

Divide and Conquer: Separatism in Transcaucasia and Russian Intervention

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Abstract

“The strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.” This quote from the famous ancient historian Thucydides may come off as rather harsh, but it describes well the attitude that many historical Great Powers have had towards weaker states. In the modern day, one can find a similar (albeit more nuanced) attitude with the Russian Federation’s own affairs with its neighbors. None of these neighbors can hold a candle to the geopolitical might that Russia is able to project, including those based in the South Caucasus. The South Caucasus (Transcaucasia) was part of the Russian Empire since the early 19th century. Control continued with the establishment of the Soviet Union, but ended with its collapse in 1991. In the wake of Russia’s retreat from the region came the birth of three new Transcaucasian republics: Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, independence was never straightforward for these new countries and political instability has remained in them ever since. Independence was never straightforward for these countries, and political instability has haunted them ever since - instability which Russia has noticed. This paper discusses and analyzes Russian intervention in the South Caucasus. While Russian policy towards each Transcaucasian country differs somewhat, Russia commonly exploits the separatist movements and violence in these states - namely those of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan - within the hope of leveraging influence.

Introduction

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The Bully Next Door

Before an analysis can be given of the conflicts in the South Caucasian countries and Russia’s desire to take advantage of them, it must be asked first: why is Russia so interested in a domineering foreign policy in that region, and how do they stand to benefit from doing so?

Russia undoubtedly wants to be a Great Power, as stated by influential Russian leaders themselves: the head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, Sergey Karaganov, once said that “We want the status of being a great power... we want to be the heart of greater Eurasia, a region of peace and cooperation.” This necessitates Russia acting like a hegemon in its own neighborhood, the South Caucasus included (Jonavičius et al., 2019, p. 8).

Desire to recreate imperial prestige from the times of the Tsars and the Bolsheviks is not the only driving force behind Russian imperialism in Transcaucasia. Russia is also concerned with NATO presence in the South Caucasus. The Putin administration accuses NATO of “destabilizing the Caucasus region with joint exercises in Georgia” (Nasriov et al., 2017, p. 51). Through leverage over the South Caucasian republics, Russia can “deny NATO’s involvement as an emerging stakeholder through new membership roadmaps and enhanced cooperation opportunities” in the region (Kasapoglu, 2017, p. 3). This policy doubles as check-mating rival Turkey as well, since it is also a member of NATO.

Finally, there is the issue of energy. There is plenty of oil and natural gas to be found both within the Caucasus and in the pipelines extending from the Caspian Sea: Azerbaijan possesses “7 billion barrels of oil (bbl) and 35 trillion cubic feet (cf) of gas,” while Georgia’s reserves lie at “40 billion bbl and 300,000 million cf” (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 3). Moreover, there are four pipelines (three oil, one gas) extending from the Caspian Sea and over the Caucasus. However, with the exception of the Baku-Novorossiysk Oil Pipeline, the pipelines are “owned and operated by Western companies and do not cross Russian territory”

(Peña-Ramos, 2017, pp. 3-4). This reality is detrimental to Russian geopolitical interests, for local Russian dominance on energy exports is being challenged.

Therefore, it is Great Power mentality, security concerns, and energy interests that motivate Russia to take an interventionist stance in the violence of the South Caucasus. By controlling and manipulating the instability of the region through a peculiar mix of provocation and mediation, Russia can effectively keep it divided and so project both military and economic power abroad. How Russia exactly goes about this from one Transcaucasian country to the next will be detailed and analyzed below.

David vs. Goliath: Russia, Georgia, and Secessionist South Ossetia and Abkhazia

One Russian strategy of keeping the South Caucasus divided is to support the secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, thereby weakening Georgia. This was exemplified by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and its aftermath. Abkhazia and South Ossetia enjoyed a degree of autonomy during Soviet times. South Ossetians could lay claim to autonomy as early as shortly “before the “Sovietization of Georgia in 1921” (Saparov, 2014, p. 75). The political and military institutions established by South Ossetian partisans hostile to Georgian rule enabled them to “exercise some political influence and... a certain degree in minor decision-making” (Saparov, 2014, p. 75). Their pains would be rewarded by the victorious invading Russian Bolsheviks with the establishment of the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast in 1922 (Saparov, 2014, p. 82). Similar efforts asserted by Abkhazians at the same time, meanwhile, would net them even greater autonomy. Sometime after the Bolshevik invasion of Georgia, Stalin heaped upon the Abkhazians the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Saparov, 2014, p. 49).

