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The Foreign Policy Concerns of the South Caucasus Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia

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The South Caucasus republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – like Turkey – are members of the Council of Europe and, with exception of Georgia, are associated with the Russian-inspired Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The last country has been the most assertive of the former Soviet republics in seeking membership in Western organizations. At the same time, these states, in an arbitrary geographical sense, are located on the continent of Asia and perhaps the Middle East, a region that can be defined in a number of ways. Azerbaijan, a region in the north-western part of Iran, is a much larger territory than and has almost double the population of the eponymous independent country. Moreover, ethnic Armenians are found in many Middle Eastern countries. Therefore, the South Caucasus republics can be considered to be part of a borderland.

Located at the crossroads of Russia, the rest of Europe and the Middle East, the countries of the region have always needed to balance their relations with their immediate and nearby neighbours and the major powers in the interests of political and economic security. Matters of territorial integrity, ethnic brethren residing in foreign countries, trade routes and historical memory have

become important factors in the development of foreign policy. As recent events have proven, Georgia has the worst relations with Russia among the South Caucasus republics despite being the only state in the Caucasus having diplomatic ties with all its immediate and nearby neighbours, albeit in the case of Russia through interest sections. Azerbaijan and Iran regard each other with suspicion – the former because of sensitivity to indigenous and Iranian-inspired Islamist activities, while the latter because of Western (including Israeli) involvement in Azerbaijan and the possible threat of pan-Azerbaijani nationalism. Despite not having a common border with its northern neighbour, Armenia has maintained the closest relationship to Russia in large part for support in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh – a territory within the international borders of Azerbaijan occupied by Armenia during the early 1990s as it was overwhelmingly populated by Armenians. While Armenia and Azerbaijan have observed a ceasefire since 1994, their common border remains closed.

Although relations have improved with Georgia, recently Armenia has been more cautious of Russia, especially since the 2008 Russian-Georgian military confrontation that resulted in Russia's recognition of 'independence' for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (territories within the international boundaries of Georgia). Moreover, Armenia has no formal relations with Turkey, which it considers responsible for genocide against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the 1890s and the First World War; a claim Turkey rejects. Since 1993, in sympathy with Azerbaijan, Turkey has closed its border with Armenia, leaving the land-locked state dependent upon Georgia and Iran, with its very limited frontier, for overland trade. However, in October 2009, Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols establishing bilateral diplomatic ties, subject to approval of their respective legislative assemblies. Azerbaijan and Georgia have maintained close relations with Turkey as all three countries have benefited from the sale and/or transfer of Azerbaijan's petroleum resources, while Turkey and Israel have engaged in military co-operation with Azerbaijan and Georgia.

All three South Caucasus republics have formal diplomatic ties with Israel as well as a number of states in both the Arab and Islamic world. Azerbaijan has the greatest cultural affinity with the latter countries being Turkic linguistically and having a predominantly Shia Muslim population. Moreover, ethnic Azeris residing outside of the countries of Azerbaijan and Iran live almost exclusively in Russia and Turkey. Unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia have indigenous national Christian churches – Georgian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic, both of which were established during the fourth century C.E. However, most ethnic Georgians living abroad reside in either Russia or Israel, while the Armenian Diaspora is quite sizable, especially in Europe, North America and the Middle East. The demographic character of the South Caucasus region has been shaped by several historical developments such as the migration of Turks from Central Asia; the spread of Christianity in the Roman and later in Byzantine Empire, the Diaspora of the Jews; the spread of Islam by the Arabs, Turks and Persians; and lastly almost two hundred years

of Russian and later Soviet rule – the most imposing foreign domination of the region with the greatest political and economic influence.

