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The Threat of New Wars in the Caucasus: A Good Case for U.S. Restraint

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Executive Summary

The decline of Russian power due to military defeats in Ukraine risks leading to increased violence and instability in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The effects of this can already be seen in the flare-up of fighting between Azerbaijan and Armenia, inadequately checked by Russian peacekeepers. This shift in power creates a temptation for Washington to increase its involvement in the region in an effort to end Russian influence there.

This temptation should be resisted. The United States has no vital national interest in this region – certainly not ones that are worth the risk of new wars. The conflicts in the southern Caucasus are deeply intractable, and have roots that long predate the Soviet collapse and indeed the Soviet Union itself. They were not created by Russia, and cannot be solved by the United States.

Increased support for Georgia risks empowering a new attempt by Georgia to retake its lost territories by force, leading to another war with Russia, the outcome of which would be uncertain and highly dangerous. Increased support for Azerbaijan threatens Armenia and would create a fierce backlash in the Armenian–American community.

Instead, the United States should continue to play a helpful but limited diplomatic role, aimed not at solving these disputes but at reducing tensions and preventing new eruptions of violence.

Policy recommendations:

- The United States should not seek to drive Russian influence from the southern Caucasus. It should accept that as a local great power they have an important stake in this region, and try to help craft international approaches that take this into account.

- In particular, the Biden administration should do nothing to encourage Georgia to resume war for the reconquest of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.
- Together with European partners and the U.N., the U.S. government should continue its existing and praiseworthy diplomatic efforts to reduce tensions between the different sides and maintain existing ceasefires.

Introduction

As Russia's military power and prestige decay due to losses and defeats in Ukraine, Russia's ability to control frozen conflicts and tensions elsewhere in the lands of the former Soviet Union is also deteriorating, and there is a serious danger that these conflicts will reignite.¹ Given the dire state of current relations between the United States and Russia, U.S. administrations may be tempted to intervene in such conflicts as part of an effort to roll back Russian influence. This temptation should be resisted. The consequences for the region would be dire, and the consequences for American goals limited or negative.

The United States has no vital national interests in the southern Caucasus, although the Armenian–American community feels the strongest possible interest in the safety and survival of Armenia. Nor does the United States possess either a strategy or the ability to control the consequences of new wars – with the result that these consequences could turn out to be negative for U.S. interests and U.S. values as well as for the people of the regions concerned.

Russia's influence in the former Soviet space has not been as uniformly negative as the invasion of Ukraine has suggested; in parts of that region Russia has acted to maintain stability and to contain the infiltration and spread of militants such as the Islamic State

¹ Mamedov, Eldar. "Why Nagorno-Karabakh should not be forgotten." IPS, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, August 19 2022.

<https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/why-nagorno-karabakh-shouldnt-be-forgotten-6138/>; "Renewed fighting in the Caucasus shows Russia's waning influence: nature abhors a vacuum." *The Economist*, September 22 2022.

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2022/09/22/renewed-fighting-in-the-caucasus-shows-russias-waning-influence>.

and Al-Qaeda and its direct affiliates that are also bitter enemies of the United States. Finally, a chaotic vacuum that could draw in Chinese power would certainly not be in the geopolitical interests of the United States.

As Russia's military power and prestige decay due to losses and defeats in Ukraine, Russia's ability to control frozen conflicts and tensions elsewhere in the lands of the former Soviet Union is also deteriorating, and there is a serious danger that these conflicts will reignite.

Thus in Central Asia, Russian forces have been instrumental in helping to defend Tajikistan from the spread of Islamist extremism from Afghanistan. The border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in September 2022 may also be due in part to a declining Russian ability to influence relations between these countries. This clash led to dozens of deaths and more than 100,000 people becoming refugees. Similar border issues exist between several states in Central Asia.

The most immediate threat of renewed conflict, however, exists in the Caucasus, where heavy fighting has broken out between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the Russian peacekeepers who have maintained relative stability in Nagorno Karabakh since the war of 2020 no longer seem capable of doing so. Russian forces have also been withdrawn from Armenia to reinforce the Russian war in Ukraine, calling into question Russia's ability to maintain its commitment to defend Armenia itself against Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Georgia for its part has an obvious interest in reversing the victories of Russia and her separatist allies in the wars of 2008 and the early 1990s. In the Russian northern Caucasus, discontent is surging in Dagestan as a result of strong local resistance to the conscription of local men for the war in Ukraine, and could encourage renewed Islamist

radicalism, which claimed numerous victims in the past.² A decline of Russian influence in the southern Caucasus may undermine Russian control of the northern Caucasus as well. It is on the Caucasus, therefore, that this paper will concentrate.

