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GEOPOLITICS AND STRATEGIC ALIGNMENTS IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Recently the Caucasus and Central Asia—or the Caspian region, as it has come to be called—has witnessed increasing interest from the political and business communities of the world. One main reason for this is, naturally, the development of Caspian oil and gas, which has attracted a horde of interested private and state-owned companies from Norway to Japan.¹ The private Western interests in oil exploitation have been one important factor in raising the importance of the Caucasus and Central Asia in the eyes of policy makers in the West. However important oil has been, it is nevertheless far from the only factor affecting the geo-strategic importance of the region. Ever since 1991, a struggle has been under way for economic and political influence in this southern rim of the former USSR; a struggle termed by some a renewed ‘Great Game’. While Russia has been attempting to reassert its influence over former dominions, new actors such as Turkey and Iran immediately entered a race in which they at first could not accurately gauge their place. More faraway actors entered the race later, for various reasons: the United States and the European Union, the latter only gradually and carefully, mostly in the economic sphere.²

Central Asia has largely been spared the ethnic unrest that has destabilised the Caucasus, but still faces the destabilising effect of the civil wars in Tadjikistan and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, ethnic conflict has plagued the Caucasus to a much higher degree than any area in Eurasia save former Yugoslavia.³ In the South Caucasus, none of the conflicts that raged between 1988 and 1994 have found a lasting solution, but are merely frozen along cease-fire lines.⁴ Being the land that separates Russia, Turkey and Iran from one another, the region has to a certain degree reverted to the situation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when it was the scene of the struggle between the Tsarist, Ottoman and Persian empires.⁵ However, today the Caucasian states are themselves actors in international politics to an extent they have never been before. Whereas in the eighteenth century the rulers of Georgia, for example, constantly struggled for the continuance of their state,⁶ post-Soviet Georgia today enjoys a position in the international community which secures its continued existence. Furthermore, it is pursuing a proactive rather than reactive foreign policy—witness the emerging axes of co-operation such as GUAM (see below). Nevertheless, the Caucasian states remain weak compared to their neighbours. They constantly fear, in particular, Russian intervention in their internal affairs and perceive a need, just like in the eighteenth century, to find allies against threats from their small or large neighbours. What is certain is that the role of the region in international politics is on the rise. The US has, for example, defined the Caspian as a region of vital US interests. From where does the strategic importance of the Caucasus derive? The following discussion will outline how the Caucasus plays a significant role in the entire international politics of Eurasia. For this purpose, the relations between the three Caucasian states will be discussed, then their role in intra-CIS politics will be outlined. Finally, their position in the wider alignments of power in the Eurasian continent will be considered.

THE CAUCASIAN TRIANGLE

Among the three Caucasian states, the first striking observation to be made is naturally that two of the states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are in a state of war, towards which the third state, Georgia, retains its neutrality. The war between the two republics, which broke out in 1992 after four years of escalation, led to the Armenian occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding regions, totalling almost 20 per cent of Azerbaijan's territory. In other words, the war meant a clear victory for the Armenian side. Having won the war, Armenia has not managed to win the peace. Negotiations are deadlocked, and Azerbaijan's standing in world politics is on the rise. At present, there is no urgent desire on either side to reach a political solution to the conflict.⁷ Both parties, in a sense, believe that time is in their favour: the Armenian side trusts its military superiority and believes that Azerbaijan can never gain the military capability to reconquer Nagorno-Karabakh. To meet the eventuality of an Azerbaijani attempt at settling the conflict by force, Armenia has forged strong military links with Russia. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, believes that "Armenia has bitten off more than it can chew"; that it "cannot sustain its position in the longer term" and that, with increasing oil revenues, Azerbaijan can build a strong army, and either impose a political solution on Armenia or "obtain a military one".⁸

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has far-reaching consequences for the region and beyond.⁹ For the Caucasus, its main implication is that it renders it impossible for the Caucasian states to act in concert against outside threats to the region. The fact that relations between the two warring countries follow the rules of a zero-sum game presents the possibility for extra-regional actors to get a foothold in the Caucasus by lending support to either party, thereby altering the balance of power in the region. This naturally translates into chronic political instability in the Caucasus. Moreover, it helps to perpetuate the economic underdevelopment of the region. In practice, the conflict has prevented the emergence in the region of stable and democratic political systems—a development that has also taken place in Georgia, for at least partly similar reasons.¹⁰ The recent conflicts have also made the Caucasian states prone to political violence and coup d'états, and have obstructed the process of democratisation. This in turn serves the interests of the former hegemonic power, Russia, which to a great extent has supported centrifugal forces in the region with a view to weakening the existing states and making them more malleable to Russian influence.¹¹ This policy has actually backfired on Russia itself. Indeed, one can claim the existence of a link between Russia's actions in the Transcaucasus and the Chechen rebellion in the North Caucasus, insofar as the separatism Russia encouraged in the Transcaucasus spilled over to Chechnya. The linkages between events in the North and South Caucasus should not be underestimated.

