
Armenia and the War on Terrorism: Delicate Times Ahead

By Richard Giragosian and Khatchik Derghoukassian
January 16, 2002

It is now clear that the "War On Terrorism" (WOT), declared after the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States, will not end with the final defeat of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan nor with the dismantling of the Bin Laden-led "Al-Qaida" terrorist network, but will carry on to a next stage, still to be determined. For much of the developing world, the priority is to stake out a secure place within this new geopolitical matrix, a priority necessitated by the U.S. recasting of the world along a new "with us or against us" axis. Among the smaller, weaker states, this need to demonstrate allegiance to the U.S. WOT has resulted in a near comical collective statement of support ranging from such improbable states as Sudan, Libya, and even Somalia.

For the Caucasus in particular, the WOT has already demonstrated the extent of the scale and scope of the changes in the geopolitical landscape. Although no stranger to the threatening and destabilizing influences of terrorism, the Caucasus is now experiencing the repercussions from the WOT with new challenges and imperatives for each of the region's countries in transition. In the Transcaucasus, the larger global shift has raised expectations and fears equally, although it can be argued that each of these three states, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia will tend to lose, with the only variance being in the degree of the losses. It seems obvious that the outlook promises further uncertainty and poses real tests for these states in a profound period of delicate times.

It is this dynamic geopolitical shift that has left many of the smaller weak states precariously caught in the shadows of new regional and global power alliances. The influence of the WOT has spread far afield from the Afghani theater of operations, involving a number of marginal and peripheral states anxious to exploit the opportunity to garner geopolitical worth and strategic value. Such an anxious effort to hurriedly climb on board the WOT locomotive was seen in the almost ridiculous claims of support so profusely offered by some questionable regimes, most notably with Azerbaijan's allegations charging the democratically elected Nagorno Karabagh government with ties to international terrorism.

The Twin Towers of the WOT

Although still somewhat abstract and inherently controversial, the concepts defining the (WOT) have undoubtedly redefined U.S. foreign policy for the remainder of the Bush Administration. The WOT comprises two competing pillars: the search for American primacy through unilateral behavior, advocated by the "hawks" of the Administration, against a realist balance of power strategy, aptly termed as "offshore balancing" following the concept of "Grand Strategy" elaborated by Christopher Layne in a widely

quoted 1997 essay. Led by U.S. Secretary of State, Collin Powell, the realist balance of power strategy is marked by a strong reliance on coalition-building and multilateral initiatives, even though the Republican "multilateralism" would be defined "A` la carte" according to State Department planning chief Richard Haas, or as a "Sinatra Doctrine" according to noted analyst Juan Gabriel Tokatlian.

The inherent tension between these two competing pillars, or "twin towers" of foreign policy, is setting the course for the future direction of the now fully-engaged United States. This WOT has effectively ended all talk of the allegedly "isolationist" Bush Administration, moving the focus sharply to global security. The real tests for the U.S. are still to come, however, with the challenges of seeking security amid the deepening global economic recession combined with the "world wariness" of the next stages of the WOT. Such world wariness stems from the possible escalation of the WOT and its expansion to other target areas such as Iraq, Somalia, or elsewhere, and threatening to divide the global coalition so carefully constructed by Secretary Powell.

The WOT holds domestic implications as well, as a series of new laws and powers have been ushered in that could very well assure an unprecedented executive branch domination in domestic politics. Such a legislative strengthening of the executive also contains an ideological shift that could damage the strong American tradition of civil liberties, as many alarmed legal observers have already remarked. Yet the ongoing debate about security versus civil liberties is just one aspect of the WOT's impact on domestic politics. Another aspect lies in the even closer internal/external linkage and interaction with new rules of the game for Capitol Hill's public policy formulation. Advocacy groups of international or global projections (such as the leading human rights groups) have also taken notice of the changing rules and their inherent emphasis on the extra-territorialization of U.S. law.