The aftermath of empire

The wars of the former Soviet Union are best viewed in the wider context of the end of empire – something that has all too often involved or led to serious conflicts. Indeed, it is rather hard to think of an example in modern history where this has not been the case. Sometimes these conflicts stemmed from the last-ditch attempts of imperial powers to retain their control; sometimes from older rivalries that empire had suppressed; sometimes from changes – social, economic, political but above all demographic – brought about by empire; often from a combination of all these elements.

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South Asia is still living with the consequences of the conflicts that resulted from the end of the British Indian empire, including most notably the bloody partition of India and Pakistan, and the resulting conflict over Kashmir. As South Asia also indicates, conflicts ultimately spawned or worsened by empires and their fall can simmer for decades before breaking out: as with the revolt of the East Bengalis against Pakistan in 1971 (leading to Indian intervention and the creation of Bangladesh), and the civil war between Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, which erupted in 1983, 36 years after Sri Lanka became independent.

²“Dagestan Anti–Mobilization Protests Rage for Second Day.” *The Moscow Times*, September 26, 2022. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/26/dagestan-anti-mobilization-protests-rage-for-second-day-a78895>.

In Africa, innumerable local conflicts can be traced back at least in part to empire and how empire was dismantled. The Middle East is in many ways still working through the consequences of the collapse of three empires, the Ottoman, British, and French; while the Balkans too are still living with the results of the Ottoman and Habsburg empires and their collapse.

The parts played by empires in helping to generate these conflicts vary from case to case; and, while sometimes the empires themselves were culpable, sometimes they found themselves responsible for local issues that they could contain but not solve. For in many cases, one insoluble element was the creation of modern exclusive nation states in areas where no such institutions had previously been known, and where the intermingling of populations made ethnically-based states an automatic recipe for conflict.

Many of the conflicts and tensions that accompanied and followed the end of the Soviet Union have fallen into these wider imperial and post-imperial patterns. In the Caucasus, the Soviet Union established ethnic republics that, after independence, found themselves bitterly at odds with ethnic minorities that had not previously lived under their rule, or had done so very unhappily. Armenians revolted against Azerbaijan; Abkhaz and Ossetes against Georgia; Chechens against Russia.

The Soviet Union moved Russians to work in the factories of Latvia and Estonia just as the British moved Chinese to Malaya and Indians to Fiji. After independence, Latvia and Estonia established an informal understanding with the Russian minorities rather similar to that of Malaysia. Under this arrangement, ethnic Latvians and Estonians monopolize the government and the security services while the Russian-speaking minority dominates the commercial economy.

Despite these common patterns, a very significant difference exists between the maritime empires of western Europe and the land empires of Turkey, Russia/USSR, and Austria/Germany. However nasty some of the conflicts involved in the fall of empire, the imperial power could in the end escape them (and responsibility for them) by returning home over the sea. For the land empires (including Britain in Ireland) no such clear-cut

escape was possible. They had to live with post-imperial disputes and conflicts on their own borders, and overlapping those borders. On the one hand, some of their own ethnic minorities saw no reason why when the rest of the empire had collapsed, they too should not have the right to the independence enjoyed by others a few meters across the new national frontier. On the other hand, their own co-ethnics left stranded in neighboring states inevitably looked to their mother country for support and protection.

In continental Europe and its immediate periphery, the end of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia (a country that was itself the unhappy offspring of the end of the Ottoman and Austrian empires) have left behind eight unsolved conflicts and territorial disputes: Bosnia, Kosovo, Transdnestrria, Crimea, the Donbas, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Clashes between Armenians and Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh in modern times predate the Soviet Union. They occurred when Russian imperial control weakened during the 1905 revolution, and again after the empire collapsed in 1917. The basic frame of the conflict is that the mountainous (“Nagorno” in Russian) part of Karabakh contains an ancient Armenian Christian population, which, from the 11th century C.E., came to be surrounded by territory where Azeri Turkic Muslims predominate.³

These Azeri lands cut Nagorno-Karabakh off from what after 1920 was to become first the Soviet republic of Armenia and then, after 1991, the independent Republic of Armenia. However, until the war of 1988-94, Nagorno-Karabakh in turn contained an Azeri minority of around one third, and the town of Shusha, a center of both Armenian and Azeri religious tradition and culture.

After the establishment of Soviet power in the southern Caucasus, Nagorno-Karabakh in 1923 was turned into an autonomous region (oblast) within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic, separated by a strip of Azerbaijani territory from the Armenian Soviet

³The best work on Nagorno-Karabakh in English is de Waal, Thomas. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*. NYU Press, New York, NY, updated edition 2013.

republic.⁴ This arrangement was never really accepted by the Armenians either of Karabakh or of Armenia, and after Stalin's death there were several attempts by the Armenian Communist leadership to have the territory transferred to Armenia. These petitions were all rejected by the Soviet government in Moscow, which feared – rightly – the ethnic conflict that would result.⁵

When Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed Soviet control in the mid 1980s, a new push by Armenians was the virtually inevitable result. In early 1988 the local Assembly (parliament) of the NK autonomous region passed a resolution to transfer the oblast to the Armenian SSR and sought approval for this from Moscow. Huge demonstrations took place in Armenia in support of this move. In a spiral of escalation that was to become disastrously familiar elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the Azerbaijani government responded by abolishing NK's autonomous status. The Soviet government for its part rejected both moves and sought to insist on the maintenance of the status quo.

