

Russia and the South: Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus*

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I. RUSSIA: NEO-IMPERIALIST OR JUST ANOTHER GREAT POWER?

As the foreign and security policies of the Russian Federation progressively acquired greater assertiveness throughout 1993 and 1994, the academic and policy debate in the world outside Russia about the deeper purposes and direction of Russian behavior have focused on one fundamental question: Has Russia turned to a neo-imperialistic foreign policy?

The objective basis of the debate was laid down by several important and rather neatly observable trends and developments in the larger Russian polity and among the political elite in 1993 and 1994. These were the domestic debate within the Russian polity on the necessity of reasserting Russia's influence on the former Soviet Republics, to pose as the protector of the Russian diaspora if for nothing else; the official redefinition of Russia's vital interests, articulating renewed claims on the space of the former Soviet Union; and notable shifts in Russia's conduct in its relations with the external world in 1993 and 1994 away from exclusive preoccupation with the West to a new embrace with the former Soviet republics with the exception of the Baltic states. The same objective factors have yielded, broadly speaking, two opposing views concerning the aims and direction of evolving Russian foreign and security policies. Put simply, one view has argued that Russia has reverted to its traditional imperial impulses and, therefore, has set for itself the task of reconstructing the historical Russian empire.¹ The opposing view by and large absolves Russia of the intention 'to strike back' with the old empire and assesses Russia's relevant moves in particular in the south as an expression of routine great power proclivity to exercise influence in its immediate periphery.²

As stated earlier, several initiatives and practices by Russia in the last two years have informed the debate on Russia's deeper purpose and long-term goals. At the doctrinal-political level, the highlights of these developments were the adoption in January 1993, by the Ministry of

* Tsarist Russia divided the Caucasus into Northern Caucasus and Transcaucasus. This study, originally prepared in June 1995, will use the term 'southern Caucasus' instead of Transcaucasus, since the former more precisely reflects the reference to a geographical location.

Foreign Affairs, of the Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation,³ and the adoption in November 1993, by the Security Council of the Russian Federation, of the Basic Provisions of the Military Doctrine.⁴ These documents were mutually complementary and reinforced each other as the declaratory expression of the conceptual vision entertained by the Russian foreign policy and security establishment concerning: (a) the vital interests and the future role of the Russian Federation at the global level and in its immediate periphery, that is in the former USSR, otherwise known as the 'near abroad' and, (b) the means by which Russia's vital interests at both levels were to be secured. Together, they set out anew, in the light of the experiences of the critical first year, the guidelines for the conduct of Russia's foreign policy while offering the organizing thoughts around which to construct national security and defense.

The conceptual elaborations and policy initiatives of 1993 were the expressions of the broad-based consensus that had been taking shape since about mid-1992 among the Russian political elite on the need for a more assertive foreign policy especially with regard to the so-called 'nearby foreign states'. The domestic debate had spawned such critical questions as the nature and basis of Russia's future relations with the newly independent states in the former Soviet space, Russia's role in crisis management and conflict resolution in those countries, the scope of Russia's peacekeeping role in the same space, and presumable aspirations of third countries like Turkey and Iran perceived as Russia's new geopolitical rivals.

Clear signals about Russia's growing resolve not to allow developments in the former Soviet space to undermine perceived Russian interests and neutralize Russian influence there emerged in Summer 1992. Russian forces intervened in the conflict in Moldova on the side of the breakaway 'Republic of Dniester', presumably to protect the Russian minority. According to Andranik Migranyan, a member of Yeltsin's Presidential Council and an adviser on foreign affairs, the decision to intervene in the insurgency in Moldova provided the turning point in the growth of the consensus on the need for an assertive Russian foreign policy.⁵ He observed that once it became clear that the West would not strongly object, the Russian Foreign Ministry's position began to change in the direction of the unconditional defense of the Dniester Republic.

The Russian decision to intervene in the civil war in Tajikistan, again in Summer 1992, under the aegis of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), offered the other major clue to the subsequent adoption by Moscow of a policy of active involvement, by use of force if necessary, in the affairs of 'nearby foreign states'. Both involvements, as well as military operations in Georgia, have been defined by Russia as 'peacekeeping operations', irrespective of the vast differences between the traditional understanding of

peacekeeping developed by United Nations conduct and the Russian operations.⁶

The Concept of Foreign Policy emerged as the reaffirmation of the official reorientation towards the CIS, the institutional expression of the 'nearby foreign states' minus the Baltic states. It called on Russia to ensure peace, stability and respect for human rights and freedoms in the former Soviet Union, to undertake mediation and peacemaking primarily on the basis of bilateral arrangements, and, together with the 'nearby foreign states', urgently to provide for the security of the external borders of the CIS. It warned that in these times of painful transition in Russia's geopolitical surroundings,

the outcome of the complex process of change would depend largely on Russia's capacity through persuasion, and in extreme cases also through the use of force, to affirm the principles of international law, including the rights of minorities, and to achieve stable neighborly relations.⁷