Georgia's attempts to secede from the Soviet Union and ensuing refusal to participate in the CIS were countered by relatively overt Russian support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian rebellious minorities, who subsequently succeeded in achieving de facto independence.¹² In the Armenian-Azerbaijani case, Russia seems to have followed a policy of weakening both parties by lending them both different degrees of support at different times. The advent to power of the nationalist president, Ebulfez Elçibey, in Baku in the summer of 1992 led to a Russian policy very similar to the one in Georgia. Moscow increasingly supported the Armenian side in the conflict, but kept a low profile by supporting the Armenian state and not the Armenian insurgents in Nagorno-Karabakh directly, unlike in Abkhazia where a direct Russian hand was clearly more tangible. Hence, Armenia appeared as the main, sometimes even sole, intervening party in the conflict. One can, in other words, conclude that even if forces in the Kremlin did not create the Caucasus's conflicts, though the general feeling in Georgia and Azerbaijan is that this was the case, strong forces were using ethnic divisions, and perhaps even doing their best to deepen them, to prevent the real independence of the Caucasian states. As a result of these developments, a number of agreements tie Armenia to Russia very tightly, despite the fact that many Armenians are suspicious of Russia's intentions and that Armenia was one of the most intransigent republics to Soviet rule in the late 1980s. Armenia, in its present geopolitical situation, sees no other option but to ally with Russia for its security. Faced with the spectre of the imminent de facto dissolution of the Georgian state in October-November 1993, Georgia was compelled to accept Russian troops on its soil and CIS membership to restore stability. Only Azerbaijan managed to avoid the return of Russian troops on its territory, but was forced to become a member of the CIS.

As far as Georgian relations with the two belligerents are concerned, it is clear that Georgia's interests are in principle similar to those of Azerbaijan: the restoration of territorial integrity and of full independence from Moscow. Armenia, on the other hand, for the foreseeable future is dependent on a Russian presence in the Caucasus, and supports the countervailing principle of the self-determination of minorities, in particular for the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh. As a result, a considerable rapprochement between Georgia and Azerbaijan has taken place, based on a commonality of interests that will be discussed below. Simultaneously, Georgia keeps amicable, although sometimes wary relations with Armenia. The Georgian leadership is aware of the potential danger of alienating Armenia. If nothing else, Tbilisi must constantly be aware of a compactly settled Armenian minority on its border with that country, factions of which have at times raised claims to political autonomy (in one event the Armenian government had to intervene to prevent the Armenians in Georgia from pushing the issue too far). Georgia's freedom of movement with regard to Armenia is hence limited.

CENTRAL ASIA

Russia, China, Afghanistan and Iran border Central Asia, and it lies only a few miles from the Pakistani and Indian borders. In other words, it is surrounded by the likely regional powers of the next century, four of which are declared nuclear weapons states. Most of the surrounding powers, furthermore, tend to be less than favourably disposed to Western, particularly American, influence in the region.

Among the Central Asian states, a basic distinction can be made between states that are trying to break free from Moscow's domination and those that have consistently stayed within Russia's orbit. In the latter category, three states are easily identifiable: Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan and Tadjikistan. The first two are states whose titular nationalities represent only roughly half of their respective populations and include substantial Russian-speaking communities. Kazakhstan's continued existence in its present shape could be put into question should it decide to embark on a more nationalistic, anti-Russian path. Kirghizstan is a small country that shares this problem. Moreover, it is vulnerable to two of its larger neighbours, China and Uzbekistan. The Chinese threat has encouraged Bishkek to develop its security ties with Moscow. In the case of Tadjikistan, the well-known civil war has been instrumental in Moscow keeping control over that country. The Tadjik government, vulnerable as it is to destabilisation both from within and from Afghanistan, has had little choice but to seek Moscow's protection. In addition, as will be seen shortly, Tadjikistan has (much like Armenia with respect to Turkey and Azerbaijan) resorted to Russia as a counterbalance against perceived Uzbek regional ambitions. These three weak states (Kazakhstan may be large by surface but its population amounts to roughly 17 million of which only 8 million are Kazakh) can hence be presumed to deviate only marginally from Russian policy. Kazakhstan is the only one among them that has tried to pursue somewhat more independent policies. For example, Kazakhstan has disagreed with Russia as regards oil transportation. Moreover, it also seeks to develop its relations with the West. In any case, these states will likely side with Moscow, although perhaps sometimes reluctantly, in Eurasian geopolitical matters.

