

WHITHER TRANSCAUCASIA?

The five-day war in August 2008 between Russia and Georgia has put the future of the Caucasus in doubt. Security structures such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have appeared either unwilling or unable to resolve the region's enduring conflict. To this situation, the Russian government's recognition of the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states represents a serious setback for the Georgian leadership's goal to integrate with the West. The "frozen conflict" between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the separatist republic of Nagorno-Karabakh continues to hinder the economic and political development of the states concerned. Under these circumstances, Turkey should take a more active role in determining the fate of the Caucasus, including bolder unilateralism.

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In August 2008, during and after the hostilities between Russia and Georgia over the latter's breakaway region of South Ossetia, English-language news reports quoted Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin publicly declaring Russia to be the "guarantor of security in the Caucasus."¹ Russian, like Turkish, has no articles of speech –no "the" or "a"– and so depending upon which English-language report one read, Putin and Medvedev seemed to label their country either as "the guarantor"² or "a guarantor."³ This linguistic ambiguity may seem trivial, but it is emblematic of larger-scale uncertainty about Russian actions in the region. Does the Russian government intend to exclude multilateral security bodies from exercising influence in the Caucasus, or does it simply seek to ensure that Russia itself is never excluded from any such framework? Months after the South Ossetian conflict, Western observers are still wondering what the Russian regime sought to accomplish by not only invading Georgia but also establishing formal diplomatic relations with South Ossetia and Georgia's other separatist republic, Abkhazia. Indeed, Russia's wanton complication of the international legal order, through unilateral recognition of two entities hitherto dismissed as "rogue territories" by every national government in the world (including Russia's), does not lend itself to quick and clear explanation.⁴

Russia vs. the West: Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh

Firstly, it is safe to assume that the Russian regime never expected the rest of the world to follow suit in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since Moscow has assured the West that the break-away Serbian province of Kosovo—recognized by most Western governments as an independent state in early 2008—will never have a seat at the United Nations. Russia's leaders could reasonably have expected the international community to leave Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the same international legal fate. This implies that "independent" Abkhazia and South Ossetia are meant to serve Russian interests in some other way than as allies at the UN. Instead, almost certainly, Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was intended primarily to confound the ambitions of another multinational security body, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Although the Russian government has expressed increasing alarm at the expansion of the Cold War-era Western military pact to the borders of the Russian Federation, it has acquiesced to the inclusion in NATO of all former

¹"Georgia signs Russia ceasefire, Bush blasts 'bullying,'" *Agence France Presse*, 15 August 2008.

²"Medvedev vows punishment for killers of Russians in S. Ossetia," RIA Novosti, 8 August 2008; "Merkel, Medvedev Clash Over Russia's War in Sochi Talks," *Deutsche Welle*, 15 August 2008.

³Bridget Kendall, "Russia actions confound allies," *BBC News*, 12 August 2008.

⁴At the time of this writing only one other state, Nicaragua, has recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent countries.

Soviet satellite states as well as three ex-Soviet republics largely because it has been powerless to stop the process. Not so in the case of the Caucasus. Whether by design or chance, the unrecognized republics of the Caucasus –Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan)– serve a practical purpose for Russia *vis-à-vis* the West. Borne out of secessionist wars sparked by the USSR’s collapse in the early 1990s, these states have remained “frozen” for a decade and a half with their status being unresolved under the international law. The recognized states of the Caucasus -in particular Georgia and Azerbaijan- cannot easily integrate, politically or economically, with Western supranational organizations such as NATO and the European Union (EU) if their central governments do not exercise real authority over the entire areas within their internationally recognized borders.⁵ The resultant situation in the Caucasus is untidy, but it does assuage the fears of a regime in Russia wary of encirclement by a military pact to which the Russian Federation does not belong.

The history of the unrecognized republics of the Caucasus is not a happy one. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russian troops stationed on or near the *de facto* borders of these territories since the signing of ceasefires have guaranteed the peace under international mandates, whether from the UN or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). But until now, the Russian government never made any serious attempts to improve economic conditions inside the two unrecognized states. In fact, it could even be argued that Russia actually hindered the improvement of living standards over the past fifteen years. In Abkhazia, for example, Russia enforced a trade embargo on the territory for more than ten years before opening the Abkhaz-Russian border to limited traffic in 2004. Abkhazia’s coast was subject to economic blockade as well, with disastrous effects on the local economy, and landlocked South Ossetia’s humanitarian crisis was even more desperate. Finally, even when fighting broke out periodically between separatist rebels and troops from their nominal mother countries,⁶ Russia never openly took the side of the separatists. All this changed with the South Ossetian conflict of August 2008.