Russia simultaneously launched a diplomatic campaign aimed at the legitimization of Russian military presence and peacekeeping activities in the CIS, whether undertaken unilaterally as in the case of the Transdnistr conflict in Moldavia, or under the aegis of the CIS, as in the case of the civil war in Tajikistan. In February 1993 President Yeltsin addressed an appeal to the international community for a United Nations mandate granting Russia special powers as the guarantor of peace and stability in the same space.⁸ At the CSCE Council of Foreign Ministers' meeting in Rome in November 1993, Russia pressed for its current and prospective peacekeeping forces in the CIS to be granted the status of CSCE forces, a request not granted.⁹

The Military Doctrine of November 1993 was similarly preoccupied with the importance of the CIS for Russian foreign and security policies.¹⁰ It pronounced that Russia's security interests extended beyond its borders to reach at least the boundaries of the former Soviet Union. It, too, empowered Russia to intervene in the event of the suppression of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of Russian-speaking citizens in the 'nearby foreign states'. The emphasis of the Military Doctrine on regional conflicts in the former Soviet space, and on the potential threat they would pose to Russian security indicate that Russia considers the role of its armed forces in the post-Soviet era to be geared more to coping with regional contingencies than a global, general war.

It is important to note that the conceptual and policy breakthrough in Russian foreign and security policies beginning in early 1993, represented a departure from the priorities and preferences of the Yeltsin-Kozyrev outlook to the world that prevailed in the first year following the disintegration of

the Soviet Union. In August 1992, for example, Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev had rejected the adoption of an assertive foreign policy towards the former Soviet republics proposed by his national communist hardliner critics on grounds that it would turn Russia into an imperial state, threatening the others, especially Russia's neighbors.¹¹ In early 1993, however, while cooperation with the West still remained a major goal, Russia now expressed a resolve to pursue its specific policies where it deemed its vital interests to be at variance from those of its partners. As explained above, Russian vital interests now embraced interests in the 'nearby foreign states'. This embrace was to be so total as to lead to the exclusion of third states – except in the mutually beneficial sphere of economic cooperation.

By mid-1994, Foreign Minister Kozyrev seemed fully satisfied with the new orientation of what he termed the 'Yeltsin-Kozyrev strategy': 'The Yeltsin-Kozyrev strategy ... is the creation of good-neighborly relations with the newly created independent states ... We are playing a special role owing to the special circumstances and because of the special weight of Russia. But we are not looking to establish and maintain dominance.'¹² At about the end of 1994, President Yeltsin confidently pronounced in his speech before the United Nations General Assembly that while new relations of vital importance to world security were forging between the United States and Russia, the countries of the CIS enjoyed priority in Russia's economic and foreign policy.¹³ Russia's link to these countries transcended ordinary neighbourship; it was one of 'blood kinship', according to the President.¹⁴

In trying to understand Russia's post-1992 approach to the countries of the CIS and the conceptual underpinnings behind it, it is important to recall that the CIS countries fall into three, rather distinct, regional categories: Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the west; Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in the southern Caucasus; and the Central Asian States of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. All three geographical groupings share essentially two attributes that potentially predetermine the broad outlines of the nature of mutual relations with Moscow and set a pattern of uniformity and continuity: the legacy of economic dependence inherited from the Soviet era, and an overload of political, social and economic problems encountered almost without exception by all the newly independent states within the CIS engaged in the process of state and nation formation. The overpowering weight of these two features have facilitated the drafting and pursuit of a broadly uniform approach by Moscow towards the CIS. On the other hand, important inter-regional and intra-regional differences have called for nuanced approaches tailored to the specifications of the regions and individual states within the regions.

The following pages will discuss the main features of the Russian approach to Central Asia and the southern Caucasus with particular emphasis on the security dimension. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of each newly independent Central Asian country within the CIS, they shall be treated as a single block for reasons of space.

II. RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA

In a thoughtful article published in fall 1993, Alexei Arbatov described the major categories of domestic views concerning Russia's relations with the former republics. On the views of the 'centrist and moderate-conservative groups', he said:

They argued that Russia is entitled to a 'special role' due to its size, historic preponderance, and other advantages over smaller states, as well as its out-of-area strategic and political interests. Preserving and, if necessary, reinstating its dominant role across the territory of the former USSR is the principal goal of their vision of Russian foreign policy. This is to be achieved by manipulation of various factors: economic dependence of some republics, presence of ethnic Russian population and Russian armed forces on the territory of others, ethnic and political tensions and border conflicts among them. By this line of logic, the weaker and less stable the other republics are, the stronger and better off Russia is.