On the other hand, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have pursued clearly more independent policies. These two countries benefit from not having a border with Russia. Turkmenistan, small in size, has nevertheless refrained from taking a stance against Moscow, on which it has remained dependent, especially in economic matters. Turkmenistan eagerly pursues its policy of neutrality. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, is in a more advantageous position. It is the most populous country of Central Asia, and it is also comparatively homogeneously populated. It does not border Russia and has no Russian troops on its soil. On the other hand, the situation in Afghanistan and Tadjikistan, being some of the most unstable and volatile states in Eurasia, are the main conditioners of Uzbekistan's security concerns.¹³ In President Islam Karimov's own words, Uzbekistan is a "front-line state".¹⁴ Moreover, substantial numbers of Uzbeks compactly reside in certain regions of both states, whereas numerous Tadjiks live in Uzbekistan. In this perspective, it is all the more interesting to note that Karimov has been a chief advocate of international, especially UN, involvement in the conflicts in Uzbekistan's

neighbourhood, rather than CIS involvement.¹⁵ President Karimov has in a variety of forums and occasions warned against renewed great-power chauvinism and denounced military co-operation within the CIS. The rhetoric emanating from Tashkent has grown increasingly assertive since the mid-1990s, parallel with the development of Russian policy along nationalist lines. Within the CIS, co-operation between Uzbekistan and like-minded states such as Ukraine and Georgia has increased. Karimov has strongly denounced moves that aim to transform the CIS into a 'subject of international law' or further integration in general. In practice, Uzbekistan suspended its participation in the CIS Inter-parliamentary Assembly in September 1997, refused participation in any CIS Customs Union and, most significantly, refused to renew the CIS collective security treaty in early 1999.¹⁶ The latter move certainly emboldened Georgia and Azerbaijan to do the same despite their more vulnerable position vis-à-vis Russia. Outside the CIS, Uzbekistan has concentrated its energy on forming relations with NATO, Germany and especially the United States. In fact, analysts have noted that Uzbekistan is, together with Israel, the sole country that has consistently supported the US in virtually all of its policy moves in the Middle East, for example with reference to Iraq and Iran. Karimov has explicitly noted that NATO expansion poses no threat to Russia, and has supported the Baltic states' aims to join the Alliance.

GUAM AND THE EMERGENCE OF AXES WITHIN THE CIS

Within the framework of the CIS, the three Caucasian countries have sided with different alignments of states that have emerged in this organisation. Armenia has been more closely drawn into a loose group of states that for different reasons work for the strengthening of the CIS, but share few other similarities or interests. Besides Russia, which is using the CIS as a tool to regain its lost influence over the former republics of the Soviet Union, this group includes Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan. As mentioned, however, these states share few geopolitical interests except for the strengthening of the CIS as an institution, and can therefore hardly be called an emerging geopolitical bloc. Georgia and Azerbaijan, on the other hand, are involved as motors of a much tighter grouping of states that share significant common interests—the so-called GUAM. The acronym of the alignment is derived simply from the initial letters of the four countries—Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. These four states all resist any further strengthening of the CIS at the expense of the sovereignty of member states. They see the CIS chiefly as an instrument of Russian influence over the republics, and want to broaden their international contacts westward and seek their security through western security mechanisms—mainly NATO. Another crucial characteristic these states share is the existence of a separatist autonomous minority on their soil, which they perceive Russia as supporting. In the cases of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, the Abkhazian, South Ossetian, Karabakh Armenian, and Transdniestrian separatist movements managed to achieve de facto independence and negotiations are equally deadlocked in all cases. In Ukraine, the secession of Crimea was temporarily averted relatively narrowly, but the situation is far from certain.¹⁷

The relations between the four states intensified at a very rapid pace through 1997 and 1998. From simply having been an alliance of common interests in the framework of the CIS, the four have realised the potential of their co-operation, which has in turn led to a quiet institutionalisation of their co-operation. Naturally, the four tried to keep a low profile in view of the hostile Russian attitude to their co-operation, and hence no institutions as such were created. Representatives of the four countries, however, met and co-ordinated policy regularly at CIS summits. An interesting development in 1998 was that GUAM co-operation moved into the military field. In May, the four countries announced plans to create a common peacekeeping battalion "under the UN aegis", in a clear attempt to avoid in the future the present reliance on Russian peacekeepers, especially in Georgia. In early December 1998, Georgian officials proposed that the four countries form such a peacekeeping force to "promote regional security and guard the proposed export oil pipeline for Azerbaijan's Caspian oil". The proposition also included a reference to its establishment within the framework of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme.¹⁸ In September 1998, the four countries also agreed to co-operate on border troops. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly from a geo-strategic perspective, GUAM is attempting to act as a single entity in its relations with NATO in a so-called '19+4' formula. Although such attempts are still little publicised, the group is actively promoting them.¹⁹ In the

economic sphere, Ukraine and Moldova are interested in a role in the export of Caspian oil over the Black Sea to Europe, while Georgia and Azerbaijan, form a 'bridge' linking the Caucasian states to Europe in more than one sense. The four hope to play a significant role in plans to revive the 'Silk Road' from Europe to Asia—the TRACECA project, which will offer new and alternative supply routes to the existing Russian ones. The four countries have reached numerous bilateral agreements, most recently on Ukrainian-Georgian economic co-operation in December 1998.