It was not until their second decade of independence, when their respective political institutions and national identities had a chance to develop, that two of the South Caucasus republics – Azerbaijan and Georgia – published National Security Concept papers.¹ A review of these documents and key speeches and interviews by Armenian officials that serve the same purpose will help illustrate the characteristics of their foreign policy concerns. The respective National Security Concept papers and pronouncements by Armenian officials emphasize ‘European aspirations and integration’, while acknowledging the importance of bilateral and multilateral relations with countries throughout the world, including their nearby neighbours in the Middle East. This is not unlike Turkey, which has been a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) since 1952 and has held accession talks with the European Union (EU) since 2005; at the same time, Turkey has been fairly active in Middle Eastern relations since the 1960s, but especially during the last decade.

It is important to note that Armenia’s current Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian was previously his country’s resident ambassador in Cairo (Egypt in 1994-1998), official representative to Morocco, Oman and Egypt and later as ambassador to France (1999-2008), performed the same duties with regard to Israel since 2000. Nalbandian – who earned a doctorate in political science in 1988 from the National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Oriental Studies in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) – told the editorial staff of the French publication *Politique Internationale* in March 2009 that issues like Nagorno-Karabakh, or relations between Armenia and Turkey are ‘direct consequences’ of past history, including the Armenian Genocide, and ‘partially consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution.’ Therefore, the present-day Armenia strives ‘to consolidate our co-operation with European institutions and nations; to strengthen our relations existing with our neighbours and to establish new ones with all other nations.’ Nalbandian points out that

only a third of our nation lives in Armenia proper. The other two-thirds of our compatriots are scattered over more than a hundred states in the world ... [where] these members of the Diaspora have ... largely preserved the languages and traditions of their ancestors, together with a spiritual link – and not only spiritual – with the motherland.²

¹ Georgia’s has no date, but was drawn up sometime after May 2005, while Azerbaijan’s is dated 23 May 2007.

² *Interview of Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian to ‘Politique Internationale’ Journal*, 4 March 2009. Available at: www.armeniaforeignministry.com/news/interview/20090304_politique.html and www.politiqueinternationale.com/revue/article.php?id_revue=122&id=789&content=synopsis.

Indeed, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan in a speech in February 2009 at the 45th Munich Security Conference stated that general concerns of the ‘human dimension’ aside, ‘When bombs go off in Ossetia [region in Russia and Georgia], Lebanon, Iraq, Israel or anywhere else in the world ... I feel very troubled as an Armenian knowing that ... there are Armenians living on both sides.’³

In addition, former Armenian deputy foreign minister Armen Baibourtian, who served under previous president Robert Kocharian (1998-2008), in a speech presented to the Japan Institute of International Affairs in October 2007 entitled ‘A Foreign Policy for a Small State: Armenia’s Case’ mentions economic concerns: ‘Clearly, without consistent expansion to the common markets of the EU and the CIS, and emerging markets in Asia and the Middle East, [the] Armenian economy will lose the momentum to acquire sustainability.’⁴ At the same time, Baibourtian states: ‘Armenia’s European aspirations are a manifestation of our strong historical and cultural link to Europe and Europeanness, as well as a national urge to develop into a free and modern society that is able to meet the demands of the new century.’⁵ It should be noted that Nalbandian, in the interview discussed previously, suggests continuity in foreign policy, but referring to Sargsyan’s inaugural address in April 2008, points out that there would be a ‘reinforcement of some priorities.’ One of which was seeking normalization of relations with Turkey and with regard to that Nalbandian states, ‘I am convinced that we must move beyond the old grievances and engage in constructive dialogue.’ Nalbandian further describes Russia as a ‘strategic partner’, and indeed that country was Sargsyan’s first foreign visit as president; however, Nalbandian also states ‘we are determined to strengthen our ties with the United States,’ home to one of the largest Diaspora communities.⁶ As for Iran, Nalbandian notes: ‘With regard [to] the South Caucasus, Tehran has always adopted a balanced position and has attempted to contribute as far as possible to the settlement of existing conflicts.’ He also expresses a desire to expand co-operation especially in matters of energy and transportation. Nalbandian mentions that Armenia’s economy lost about \$600 million due to the 2008 Russian-Georgian war and that his country was probably one of the most interested countries in Georgia’s

(Both accessed on 29 October 2009). The citation for *Politique Internationale* is No. 122 (Hiver 2009).