The August War and Its Aftermath

The Russian regime had never formalized recognition of the Transcaucasian mini-states for fear of international accusations that it was countenancing regional instability. What apparently changed the rules of the game, in Russian eyes, was the near-universal Western recognition of Kosovo. This was done over

⁵ It should be noted that membership in NATO under such conditions may be more difficult than in the EU. Cyprus, for example, is a member of the EU but its internationally recognized central government does not exercise *de facto* jurisdiction over the entire territory of the republic. There are no such examples among NATO member-states.

⁶ Most notably, in summer 2004 fighting broke out between Georgian troops and South Ossetian forces that left many dead.

Russian objections, but what was not completely made public was the fact that some Western countries, e.g., Spain and Greece, did not extend recognition to the Serbian province. Nor, for obvious reasons, did Georgia or Azerbaijan. Fear of obvious parallels between Kosovo and the unrecognized ex-Soviet republics under international law⁷ probably dissuaded the Georgian and Azerbaijani governments from granting the Kosovo-Albanians the right to open embassies in their capitals. The Russian regime, being aware that the West had complicated Georgia and Azerbaijan's positions, was also rankled by the West's thumbing its nose over independence of Kosovo. This, combined with the increasingly bellicose, warlike, anti-Russian rhetoric emanating from Georgia's pro-Western regime, gave the Russian government a pretext to act.

Who actually started the armed hostilities in August 2008 may never be precisely ascertained. The usual exchange of fire that occurs in summer between Georgian troops and Ossetian irregulars may this time have been allowed to escalate, until eventually Georgian-inhabited villages inside South Ossetia were shelled. What is indisputable is that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili –never the calmest head among national leaders– gave the order for his small NATO-trained and equipped army to invade South Ossetia and seize the small capital city of Tskhinvali. The Russian government then pointed to the killing of some of its peacekeepers, along with other Russian citizens,⁸ by Georgian forces, and the Russian military –to quote Medvedev– delivered a “crushing response.”⁹

Russia's resoluteness in dealing with Georgia shocked the outside world. The Russian operation was full-scale, involving the bombing of Georgian military facilities across the country. The occupation of Georgia's main port; Poti, prevented Georgia from receiving Western military aid by sea during the fighting. Georgia's leadership had badly miscalculated: not only did Russia react with overwhelming force, but America and the West did not intervene or even seem to fully appreciate what was going on until the five-day war was almost over. Once the dust had settled, many European governments refrained from tough talk about pushing for Georgian membership in NATO. This left the Bush administration's call for Georgia's induction into the pact sounding like a distant cry in the wilderness, as Russian troops remained in Georgia proper until shortly before the October 10th deadline for pullout agreed in August between Russian President Medvedev and French President Nicholas Sarkozy.

The Russian military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is now to be made

⁷ Although many Western commentators dismiss such comparisons as invalid, in the case of Abkhazia, the argument for independence not only from an international legal perspective but also from history is no weaker, and indeed perhaps stronger, than Kosovo's.

⁸ The Russian Foreign Ministry has been giving passports to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for several years.

⁹ “Medvedev talks tough as Russia withdraws,” *Reuters*, 18 August 2008.

permanent, with new Russian barracks being constructed and existing military facilities renovated and upgraded.¹⁰ In other words, Abkhazia, with a population of some 200,000 and South Ossetia, with perhaps only 60,000 are to be Russian military protectorates. Russia has hitherto enjoyed only one major port on the Black Sea, Novorossiysk, and Abkhazia will extend the Russian coastal presence considerably. South Ossetia is useful because it is located on the other side of a tunnel that connects the Russian Federation with the South Caucasus, through the Greater Caucasus mountain range. Still, while such factors deserve to be taken into account in measuring the balance of forces in the area, they do not add up to a momentous shift in the military equation. Russian troops were, after all, already present in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even if Moscow had removed the last of its bases from Georgia proper. The Russian objective, rather, was to further “blur” Georgia’s borders, to make its integration with “Euro-Atlantic structures” even more difficult.

