

PERCEPTIONS
JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
June - August 1998 Volume III - Number 2

SECURITY THREATS IN THE CAUCASUS: GEORGIA'S VIEW

ALEXANDER RONDELI

Dr. Alexander Rondeli is Director of Foreign Policy Research and Analysis Centre, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Georgia.

For every country national security problems and priorities are of vital and primary importance. New, independent states are particularly sensitive to security problems, as they lack the experience that comes from independent statehood. They have not had the opportunity to develop a defined culture for strategic planning or foreign policy engineering. Furthermore, newly independent states - only just emerging as sovereign, autonomous actors - feel insecure and quite uncertain about what their security interests and priorities should be, and how to go about defining them. Thus, they tend to underestimate certain security threats, exaggerate others and, sometimes, even miss vital factors in the game of national security planning. Their strategic visions, and corresponding calculations, are mainly based on historical memories, which themselves are constructed with reference to ethnic lines. They are also affected by a division between 'us' and 'them', and the classical pattern of 'insiders' and 'outsiders', or 'friends' and 'enemies'. These calculations are also grounded on an assessment of the global political and economic system, which quite frequently becomes unrealistic, being judged through the states' perspective on security.

The region and context in which these states find themselves can complicate or reduce their security problems, as well as the tasks facing them as regards foreign policy. Every region has its own distinct security environment, which is for the main part defined by the region's geo-strategic and geo-economic position. This, in turn, is influenced or determined by how strongly the major world powers are interested in this particular region and by the interest and involvement of more powerful neighbours and regional powers in the state's political and economic life. Furthermore, one cannot forget the additional burden of the political situation and security issues within the country itself, in turn influenced by the pattern of enmities and amities intrinsic to the region.

THE CAUCASUS: A RE-EMERGING REGION

The Caucasian states, soon after gaining independence, became not only an object of intense interest for their much more powerful neighbours, but also for the region's main powers (Iran, Russia, and Turkey). At the same time they are becoming more and more valuable to the world's leading powers, because of the region's significant oil reserves and its potential role as a transit corridor between Europe and Asia.¹ Hence, the region is starting to attract international investors, which results in an increase in their strategic importance, and thus in their significance in the security interests of leading powers. The Caucasus is transforming into one of the new regional security complexes in the Post-Soviet space (along with Central Asia).

The distinctiveness of the emerging Caucasian security complex stems, first of all, from the legacy it receives from the breakdown of the Soviet Union, eg. all three states in the region are members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) created at the beginning of the 1990's as an attempt by Russia to control the Post-Soviet space. This attempt is influenced by an interesting realignment of pre-Soviet cultural identities, coupled with a new pattern of alliances, a new set of economic interests and new possibilities of economic links. The changing political and economic circumstances surrounding the CIS states and the different dynamics of security can also be seen to have a role.

The Caucasus has a specific security context of its own, with its own distinct, and extremely

difficult, problems. There are several main factors influencing the situation in the region, which can provoke instability and/or add to potential threats which individual states have to face when dealing with issues of security. The Caucasus is a region, which has little or no tradition of modern statehood. It is inhabited by a mosaic of various religious and ethnic groups who, for the most part, share a history or legacy of friendship, understanding, and tolerance, but have been known to display mistrust, animosity, dispute, and violence at other times. The region is a territory where some state boundaries are not yet precisely defined and demarcated, and thus these may be disputed.

The issue of demarcation of state boundaries is not as acute in the Caucasus as it is in some of the other CIS states, but problems of boundary demarcation and delimitation create and will create serious problems for the region's security and stability.

The Caucasian countries are not only weak powers; they are also weak, inefficient states. One could even go as far as to say that the newly independent Caucasian countries are, in fact, still quasi-states, as their statehood is still incomplete and a state-building is progressing with considerable difficulty.

Despite pressures on the nation state in the late twentieth century, whether these pressures are caused by external challenges to the economic sovereignty of a state or by internal challenges to the "ruling" ethnic group within a nation, the conditions for independent statehood in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have never been so good. The chaos of the last few years has taught the Caucasian people the value of self-organisation and the necessity of having a strong and effective state order. These new nations have to handle the tendencies of rapid globalisation, which directly challenge the state, while at the same time trying to build modern states.

The Chechnian conflict revealed the weaknesses of the Russian military and the limitations of an imperial power. The Caucasian states managed to reduce their economic dependence on Russia. The UN, the OSCE and various other Western NGOs, despite the fact that they have not thus far been very successful mediators, internationalise conflicts in the region, publicly defend the rights of small nations, and consequently make the potential hegemonic aspirations of regional powers less legitimate and less feasible. The discovery of major oil reserves in the Caucasus, the weakness of the surrounding regional powers and the rivalry between them, as well as their need for Western aid, gives the Caucasian states considerable leverage.