The proponents of this policy believe that ... containment of the smaller republics' drives toward independence will eventually result in a decline of local nationalism, after which reintegration will gain momentum again (with a few exceptions such as the Baltics. They argue that Russia's 'special responsibility and authority for the former Soviet Republics (a new version of the Monroe Doctrine) should be recognized by the West and sanctioned by the UN'.¹⁵

Today, almost two years later, Russian policy towards Central Asia and the southern Caucasus seems to fully correspond to the visions of the centrist and moderate conservative groups in the Russian polity, so skilfully depicted in the above quotation. Evidently, the evolution of official policy and its doctrinaire manifestations reviewed in the preceding pages were a reflection of the shift in the balance of domestic political forces some of which had strongly criticized what seemed the exclusively Western orientation of the early Yeltsin-Kozyrev foreign policy.¹⁶

Indeed, Central Asia had remained on the sidelines of Moscow's attention for nearly a whole year as a new and uncertain Russia struggled to

comprehend the foreign policy implications of its drastically diminished power and prestige, a drastic change not merely by world standards but, perhaps of more immediate relevance to the question of how to relate to the newly independent countries, by regional standards as well. In contrast, the power vacuum created by the Soviet retrenchment and dissolution had invited other regional contenders for influence, namely, Turkey, Iran and China above all else, to take an active interest in the newly opened up geopolitical space of Central Asia.

The debate in Russia in 1992–93 on Russia's foreign policy alternatives and the perception that neighboring third countries were pressing to penetrate Central Asia to the detriment of Russia's special role and historical interests there, intersected at numerous junctures strongly to reinforce the perception that Russia needed to resume the initiative in the south, a term which generally implies both Central Asia and the southern Caucasus. Various perceived dangers to Russian interests in and around Central Asia, that is, the revival of ideas about forming an Islamic political union, a regional economic union, and a Turkish community of nations, apparently acted as an important trigger on Moscow to mobilize renewed interest and subsequent reinvolverment in Central Asia. The Concept on Foreign Policy specifies these influences, and the presumable role of neighboring third countries in their mobilization, implying that evolving Russian policies were at least partly prompted by a desire to exclude rival centers of influence from the region.

Against this background, a steady momentum towards reintegration in particular within the framework of the CIS, has been the outstanding feature of the plethora of moves and initiatives since the latter part of 1992 and early 1993 to pull the Central Asian periphery into the orbit of the Russian center. The ambivalence of the early post-Soviet phase of Russian policy towards Central Asia has since been replaced by a broad official and popular consensus that claims that Russia has special national and geopolitical interests in the countries of Central Asia which must be vigilantly protected directly on the territory of the states concerned.

The momentum towards reintegration could be successfully mobilized and sustained primarily because the inherently fragile states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have been beset by formidable political, economic, demographic and security challenges. The leaderships in all five states have, therefore, essentially conceded that Russian presence and influence in Central Asia are an imperative for regional stability and for the stability and security of their respective regimes. The following quotation from an interview with Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev, on the occasion of a special CIS summit meeting of heads of state in August 1993 on the crisis in Tajikistan, can be taken as a

representative sample of the views of national leaders in Central Asia with the reminder, however, that Kyrgyzstan has been the most heavily dependent on Russian support for the day to day vitality of its national economy:

I entirely support a resolute turn by the Russian leadership at present toward the problems in Central Asia and toward ensuring stability and peace in the Central Asian region. I think Russia has enormous interests in our region; the most important thing is that the interest of the republics of Central Asia are also closely linked with the interests of Russia. The countries of Central Asia have always been attracted toward Russia. They have always believed that progress in their countries is possible only in union with Russia.¹⁷

President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, an ardent champion of the idea of economic union, repeated on the same occasion his warning that without economic union and without helping each other, everybody would face hard times.¹⁸

Newly independent countries in Central Asia have chosen to revive and intensify relations with the Russian center for one or a combination of the following reasons: to sustain their shattered economies; to bolster their domestic regimes and grip on power; to preserve their territorial integrity in the face of existing and potential territorial disputes among the republics themselves; and to contain dangerous movements and influences such as Islamic radicalism and inter-ethnic conflict. Variations among the national leaderships concerning the long-term implications of their continued dependence on and reintegration with Russia for the future of their national sovereignty have been one of degree rather than substance. In fact, the long-term viability of these states other than Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as independent entities have been in question. Even Kazakhstan, faced with a precarious demographic balance between the indigenous Kazakh and the Russian populations, constituting roughly 40 and 38 per cent respectively, may be placed within the category of an inherently vulnerable, potentially unviable state. An agreement finally reached in January 1995 between Yeltsin and Nazarbaev granted the right of dual citizenship to their respective peoples, a move strongly resisted for long by the Kazakh leader.¹⁹ Acutely aware of the pressures this and other vulnerabilities and dependency relationships present to the prospects of the long-term stability and integrity of his country, President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan has been in the forefront among Central Asian leaders in his advocacy of close economic, political and defense cooperation with Russia and within the CIS.