Moscow has correctly calculated that as long as Russia does not formally recognize Georgia to have the same borders that the rest of the world does, Georgia can be admitted to NATO only at considerable peril to the Western defense pact as a whole. That is to say, the governments of the NATO countries could announce Georgia’s membership, but in that case NATO might be immediately put to the test as a collective security association. The treaty’s charter holds essentially that any member’s armed conflict with a non-member becomes every other member’s conflict. By admitting Georgia while Abkhazia and South Ossetia exist as *de jure* independent states within Georgian borders, NATO would face Morton’s Fork: either intervene militarily in Georgia at the first sign of fighting, or lose credibility internationally. If NATO intervened, it probably could not conduct a casualty-free war through a few weeks of sustained high-altitude bombing, as it did in Kosovo in 1999. This time, Russian anti-aircraft batteries would target NATO planes, and the Russian regime has bet that the West will not risk this scenario. At the same time, NATO must either expand –taking in more and more members to form a constantly enlarging “bloc of freedom”– or fade away. It is now up to NATO to make the next move. By recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent, Moscow has called NATO’s bluff.

Energy, Security and the Fate of NATO

Even taking all this into account, in the aftermath of the conflict there is not yet a sense that Russia seeks to exclude the West from the Caucasus. According to Liana Jervalidze, energy security analyst with Transparency International, a Western NGO that monitors corruption and due process worldwide, the Russian

¹⁰ “Russian Forces Building New S. Ossetia Barracks,” *Reuters*, 13 October 2008; “Abkhazia: Russia can use old Soviet base,” *United Press International*, 18 October 2008.

military “did not damage a single domestic energy facility” in Georgia during the August operation. These include the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, which deliver energy from the Caspian through Georgia to Western markets via Turkey. This was, in her words, “very strange.” She recounts that after the 1992-1993 secessionist war in Abkhazia, from 1994 to 2002 several terrorist acts occurred which damaged Georgia’s electricity grid. These included attacks on the Inguri River hydroelectric power plant (with a capacity of 1,300 megawatts) and two gas power generation units. The Russians, Jervalidze claims, “organized the 2002 attacks because discussions on the ratification of these projects were taking place that year and Moscow sought to destabilize the situation.” In August 2008, by contrast, the Russians “did not damage a single transmission line or facility.” The message the Russian regime was sending to Western consumers was that “only Russian goodwill can secure energy in the Caucasus, not Western surveillance satellites, maintains Jervalidze.”¹¹

The regime in Georgia appears to have grasped Moscow’s message quickly. Alexei Sekarev, a team leader with the Georgian-European Policy and Legal Advice Center (GEPLAC) in Tbilisi, asserts that the Georgian government’s position changed drastically after the war. Mikheil Saakashvili’s speech to the UN shortly after the conflict was suddenly “less NATO and more EU.” Before the war, NATO membership had top foreign policy priority for the Georgian government because, according to Sekarev, the Georgians entertained the “erroneous perception that it was easier to accede to than the EU.” Now, however, with Abkhazia and South Ossetia hosting Russian ambassadors, the NATO option for Georgia seems more remote than ever and, says Sekarev, “the priorities may be shifting.” It now falls to GEPLAC, an organization financed by the European Commission, to “do the long and boring study of what is necessary for Georgia to become an associate member of the EU.”¹²

While the Russian regime may be content to allow Western commercial involvement in the Caucasus, including EU membership for the states of the region, it may not quietly countenance Western energy sector involvement further east than Azerbaijan’s territorial waters. Jervalidze believes it is not Western-owned and operated Transcaucasian pipelines that worry Moscow, but rather the prospect of a Transcaspian energy corridor linking the Caucasus with energy-rich Central Asia. Because the Europeans “don’t want to jeopardize oil and gas supplies to Europe.” She further asserts that aggressive Western intervention in the region to realize construction and security of Transcaspian oil and gas pipelines is unlikely.¹³

¹¹ Interview with Liana Jervalidze, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2 October 2008.

¹² Interview with Alexei Sekarev, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2 October 2008.

¹³ Interview with Liana Jervalidze, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2 October 2008.