Clashes between Armenians and Azeris in Nagorno–Karabakh in modern times predate the Soviet Union.

Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan escalated, and led to ethnic cleansing of minority populations on both sides, inadequately checked by Soviet internal security forces, and eventually leading to the complete removal of the Armenian minority from Azerbaijan and the Azeri minority from Armenia. In both cases, Armenian and Azerbaijani police units were heavily involved in the expulsions.

When the Soviet Union collapsed following the failed coup of August 1991, both Armenia and Azerbaijan declared independence and this was recognized by the international community and the new state of Russia. In December 1991, the Armenian majority in NK, with the support of Armenia, also voted for independence from

⁴Tchilingirian, Hratch. "Nagorno-Karabakh: War fails to resolve the conflict." *Cambridge Journal of Law, Politics and Art*, 2022.

https://www.cjlpa.org/files/ugd/b589e0_23c87be158174a409c275d8be700ba65.pdf.

⁵De Waal. *Black Garden*. 137–40.

Azerbaijan, but as in all other cases (Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Crimea) this vote was not recognized internationally or by Moscow, on the principle that only the fifteen “union republics” of the former Soviet Union had the legal right to independence under the Soviet constitution.

The result was full scale war, in which the Armenians won a series of crushing victories, with some help from Russia and a great deal from the Armenian diaspora in the West. Some 30,000 people died on both sides and hundreds of thousands became refugees. In May 1994, the Russian government brokered a ceasefire, which left Armenian forces in full control not only of NK itself but of several surrounding regions of Azerbaijan proper. Despite periodic armed clashes, this situation was to remain basically unchanged until 2020.

The intervening quarter of a century saw repeated attempts to resolve the conflict, led by the “Minsk Group,” including both Russia and Western countries, set up by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). All these attempts foundered on the basic problem that Armenia could not accept any solution that would place the Armenians of NK under the control of the Azerbaijani security forces, while Azerbaijan could not accept any solution that would leave NK with its own army – in part because this in turn would make the return of Azeri refugees to the region impossible.

Both Russia and the West have been ambiguous in their responses to the NK conflict. Russia is tied to Armenia by the fact that as relations between Russia and Georgia worsened, Armenia became Russia’s only ally in the southern Caucasus, and one of the very few in the former Soviet Union as a whole. Russia and Armenia have a defensive alliance (which does not cover NK), and Armenia hosts a Russian brigade, anti-aircraft batteries, and several air force squadrons.⁶

⁶ O’Rourke, Breffni. “Russia and Armenia sign extended defense pact.” RFE/RL August 10, 2010. https://www.rferl.org/a/Russian_President_Medvedev_To_Visit_Armenia/2131915.html; Cutler, Robert M. “Putin is turning Armenia into a Russian outpost.” *Foreign Policy*, September 22, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/09/22/putin-armenia-russian-outpost-nagorno-karabakh/>.

This alliance has been strongly desired by Armenia, which has a traditional dread of its vast Turkish neighbor to the West, and of the close relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan. On the other hand, Russia has not wished to break with Azerbaijan, partly for fear that in this case, Azerbaijan might become an ally of the United States. As Turkey has moved away from the Western alliance, maintaining good relations with Istanbul has become a critical part of Russian strategy, especially since the invasion of Ukraine and Russia's own isolation from the West. Two days before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Russia and Azerbaijan signed a comprehensive agreement on cooperation, described by President Ilham Aliyev of Azerbaijan (inaccurately but significantly) as an "alliance." An obvious Russian attempt to ensure Azerbaijani neutrality in the Ukraine conflict, this agreement caused deep unease in Armenia.⁷

The United States has had an obvious interest in good relations with Azerbaijan due to that country's considerable oil and gas reserves under the Caspian Sea. These have gained a new importance as a result of the cuts in Russian gas supplies to Europe consequent on the Ukraine war and Western sanctions.⁸ Azerbaijan is also seen by sections of the U.S. security establishment as a potential ally against both Russia and Iran. Close relations between Azerbaijan and Israel also aid Washington's goal of putting pressure on Tehran.