Economic imperatives have provided an especially urgent dynamic in

favor of integration. Even though Central Asia is a region of vast natural resources, most countries depend on deliveries from Russia to meet their needs for food and fossil fuel. This is, ironically, despite the tremendous wealth in natural resources owned by these countries. For example, Strobe Talbott, then Acting Secretary, explained in an address at the US Central Asia Business Conference in Washington, DC, on 3 May 1994, that the mineral deposits in Uzbekistan alone were estimated to have a market value of \$3 trillion, and that Turkmenistan produced 85 billion cubic meters of natural gas a year.²⁰

There are other forms of economic dependence, as well, such as the need to use the transportation networks in Russia for access to world markets. For, these countries are all land-locked. Hence, numerous forms of organizational and infrastructural dependence inherited from the centralized command economy of the former Soviet Union create a need to make concessions to the Russian side in political terms.²¹ Clearly, Russia is acutely aware of its stronger bargaining position *vis-à-vis* CIS countries due to its superior economic capabilities in relative and absolute terms, as suggested by Valeryan Viktorov, deputy chairman of the Federation Council, when he said that the CIS republics were 'fed up with their sovereignty' and were seeking economic integration particularly with Russia, the locomotive which would pull its own economy and those of the CIS countries out of the crisis.²² A Russian government agency report issued in September 1994 indicated that in 1993 alone deliveries by Russia to other CIS countries for which no payment was made reached around \$10 billion.²³

In the field of security, too, there are areas where Russian and Central Asian needs seem to have converged. As previously observed, Russia has felt that its southern borders need to be safeguarded against inter-ethnic and radical Islamic movements emanating from the south. Hence, tensions and armed conflicts in these areas must be contained and preferably eliminated in order to prevent them from spilling over into Russia. Central Asian states, all of them militarily weak, politically authoritarian and vulnerable to destabilization from multiple sources, have found cooperation with Russia indispensable to the maintenance of economic and regime security.

The perceived Islamic fundamentalist drive for power in Tajikistan, and the Afghan support for it, have apparently played a seminal role in convincing both Russian and Central Asian leaderships to join in a united effort to contain such forces and influences. From the perspective of Russia, the evolution of the initial power struggle in Tajikistan between hardline Communist opposition and the coalition government composed of democrats, moderate Islamists and former Communists into a civil war in early 1992 represented a formidable test case between the forces of stability and those of instability in post-Soviet Central Asia.²⁴ To preserve the forces

of stability Russia felt compelled to resort to military involvement in Central Asia in the role of a peacekeeper, pressing the Central Asian state also to assume responsibility within the framework of CIS.

The impact on the long-term visions and calculations of Central Asian countries was equally profound. The specter of an Islamic fundamentalist takeover in Tajikistan helped solidify consensus in particular among Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan against Tajikistan-type Islamist challenges to secular rule. In fear, they lined up behind Russia and called for steps for a stronger CIS.

Russia's concern with the possible adverse repercussions of Islamic radicalism and inter-ethnic conflicts in its south on the political and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation as well as with the welfare of the Russian diaspora are only one aspect, however, of Russian security thinking concerning this part of the CIS. The broader motive force is geopolitical, intertwined with the yearning to reaffirm Russia's great power status. The Russian mental map perceives the territories of the Russian Federation and the CIS states as comprising a single geopolitical space shaped by the forces of history and whose preservation is dictated by historical as well as contemporary circumstances. In fact, it is precisely this perceptual and philosophical mindset that has inspired 'the CIS first' strategy by Russia in the first place since early 1993.

Despite the appearance that the Treaty on Collective Security forms the blueprint for a new military alliance on the territory of the former Soviet Union, concrete progress on military integration has lagged. Evidently Russia does not consider the present state of security cooperation within the CIS adequate to meet security challenges as perceived by Moscow. Russian Defense Minister General Pavel Grachev has described the CIS Collective Security Treaty as a mere formality and called for the creation of 'a real CIS defense union'.²⁵ Ironically, it was the same Russian Ministry of Defense which had engineered in June 1993 the dissolution of the Supreme Command of the CIS joint armed forces in order to avoid subordination of the Russian military to a non-Russian authority.