As far as the Caucasus is concerned, Armenia is totally excluded from GUAM's co-operation schemes for the simple reason of Azerbaijan's presence in the group. In general, Azerbaijan and in particular Baku has become the political and economic hub of the entire Caspian region. With its oil resources and demographic strength, Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming the most powerful state in the Caucasus and hence has an increasing capacity to keep Armenia out of economic co-operation schemes, either with reference to GUAM or with the outside world. In the perspective of Azerbaijan's wish for a strong link to Turkey and the West, this makes the function of Georgia crucial to Azerbaijan: it is its link to the West, to Europe and to Turkey. This state of affairs has interesting implications for the Georgian-Armenian relationship. In pipeline politics, Azerbaijan excludes Armenia as a candidate to carry oil to the Turkish Mediterranean coast as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unsettled. And as Iran is impossible because of American objections, Georgia has, more or less by default, become the choice of the Baku-Ceyhan project. This project and the Baku-Supsa pipeline carry considerable importance for the strained Georgian economy. As a result, Tbilisi, from one perspective, has a vested interest in the isolation of Armenia, a more logical transportation route for many products, from Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Throughout 1998, there was speculation that Uzbekistan, which shares many of GUAM's interests, would join the alliance. The occasion that was finally chosen for Uzbekistan's accession was, significantly, the celebrations of NATO's 50th birthday in Washington in April 1999. Not only did Uzbekistan become a member of the alliance, but it also chose Washington as the arena to formalise and institutionalise the alliance.²⁰ Azerbaijan's President, Haydar Aliyev, was elected chairman of the organisation, which was renamed GUUAM through Uzbekistan's accession. It was announced that a secretariat would be formed.²¹ The institutionalisation and expansion of GUAM is a significant event as it coincides with the renegotiation of the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS, which Azerbaijan, Georgia and Uzbekistan refused to adhere to despite Russian pressure. In fact, the CIS has now for all practical purposes been divided into two camps, the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty (CST) and the pro-Western GUUAM. This has practically neutralised whatever political influence the CIS has as an organisation.

THE CAUCASUS IN EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS

Beyond the CIS, the Caucasus has become a primary ground for the proliferation of new regional alignments in the post-Cold War era. In a sense, what is happening on the Eurasian continent is, just like in the CIS, the subtle emergence of two opposing blocs, although that term is highly exaggerated at this point. It is necessary to point out that the web of relations that is emerging is in its early stages; there is no certainty of future developments. More importantly, though we speak of opposing alignments, it must be said that even among states falling on opposite sides, there may be shared interests and even interdependence in certain questions, which tends to blur the picture.

As concerns relations between the states that span from the former Soviet Union south into the Middle East, it at present seems as if a division is developing between two groups of states. The first is basically a pro-Western group, proactive in foreign policy matters and anti-Russian in the framework of the CIS. This group generally resists Iranian influence and seeks to minimise it, and the US supports it on a large scale. On the other side, there is a set of countries which resent the increasing influence of the US and Turkey in the region and are in a conflictual position with America's allies. These states mainly follow a reactive foreign policy aimed at preventing through a variety of means—

subversion in the case of Syria towards Turkey and perhaps Russia towards Georgia—the influence of Western-oriented states.

Two crucial actors or pivots in this respect are Turkey and Iran. Turkey is a heavily Western-orientated country with strong military ties to the US but an ambiguous relationship with the EU, which is very hesitant in accepting Turkey's role in their often narrow conception of Europe. Turkey is sometimes seen as the prolonged arm of the US in Central Asia and the Caucasus, especially by states in the opposing group. Turkey's main ally in the region has been and remains Azerbaijan. Turkey is the only country to have openly supported Azerbaijan in its conflict with Armenia and Turkey's economic and political influence in the country is tangible.²² Georgia has found it logical and necessary to improve its relations with Turkey despite the remnants of mistrust for Turks among Georgians in general, conditioned of course by a history not devoid of conflict. However, today Georgia's interests and orientations coincide in many respects with those of Turkey. The last few years have also seen the gradual improvement of Turkey's relations with Ukraine and Moldova. Turkey's interests in these countries are partly related to the Turkic minorities (the Gagauz in Moldova and the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine) but contain a heavy strategic component. Without wanting to alienate Russia with which Turkey has very important trade relations (another proof of the web of interdependence of today's international relations), Ankara has become a tacit supporter of G20—it is simply in line with Turkey's own interests to strengthen the independence of and co-operation among these states. Naturally, a possible point of contention is that Turkey and Ukraine are rivals for the transportation of Caspian oil. If oil quantities are really not as high as some observers hope, the oil will not be enough to satisfy every interested transporting country. Despite the strong backing of the Turkish, Azerbaijani and US governments for Turkey's own Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project, oil companies involved in the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) are reluctant to finance this pipeline given the current state of the oil market with prices hovering around \$10-12 a barrel and Iraq and Iran waiting for sanctions to be lifted. It seems as if substantial government subsidies from either the US or Turkey will be necessary for the speedy realisation of the Baku-Ceyhan project. Indeed representatives of the oil companies complain that despite the heavy pressure on them to choose the Baku-Ceyhan line, not a cent has been promised in government support from any of the countries supporting it. In the long run, however, political considerations weigh heavily. On 29 October 1998, the presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, as well as the US secretary of energy, signed the 'Ankara Declaration', supporting the Baku-Ceyhan route.²³ This commitment was renewed in April 1999. It seems very unlikely at this point that oil companies will totally disregard this comparatively strong consensus among these states for the Baku-Ceyhan route. The most probable solution seems to be the postponement but eventual building of this pipeline. Besides oil interests, Turkey has important economic interests in the area, which holds new markets for Turkish industrial products of all sorts. No visitor to the Caucasus, even to Armenia with which Turkey has a closed border and no direct relations, can fail to notice the Turkish economic presence. Russia sees this Turkish penetration as very threatening, in particular as Turkish policy makers were somewhat euphoric about their country's possibilities of creating a 'Turkic twenty-first century' back in 1991-92.