The presence of a large (though mostly well-integrated) Azeri minority in northern Iran has led to Iranian fears of separatism backed by Baku and Washington, and to considerable Iranian help for Armenia, above all in the form of energy supplies. Western moves towards alignment with Azerbaijan were however severely hampered by the Armenian communities in America and France, which used their political leverage to

⁷ Isayev, Heydar and Joshua Kucera. "Ahead of Ukraine invasion, Russia and Azerbaijan cement 'Alliance.'" *Eurasianet*, February 24, 2022.

<https://eurasianet.org/ahead-of-ukraine-invasion-azerbaijan-and-russia-cement-alliance>.

⁸ "Azerbaijan says will increase gas supplies to Europe this year by 30 percent." RFE/RL September 12, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/azerbaijan-increase-eu-gas-exports/32029812.html>; "EU signs deal to double Azerbaijani gas exports by 2027." *Euronews*, July 17, 2022.

<https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2022/07/18/von-der-leyen-heads-to-azerbaijan-to-secure-new-gas-import-deal>.

ensure sympathy for Armenia. The large Armenian diaspora in Russia has also used its influence to this end.

During these years, Azerbaijan's revenues from oil and gas allowed it to build up well-armed forces, helped by Turkey and including the purchase of Israeli weaponry. In September 2020, Azerbaijan launched a successful offensive that recaptured most of the Azeri territories around NK and a large part of NK itself. The war was brought to an end by a ceasefire brokered by Russia that involved the deployment of Russian peacekeepers to NK and the corridor linking NK to Armenia.⁹ It is this precarious Russian-imposed ceasefire that is now in danger as a result of the Russian defeats in Ukraine and the general decline of Russian power and prestige.

After the second Nagorno-Karabakh war

Since 2020, talks on the status of the remaining parts of NK have remained deadlocked. Russia, however, has sought to compensate Azerbaijan through the promotion of an Azerbaijani transport corridor linking Azerbaijan to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, and through Nakhichevan to Turkey and the West – a plan that also reflects Russia's growing desire for good relations with Turkey. Armenia has agreed to discuss this, despite great anxieties on the subject both in Armenia and in Iran, which fears any expansion of Azerbaijani power along its northern border. To signal its concern, Iran in October 2021 and 2022 held military exercises along its border with Azerbaijan.¹⁰

The possibility of close Russian-Iranian cooperation in the Caucasus against a stronger role for America has been increased by the closer military ties established as a result of

⁹ "Nagorno-Karabakh: Russia Deploys Peacekeeping Troops to Region." BBC, November 10 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54885906> ; Vartanyan, Olesya. "A Risky Role for Russian Peacekeepers in Nagorno Karabakh." International Crisis Group, November 10 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/caucasus/nagorno-karabakh-conflict/risky-role-russian-peacekeepers-nagorno-karabakh>.

¹⁰ Goyushadze, Aziza. "Iran holds military exercises on border amid tensions with Azerbaijan. VOA News, October 20 2022. <https://www.voanews.com/a/iran-holds-military-exercises-on-border-amid-tensions-with-azerbaijan-/6799197.html>.

the war in Ukraine, where Russian forces have started to use Iranian drones to considerable effect.¹¹

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a new chapter unfolded in the South Caucasus. Baku used the Ukraine war to begin testing Moscow's resolve and its peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh. In the late summer of 2022 Azerbaijan, in an unprecedented step, moved several kilometers into Armenia—proper, following Russia's strategic setback in Kharkiv.

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Russia's failure to respond — despite the Russian-Armenian Treaty and Yerevan's membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization — seriously weakened Armenian faith in the Russian alliance, and led to Armenian overtures to Washington.¹² The September escalation was ended through a U.S.-brokered ceasefire.

The latest outbreak of fighting was also followed by a visit to Armenia (very pointedly, not to Azerbaijan) by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in September 2022, accompanied by two Armenian-American members of Congress. During this visit, Pelosi made a number of unconditionally pro-Armenian and anti-Azerbaijani statements — a sign of how the electoral calculations of the U.S. Congress may differ from the strategic ones of the U.S. security establishment.¹³ Washington and the European Union are also somewhat hampered in their attempts at alignment with Azerbaijan by the fact that Azerbaijan is

¹¹ Feldstein, Steven. "The larger Geopolitical Shift Behind Iran's Drone Sales to Russia." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 26, 2022.

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/10/26/larger-geopolitical-shift-behind-iran-s-drone-sales-to-russia-pub-88268>.

¹² Gavin, Gabriel. "Pelosi's Visit Fires Debate in Armenia Over Alliance With Russia." *Politico*, September 19, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/nancy-pelosi-visit-armenia-debate-alliance-russia/>; Dovich, Mark.

"Survey: Growing skepticism in Armenia about Russia, even before recent fighting." *CivilNet*, September 20th, 2022.