With respect to NATO, Russia's leaders may have correctly calculated that they can bring about the organization's decline and fall by throwing a spanner into the works in the Caucasus. In the post-Cold War world, NATO appears increasingly flaccid and moribund, more a "club" than a tight collective security grouping on constant state of alert. The alliance was designed to contain the Soviet bloc, which offered the world an "alternative" to multi-party parliamentary democracies and free-market economies. This alternative model –the one-party state ruled by a radical totalitarian ideology– no longer menaces the globe. Now, although containment of the Russian Federation does not feature among NATO's stated aims, this is what the Kremlin has ultimately –and not unreasonably– concluded to be the pact's real objective. Vladimir Putin said in April 2008 that NATO "is not a democratizer." He spoke in reference to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians living in NATO-member Latvia, people who have lived there since before the Soviet break-up but who are denied full civil rights as Latvian citizens and barred from certain jobs.¹⁴ Russian interpretation of the *raison d'être* of NATO, and criticism of continued expansion, are therefore not entirely hollow. The caliber of potential new NATO member-states from the ex-USSR does not give many reasons for hope in the alliance's future. The August 2008 war did not help the Georgian regime's international image, and Sekarev puts most of the blame for the war on the Georgian government, which launched full-blown hostilities. Many in Georgia, he says, had read the pre-war situation as follows: "Begin a dangerous adventure, gain an advantage in being perceived as a victim, and, by being a loser, receive \$2 billion." (Indeed, the Georgian regime's tactic appears to have been at least partially successful, as evidenced by recent Western pledges of over three billion dollars in aid for postwar reconstruction) The Americans, says Sekarev, are "not very clever," adding that Washington should have explained to Saakashvili that the U.S. would "not intervene in this war."¹⁵ As it happened, the Georgian president embarked on his operation in the hope of luring the West in to stand up to Russia and reunite his country. What Saakashvili accomplished, mostly, was embarrassment of his Western supporters, allegations of war crimes against Georgian troops from international human rights groups and an end to his heroic reputation in the West.

The Russians view NATO as the agency for widening the market of the Western "military-industrial complex," to borrow a term from the Soviet lexicon. Yet even accepting the Russian view as valid, NATO would, ideally, still be preferable to the Russian Defense Ministry as the chief security establishment in the Caucasus. NATO is multilateral, and could conceivably provide stability to the states on the periphery of the ex-USSR by coordinating their military commands

¹⁴ Sebastian Alison and James G. Neuger, "Putin Says NATO Expansion Is Direct Threat to Russia," *Bloomberg*, 4 April 2008.

¹⁵ Interview with Alexei Sekarev, Tbilisi, Georgia, 2 October 2008.

and defense sectors. Unfortunately, the organization probably lacks the unity and muscle necessary to the task of denying Russia military control over its “near abroad.” It therefore may be entering an era of serious decline. To prevent NATO’s expansion, Russia has shown it is prepared to take a stand militarily in Georgia, and also diplomatically in other ex-Soviet states with separatist republics on their territories. The Russian government has made diplomatic initiatives toward Azerbaijan and Moldova, involving offers to help reunite them with their separatist territories (Nagorno-Karabakh and Transdniestria, respectively) in exchange for countries promising never to try to join NATO or host NATO troops. These efforts to date have shown some signs of success.¹⁶

Western military intervention in the Caucasus, through NATO, might have been feasible in the early-to-mid-1990s, when the post-Soviet Russian regime was weak and distracted by domestic crises.¹⁷ Now, such intervention could only be carried out at considerable risk of a wider conflagration, with Turkey as a frontline state. Possibly, the Russian regime today views Transcaucasia in terms of strategic importance most possibly like the way the United States viewed the Caribbean in 1962. If so, the question of whether, in a post-Cold War age of increasing multilateralism, the Russian Federation can legitimately claim the status of sole guarantor of regional security and stability for an entire region looms large. If NATO is not to serve as the multilateral security regime in the Caucasus, who or what should fill this role? Under the changed environment, if caution and flexibility are to be the hallmarks of political and economic integration of the Caucasus with the West, Turkey has a constructive part to play.

Turkey as Honest Broker

On August 13th, when fighting in and around South Ossetia had just ended, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan appeared in Moscow to present an initiative for conflict resolution to President Medvedev. The next day, Erdoğan was in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, to push the plan –the “Caucasus Security and Cooperation Platform” (abbreviated KIIP in Turkish)– to President Saakashvili. The KIIP, it emerged, had been conceived by Ankara as a Russo-Turkish-led program for resolving conflict in the Caucasus, in particular the unresolved dispute over Azerbaijan’s separatist, Armenian-controlled enclave of Nagorno-

¹⁶ See Jean-Cristophe Peuch, “Are Russia and Turkey Trying to Alter the Nagorno-Karabakh Peace ” *Eurasia Insight*, 26 September 2008, http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092608_pr.shtml.