The ineffectiveness and impotence of the structures of CIS countries, which are supposed to be integrating, in combination with Russia's inability to deal with the other CIS member states on equal terms, and its desire to become the dominating motor within the Commonwealth, provokes in other CIS members the feeling that such a union is incapable of guaranteeing their economic interests and, more importantly, their security.

Currently, the Caucasian states lack economic resources and political or strategic tools. Thus, they are unable to defend their national interests, or even their territorial integrity, within the post-Soviet space. All need financial support to remedy their weak economies and backward industries.

The threats with which the Caucasian states find themselves confronted originate within the region, although the possibility of external threats can never be excluded. Russia's involvement in local conflicts illustrates how serious regional powers can influence local security dynamics.² In at least two states - namely Azerbaijan and Georgia - the situation is further aggravated by their multi-ethnic and multi-religious character. This, combined with an extreme weakness of civic elements, makes the process of state building difficult. The process of democratisation, so far, has revealed the deficiencies of the multiethnic post-Soviet states. Conflicts (in mountainous Karabagh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia) became a very serious problem, not only for the Caucasian states themselves, but also for the neighbouring regions and the international community.

The democratisation coincides with the occurrence of violence in this region raises the question of

whether the democratisation of multiethnic societies inevitably creates favourable conditions for ethnic conflict, or conflicts which are the consequence of external manipulation.

One has to agree with S. Neil MacFarlane³, who argues that, in the South Caucasus, democratisation has allowed or set conditions for the emergence of pre-existing nationalist sentiments that were strengthened by the Soviet experience. The ethno-demographic make-up of the region contributed to the resurgence of nationalism in regional and ethnic conflicts, but outside forces as well as leading regional powers (namely Russia) played an important role in the conflicts of the South Caucasus, with the aim of weakening countries such as Georgia or Azerbaijan.⁴

For the governments of the Caucasian states, encouraging the development of a self-respecting democratic nation and creating modern nation-states is indeed a difficult task. Therefore, in the Caucasian context 'national security' involves the complex relationship between emerging nations and the creation of democratic states.

THREATS TO THE SECURITY OF THE REGION AND THE ROLE OF THE REGIONAL POWERS

The security problems the Caucasian states have to face on the inside make them not only extremely vulnerable to domestic unrest, but also to threats from the outside. The more so, as none of the Caucasian states is economically self-reliant and all of them are currently undergoing deep economic and social crises. The weakness of their statehood makes the Caucasian states more sensitive and biased in their vision of the external environment, to such an extent that this vision itself can become dangerous or even threatening. Their concept of 'national security' itself is still as problematic as it is strongly influenced by the inertia of the 'Soviet mentality' and haunted by the experience of the past.

Security is the successful management of change, because change provokes a potential for crisis and conflict. The Caucasus region is going through a process of transition and rapid change. Regional security in the Caucasus would mean the successful management of change, toward an equitable and peaceful order. This can be achieved only with responsible policy on the part of the main regional powers.⁵

The Caucasian states form a regional security complex that is still in its embryonic state. Relationships within a potential security complex are still overshadowed and strongly influenced by the relationship to more powerful neighbours and players. In some instances, external forces and factors manipulate political groups, revisionist ethnic factions, or even entire states within the region, for their own interest, but thereby add to the insecurity within the region. The security structures and arrangements of the CIS have little positive effect on the security environment of the region.

The weak Caucasian states are still incapable of defending their national interests and of providing for their security alone. Consequently, the security concerns raised by the states in this region and the foreign policy behaviour they display may originate in their own belief that they are incapable of relying solely on their own means and that the solution of any 'security dilemma' must come from the outside.

The states of the Caucasus have no alternative than to develop an economic co-operation within the region and to solve the question of security on their own. Armenia, nevertheless, seeks protection from Russia, partly because of its different security concerns, and partly because of its confrontation with Azerbaijan over Karabagh. As a consequence, co-operation in the region, whether in economic terms, or in issues of security, is not promoted.

Security threats within each country in this region, as well as on the overall regional, do not only pose a problem for the region itself. Ethnic tensions and conflicts among the states of this region can easily spill over its borders, aggravate the security structures and affect the amity-enmity pattern within and without the CIS (such as in Iran and Turkey). There is an urgent need for a more positive involvement of the outside powers in this region, which is to be aimed at supporting

regional co-operation and at contributing to the region's security. The Caucasian states would prefer co-operation to anarchy; they would prefer co-operation to the selfish and 'negative' meddling of outside powers in the affairs of the regional states; they would prefer it to the chaos which results and is produced by the 'security dilemma'. It is truly in the interests of the regional actors to play a more constructive role in establishing a 'healthy' security environment in the Caucasus. It is time for the states of this region to think more about a regional co-operation on economic matters as well as on matters of security, as this is the only way to preserve their recently gained independence and to fully develop their economic potential.