<https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/675844/survey-growing-skepticism-in-armenia-about-russia-even-before-recent-fighting/>

¹³ Gall, Carlotta. "Nancy Pelosi Visits Armenia Amidst Conflict with Azerbaijan." *New York Times*, September 17, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/17/world/europe/nancy-pelosi-armenia.html>; U.S. Embassy. "Speaker Pelosi remarks at Congressional press conference with Armenian Speaker Alen Simonyan." <https://am.usembassy.gov/speaker-pelosi-remarks/>.

an unabashed hereditary dictatorship of the Aliyev dynasty, whereas Armenia is a democracy, albeit a flawed one.¹⁴

The EU has also taken a new interest in the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. European Council President Charles Michel has hosted multiple rounds of talks between Prime Minister Pashinyan of Armenia and President Aliyev of Azerbaijan aimed at the creation of a lasting peace settlement.

Developments in late November 2022 however demonstrated the extreme difficulties facing any effort at outside mediation. On the one hand, at the summit of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Yerevan on November 24, Putin was subjected to fierce criticism by Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan and the Armenian media for the failure of Russia and the CSTO to defend Armenia against Azerbaijan (which is not a CSTO member).¹⁵ Instead, the Armenian government asked France (which has a large and influential Armenian minority) to mediate in the NK conflict. In the words of Professor Emil Avdaliani:

“The protests indicate a shift in Armenia’s perception of Russia. Its unreliability as an ally has grown palpable. Anti-Russian sentiments always were present among Armenia’s political elites, but now it turns into resentment.

The protests benefited Pashinyan as it allowed him to show that Armenia needs concrete guarantees and not just empty promises. This does not mean that

¹⁴ “2019 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Azerbaijan.” U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/azerbaijan/>; “Azerbaijan: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report.” Freedom House, 2022.

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan/freedom-world/2022>; Rankin, Jennifer. “Human Rights Groups Criticize EU’s Azerbaijan Gas Deal.” *The Guardian*, July 19 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/19/human-rights-groups-criticise-eus-azerbaijan-gas-deal>.

¹⁵ Trevelyan, Mark. “Hosting Putin, Armenian leader complains of lack of help from Russian-led alliance.” Reuters, November 23, 2020. <https://www.reuters.com/world/front-putin-armenian-leader-laments-lack-help-russian-led-alliance-2022-11-23/>.

Armenia will be withdrawing from CSTO, but just that Yerevan tries to influence the negative dynamics in the grouping.”¹⁶

The proposal of French mediation was, however, immediately rejected by Azerbaijan. President Ilham Aliyev canceled talks, scheduled for December 7 with Armenia in Brussels, to be mediated by France and the EU, and declared that Azerbaijan would reject any further French participation in talks, adding that France’s expressions of support for Armenian sovereignty displayed French bias and had “insulted” Azerbaijan.¹⁷

For all its increased weakness, Russia still has troops in Armenia that provide a final barrier to an Azeri or Turkish invasion of Armenia proper. There seems very little chance indeed that France – let alone the rest of the EU – would be willing or able to deploy troops to the Caucasus.

And while Armenia is trying to attract French and European support partially to replace that of Russia, it faces one probably insuperable obstacle. France and the EU are not going to provide “concrete guarantees” to Armenia either. For all its increased weakness, Russia still has troops in Armenia that provide a final barrier to an Azeri or Turkish invasion of Armenia proper. There seems very little chance indeed that France – let alone the rest of the EU – would be willing or able to deploy troops to the Caucasus, or extend a military guarantee (including a nuclear deterrent) to Armenia, as Russia has done.

The limitation of French and EU influence also brings out a fundamental problem of the NK peace process, already mentioned: that there can be no real security for Armenians

¹⁶ Bioffrey, Daniel. “Putin’s grip on regional allies loosens again after Armenia snub.” *The Guardian*, November 25, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/25/putinsgrip-regional-allies-loosen-again-after-armenia-s-nub-csto-summit>.

¹⁷ “Azerbaijan cancels Armenia talks, says France cannot take part.” *Reuters*, November 25, 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/planned-brussels-meeting-between-armenia-azerbaijan-leaders-scrapped-interfax-2022-11-25/>.

within Azerbaijan or Azeris within Armenia, without the presence of large, long-term and neutral peacekeeping forces (as in Bosnia).¹⁸ Without the deployment of U.S. peacekeepers there is, therefore, no possibility of the United States playing a decisive role in bringing the Nagorno–Karabakh War to an end and controlling the subsequent situation in the region. To dispatch such a force would however be an extremely reckless move from a strategic and military point of view. It would be bitterly opposed by both Russia and Iran. Given the increasingly difficult state of U.S.–Turkish relations, it would also be very unlikely to be welcomed by Turkey.

A U.S. force would, therefore, have to be established and maintained in the face of hostility from all three of the region’s great powers, which between them control all the land borders of the southern Caucasus. In the event of a further deterioration of relations with Russia or Iran (or both), such a force would be acutely endangered.