Therefore, a history of autonomy, combined with linguistic differences (Ossetians and Abkhazians each speak a language different to Georgian), would help to release long pent-up tensions between the three groups when the USSR collapsed. It also did not help that South Ossetians in particular have closer affinity with Russia than with Georgia: their northern brethren reside in Russia, and as many as “nearly 90 percent” of South Ossetians possessed Russian citizenship in 1992, the year both Russia and Georgia signed the Dagomys Agreements following the first outburst of violence between South Ossetians and Georgians (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 6).

Sporadic fighting between Georgians and secessionist elements haunted the 1990s and beyond. The last time Georgia made a serious effort at ending the autonomy of its breakaway provinces was in 2008, when Georgian troops invaded and bombed South Ossetia and Abkhazia through Operation Clear Field and Operation Rock, respectively (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 6). These campaigns turned out to be a serious blunder for Georgia, as Russia immediately intervened on behalf of the secessionists. With little NATO support and a miniscule military, the brief clash with Russia went as well for Georgia as anyone could reasonably expect. The end of the 2008 war witnessed Russian troops stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, an occupation that lasts to this day.

So has Russia taken advantage of Georgian weakness? For one, Russia obviously has now greater freedom in militarily inserting itself in Georgia. The now-permanent stationing of Russian troops in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia means that military facilities can be constructed in these regions. Perhaps the best example of this is the Abkhazian port of

Ochamchire, which has enabled Russia to “strengthen the already massive presence of its naval fleet in the Black Sea” (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 7). Furthermore, naval basing in Abkhazia as well as Crimea situates Russia well against Turkey, bolstering the former’s position in the “race in naval modernization going on between the two nations” (Kasapoglu, 2017, p. 4).

But what perhaps benefited Russia even more out of its support of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is its now-greater leverage over the energy flowing through Georgia. Georgia and other South Caucasian states have tried to lessen their dependence on Russian energy through positioning themselves as energy transit states (i.e. energy flowing from the Caspian Sea would go through these countries and not Russia). Needless to say, this trend would go against Russian interests, but Russian victory in the 2008 war may have reversed it. With a diminished Georgian army and Russian forces now within striking distance of Tbilisi from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has helped in discouraging the “creation of new pipelines through the South Caucasus and Georgia avoiding Russian territory,” such as the now-stillborne Nabucco project (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 7). Russia itself, meanwhile, became a more attractive alternative corridor for the transit of energy: thanks to Russian presence in South Ossetia, the Dzuarikau-Tskhinvali pipeline - the “highest mountain pipeline in the world” - was built in that breakaway region in 2009 (Pototskaya, 2014, p. 303).

In short, Russia’s backing of Georgian secessionists has kept Georgia weak, increased Russian military capacity in its sphere of influence, and shifted the balance of power in regards to energy transportation in Moscow’s favor. We will see similar consequences with Russia’s intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis.

Into the Frying Pan: Russia’s Intervention in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis

Russian relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia are shaped by the conflict waged between the two over Nagorno-Karabakh. Russian posturing in the crisis - acting as both mediator and instigator - enables it to spread its military and economic influence abroad not unlike what it accomplished with Georgia.

Nominally part of Azerbaijan, the existence of Nagorno-Karabakh is an oddity. Whereas Azerbaijan is “predominantly Muslim and ethnically Azeri,” as much as “75 percent of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is Christian and ethnically Armenian” (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 6). This is because the Soviet Union, “in an effort to divide and rule the South Caucasus,” intentionally placed the Armenian-majority Nagorno-Karabakh district under the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic in 1921 (di France, 2018). Similar to South Ossetians and Abkhazians within Georgia, Armenians felt alienated inside a state whose majority ethnic group spoke a different language (and in this case, practiced a different religion). Also similar to Georgia, pent-up tension between Azeris and Armenians residing in Azerbaijan would be released violently with the collapse of the USSR.

Nagorno-Karabakh’s attempt to secede from Azerbaijan and unite with Armenia towards the end of the 1980s resulted in conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, ending with Armenian occupation of “about 20% of Azerbaijani territory - namely Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding Azerbaijani districts” (di Franco, 2018). Although Nagorno-Karabakh now desires outright independence as the Republic of Artsakh, it continues to receive strong military support from Armenia - and so relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain tense (despite the recent ceasefire in 2020). As a matter of fact, the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia

is the “most militarized in the world” (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 8).