¹⁷ Indeed, it has been suggested that domestic economic crisis in Russia may actually have prompted the August war. “The breakdown of oil and gas industry negotiations with major foreign investors preceded the muscular display of Russian military power in Georgia in August and the subsequent further flight of foreign capital.” George H. Wittman, “Moskva Meltdown,” *American Spectator* (online edition), 24 October 2008, <http://www.spectator.org/archives/2008/10/24/moskva-meltdown>.

Karabakh. The move was welcomed in Moscow,¹⁸ but did not go unnoticed long in the West.

Two weeks after Erdoğan's mission, Zeyno Baran, the Turkish-American head of the Center for Eurasian Policy at the Hudson Institute in Washington, voiced the likely concerns of the US administration when she wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed -entitled "Will Turkey Abandon NATO?"- that the KIIP looked like a coordinated Russo-Turkish attempt to "keep the U.S. and the EU at arm's length."¹⁹ The worry in the West would be that, if the KIIP produced visible results, it might sound the death knell for the U.S.-led body hitherto chiefly responsible for the Nagorno-Karabakh issue: the "Minsk Group" of the OSCE. The Minsk Group is chaired by U.S. and France among the Western powers, together with Russia. Apart from Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, participating states include far-flung Belarus, Germany, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, Sweden and Finland. While the Turkish government has denied that the KIIP is designed to supplant the Minsk Group, this has apparently failed to assuage Western fears. The KIIP plan is a "3+2" formula – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, plus Russia and Turkey. In other words, as far as drawing the map of the Caucasus was concerned, the KIIP looked as if it left the U.S. out in the cold.

While Ankara does not necessarily envision the KIIP as a replacement of the OSCE Minsk Group, it does apparently view it as part of a security framework that could fill a regional void in the absence of a multilateral defense pact such as NATO. According to Sinan Oğan, chairman of the Turkish Centre for International Relations and Strategic Analysis (TÜRKSAM), "Ankara is of the opinion that the countries of the region should not be full members of NATO." This view is founded on current realities: "Those countries that have some kind of border problems cannot be accepted." However, Turkey's leadership does think partnership programs that integrate the Caucasus states with NATO should be continued, and the KIIP is, in Oğan's words, "Turkey's idea for reaching this goal."²⁰

The Armenian government's support for the KIIP without preconditions can be seen as part of a recent, encouraging trend in warming Turkish-Armenian relations. Official high-level meetings between Turkish and Armenian officials -both low and high-profile- on normalizing ties have been going on for many months. Among the astonishing results has been an acceptance by Yerevan of a Turkish proposal for a commission of historians -including "neutral" scholars

¹⁸ "Russian Foreign Minister: 'Russia welcomes Turkey's Caucasus Platform,'" *Today.az*, 3 October 2008, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/47950.html>.

¹⁹ Zeyno Baran, "Will Turkey Abandon NATO?" (opinion) *Wall Street Journal*, 29 August 2008.

²⁰ Interview with Sinan Oğan, 30 October 2008. Mr. Oğan also notes, however, that with the August 2008 conflict over South Ossetia, Georgia "solved its [border] problems in a de facto way."

as well as Turks and Armenians- to study the mass killings and deportations in eastern Anatolia in between 1915-1922, popularly labeled the “Armenian Genocide.” Turkish President Abdullah Gül attended a football match between the national teams of Turkey and Armenia during his visit to Yerevan in September; Armenian President Serzh Sargsian has said he is prepared to go to Istanbul to attend a rematch next year. Ankara has said it expected an Armenian-Azerbaijani deal on Nagorno-Karabakh to be reached shortly after the October 15th Presidential Election in Azerbaijan. Veteran Turkish columnist Cengiz Çandar wrote optimistically in the *Turkish Daily News* that, “[d]iplomatic ties between Turkey and Armenia” were to be “formed concurrently,” and that both sides would “announce the opening of borders.”²¹