GEORGIA'S VIEW ON THE REGION'S DEVELOPMENT

Georgia's priority, concerning regional security and economic issues, is to find a new role and function within the international system as well as within the region. This, however, cannot be achieved without stability and economic development in the region. Again, in order to obtain stability and economic development certain conditions have to be fulfilled.

The territorial integrity of states must be preserved. The instigators of conflicts must be condemned, and conflict management must become a collective effort. Human rights must be protected, always and everywhere. Restoration and preservation of peace and stability is impossible without the realisation of these fundamental principles. Regional states have to co-operate in the promotion of ethnic and confessional tolerance. Extremist nationalism, xenophobia and separatism have to be collectively condemned and persecuted.

The basis of Georgia's vision of the Caucasus region is its belief in promoting regional security and economic co-operation.

The security dynamics in the Caucasus are first of all determined by the regional powers. The interests and deeds of the regional powers shape the security environment of this region.

Georgia perceives the role of regional powers to be one of not only giving support to the region's new independent states in building their statehood, but also one of promoting regional co-operation and inter-dependence. Hence, regional powers have to play a major role in preserving territorial integrity and in promoting economic dynamism in the newly independent states of the Caucasus.

Georgia sees its future, within a regional context, more in geo-economic terms than in geo-political ones. Georgia feels that Azerbaijan also looks to its future in a similar way. Armenia, by our view, still perceives the complicated political and economic issues of this region through a more geopolitical lens; it relies heavily on external support instead of developing confidence in itself, to work towards a co-operation within the region.

The region's future has to be seen in an economic context, otherwise, the Caucasus may remain underdeveloped; it may lack an integrative, as well as co-operative, spirit, lack the necessary links, and will stay open to conflicts. Regional security can be developed through economic co-operation, which would not only bring stability and economic dynamism to all three small independent states but also benefit regional powers, both in their security and in their economies. The Caucasus may play the role of a bridge for regional powers, even more the role of a bridge in East-West and North-South trade.

Mass transport, as well as means of communication, must be protected. Everything necessary must be done to ensure free access to these means. One of the most important political and economic resources of the Caucasus is its favourable location. It is through its location, that the region can acquire global importance. Thus, any blocking in communication has to be considered as a criminal act against the well-being of the whole region. A co-operation on environmental issues has to be developed.

Georgia perceives the role of regional powers in the Caucasus in terms of how able they are to find responsible approaches to the potential problems of the region. The regional powers (Iran, Russia,

Turkey) are multiethnic states, which are interested in preserving their own territorial integrity and internal unity. Thus, the Georgian view is that regional powers are deeply concerned with Caucasian problems and would like to solve them first of all, because this serves their own interests.

The conflicts which have already taken place in the Caucasus have shown regional powers that internal problems and instability within each of the Caucasian states may spill over the regional boundaries, and affect the interests of the regional powers (including their security concerns). They may trigger unexpected processes and changes, and may even threaten the security of the regional powers themselves (as has been the case with Russia).

The regional powers have to strengthen regional security and economic co-operation, support the political and economic development of the newly independent states in the Caucasus and should not attempt, as has been the case in some instances, to turn these states into impotent satellites and quasi-states, which would be incapable of preserving internal stability.

1 See Rajan Menon, *Treacherous Terrain: The Political and Security Dimensions of Energy Development in the Caspian Sea Zone*, in "The National Bureau of Asian Research", *NBR Analysis*, Vol.9, No.1, Seattle, February 1998.

2 Thomas Goltz, "Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand", *Foreign Policy*, No.92, Fall 1993, pp.92-116.

3 S. Neil MacFarlane, "Government and Opposition", *Democratisation, Nationalism and Regional Security in the Southern Caucasus*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1997, pp. 399-420.

4 S. Neil MacFarlane, and Larry Minear, "Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and Peacekeeping", *Occasional Paper No. 21*, The Thomas Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, 1996, pp.15-16; S. Neil MacFarlane, and Larry Minear, "Humanitarian Action and Politics: The Case of Nagorno-Karabagh", *Occasional Paper No. 25*, The Thomas Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, 1997, pp. 16-17/24-29; Thomas Goltz, "Letter from Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand", *Foreign Policy*, No. 92, Fall 1993, pp. 92-116.

5 How Iran views the region is discussed in: Mehrdad Mohsenin, "Iran's Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus", Vol. VII, No.4, Winter 1996, pp. 834-853.