security complex. The most important question in this regard concerns Russia's membership or exclusion in this complex. Can Russia be regarded as a member of the Caucasian security complex? In geographical terms, parts of the Russian-dominated territory are located in the Caucasus. Consequently, security developments in this region affect Russia's national security. Accordingly, the main reason for Russia's objection to Georgia's membership in NATO and establishment of the great powers' presence in the country includes the vulnerability of Russia's national security in a region like Chechnya.

On the other hand, Russia's presence and actorness in the region so far has been beyond those of a regional player, making most of the country's involvement in the region being defined in the context of great powers' actions. Iran and Turkey, moreover, see themselves as a part of the Caucasian security complex because of the existing affinities. In this framework, due to its neighborhood with the Caucasus, even the European Union is very sensitive to the issue of security in the region. For this reason, in security initiatives proposed for the region (e.g. 3+3, 3+2, and 3+3+1 plans), Iran, Turkey and Russia as well as the EU are considered along with Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia.

On the other hand, the relations between states are not only characterized by conflicting interests and security (mis)perceptions, but also by opposite visions for the region (Coppieters, 1996: 254). Russians define the Caucasus as the 'near abroad'. Turkey thinks that the large Turkic community of "Turan" in the Caucasus and Central Asia should be united under the leadership of Turkey (Coppieters, 1996: 255). Because of its historical and cultural affinities with the region, Iran defines this region in the sphere of Iranian civilization. The European Union has defined a specific form of linkages with regional countries according to its European Neighborhood Policy. Principally the United States should be added to the aforementioned complex, looking at the region particularly in the energy security framework.

If we add ethnic factor, which plays a significant role in the region, the region's security complexities will become more apparent. In other words, the Caucasian security complex includes a wide range of actors from small players

like a 70 thousand-strong actor, i.e. South Ossetia, to large powers like Russia and the United States. The presence of numerous and different actors raises a fundamental question whether security in the Caucasus is defined in a regional context or in an international one. Considering the importance of energy security as well as the region's geostrategic significance for the U.S. and Europe on the one hand, and its importance for Russian national security on the other, the question of security in the Caucasus seems to have become a matter of great powers relations rather than a regional issue.

During the past 15 years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus has been faced with numerous crises as mentioned above, and it has been in a fragile security situation. Although there are many factors determining the creation of such a situation, the role played by the great powers in the instigation or prolongation of such crises has been salient. An investigation of security conditions in the Caucasus demonstrates that during this period whenever the interests of great powers have coincided, there has been a fertile ground for their cooperation on the establishment of security, yielding positive results.

On the contrary, attempts at shifting the balance of power and privileging one's own interests have given rise to new crises and conflicts in the region. Indeed, the new stage of crisis in the Caucasus broke out when the West, by encouraging the Rose Revolution in Georgia, tried to ignore Russia rather than collaborating with it in regional affairs. This attitude which was also followed in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine convinced the Russians that the West was not ready to recognize Russian interests in the former Soviet sphere. As a result, Russia's strategic thinking in recent years has distanced from the optimistic attitude held by Gorbachev entitled 'Common Security' as followed throughout Yeltsin years. As Director of the Moscow Center Carnegie Endowment, Dimitri Trenin, suggests, "Demilitarization of Russian strategic thinking is a thing of the past. This, however, does not mean a return to the Cold War mentality. More likely, Russian strategic thinkers and practitioners are back 100-120 years in time, in the pre-World War I environment of ruthless strategic competition among the major powers" (Trenin, 2007: 36).

All of this shows that unlike the Yeltsin era, Russia under Putin no longer tolerates security ties between the CIS republics and outside powers as evidenced by its opposition to the NATO membership bid by Ukraine and Georgia. Although military confrontation between Russia and the Western great powers in the Caucasus is unlikely, current power projection by both

sides will create an unstable situation in the region, threatening peace and security in one of the mostly volatile regions of the contemporary world. Indeed, one point is certain: Russia will no longer tolerate any security arrangements between the Caucasian states and the outside powers as it sees such arrangements as an encroachment of its immediate security environment. However, it seems that Russia will stop short of open and an all-out hostility toward the West reminiscent of the Cold War.

Conclusion

Moscow regards the Caucasus as its backyard and considers controlling the Caucasus very important and strategic in order to keep its hold on the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. For this reason, whenever the central government in Moscow enjoys enough power, it has shown its interest in dominating this region. Given the fragile nature of ethnic issues in the Caucasus and its neighboring regions in the Russian territory, the reluctance of many nationalities to accept Russia's domination, and the likelihood that they could be intrigued by outside forces, Russia regards the republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia as its strategic depth and considers any influence exerted by foreign powers in these regions as a threat to its national security.

During the years after the Soviet collapse, the Russians lost much of their control over the region because of their own domestic problems, but it seems that Moscow is not interested in withdrawing further from the region.

At the same time, the U.S. is also interested in expanding its influence in this region because it knows well that the Caucasus holds many strategic prizes for U.S. global position. The region can provide the U.S. with an energy supply, an access route to energy resources located in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea, and strategic superiority needed to confront Russia and Iran.

The will and interest of both the U.S. and Russia combined with the region's political and geopolitical situation have given the dialectical relationship between geopolitical changes and crisis a prominent role in shaping future political and strategic contours of the region. Under these conditions, it seems that as long as all regional and trans-regional powers do not pay attention to the interests of other powers or be perceived as threats against them, this situation will continue. Following the crisis in Georgia, reformulating some of the old security arrangements or building new ones has been tossed among players. But some of these proposals tend to be insufficiently attentive to the realities on the ground.

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