The legislative enhancements to U.S. security are a natural extension of the profound effects of September 11th on the U.S. body politic. Seemingly contrary to the goals of the attackers, September 11th has in fact unified a previously fragmented American identity, reawakening the slumbering patriotism of most Americans. Ironically, this national reawakening follows the country's most divisive presidential elections in recent history and has bolstered the Bush Administration tremendously. Similar to the effects of Pearl Harbor, the attacks on American soil have accomplished a nationalistic unity not seen since World War II. And perhaps most significant for the world, the aftermath of September 11th has demonstrated the potency and power of an awakened United States.

A Realist New World Order: A "Duo Concert"?

It is not just the changes in U.S. foreign policy, however, that is marking the WOT's new international context of a restructured international political and economic order. There is significant potential to utilize the new environment to modernize the global security and economic architecture and to stabilize a number of conflict zones. The overall goal should be to address the world's traditionally ignored regions and regimes by performing

an "exorcism of terror" by preventing the causes of conflict. The WOT has led President Bush Junior to validate President Bush Senior's heralding of a "new world order," a once premature announcement that now seems quite apparent. The hallmark of this new world order can be seen in Washington's new global relationships, and with Russia most dramatically.

The last U.S.-Russian summit between presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin took place in a strange coincidence on the very day the Northern Alliance forces, with U.S. support, entered and secured Kabul on November 13th. Although resulting in very little with respect to the standard agenda of the abolition of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty and the Bush Administration main defense project, the National Missile Defense (NMD), the Texas summit did, however, articulate an important mutual understanding and support of the WOT. Despite the still ongoing evolution of this new bilateral strategic relationship, it seems evident that a new "burden sharing" arrangement between Russia and the West is underway, demarcating stable areas of influence and zones of cooperation. This is also seen in the current negotiations between Russia and the North Atlantic Treaty organization (NATO).

This new U.S.-Russian strategic relationship could well define a 19th century Concert of Europe-style new "Duo Concert" based on mutual interest through a partnership in the WOT. This new great power concert, with all of its internal, regional and global implications, is the context in which the three Transcaucasus states, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, find themselves. Since 1991, the fall of the former Soviet Union and the emergence of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the nature of the U.S.-Russian relationship has formed the subtext of the foreign policy agendas of these three states. Such a decade-long subtext has been strongest in the region's security and energy issues, with each country balancing its own foreign policy against the limits of being hostage to the broader implications of U.S.-Russian relations.

Implications for the Caucasus

In the immediate aftermath of September 11th, all three countries responded by attempting to redefine their regional policies according to the new shifting international conditions. The most pressing challenge for the Transcaucasus is to accommodate the now converging interests of Moscow and Washington. Despite the discontents in both camps, the American hegemony advocates in Washington and the eternally NATO-suspicious in Moscow, true U.S.-Russian security cooperation could lessen influence-expansion competition and offer new ways to overcome regional obstacles, especially in terms of energy development. Such a situation, once concrete, holds substantial promise, although possible only within the parameters of the U.S.-Russian cooperation process.

Such a promise of a new "great power framework" in the Caucasus would redefine mutually accepted "zones of influence," based not on strict geography but according to specific issues. Such promise for bilateral cooperation, however, is limited by the influence of external third parties, most clearly by regional powers Turkey and Iran, and

depends on the abilities of the U.S. and Russian governments to prioritize their bilateral agenda for the Caucasus and to contain the destabilizing roles of such external actors.

This regional aftermath of the WOT's new global context will undoubtedly impose an imperative for a foreign policy of delicate balance on each of the three states of the Transcaucasus. It is no longer the zero-sum game of a bilateral competition but a period of newly defined multiple alliances, each based on the various agenda issues of the U.S.-Russian partnership. Although the conflict-prone nature of the region is far from over and each state will still pursue its own national and security interests, the new regional environment is now endowed with a substantially less competitive context. But it is still a war of jockeying and repositioning among and between the three states as each state seeks to strengthen its geopolitical position.