³ *Speech by President of the Republic of Armenia H.E. Mr. Serzh Sargsyan at the 45th Munich Security Conference*, 7 February 2009. Available at:

www.armeniaforeignministry.com/news/inthenews/20090211_munich.html. (Accessed on 14 October 2009).

⁴ *Speech by H.E. Mr. Armen Baibourtian, Deputy Foreign Minister of the Republic of Armenia*, Tokyo, 31 October 2007. Available at:

www.armenianforeignministry.com/speeches/071031_baib.html. (Accessed on 16 February 2008).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Interview of Nalbandian*, 4 March 2009.

stability and security ‘not only because over 70% of our trade is conducted via Georgian territory but also because our two nations are linked by ancient friendship.’⁷

As for the respective National Security Concept papers, Georgia contends that ‘As a Black Sea and South-Eastern European state, [it] has historically been a geographic, political and cultural part of Europe. Therefore, integration into European and Euro-Atlantic political, economic and security systems is the firm will of the Georgian people.’⁸ Unlike Georgia and Armenia with their respective Orthodox and Gregorian Christian populations and longstanding historical identities, predominantly Shia Muslim Azerbaijan maintains that:

located at the crossroads of West and East ... [it] has embraced the positive elements of various civilizations. The Republic of Azerbaijan shares the European values and as an inalienable component of the Euro-Atlantic security structure contributes to the security of this area [, while] ... as a part of the Islamic world, shares the progressive heritage and spiritual values of Islamic civilization.⁹

As for security arrangements, all three South Caucasus states have joined NATO’s Partnership for Peace Program. Georgia was rejected for membership in NATO – along with Ukraine – April 2007. Azerbaijan and Armenia are not ready to commit to the Western military alliance and the latter probably never will give up its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization of the CIS.

Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have important concerns about issues of territorial integrity. The former’s National Security Concept paper was written before the Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as ‘independent’, something with which only Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru have concurred. According to that document, which now seems out-of-date regarding relations with Russia, Georgia ‘expresses its readiness to intensify political dialogue, deepen trade, economic and socio-cultural relations, cooperate in solving regional conflicts, and to fight against terrorism and transnational crime with the Russian Federation.’¹⁰ This seems unlikely for the time and perhaps as long as Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili (2004 - present) remains in office, given the personal animosity between him and Vladimir Putin –Russia’s former president (2000-2008) and current prime minister. (Interestingly, in early 2009, Armenia

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *National Security Concept of Georgia*, no date given (but obviously drawn up sometime after 30 May 2005), pp. 8-9 in HMTL format. Available at: www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?sec_id=24&lang_id=ENG. (Accessed on 16 February 2008).

⁹ *National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, Approved by Instruction No. 2198 of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on 23 May 2007, p. 3. Available at: www.mfa.gov.az/ssi_eng/foreign_policy/inter_affairs/nsc/NSC.pdf. (Accessed on 16 February 2008).

¹⁰ *National Security Concept of Georgia*, p. 12.

awarded Saakashvili a major national honour.) As for Azerbaijan's National Security Concept document, it is very blunt regarding Armenia's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding territory: 'Regardless of the outcome of the conflict resolution process, persistence of the ideology of mono-ethnic statehood, ethnic cleansing practices and territorial expansionism of the Armenian State policy will inevitably continue to affect negatively [on] relations.'¹¹ It remains to be seen how recent diplomatic moves at rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia will impact on relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