The second crucial actor is Iran. Iran has from the beginning been very realistic about its possibilities in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Seeing the impossibility of transposing the Iranian model to Central Asian countries, Iran was nevertheless worried about the adulation of the 'Turkish model' in the region. Hence, Iran and Russia have found a common cause in seeking to prevent Turkish influence from gaining too much ground in the region. For Iran, which is mainly interested in stability—internal as well as external—on both sides of its northern border, accepting the return of Russian hegemony is preferable, if conducive to stability, to increasing Turkish influence. As a result of this, Russia and Iran have become increasingly aligned into what today forms a virtual strategic alliance.²⁴ Both states share an aversion to US and Turkish influence in their neighbourhood and work together to minimise it. In this context Armenia has become a logical part of the alliance, and in fact a virtual Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran axis has emerged, whose main function is to counteract Turkish influence.

As far as the Caucasus is concerned, Iranian policy has been very interesting and quite illogical on the surface to the outsider. Whereas Shiite clerics govern Iran, Azerbaijan is the only other sizeable country to have an overwhelmingly Shiite majority population. Despite this fact, Iran, after a period of neutrality, moved closer to Armenia and has become that country's main economic provider. Iran was from the beginning very worried about the creation of an Azerbaijani state to its immediate north as it feared this state could stir up irredentism among the perhaps twenty million Azeris in Iran, considerably more numerous than those in Azerbaijan itself. These fears in a sense became reality with the advent to power in Baku of President Elçibey in 1992, whose openly anti-Iranian rhetoric pushed Iran closer to Armenia. Today Iranian-Azerbaijani relations remain distrustful and occasionally hostile but on a working level.²⁵

On the southern flank of these emerging alignments, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Turkish-Israeli strategic alliance. Especially for Arab states, some of which (especially Syria) feel directly threatened by the new partnership. The military pact between the two strongest military powers of the Middle East is an event that has redrawn the balance of power in the entire region.²⁶ The same is true for Iran, which fears that it is also targeted by the alliance, notably given the existence of a close Iranian-Syrian relationship. In this context, Turkish and Israeli assurances that their relations are directed at no other state have not succeeded in calming Arab and Iranian fears. In a sense, closer relations between Iran, Armenia and Syria have reciprocated the Turkish-Israeli partnership. Interestingly, one can also see the participation of Greece, to a certain extent, in this latter grouping in a form of quadripartite consultative relations. With respect to the Caucasus, Israel has developed considerable interests in Azerbaijan,²⁷ and is one of the largest sources of investment for the Georgian economy.²⁸ On the other hand, the perceived target country of the Turkish-Israeli alliance, Syria, enjoys cordial relations with Armenia, beyond the familiar fact of its relationship with Iran.