A U.S. engagement that compelled Armenian hostility to Iran would, however, not be welcome to Armenia; nor would it be in America’s interest to expose itself to the risks accompanied with such a military presence. In the first place, despite recent disillusionment with Russia, it remains deeply engraved in Armenian historical memory that after the World War One, the Western powers, including America, did nothing to live up to their pro–Armenian rhetoric, and that it was only the intervention of the Soviet army that prevented the destruction of Armenia by Turkey and Azerbaijan. In the words of one Armenian–American in Yerevan after Pelosi’s visit:

“It’s important to see the U.S. finally stepping up and recognizing what is going on here. But warm words aren’t everything. We need tangible support to help stop those who want to wipe us off the map.”¹⁹

Second, a U.S. attempt to replace Russia would undoubtedly be strongly resisted by Moscow; and while Russian military power has declined steeply since the start of the war in Ukraine, Russia retains considerable ability to destabilize Armenian internal politics. Finally, the establishment of a U.S. military presence in the Caucasus would

¹⁸ Macer-Wright, Alun. “Why Negotiations in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Have Failed.” *Caucasus Institute*, Spring 2021. https://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/CI-Essay-Alun-Macer-Wright_final.pdf.

¹⁹ Gavin. “Pelosi’s Visit Fires Debate in Armenia Over Alliance With Russia.”

very likely embolden Georgia to make a fresh attempt to regain its own lost territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force of arms. It is to these frozen conflicts that we now turn.

The South Ossetian conflict

The wars in the Georgian autonomous territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia had the same basic origins as the war over Nagorno–Karabakh, though also with specific differences.²⁰ Of these, the most important has been a far greater degree of direct Russian involvement on the side of the separatists. In both cases, ethnic tensions predated the establishment of Soviet control. South Ossetia saw heavy fighting between local Ossetes and Georgian forces during the period of Georgian independence from 1918–21, in which several thousand people died.

The Georgian autonomous region of South Ossetia was created for the local majority of Ossetes, a people who speak a language related to Persian (Farsi), and very distinct from Georgian.²¹ A majority of Ossetes live in the Russian autonomous republic of North Ossetia, and desire for union between the two Ossete regions was a principal driver of the southern Ossete separatist movement. South Ossetia, however, also included a Georgian ethnic minority of around 40 percent, and the grant of autonomy within Georgia was a Soviet compromise that could really only work as long as the Soviet Union itself survived.

Nationalism in South Ossetia rose largely in response to the growth of the national independence movement in Georgia itself, both because of that movement's strongly ethno–nationalist character, and because, if Georgia were to become independent, that would lead to the northern and southern Ossetes being separated by an international frontier.

²⁰ Souleimanov, Emil. *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh Wars Reconsidered*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

²¹ Foltz, Richard. *The Ossetes: Modern Day Scythians of the Caucasus*. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021; Saparov, Arsene. *From Conflict to Autonomy: The Soviet Union and the Making of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno–Karabakh*. New York, Routledge, 2015.

Matters came to a head as a result of the Georgian parliamentary elections of October 1990, which resulted in victory for the nationalist Round Table–Free Georgia coalition led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, whose speeches had included strongly anti–Ossete remarks. The result was a declaration of “sovereignty” (a highly ambiguous term somewhere between enhanced autonomy and independence) by the Ossete majority in the Southern Ossete regional assembly. In response, the Georgian government abolished Southern Ossete autonomy and dispatched Georgian police and nationalist volunteers to South Ossetia, which carried out abuses against the Ossete population.²² Soviet interior ministry troops were then deployed to separate the two sides.

After the failed Soviet coup of August 1991, Georgia became independent. South Ossetia also declared independence from Georgia, and remained a separate area under Russian military protection, though Russia continued formally to recognize Georgian sovereignty. A ceasefire, punctuated by occasional clashes, remained in place until August 2008.

In that month, the Georgian nationalist government of Mikheil Saakashvili, emboldened by the U.S. proposal of NATO membership for Georgia, and apparently expecting U.S. military support, launched an attempt to reconquer the whole of South Ossetia, which besieged the Russian peacekeeping force there. Russia then launched a counter–attack that defeated the Georgians and expelled them from South Ossetia altogether.

The most balanced and objective report on the origins of the Russo–Georgian War of August 2008 was produced by Heidi Tagliavini on behalf of the E.U. While by no means exonerating Russia and South Ossetia for their share of responsibility for the clashes leading up to the war, the report states clearly that full–scale war was initiated by Georgia. According to the report, the war began with:

“a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounding areas, launched in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008” although this

²² “Conflict in Georgia: Human Rights Abuses by the Government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.” *Helsinki Watch/Human Rights Watch*. Vol.3, Issue 16, December 27, 1991. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/pdfs/g/georgia/georgia91d.pdf>.