There has been some movement in 1995 potentially contributing to military integration. Two CIS summits of heads of state have been the occasion for intense deliberation of several military issues. At the Alma Ata summit in February, agreement was reached on 'the concept of collective security' and on 'a declaration on collective security', as reported later by President Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan.²⁶ Plans for military cooperation entailed in particular the questions of joint border and air defenses on which no consensus emerged. The Alma Ata summit also reviewed plans to establish four regional collective security zones in the territory of the commonwealth.²⁷ At the Minsk summit held in May, seven out of 12 CIS

members signed the treaty on joint protection of the external CIS borders. Azerbaijan, Moldova, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan refused to join.²⁸

Despite the high public profile of these summits, however, serious apprehensions seem to have been entertained by several CIS leaders about Moscow's preoccupation with issues of military integration. On the occasion of the Minsk summit Presidents Islam Kerimov of Uzbekistan and Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine as well as Azerbaijani officials openly expressed their frustration with the priority assigned to military matters over economic issues.²⁹ According to President Kuchma, 'there is no CIS external borders but each state has its external and internal borders'.³⁰

The Russian insistence on the joint protection of the external borders of the CIS implicitly raises fundamental questions about Russia's commitment to respect the international borders of the newly independent states in the former Soviet Union. Persistent reference to the 'external borders' of the CIS by implication glosses over the existence of publicly acknowledged international borders, creating an aura of ambivalence about the very existence of distinct borders within the CIS representing the territorial and political sovereignty of the states behind those borders. For Russian officials there appears to be little ambiguity, however, as suggested by Foreign Minister Kozyrev when he said, 'Russia does not have borders other than the former Soviet borders ... the only border we can maintain is the old Soviet border around the countries.'³¹

Russian policies aiming to integrate border protection and air defense in Central Asia and the southern Caucasus might have been prompted partly by Russian perceptions of rival Turkish, Iranian and Chinese aspirations and designs in these regions. Of the three, Turkey appears to occupy a central position in the security thinking of Russia concerning especially Russian/CIS security in the Caucasus, a point which will be raised again in the next section. Hence, the military arrangements with Georgia and Armenia, also to be discussed in the following section.

III. RUSSIA AND THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS³

Russia's approach to southern Caucasus has been substantially different from that followed toward Central Asia. Strategic goals in both regions are mutually supportive: to maintain Moscow's dominance in a single military-strategic area extending from the Black Sea in the west, to run across the Caspian Sea, to reach the borders of China in the east. The instruments utilized in the process of advancing towards that goal have differed, however, largely because the prevailing regional and domestic dynamics have differed in respective regions.

The southern Caucasus has been extensively destabilized by the Armenia-Azeri inter-ethnic/inter-state war over the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and the civil war in Georgia between the central government on the one hand and the separatist Abkhasian and South Ossetian minorities on the other. Except for Armenia, internal regimes have been less durable than those in Central Asia, reinforcing the customary tendency in weak states to count on external allies for survival of the regimes in power. In Georgia, the conflict between chauvinist President Zviad Gamsagurdhia and the opposition severely destabilized the country and resulted in Gamsagurdhia's brutal elimination. Eduard Shevardnadze's return to Georgia to assume the leadership of the country could not restore normalcy either in the face of a fierce civil war. In Azerbaijan, democratically elected President Abulfaz Elchibey was removed from office by force in June 1993, an ouster believed to have been facilitated by Moscow, to be replaced by the then President of the Assembly and former Azerbaijani Communist Party First Secretary Haidar Aliiev, who himself has since been the target of at least one publicly known coup attempt. In both cases, the humiliating defeats by government forces in the war against the adversary made the incumbents inherently vulnerable to popular discontent and armed mutiny.

Russia has apparently seen the civil war in Georgia, the Armenia-Azeri war over Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia's historical animosity to Turkey, which both Armenia and Russia have relied upon to neutralize Turkey's mediation role in the CSCE-sponsored Minsk Group, as opportunities to be manipulated in order to achieve a position of control in the southern Caucasus. It has capitalized on the weaknesses of the contending factions, the presence of Russian troops on the ground left from the Soviet era, and the plight of Russians caught between warring factions, to enhance its inherent influence and to arrogate to itself the role of the ultimate peace broker. Such role would allow it to dictate not merely the elements and conditions of peace between the warring sides but also the final balance of power in the region. Russia is widely believed to have played a significant role in the early stages of the conflict in support of the Abkhazian side and eventually interjected itself as the only mediator and peacekeeper.³² In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it has watched the disciplined Armenian forces occupy 20 per cent of the territory of Azerbaijan, to be used as a bargaining chip in the negotiations to force Azerbaijan to yield, while political chaos in the latter sapped its military and diplomatic effectiveness. This new phase in the conflict made it even more intractable especially for Azerbaijan who alone seemed powerless to reverse the situation on the ground. In the end, both Georgia and Azerbaijan were subdued following their losses, if not defeats, in their respective struggles. In Fall 1993, they joined the Treaty on Collective Security in anticipation of Moscow's support for their respective

causes. In less than two years Russia emerged as the ultimate voice in the bilateral and multilateral mediation processes.