UZBEKISTAN'S ROLE IN EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS

It is apparent that the ruling forces in Uzbekistan see for the country a role as a regional power. This role was already evident in the 1920s, as Mikhail Kalinin, the then chairman of the executive committee of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets, urged Uzbekistan's leadership to "relate to your neighbours as Moscow relates to you".²⁹ Indeed, when speaking of regional alignments, Uzbekistan is, unlike Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia or Tadjikistan, not a minor player that seeks to conduct alliances for its own safety. Although hardly having the capacities of Moscow or Washington, or even of Ankara or Tehran, Tashkent is a regional player in its own right. Its ambitions go beyond those of the smaller states. Smaller states think of attracting the influence of one or the other regional power to increase its own security vis-à-vis its regional rivals or hostile larger powers. Although the leaders of these states sometimes advance the position of their own country with considerable skill (as presidents Aliyev of Azerbaijan and Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia), they do not, nevertheless, aspire to a regional role of their own, such as influence over neighbouring states. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, arguably aspires to precisely such a regional role. Indeed, Tashkent is not only interested in escaping Moscow's influence, but is positioning itself as a rival to Moscow in southern Central Asia. For this purpose, it follows a policy similar to that of Turkey or Israel: to cultivate its security relationship with the United States without therefore giving up its own policy of asserting its influence in its neighbouring countries. The Uzbek policies in Kirghizstan, Tadjikistan and Afghanistan testify to this general pattern. Uzbekistan's relations with Kirghizstan have since independence been characterised by Bishkek's dependence on Tashkent for energy purposes, and Tashkent's sometimes blatant disregard for Kirghizstan's integrity, such as the Uzbek undercover police's unauthorised capture of an Uzbek national on Kirghiz territory. It is clear that the Uzbek government is exerting pressure of Bishkek and does not fail to remind the Kirghiz authorities of the weakness of Kirghizstan. With regard to Afghanistan, the Uzbek leadership has been actively supporting the anti-Taliban forces in that country, especially, though with limited success, the ethnic Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum. With respect to Tadjikistan, a gap has been growing recently between the Uzbek and Tadjik governments, although earlier relations had been considerably more cordial. Only a few years ago, a dichotomy was arguably present in Uzbek foreign policy toward Russia: a policy of asserting independence in general,

but also maintaining significant co-operation and common interests as regards Tadjikistan. However, Tashkent has recently become openly critical of the Imomali Rakhmonov government in Dushanbe. There have been allegations of Uzbek support for Mahmud Khudoiberdiev's December 1998 rebellion against the Dushanbe authorities. According to such speculation, the Uzbek leadership would be allying with the so-called Leninabad clan, that is the coalition of the ethnic Uzbeks and 'northerner' Tadjiks of the Hojent area that stand in stark opposition to the present government, dominated by the Kulyab region. Even with the agreement that gave the United Tadjik Opposition a third of government seats, the interests of the northern areas, that held power for most of the Soviet era, remain unanswered in the governance of Tadjikistan. These areas, that have historically been close to Uzbekistan both culturally and politically, would hence be logical allies for Tashkent. Whatever the involvement of Uzbekistan has been, it is clear that Tashkent cannot avoid getting involved in the politics of Tadjikistan. The northern regions of that country are less than 100 kilometres from Tashkent, and ethnic Uzbeks will certainly be involved if disturbances spread in the Hojent region.³⁰

In the geopolitics of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is both a crucial geopolitical pivot and a player not to be neglected. Uzbekistan is the only country that in the long run has a distinct potential to establish itself as a regional power in Central Asia. By this circumstance, it is certain that Western and especially American interests in the country will increase. It is also relatively clear that the larger interests of Tashkent and Washington in Eurasian geopolitics will continue to converge for the foreseeable future: to prevent Moscow excluding other international actors from economic and political influence over Central Asia, and to increase Western and other international presences in Central Asia in order to help the region transform into a bastion of stability that would be centred around Tashkent. The key question remains the future of Afghanistan, a game in which a number of rounds remain to be played. In the short term, Uzbekistan looks poised to side increasingly and more publicly with the West and the US in regional matters. However, Tashkent needs to maintain its calm. As the recent explosions in the Uzbek capital prove, it is not a country devoid of problems. Interestingly, Karimov, after some time, blamed the attempt on his life on 'imperialistic forces', the standard term for conservative forces in Russia and CIS countries. One could speculate that these events accelerated the accession of Uzbekistan to GUAM, a move whose timing was somewhat unanticipated and took place in a context that was certain to be interpreted as provocative in Russia.

The Uzbek leadership's task is, after all, daunting: to keep Moscow out and Washington in, and to increase its regional role while avoiding strife on its southern and eastern borders from spreading into the country. But the prize should it succeed in this task is attractive: to turn Uzbekistan into a kind of Israel in Central Asia: a leading American-supported regional power in Central Asia in the early twenty-first century.

LINKS TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Another interesting development is how the Caucasus is increasingly being integrated into the security relations of the Middle East. Indeed, the alignments that characterise the Caucasian security complex can actually be drawn further down into the Middle East along the same criteria: one set of pro-Western, proactive states and one group of anti-Western, reactive states. The most notable inclusion to be made is Israel. Israel's role in the Caucasus and Central Asia is more important than most analysts normally acknowledge. In a recent study, Bülent Aras outlines the basic reasons that have brought certain Caucasian and Central Asian states closer to Israel. First, is the mutual fear of the expansion of Islamic fundamentalism and the desire to contain Iranian influence in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. Second, is the fact of Israel's powerful image as a "model state: small but politically and economically strong, and both democratic and secular". Related to this, the concerned states see Israel's close relationship with the US and the West as a "gateway to the Western world in general, and to the United States in particular". Finally, Israel's economic assistance has been welcomed by these states, all of which desperately seek foreign investment.³¹ Indeed, Israel is among the three main states investing in the Georgian economy, for example.³² Among the states of the region, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are the ones to have attracted most Israeli interest. As regards