“was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocations and incidents.”²³

The war was followed by Russian recognition of Southern Ossete independence, though only five member states of the U.N. have followed suit. Since 2008, the conflict has been effectively frozen.

The Abkhaz conflict

In Abkhazia, as in Nagorno–Karabakh, the relaxation of Soviet authoritarianism under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s led to a surge in longstanding demands by the indigenous Abkhaz population (closely related to the Circassian minorities of the Russian North Caucasus) for separation from Georgia.²⁴ Abkhaz demanded the restoration of the status of a union republic that Abkhazia had enjoyed (in a somewhat qualified fashion) between the establishment of the Soviet Union and Joseph Stalin’s incorporation of Abkhazia into Georgia (as an autonomous republic) in 1931.²⁵

The rule of Stalin (himself an ethnic Georgian) initiated a period of “Georgianization” of Abkhazia, including the large–scale movement of Georgians into the region. By the end of Soviet rule, ethnic Abkhaz had been reduced to a mere 19 percent of Abkhazia’s population. The Abkhaz population had already been severely reduced by the flight of tens of thousands of Muslim Abkhaz to the Ottoman Empire as a result of the Russian imperial conquest of Abkhazia in the mid-19th century.

²³ Tagliavini, Heidi. *Report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the War in Georgia*. Council of the European Union, September 2009. https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/HUDOC_38263_08_Annexes_ENG.pdf; Markovic, Nina. “Behind the Scenes of the Russia-Georgia Conflict.” Parliament of Australia Foreign Affairs, Security and Defence Section, September 17, 2008. https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_DepHelsinki/Watch_issue_3artments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/0809/RussiaGeorgiaConflict; King, Charles. “The Five Day War: Managing Moscow After The Georgia Crisis.” *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2008.

²⁴ The only books in English on the modern history of Abkhazia are Hewitt, George. *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*. New York, Routledge 1998; and Somnez, Metin, and George Hewitt. *Abkhazia: 1992-2022: Georgian–Abkhaz Conflict and War*. Independently published 2022. The history of Abkhazia and Abkhaz–Georgian relations are also covered briefly in Rayfield, Donald. *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*. New York, Reaktion, reprint 2019. See also “Abkhazia Profile.” BBC January 13, 2020. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-18175030>.

²⁵ For a humorous fictional picture of the traditional relationship between Abkhaz and Georgians, see the stories by Abkhaz author Iskander, Fazil. *Sandro of Chegem*. New York, Vintage Books, 1983.

In the last years of the Soviet Union, ethnic Georgians made up 45.7 percent of Abkhazia's population, with the remaining 35 percent made up chiefly of ethnic Russians and Armenians attracted to Abkhazia by its role as one of the tourist centers of the Soviet Union, together with a small ancient population of Pontic Greeks. In the Soviet referendum of March 1991 on maintaining the Soviet Union, the overwhelming majority of the non-Georgian population (98 percent) voted in favor, while the vast majority of ethnic Georgians boycotted the vote.²⁶

In Abkhazia, as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the relaxation of Soviet authoritarianism under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s led to a surge in longstanding demands by the indigenous Abkhaz population.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a series of clashes in Abkhazia between ethnic Abkhaz and Georgians. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgian independence, a majority of the Abkhaz assembly in July 1992 declared de facto independence from Georgia. The following month, Georgian nationalist militias moved into Abkhazia and occupied the capital Sukhumi, burning down the Abkhaz national library and engaging in atrocities against Abkhaz, Russian, and Armenian residents.²⁷

In response, a loose coalition of North Caucasian forces came to the help of Abkhazia, together with increasing numbers of semi-covert Russian troops, and successfully defended the northern part of the territory. The following year, they drove the Georgian armed forces from Abkhazia. This campaign was in turn accompanied by atrocities against the ethnic Georgian population and the flight of the majority of Georgians.²⁸

²⁶ For Abkhaz history, see the Encyclopedia Britannica entry. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Abkhazia>.

²⁷ For the situation in Abkhazia and the frozen conflict between 1993 and 2008, see "Abkhazia Today." International Crisis Group, September 15 2006. <https://web.archive.org/web/20070510033711/http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?!=1&id=4377>.

²⁸ For the Georgian displaced people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, see Kalin, Walter. "Report of the Representative of the UN Secretary General's mission to Georgia." United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2005. https://web.archive.org/web/20061223084834/http://www.brook.edu/fp/projects/idp/200603_rpt_Georgia.pdf.