The question is: Why such direct and persistent Russian military and diplomatic involvement in the conflicts in the southern Caucasus? Russia has maintained that the southern Caucasus presents a special and urgent security concern because it lies along the borders of one of the most complicated and unstable regions of the federation, namely the northern Caucasus. It is in the northern Caucasus that a range of complex forces, namely, ethnic diversity, arbitrary political boundaries, the Center's fear of Islam, and historical animosity to Russian overlordship, combined traditionally to sensitize Moscow against any serious manifestations of regional defiance and interference from the outside, historically meaning especially by Turkey and Iran. It is here that the independence-seeking Chechnya, with its rich oil reserves and highly developed pipelines, is located and the latest round of Chechen-Russian war has been raging since December 1994.³³ The Caucasus also lie on the northern tip of the Middle East/Gulf region where Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism have originated. Russia articulates deep concerns about the possibility that inter-ethnic and secessionist conflicts in the southern Caucasus would further aggravate the already deteriorating national, political and military relations among the peoples of northern Caucasus and their relations with Moscow.

These are all valid arguments, of course. However, the significance of the southern Caucasus for Russia goes beyond the limited scope of the security considerations concerning the northern Caucasus. The southern Caucasus holds enormous geostrategic significance for the Russian Federation due to its particular location on the east of the Black Sea, the north of the Middle East/Gulf region, and, on the path of existing and prospective transportation systems linking fossil-fuel rich Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, with the sea-ports of the Black Sea and the Mediterranean for access to world markets. For example, the Russian drive to establish military control in Georgia should be attributed to the importance Russia attaches to recapturing a strong presence in the Black Sea, as the following statement uttered by Defense Minister General Pavel Grachev in February 1993, at the time of heightened tensions between Georgia and Russia over the latter's military role in the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, suggests:

The Black Sea coast of the Caucasus and the area where our troops are stationed is a strategically important area for the Russian army ... (Russia) may take every measure to ensure that our troops will remain there (Georgia), otherwise we will lose the Black Sea.³⁴

Briefly, then, the southern Caucasus serves as a strategic hub between

Central Asia, the Black Sea and the Mediterranean for a great power like Russia which straddles the northern periphery of this extended geopolitical space. Politico-military presence in the southern Caucasus would at a minimum help Russia to safeguard and possibly extend its interests in Central Asia and the Black Sea region. Defense Minister Grachev articulated more than once Russia's continued geopolitical and strategic interests in the region.³⁵

Pavel Felgengauer, a noted Russian specialist on military affairs, points to another strategic feature of the region: its proximity to a potential rival of Russia, namely Turkey.

The southern Caucasus is Russia's main strategic forward defense area directly affecting the military situation in the NCMD (North Caucasus Military District). Many Russian forces still remain in the Transcaucasus, deployed on the old strategic frontier – *on the border with Turkey* (emphasis mine), a NATO member.³⁶

Evidently, the calculation that instability in the Caucasus might offer Turkey and Iran opportunities to exploit the situation to their respective advantages has provided another powerful motive force behind Russia's demonstrated sensitivity to the question of the security of the southern borders. As mentioned previously, Turkey, both because it is a NATO country and because it is the only Turkish state that could act as a potential pole of attraction to the Turkic peoples inside and outside Russia on the basis of ethnicity, thus presumably raising the specter of pan-Turkism, has been the target of deeper suspicions ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union.³⁷ A report distributed to Russian and foreign journalists by Yevgeniy Primakov, director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, in September 1994, openly charged Turkey and Iran of having aggravated the situation in the CIS 'hot spots' by becoming 'embroiled' in them in order to broaden their influence and assert themselves as regional superpowers.³⁸