Azerbaijan, Israel from the start took on an overtly pro-Azerbaijani stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Some think Israel has supplied arms to Azerbaijan.³³ Co-operation in the field of intelligence has also taken place; economically Azerbaijan is interested in Israel's technological expertise, while Israel hopes that Azerbaijani oil could reach Israel through an under-water pipeline from Ceyhan once the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is realised.³⁴ Naturally, Iran has repeatedly warned Azerbaijan against pursuing and developing its ties to Israel, but such threats and warnings have not impeded the ties, rather the opposite. An interesting recent development has been that the Jewish lobby in the American congress has become increasingly supportive of Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Jewish lobby has come to a split with its one-time ally, the Armenian lobby, because of its support for Turkey and Azerbaijan.³⁵ The Azerbaijani former Foreign Minister, Hasan Hasanov, was quoted as having stated, "We don't conceal that we rely on the Israeli lobby in the US".³⁶ Importantly, the prospect of Azerbaijan playing an ever-increasing role in the Israeli-Turkish military relationship seems inevitable. As Azerbaijan feels increasingly threatened by Iran, Russia and Armenia, it finds little choice but to reciprocate by forming an alliance with Israel and Turkey in the military field, and will by extension benefit from the close links with the US that these states enjoy. Hence it seems likely that Israeli-Azerbaijani military co-operation will increase in the immediate future.

The Israeli connection has also been instrumental in bringing Syria closer to the Iranian-Russian alliance. Syria's security concerns have been aggravated by the Turkish-Israeli relationship and Syria is already aligned with Iran, and possesses good relations with Russian security structures since the time of the USSR. Moreover, ties with Armenia have kept growing since that country's independence, helped by the fact that several high Armenian officials—including former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan—have close personal links with Syria. It is also not unlikely that the Greek government of South Cyprus will pursue closer links with Syria and Russia. The planned stationing of Russian S-300 missiles on the island was not an isolated event but a part of a larger pattern of increased Russian presence in Greek Cyprus. In addition, it should be noted that the once excellent relations between Greek Cyprus and Israel have plummeted to such a degree since Israel's alliance with Turkey that the Israeli president cut short a state visit to the island and returned home. In sum, the strategic alignments that are observable in the Caucasus have to a considerable degree been stitched together with the alignments existing in the Middle East. In a sense, this is a part of the inevitable reintegration of the region with its historical contacts to its south.

THE CAUCASUS: A STRATEGIC NEXUS

Looking at the Caucasus from a healthy distance, a glance at the map speaks clearly. The eastward expansion of the Turkish-American alliance's influence into Central Asia depends on the rather tiny wedge that Georgia and Azerbaijan form between Russia, Armenia and Iran. Armenia's geographical location is crucial in that forms a wedge in the otherwise unbroken 'Turkic' chain that theoretically stretches from Istanbul to Chinese Xinjiang. (This is of course a cultural chain, not necessarily a political one). As a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, it is interesting to analyse the situation in and threats to Azerbaijan and Georgia. In terms of political orientation, both states' leaderships have firm popular support for their anti-Russian stance. Both regimes have nevertheless experienced violent attempts to alter the political scene of the respective countries. Coups against Haydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan took place in 1994 and 1995.³⁷ Nevertheless, Aliyev seems to have established firm control over the government apparatus and also over the territory of the republic, that is the territory that is not occupied by Armenian forces. In Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze has been less successful in asserting control over his country's territory. The Russian military bases remain an actor within Georgia's territory that is outside the government's control. Moreover, rebels in western Georgia remind the world of their existence by staging mutinies with irregular intervals, and the Armenian population of southwestern Georgia remains elusive to Tbilisi's control.³⁸ The two narrowly failed assassination attempts against Shevardnadze raise the question of outside involvement, and the assertion that outside forces are trying to destabilise Georgia does not seem at all too far-fetched. Indeed, it seems clear today that Georgia is the weaker link in two chains: the first connecting the US, Turkey, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, the second being the GUUAM chain. Without stability and a pro-Western regime in Georgia, Azerbaijan would be cut off from its Western allies. Hence, while it might

seem difficult at the present moment—that is while president Aliyev is politically active and well—to destabilise Azerbaijan effectively, destabilising Georgia would make very much the same damage to the pro-Western alliance in regional terms. Hence, while Zbigniew Brzezinski is fundamentally right in calling Azerbaijan a geo-politically pivotal country,³⁹ equal attention should be paid to Georgia.

Developments in Georgia can indeed be seen in this light, notably the assassination attempts on Shevardnadze, which if successful could have led to the rapid destabilisation of that country. Hence, Georgia deserves to be termed 'geopolitical pivot' equally with Azerbaijan. This needs to be emphasised since international attention to and interests in Azerbaijan are relatively important today, lending the country a measure of support from the international community, whereas this is not the case in Georgia. TRACECA might be a way for Georgia to increase its stability, but the need for increased attention to the strategic importance of that country remains.