So how has Russia positioned itself in the conflict, so as to increase its leverage over the competing sides? To maximize its geopolitical weight over the South Caucasus, Russia wants Armenia and Azerbaijan to continue their hostile relationship. This necessitates firmly aligning with either country, and Russia has chosen Armenia. Armenia is Russia’s “only military and political ally in the region” through Armenia’s continued membership in both the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (unlike Georgia) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (unlike Georgia and Azerbaijan) (Pototskaya, 2014, p. 301). Because of this, Russia is able to maintain a military presence in Armenia - namely through its “bases in Erebuni (mostly air elements) and Gyumri” (Kasapoglu, 2017, p. 6). It is this power projection, furthermore, that allows Russia to better keep NATO (i.e. Turkey) in check and keep an eye on the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute.

However, Russia does not necessarily want to totally antagonize Azerbaijan either, for it is the most strategically placed of the South Caucasus republics when it comes to the transportation of energy in that region (Azerbaijan borders the Caspian Sea, where it extracts natural gas) (Pototskaya, 2014, p. 303). To maintain local geo-energy dominance, Russia has a share of the gas Azerbaijan exports. For this reason, Russia provides some military aid to Azerbaijan. For instance, it was reported by unofficial sources that in September 2010 there was a “significant delivery of Russian weaponry to Azerbaijan” (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 8).

Lastly, Russia’s playing of both sides is evident in its handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Simply put, Russia acts as both instigator and mediator in the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh: it seeks to maintain the status quo.

On the one hand, it is imperative for Russia - as advocated by major Russian news outlets themselves such as *The Moscow Times* - to “firmly hold back Yerevan, Baku, and the Karabakh leadership from a new war” (Trenin, 2018). After all, should Azerbaijan commit to an all-out lengthy invasion, the energy flowing from its capital to Russia’s Novorossiysk would be hampered or cut out altogether. It is for this reason that Russia helped to mediate a ceasefire between the two in 1994 and another in 2020, as well as maintain a presence of 2,000 Russian peacekeepers in the region (di Franco, 2018; BBC, 2020).

On the other hand, Russia wants to impede progress towards everlasting peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan by instigating violence (or at least mutual distrust) *just* enough that there will not be a unified South Caucasian bloc that could possibly counter Russian interests. It is also through intentionally keeping the conflict prolonged that Russia manages to “sow doubt over the construction of the TAP [Trans Adriatic Pipeline] and other pipelines that cross the South Caucasus or those being planned that intend to avoid Russian territory” - thereby maintaining Russia’s regional monopoly on energy exports (Peña-Ramos, 2017, p. 10). Hence, Russia sells arms to both sides (in fact, Azerbaijan receives “85% of its arm imports from Russia”) (di Franco, 2018).

Conclusion

Moscow’s policy towards the South Caucasus differs from state to state there. However, the one commonality that can be identified in these interactions is Russia taking advantage of secessionist movements in the region. This is done so as to keep the Transcaucasian states disunited, bolster Russia’s geo-energy interests, and project military

power abroad.

A NATO report perhaps best summarizes Russia's behavior in the South Caucasus as "Cooperation with Armenia, Confrontation with Georgia, and Confusion with Azerbaijan" (Kasapoglu, 2017, p. 3). Russia is clearly not afraid to support Abkhazian and South Ossetian aspirations to the point of war with Georgia, thereby diminishing Georgia's strategic position as a terminal energy transit state as well as Georgia's ability to defend itself militarily. The matter of Nagorno-Karabakh is more complex. Russia is firm allies with Armenia; while Azerbaijan is not entirely pleased with Russian military bases placed in its rival (as well as other mixed signals sent by Russia), the government of Baku can hardly complain about Russian military aid through arms imports. Russian support emboldens both countries enough to continue disputing over Nagorno-Karabakh but not to the point of a protracted war (the most recent clash between the two countries only lasted about a month before Russia and other states mediated a ceasefire). This all plays to Russia's benefit as detailed earlier.

Time will tell whether Russia's divide-and-rule strategy in the South Caucasus will either reap long-term benefits for Moscow, or just ultimately end up getting it involved in a quagmire. Even now, NATO is not entirely dissuaded from seeking new partnerships in the region, while Russia's geo-energy monopoly is still not entirely assured as plans for new pipelines continue to be explored. It will especially be interesting to see whether Putin's future successor can play the game as well as Putin himself does in keeping the South Caucasus within Russia's orbit.

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