Russia's actual approach to Turkey and Iran have shown substantial differences. Despite the negative rhetoric on Islamic fundamentalism, Moscow has been in general comfortable with Iran in its capacity as a regional actor, possibly viewing it as a counterbalance to Turkey. In the actual conduct of bilateral relations, it has been accommodating to Iran's interests, as the continuing determination to carry through with the nuclear deal – despite the attendant strains on Russian-American relations seems to indicate. In contrast, Russia has displayed a consistent hard line towards Turkish positions on various issues of mutual interest, that is, alternative oil pipeline routes for the transport of Kazakh and Azeri oil to world markets and the adverse environmental impact of heavy tankers if it passed through

the Turkish Straits. On both issues Russia has chosen to try to outmanoeuvre Turkey.³⁹

Security Strategy

Russia has pursued a three-pronged security strategy in the southern Caucasus:

1. On the diplomatic-military track, it has struggled to win for itself, or failing that for the CIS, an exclusive role both as a mediator and as a peacekeeper in regional conflicts. Persistent calls for an international mandate recognizing Russia's special rights and responsibilities as the sole peacekeeper in the former Soviet Union, and its corollary, namely the long resistance to the idea of a multilateral peacekeeping force for the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh under the authority of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have been the primary mechanisms utilized in the implementation of this track.⁴⁰ At the OSCE Summit in Budapest in December 1994, Russia yielded to the idea of a multinational force but there has been no concrete progress since then, indicating that Russia's concession on this score has remained mostly on paper. Both Russia and Armenia have raised strong objections to a possible Turkish peacekeeping role in the southern Caucasus.

2. On the military track Russia has pressed for the conclusion of bilateral agreements with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan that would authorize the deployment of Russian troops and the establishment of Russian bases on their respective territories.

Accordingly, in March 1995, the Defense Ministers of Russia and Georgia initialled an agreement defining the status of four military bases made available to Russia for a 25-year term. These are the bases in Gudauta (Abkhazia), Batumi, Akhalkalaki (southern Georgia) and Vaziani. In a review of the reasons behind the agreement, Georgia's Head of State Eduard Shevardnadze explained that in return Russia would support the reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and assist in creating the Georgian armed forces.⁴¹ Conceding that the presence of foreign troops would not be welcome by any country, he nevertheless emphasized that he could not see any other way out of Georgia's difficulties.

Russian and Georgian defense cooperation also provides for Russian border troops to be deployed as border guards on Georgia's frontier with Turkey.⁴² This means that, together with the military bases, the Russian armed forces have resumed their Soviet era positions along the current CIS-Turkish border.

Russian-Armenian security relations have shown similar trends. A treaty signed by the Presidents of Russia and Armenia in Moscow on 16 March

1995, also formalized the status of two Russian military bases, in Erevan and Gyumri each, in Armenia.⁴³ Defense Minister Grachev visited Erevan the last week of March for consultations on setting up a single air defense system for the CIS and to review the preparations for the joint military exercises scheduled for the end of the month. Grachev attached a great deal of political and military significance to the operation which apparently was to be the first of its kind in the CIS.⁴⁴

Azerbaijan seems to have withstood, so far, pressures to concede to the deployment of Russian troops and granting of basing rights to Russia. Lately, it has appeared to be prepared to negotiate the status of Gabala, a strategic electronic-monitoring center from the Soviet era. Azerbaijan has also been insistent that peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone of Nagorno-Karabakh be of multinational composition and be authorized by the OSCE. It, therefore, welcomed the decision of the OSCE Budapest Summit to authorize the dispatch of a peacekeeping force to the area. As events have shown, however, that decision has remained on paper.

3. Multilaterally, Russia sought to increase, or eliminate altogether, the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty's sub-zonal limits that apply to Russia's northern Caucasus. Russia and Ukraine are subject to sub-zonal limits within their territories with a view to preventing the movement of Treaty Limited Equipment (TLEs) from outside the sub-zones, which originally coincided with the former Soviet Military Districts. Such limits were especially important at the time of their negotiation in 1989–90 to allay the fears of Norway and Turkey that Soviet TLEs moved from Central Europe would end up in Soviet Military Districts on their borders. These fears are still valid today even though the geopolitical circumstances have changed. The Russian moves for the revision of the treaty were prompted, according to some observers, by a wish to have its units assigned to peacekeeping in the southern Caucasus excluded from count levels of the TLEs.⁴⁵ It was suggested that Russia planned to eventually deploy 23,000 peacekeepers in the southern Caucasus.⁴⁶ Assuming that these plans are implemented, their equipment will need to be counted within the CFE's southern flank limits.