In its National Security Concept, Georgia defines its ties with the US, Ukraine, Turkey and Azerbaijan as 'strategic partnerships' and values its 'good neighbourly relations' with Armenia.¹² Azerbaijan, in its National Security Concept, also acknowledges the benefits of its 'strategic partnership' with Turkey and Georgia and describes its relations with both the US and Russia in similar terms; in addition, Azerbaijan 'attaches great importance to its relations with Iran ... [with which it] share[s] a common rich historical and cultural heritage.' As for ties with other Middle Eastern countries, there is one sentence simply asserting they 'have big potential.'¹³ However, the document does highlight the fact that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which Azerbaijan joined in 1991 and whose membership includes every country in the Middle East – except Israel –, was the first international organization 'which recognized and condemned Armenia as an aggressor' in the war over Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁴ (It should be noted that the Saudi-inspired OIC is the second largest international governmental organization after the UN and its membership includes other secular states, such as Turkey and Albania as well as all the other countries of former Soviet Central Asia.)¹⁵ Georgia's National Security Concept document does not specifically mention relations with Middle Eastern countries, but acknowledges that developments in that area of the world have a 'serious influence' on Georgia's 'security environment', second only to Europe.¹⁶ Sometime in 2006, the Georgia's foreign ministry issued a 24-page position paper entitled 'Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009', which 'adheres to the requirements as defined in the National Security Concept of Georgia', but is much more specific regarding the Middle East. Turkey is described as Georgia's 'leading regional partner, which supports our country's formation into a stable and strong country.' Also, Georgia 'places a special emphasis on further development of relations with Israel, particularly with regard to economy, tourism and culture ... is interested in cooperation with Iran in such

¹¹ *National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, p. 5.

¹² *National Security Concept of Georgia*, pp. 10-12.

¹³ *National Security Concept of the Republic of Azerbaijan*, pp. 12-14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11.

¹⁵ See www.oic-oci.org/member_states.asp for the website of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which includes 57 member states and a number of official observers such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Russia and the Turkish Cypriot state. (Accessed on 2 November 2009).

¹⁶ *National Security Concept of Georgia*, p. 3.

areas as transport and energy’ and wants to intensify economic and trade ties as well as to co-operate in tourism with Egypt and Jordan.¹⁷

Both Azeris and Armenians have emotional attachments in the form of ethnic and/or religious connections with the Muslim Middle East or with lands beyond the current borders of the respective states of Azerbaijan and Armenia. However, Georgia’s interests are almost exclusively tied to practical concerns, such as the need to protect itself politically and economically from Russia and to encourage foreign investment and tourism. Armenia and Azerbaijan, certainly, have those needs as well, but Azerbaijan can look towards fellow Turkic and Muslim brethren and Armenia can depend on its sizable Diaspora for succour in times of crisis. Therefore, Georgia’s orientation is more closely tied with the West – including Turkey and Israel – than its neighbours and its emphasis in relations with the Arab world is directed toward conservative states in the region. Azerbaijan and Armenia are more sensitive to the effects of the Arab-Israeli conflict and not as limited in their outlook toward the Islamic world and countries in the Non-Aligned Movement.

The South Caucasus republics are products of their past history. Nationalism developed in these countries in the late nineteenth and/or early twentieth century and their short-lived experiences of independence following the First World War, while they were politically and economically unstable, left an indelible mark. During the last years of the Soviet Union, after the Baltic republics, the South Caucasus manifested the greatest amount of nationalist zeal. The newly independent states were determined to diversify their international relations as much as possible and to seek support for their territorial integrity both actual and perceived, as in the case of Armenia regarding Nagorno-Karabakh. They also need to develop their economies, which have been tied to the Soviet Union’s command structure for almost three-quarters of a century. At the moment, Azerbaijan with its energy resources has a greater degree of economic independence, but with the continued state of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, it is weakened politically. Georgia is far better off economically than it was in 1991, but the continued Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, limits its political manoeuvrability. Armenia is still tied greatly economically to Russia, but its political rapprochement with Turkey, if successful, can only bring much economic benefit. Overall, all three South Caucasus states need to co-operate fully with each other and continue to work out a proper balance in their respective relations with immediate and nearby neighbours outside the region.

¹⁷ Georgia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Foreign Policy Strategy 2006-2009*, no date given, pp. 4 and 21-22. Available at: www.mfa.gov.ge/files/35_9440_673620_11.pdf. (Accessed on 8 November 2009). Regarding Israel, the document prefaces its comments with the following words: ‘With the millennia old strong ties between the Georgian and Jewish people....’

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