The increasingly rosy Turkish-Armenian ties have been attended by mixed reactions from Azerbaijan, Georgia and Iran. An unnamed, high-ranking Azerbaijani politician said that Azerbaijan would not participate in the KIIP unless the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh was resolved first. On September 8th, two days before Gül was due to visit the Azerbaijani capital, Baku, to present the KIIP to President Ilham Aliyev, the Azerbaijani ultranationalist press angrily denounced Gül’s September 6th visit to Yerevan.²² Aliyev’s public stance toward the KIIP was initially positive. However, the Azerbaijan presidential administration’s subsequent call for Turkey to become a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, on an equal level with America, France and Russia, made it seem as if Baku was leaning toward preserving the old conflict resolution format. As it happened, Baku admitted the idea of Turkey as Minsk Group co-chair was impossible without Yerevan’s consent, and at the same time conceded that the probability of Armenia’s agreeing was “zero.”²³ Thus, in the end, the Azerbaijani regime’s enthusiasm for the KIIP appeared tepid at best.

The Georgian government’s reaction to Ankara’s peace initiative has been lukewarm as well. The regime in Tbilisi has staked all its hopes on U.S. military involvement -indeed, intervention- in the Caucasus as the only way to guarantee Georgia’s independence, continued pro-Western orientation, and integration with “Euro-Atlantic structures.” As the South Ossetian war reached its quick conclusion, Georgians watched anxiously, in the words of one Georgian commentator, to see whether Turkey would “allow the U.S. ships into the Black Sea.”²⁴ Finally, the Iranian government has said that the non-participation of Iran in the KIIP makes it “inadequate.” Tehran has called for a “3+3” version to replace

²¹ Cengiz Çandar, “Clues from New York for Turkey and the Caucasus,” *Turkish Daily News*, 25 September 2008.

²² Gareth Jenkins, “Turkey Launches Karabakh Peace Initiative,” *Eurasian Daily Monitor*, 12 September 2008.

²³ “Azerbaijan wants Turkey to be co-chairman of OSCE Minsk Group,” *World Bulletin*, 25 September 2008.

²⁴ Interview with Tamuna Karosanidze, Executive Director, *Transparency International*, Tbilisi, Georgia, 1 October 2008.

the “3+2” version that excludes Iran.²⁵ As matters currently stand with regard to the KIIP, Ankara appears to be slowly lining up alongside Moscow and Yerevan, in juxtaposition to Baku, Tbilisi, Washington, and –ironically– Tehran.

Conclusion

Ankara can expect some opposition from its Western allies as long as it pursues a Russo-Turkish solution for the Caucasus. Yet the Russo-Turkish dynamic may need to be strengthened if the influence of NATO and the West in the region goes into serious decline, and if the Caucasus is not to be left to an exclusively Russian-ordained fate. The dialogue between Moscow and Ankara should be deepened, and criticism from Washington should not cause Turkey to give up pushing the KIIP or other Turkish-led plans as viable conflict-resolution mechanisms. Ankara should abandon its traditional fear of appearing to act too unilaterally in policy toward its neighbors to the east.

The OSCE Minsk Group, the primary international dispute resolution body dealing with Nagorno-Karabakh,²⁶ has produced little meaningful progress in the past decade and a half. Maintaining the current paradigm to the exclusion of all else feels like political and economic “purgatory” for the Caucasus, a fate of precarious energy paths winding their way through war-torn areas, bypassing Armenian territory when a diversification of routes that included Armenia would clearly be the best option for all the peoples of the region. Russo-Turkish cooperation represents the best chance to make this a reality. The alternative –Russia as “hegemon” in the Caucasus for the foreseeable future– is grim.

Contrary to the impression created by many in the West, notably the “Armenian Diaspora,” the inhabitants of all the Caucasus states see Turkey as favorable and hence Turkey should not be afraid to take a bolder, more active role in settling borders to the benefit of all. The continued existence of “frozen conflicts” and *de facto* independent states –non-universally recognized as sovereign and trapped in a no-man’s land of underdevelopment and destitution– presents the greatest impediment to peace and prosperity for the whole Caucasus.

²⁵ “Iran eager to join the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform,” *ANS Press*, 15 September 2008.

²⁶ The option of placing Nagorno-Karabakh under indefinite international administration, led by Russia and Turkey, has never been seriously considered but might prove agreeable to both Armenia and Azerbaijan.