THE UNITED STATES' POLICY

Moving to the role of the United States, it has passed through several phases since 1991. Initially, Washington was not keen on asserting its influence in the region, acknowledging it as Russia's sphere of influence. This policy stemmed from, first of all, a persisting respect for the Soviet Union's position as a superpower, but it also stemmed from a lack of knowledge and initiative as concerned the Caspian region, as well as a lack of realisation of American interests there. In the main, Washington limited its policy to espousing the Turkish model for the Muslim states emerging from the Soviet Union, supporting Turkey's quest for influence there as well as the true independence of the newly independent states. The lack of a proactive American policy in the region could be illustrated no better than by the way in which the Armenian lobby in congress was able to hijack American policy and use its influence to shape American policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, by 1994-95, the American policy was in a stage of transition. The Azerbaijani oil resources were beginning to influence the White House to treat the two parties to the conflict in a more equal way, however respect for Russia was still a crucial factor. The ground-breaking event was the war in Chechnya, which proved to US policy makers the actual (conventional) military capabilities of Russia: that it could create substantial amounts of trouble, but not mount a serious offensive military challenge. In other words, much of US respect for Russia was lost. It is no coincidence that US policy in the Caspian became increasingly assertive from the second half of 1996, and the US has announced that it considers the Caucasus and the Caspian a region of 'vital US interests'.

In institutional terms, a most important factor, which is heavily linked with Azerbaijani and Georgian perceptions of American power, is the importance accorded to NATO as an institution. It has already been mentioned that GUUAM is actively seeking to forge relations with NATO. Many Georgians, for example, believe that within five years, Georgia will be a member of NATO—the Alliance is seen as the only body that can actively safeguard Georgia's independence. The pace at which NATO Secretary-general, Javier Solana, and other officials visit the Caucasus indeed suggests closer relations emerging between the Alliance and the states belonging to GUUAM.

CONCLUSION

Summing up the discussion above, the 'pieces' fall into place relatively clearly. The web of relations emerging in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East after the demise of the bipolar world in 1989-91 seems now to begin to crystallise into a new set of alignments. However deep the trenches may seem to have been dug in certain cases, especially among the smaller players in these emerging alignments, there may presently not be a need to evoke the example of the danger of alliance systems that provoked the First World War, although there are, in principle, certain similarities. It is a fact that economic interdependence is the rule of the day, and that the major actors in this 'Great Game' to a certain degree keep working relations, except for the case of Iran and the US. Turkey's commercial links with Russia are crucially important to both countries and thereby exercise a degree of control over the foreign policies of both states—Turkish economic interests in Russia actually account for

several times its economic interests in Central Asia and the Caucasus as a whole. Likewise, Turkey has always kept working relations with Iran, despite the rivalry between the two states. In a sense it does make sense to speak of the two as rivals but not as enemies. The same goes for Russia and the US despite the recent deterioration of relations due to the Kosovo crisis. Furthermore, Armenia's special relationship with the US is another factor that breaks through the general picture of relations described above.

It is arguably too early to dwell on the potential threats posed by the emergence of these conflicting or competing alliances. However, the main danger for international security is that either of the larger states would be drawn into a military confrontation between two minor powers on opposing sides of the alignments. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict offered such dangers in 1992-94, which were nevertheless avoided because of Iranian and Turkish caution about upsetting Russia, which in fact threatened a third world war in the event of Turkish interference. The event of renewed fighting between the two countries does indeed constitute a considerable danger to international security, which no other conflict in the region does to the same extent. A significant difference would be the level of armaments of the parties. Armenia has, for example, acquired weapons worth over a billion dollars from Russia, and Azerbaijan may in the future use its oil resources to buy similar amounts of weaponry. Given the geographic size of the area of conflict, the repercussions on neighbouring countries will definitely be greater this time around, a fact worth further analysis. The regional alignments in Eurasia are an important dimension in the emerging international politics of Eurasia. As such, they need to be further discussed, analysed and managed. The lack of this could make the deterioration of relations in case of regional crises, and ultimately the risk of escalation of hostilities, more salient than it already is today.

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3 For a detailed analysis of the conflicts in the region, see Svante E. Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 1999.

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6 See Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994 (revised edition), p. 55.

7 On the possible solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, see Svante E. Cornell, *Conflict Theory and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Guidelines for a Political Solution?*, Stockholm, Triton, 1997.

8 Quotations of a senior Azerbaijani government official in S. Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear, *Humanitarian Action and Politics: the Case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Providence, R.I., T. J. Watson Institute for International Studies, Occasional Paper No. 25, 1997, p. 89. Senior government officials in Baku made similar statements to the present author in October 1998.

9 See Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabakh*, Paper presented at the International Studies Association meeting, Minneapolis, March 1998, for a detailed overview of the

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14 Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Stability and Progress*, Richmond, Curzon Press, 1997, p. 12.

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