DISPATCHES

The Centrality of the Caucasus

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MOSCOW—Since 1991, the South Caucasus has been a strategic priority for Russia. As the successor to the USSR, the Russian Federation has consistently claimed a special historical and political role in the geopolitics of the Caucasus. But, contrary to what many in Europe and the United States believe, Russia's interest is not motivated by an urge for "imperial revival." Rather, it reflects the fact that stability in the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus is a basic requirement for security within Russia itself. It is also a precondition for Russia's territorial integrity.

After all, Russia is a Caucasian state, just like Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Seven constituent republics of the Russian Federation are located in the North Caucasus, and three neighboring regions are situated in the Caucasian Steppe. And, as a practical matter, the ethno-political tensions that have arisen in Russia's regions have been closely connected with conflicts under way in the Caucasus. The Georgian-Ossetian conflict (1990-1992), for example, had a substantial impact within Russia itself, spiking tensions between the republics of North Ossetia and Ingushetia. The fighting resulted in a stream of refugees from the former South Ossetian autonomous province—and from internal areas of Georgia—into North Ossetia. Those refugees subsequently became embroiled in the Ossetian-Ingush ethnic conflict (1992), which culminated in the withdrawal of the Ingush from the disputed Prigorodny (Suburban) district of North Ossetia.

One ethnic purge encouraged another. The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict promoted the consolidation and radicalization of ethno-nationalist movements

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in the Russian republics of Kabardino-Balkariya, Karachaevo-Circassia and Adygea. The Caucasus Confederation of the Mountain Peoples, created and led by them, became one of the main actors in the military clashes between Georgia and Abkhazia (1992-1993). Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the Avars (a Dagestani ethnic group) from the Kvareli district of Georgia in the early 1990s led to the creation of new conflict zones in the north of the Russian republic of Dagestan. The exodus of ethnic Russians was a direct consequence.

The security of the Russian Caucasus, in other words, is inseparable from stability in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan—and impossible without it. All of which goes a long way toward explaining why, ever since the Soviet collapse, the Russian Federation has undertaken the burden of geopolitical leadership in the South Caucasus. And peacekeeping operations have become one of Moscow's more effective instruments of influence. Since July 1992, Russia has policed the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Since July 1994, it likewise has provided security for the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. By doing so, Russia managed to prevent military clashes and bloodshed, and subsequently to "freeze" those conflicts. Russia also stopped the civil war in Georgia in 1993, and its diplomacy played a significant role in securing the 1994 cease-fire between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh.

These activities, however, have not been received warmly in Georgia, Armenia or Azerbajian. While in Armenia, Russia's military presence is more or less accepted as contributing to national security, in Georgia it is perceived as an occupation and annexation effort. Russia has been responsive to these concerns; in November 1999, at the OSCE's Istanbul Summit, Moscow and Tbilisi came to terms regarding the withdrawal of Russian military units from Georgian territory, and in 2006 the final stage of this withdrawal began. Nonetheless, today the Georgian leadership has made the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the region's "frozen conflicts" a major priority.

The Russian military presence at Azerbaijan, by contrast, is minimal. There is only one object of true strategic interest: the radar station at Gabala. Located on the southern slope of the Caucasian ridge, the station has played a significant role in ensuring the security of Russia's southern borders. Russian forces therefore remain ensconced there, pursuant to a 2002 agreement signed by the presidents of both countries.

Yet Russia's regional posture is changing. In the early 1990s, their common Soviet past still united Russia's officials and businessmen with the leaders of the Newly Independent States, and the assumption in Moscow was that the former Soviet republics would remain indefinitely pro-Russian in orientation. Since then, however, this geopolitical advantage has gradually receded, with more and more states in the region trending away from Russia. Given Moscow's need to shape the security environment there, the results have been predictable: an increasingly heavy Russian hand in the politics of the region. It is a dynamic that shows no sign of abating.