In this context, Armenia, a country that has suffered international setbacks in its diplomatic position regarding its hostile neighbors and adversaries, must look beyond its traditional reliance on the strategic alliance with Russia as its sole pillar of national security. While that alliance is still obviously crucial, it should not disregard an opportunity for a special role within the evolving Russian partnerships with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such an opportunity would maximize the unique Armenian position of bridging both camps, an asset not held by its two neighbors and a move truly validating the course of "complementarity" as the defining concept of Armenia's foreign policy.

Section 907: Rewarding the Aggressor

It is disturbing that the first concrete statement of the new security environment of the Caucasus came at the expense of Armenia. This setback to Armenia came in the form of the suspension of U.S. sanctions imposed on Azerbaijan for its long-standing blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. With a vote in the U.S. Congress in late October, the sanctions manifested through Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act were effectively suspended, providing the president with broad powers to waive the sanctions annually with minimal requirements to certify his decision.

By removing the Section 907 sanctions, the U.S. has effectively stripped itself of an important lever designed to hold the authoritarian Azerbaijani government accountable for actively preventing the restoration of regional trade and transport links. Azerbaijan's policy of blockade, compounded by Turkey's support in upholding the blockade, represents one of the most serious obstacles toward regional security and continues to impede the mediation effort seeking a negotiated settlement of the Nagorno Karabagh conflict. With the removal of Section 907 as an incentive to restore normal trade and end all hostile blockades, the outlook for regional economic development is also greatly diminished. As a move justified by its supporters as necessary to reward Azerbaijan for assisting in the campaign against global terrorism, it is sadly ironic that the first policy shift in the region has rewarded the aggressor at the expense of the victim.

Overcoming the Weak State Syndrome

Looking back over the last decade, one can see a spotted record of reform and development in Armenia. Despite a notable attempt at forging strategic relations with its neighbors and the regional powers, Armenia still remains beset by the fundamental challenges of corruption and stunted reform. Much of this corruption and clan-based economy are legacies of the Ter Petrosian administration, a disturbing period of modern Armenian history marked by autocratic rule, rampant governmental corruption and misdirected reforms aimed at securing power and wealth for a small ruling elite. These internal challenges compound the fragility of Armenian democracy and pose sizable obstacles to overcoming the twin isolation of geography and blockade. On balance, Armenia can be appropriately characterized as a "weak state," a seemingly fitting category given its neighbors - a Georgian "failed state" and an Azerbaijani "war state."

The concept of "weak state" is yet to be theoretically refined to fit the structural context of the global political economy and the aftermath of the post-Cold War characterized as the Age of Globalization. As scholar Bruce Bagley, among others, first conceived the concept, the "weakness" of a state is referred to in its institutional inability to extract resources from a society and resolve the conflicts within it. Though primarily seen in a domestic context, Armenia's case, however, shows the need for projecting the conceptualization effort to the foreign policy realm, incorporating the importance of a national Diaspora affected directly or indirectly by state policies and with certain leverage to influence decisions in Yerevan.

The excesses of the Ter Petrosian regime blurred the contrast between Armenia and its neighbors. Armenia was once the "island of democracy" of the region, initially demonstrating an impressive record of privatization, democratic reform and internal stability. This contrast was rapidly eroded in the early 1990s, however, amid a domestic "reign of authoritarianism" directed against real and perceived opponents of Ter Petrosian regime. This contrast has been steadily restored under the Kocharian government and Armenia holds renewed opportunities for establishing itself as the only stable democratic state in the region. Such a contrast is affirmed externally by the Azerbaijani regime's blatant disregard of democracy and its trend toward dynastic rule, and by the tragic nature of the failing Georgian state. The contrast needs to be bolstered internally, however, as the need to consolidate democratic institutions and the rule of law needs to be matched by a formidable campaign against corruption. Such an internal effort is vital to overcome the "weak state syndrome" afflicting Armenia.