Russia's dissatisfaction with its sublimits in the flanks and its diplomatic initiatives to have its treaty quota raised on the grounds that conditions have changed since the signing of the CFE Treaty and also that pervasive instability in northern and southern Caucasus has been undermining Russian security, have already delayed timely implementation by Russia.⁴⁷ In an interview with Interfax in April 1995, Defense Minister Grachev once more reaffirmed his country's position that Russia as the successor state to the Soviet Union could not observe all of the flank limitations.⁴⁸

The acute sense of concern displayed by Russia over the developments in the southern Caucasus and several measures of security cooperation entered into or under consideration with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, each with the potential to eventually bind the three republics with a Moscow-led integrated military system, raise a set of fundamental puzzles about Moscow's real intentions in this part of the former Soviet Union. Essentially, these puzzles can be reduced to: first, what is the real military threat in the southern Caucasus that presumably has forced Russia to take these important military steps? The independent countries in the region are incapable of posing a military threat to Russia, either singly or in a coalition, which in any event is an improbable scenario. Nor do risks of a spillover of ethnic and Islamic fundamentalist movements into the northern Caucasus entail direct and overwhelming military threats. Certainly these forces pose destabilizing local influences among and within tiny political entities but not of a nature and scope that would inevitably demand recourse to much superior military force by Moscow for their containment and/or resolution. What, then, is the military threat that would justify Russia's dedication to a steady program of military entrenchment in the post-Soviet southern Caucasus?

The second question addresses the contradictions in Russia's concern over NATO's prospective eastward expansion on the one hand and its drive to militarize the strategic buffer between Russia and NATO in the southern Caucasus on the other. Russia has been objecting to NATO's expansion in the east essentially on grounds that such expansion would place NATO's military prowess directly at the borders of Russia, thus depriving it of a strategic buffer in East/Central Europe between itself and other European great powers. Such a development would isolate Russia and usher in an era of cold peace, according to Moscow. Paradoxically, the same scenario, apparently awesome from the perspective of Moscow, is effectively being acted out by Russia itself along NATO's borders in the southern Caucasus through a range of bilateral agreements, potentially laying the foundation of military integration with Georgia and Armenia. Thus, the buffer between Russia and NATO in the southern Caucasus has effectively been eliminated, creating a new, 'post-Soviet' military reality along NATO's borders in Turkey. Russian pressures to raise the CFE Treaty's sub-zonal ceiling in Russia's North Caucasus military district will, if successful, reinforce this new reality in the direction of remilitarization.

The asymmetry in Russia's conceptualization of its security needs with regard to NATO in Europe and NATO in the southern Caucasus have broader implications for European security as well. Turkey has turned, once again, into a frontline NATO country directly facing Russian military power along its borders as a consequence of the Russian strategy of forward defense. This strategy has set in motion the search for arrangements, for

example, the revision of the CFE treaty and bilateral agreements with the local actors, that would legitimize the deployment of Russian forces on both sides of the Caucasus above their current levels, and with an integrated command and control role for the Russian military. In that zone of application of the CFE Treaty in the southern Caucasus where no single country poses a military threat to Russia and where a regional coalition threat is hardly conceivable due to the absence of a common political and ideological base, pressures directed at the revision of one of the most important instruments of post-Cold War European stability and security can be construed as behavior designed to serve two goals: to acquire a position of regional dominance, and, to signal to the West that Russia is inclined to assess its enhanced power position in the geopolitical space from the Black Sea to China as a trade-off against NATO's eastward expansion.

One has to admit that many of Russia's central concerns about the pending enlargement are justified. Most importantly, such enlargement would isolate it politically and militarily, and potentially lay the foundation of a new divide between the East and the West. Second, the relevance of the totality of the CFE Treaty will become deeply suspect, overshadowing the question of the relevance of southern flank limitations. And, as a Russian Foreign Ministry official has recently stated, 'the CFE treaty will vanish the day the first country of Eastern Europe joins NATO, and no possible concessions on the flank issue would save it'.⁴⁹ President Yeltsin also confirmed, following the Moscow summit in May 1995, that there would be no tradeoff.⁵⁰ In contrast, the question of southern flank limitations primarily entails the issue of regional balance of forces. The introduction of new Russian forces in case southern flank limits are raised would upset the balance to the disadvantage of Turkey. The impact of a NATO expansion would be system-wide spawning the whole Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian space to the disadvantage of Russia. In that case, Russia would be justified in pressing for the CIS to become an actual military alliance. Whether the CIS members would go along with Moscow is another question.

IV. CONCLUSION

The evolution of Russia's relations with and presence in Central Asia and the southern Caucasus that have been traced in the text reduces the question posed at the beginning of this study 'Has Russia turned to a neo-imperialistic foreign policy?' to an academic one. This is true especially for a country like Turkey which is situated directly on Russia's periphery and whose active interest in Central Asia and the southern Caucasus in the post-Soviet era has alerted Russia to the need to turn to a thoroughly self-centered policy in this part of the former Soviet Union.