
The War on Terrorism: Implications for the Caucasus

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The still unfolding US campaign against global terrorism poses several significant changes to the traditional geopolitical landscape, ranging from a convergence of interests among the United States, Russia, Iran, and even China, to a focus on Central Asia as a region of newly-enhanced strategic importance. The implications are both profound and comprehensive, but their potential for altering the situation in the Caucasus are striking.

The fragile states of the Caucasus now face a set of new challenges and opportunities stemming from US efforts to create an anti-terrorism coalition. Each of the region's three small states -- Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia -- now face greater insecurity and increased vulnerability. Each is particularly prone to the effects of a recasting of relations in the region as a whole, and of changes in US-Russian relations in particular.

This is most evident in the apparent revision of the Western stance towards Russian actions in Chechnya, granting Moscow much more of a free hand in its military campaign there. Many in the region worry that US interest in the Caucasus will wane, while Russian interest increases.

Until recently, the chief focus on the Caucasus concerned the development of Caspian Basin energy resources. The United States was a big player, advocating the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Geopolitical tension over oil and gas, as well as export routes, was on the rise this summer, underscored by Iran's aggressive behavior in a dispute with Azerbaijan over Caspian boundaries. This focus has now been overtaken by a greater pursuit of security and stability, manifested in the global fight against terrorism. For the Caucasus, this means a shift in the traditional geopolitical balance of the regional powers -- Russia, Iran and Turkey. It also creates an immediate challenge for each of the three small Caucasus states to chart a new course in their foreign policy.

The shift of the geopolitical landscape, although global, is starkly evident in the Caucasus. The United States, in seeking to forge a broad anti-terrorism coalition, has explored new avenues of cooperation with both Iran and Russia. These new avenues offer additional incentives for coordination of regional energy development and transport. Such cooperation, however, means the United States may have to make compromises on some energy development positions.

For small landlocked Armenia, the regional shift offers an opportunity to capitalize on its long-standing foreign policy of "complementarity," whereby Armenia has sought to balance its expanding relations with Washington with its dependence on Moscow and its necessity for relations with Tehran. As the direction of the US campaign currently suggests a more dynamic partnership with Russia, Armenia may also garner a stronger strategic importance.

These geopolitical realignments threaten to damage Azerbaijan, however. Already, Baku has been hampered by the recent economic difficulties of its closest regional ally, Turkey. Now, Azerbaijan's international importance, derived mostly from its status as a potential Caspian oil and gas power, could diminish, given the US preoccupation with security issues. Having formulated foreign policy solely on the basis of global interest in its Caspian resources, political leaders now may need to refine Azerbaijan's image to retain international interest in the country's development.

Georgia faces the most serious challenge, and has the most to lose from new geopolitical conditions. Tbilisi is in danger of entering a final, and possibly fatal, stage as a "failed state." The realignment of Russian and US interests in combating terrorism implies a more accepting view of Russian actions in Chechnya, and suggests a renewed Russian determination to maintain its

military bases in Georgia. It also seems likely that Russian cooperation in the US anti-terror campaign will result in increased Russian pressure on the Shevardnadze government to adopt stronger measures to combat the presence of Chechen rebel bases and supply lines within Georgian territory.

The Chechen threat from Georgia, both real and exaggerated, will continue to be used to justify a halt to the withdrawal of Russian forces from their remaining bases in Georgia and will be used as political leverage over the weakened Georgian government. The implications of this new war on terrorism, therefore, herald pronounced change for the region, with their full outcome yet to be determined.

Editor's Note: Richard Giragosian is a frequent commentator on Caucasus-related issues. He served for nine years as a professional staff member of the Joint Economic Committee of the U.S. Congress. He is also the author of a monthly newsletter, "TransCaucasus: A Chronology," now in its tenth year of consecutive monthly publications.

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