Armenia as Pivotal Player in Regional Security

In accordance with this contrast between Armenia and its neighbors, Armenia holds new potential in this post-September 11th reality to utilize a unique geopolitical position. Specifically, the convergence of interests between Russian and the United States, no matter how short-lived, empowers Armenia as a pivotal player in regional security.

Virtually validating the concept of "complementarity" by bridging U.S. and Russian interests in the Caucasus, Armenia can now forge an enhanced role in the new dynamic of NATO-Russian cooperation. With security and stability as the new hallmarks of Russian and U.S. policies in the region, Armenia can exploit its "bridging" position between Moscow and Washington, a position even more appealing given the marked contrast with the failed Georgian state and the dynastic, war state of Azerbaijan.

Such potential may also be extended to a new level of regional development, overcoming the exclusionary nature of pipeline politics as the only truly stable country in the region. With the energy sector being an arena for the new U.S.-Russian cooperation, it may be realistically argued that Armenia now holds a unique role in the transport of Caspian energy devoid of the risks posed by a destabilized Georgia and an Azerbaijan destabilized by looming succession. And as the failed advocacy of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline on strictly geopolitical over commercial grounds has demonstrated, the essential considerations of regional energy development must be justified in terms of economics and, therefore, mandates Armenian participation. In terms of stability and security, this inclusion is also vital to restoring the economic relations of the region as a fundamental prerequisite to conflict resolution and prevention.

The challenge for Armenia, however, is considerable, as although such opportunity is an obviously welcome development, the realization of such potential necessitates prudent policy and firm political will. The test for Armenia's leadership now rests with its ability to chart a steady course through the shoals of a region at risk. Such a course is also required to reflect a serious understanding of the opportunities of the new Russian-U.S. relationship while avoiding too much of a shift in one direction or the other. This balancing of policy is delicate and must exploit the U.S. emphasis on stability while continuing to utilize the Russian strategic interests in the region. There are also some secondary policy aspects of value, such as the emerging Armenian relationship with Iran as a possible feature of the current U.S. effort to reengage Iran.

Conclusion: Balancing Issues not Adversaries

The key to seizing the opportunities offered in the new global and regional geopolitical reality lies in the need for Armenia to balance issues rather than adversaries. The new reality is no longer the traditional zero-sum game, with a standard balance of power among competing rivals, but is one of converging interests among formerly rival powers. Recognizing this, Armenia must forge an internal policy aimed at strengthening the Armenian state supplemented by an external policy establishing a role within the Russia-U.S. relationship. This strategy must be based on nation-bolstering measures to overcome internal weaknesses of corruption and fragile democracy, with a complementary campaign to limit reliance on Russia and deepen relations with NATO and the West.

The coming months will determine the success or failure of Armenia's ability to seize these opportunities and will reveal Armenia's place within the rapidly changing

geopolitical landscape. The coming months, however, may be truly tumultuous times for Armenia as Georgian instability is reaching crisis proportions and as Azerbaijan faces a likely struggle for power as its succession question looms ever larger. Undoubtedly, the Kocharian Administration will soon face its most demanding challenge and, hopefully, will prevent Armenia from losing yet another historic opportunity.

Richard Giragosian was a professional staff member with the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress specializing in international relations and economics in the former Soviet Union and China. He is the author of the monthly newsletter, "TransCaucasus: A Chronology."

Khatchik Der Ghougassian is a Ph.D. student of International Relations in the School of International Studies, at the University of Miami. He has written as a political analyst in the Armenian and Argentinean press.

Richard Giragosian was a professional staff member with the Joint Economic Committee, U.S. Congress specializing in international relations and economics in the former Soviet Union and China. He is the author of the monthly newsletter, "TransCaucasus: A Chronology."

Khatchik Der Ghougassian is a Ph.D. student of International Relations in the School of International Studies, at the University of Miami. He has written as a political analyst in the Armenian and Argentinean press.