Today, the population of Abkhazia is around 50 percent Abkhaz, 18 percent Armenian and nine percent Russian. A sizable ethnic Georgian minority of 18 percent remains, concentrated in the Gali district of southern Abkhazia.²⁹

The result of the war of 1992–93 was de facto Abkhaz independence and a ceasefire, which despite occasional clashes, has mostly lasted until the present day. For more than a decade, Russia continued to recognize Abkhazia as formally part of Georgia; but following the Georgian–Russian war of 2008, Russia drove the last remaining Georgian forces from the Abkhaz mountains and recognized Abkhaz independence, though this has not been accepted by the great majority of the international community.

Before 2008, Russia, the United States and leading European countries made sporadic attempts to broker a peace settlement in Abkhazia, based on the idea of a return of the region to Georgia with guaranteed autonomous status. These efforts, however, foundered on the open opposition of the Abkhaz authorities and the covert opposition of Moscow, as well as the refusal of Georgian governments to allow a separate Abkhaz army. In the words of a Conciliation Resources report of early 2008:

“International actors have provided modest support for initiatives designed to overcome isolation, build confidence or promote development without adequately addressing underlying concerns regarding identity and security. Indeed far more significant support has gone into the state-building projects of the respective parties – openly on the part of the U.S. and EU in regard to Georgia and covertly on the part of Russia in regard to Abkhazia.”³⁰

Any hope of agreement was blocked in part by the same factor that applied in the case of Nagorno–Karabakh: that Abkhaz and Russians in Abkhazia are absolutely unable to trust the Georgian armed forces for protection, and an international peacekeeping force would also be both distrusted by the Abkhaz and opposed by Moscow.

²⁹ Census figures at <http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html>.

³⁰ Cohen, Jonathan. “Introduction to the Georgia–Abkhazia Case Study.” *Accord*, February 2008. <https://www.c-r.org/accord/incentives-sanctions-and-conditionality/introduction-georgia%E2%80%93abkhazia-case-study>.

In the case of Abkhazia, an additional factor is that the Georgian government naturally insists that any peace settlement must involve the return of all Georgian refugees and their descendants to Abkhazia, thereby reducing the Abkhaz again to a small minority – an issue that has also been a crucial obstacle to peace between Israel and the Palestinians, for example.³¹

Conclusions

The ethnic disputes in the southern Caucasus are extremely complex in nature, and extremely difficult to solve.³² These conflicts cannot simply be reduced to an issue of Russian domination promoting secession and conflict. Indeed, Western observers have always recognized this in the case of Nagorno–Karabakh, thanks largely to the commitment of the Armenian diaspora in the West. Lacking such diasporas, Abkhaz and Ossetes have seen their own views and interests overwhelmingly ignored.

The United States has no magic formula to solve any of these conflicts. In the case of Nagorno–Karabakh, as described, U.S. strategy has been suspended between desire for closer relations with Azerbaijan and the influence of the Armenian diaspora in the U.S. Congress. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia U.S. policy has in general been simply to support Georgia. This creates the likelihood that greater U.S. military and political involvement in the region will become inextricably mixed with the agenda of expelling Russia, without America being able to create a stable regional order of its own.

So far, the Georgian government, unlike that of Azerbaijan, has not exploited Russia's difficulties in Ukraine to launch or threaten new military offensives to recover its lost territories. The Georgian government is dominated by the Georgian Dream Party, whose

³¹ "Displacement in the Caucasus." UNHCR, May 1, 1996.

<https://www.unhcr.org/publications/refugeemag/3b5583fd4/unhcr-publication-cis-conference-displacement-cis-conflicts-caucasus.html>.

³² Glantz, Mary, and Noah Higgins. "Russia's Ukraine War Could Offer Chance to Resolve South Caucasus Conflicts." U.S. Institute of Peace, May 5, 2022.

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/russias-ukraine-war-could-offer-chance-resolve-south-caucasus-conflicts>.

leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, has close business ties to Russia.³³ Georgia has also not introduced economic sanctions against Russia, though it voted in the U.N. to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Doubtless Georgian caution has also been shaped by the memory of Georgia's disastrous defeat the last time it attempted this, and by the fact that after much pro-Georgian rhetoric, America did not come to Georgia's aid. However, this restraint has led to considerable anger in the Georgian public, and greater U.S. engagement, especially if combined with fresh Russian defeats in Ukraine, could well make it impossible for the Georgian government not to try again; and if it continued to refuse, it might follow several previous post-Soviet governments in being overthrown by a coup or popular revolt.³⁴

If such a Georgian move succeeded in reconquering these territories, the result would almost certainly be some combination of the flight and the ethnic cleansing of the Ossete, Abkhaz, and Russian populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia — a grave crime in itself, and one that would bring discredit on America by association, and strengthen those voices around the world that describe U.S. commitment to democracy and human rights as a hypocritical screen for U.S. aggrandizement.

There would also, however, be a serious risk that, as in 2008, such a Georgian move would be defeated. Although the Georgian armed forces have been heavily armed and financed by the United States and NATO, the population of Georgia is barely one tenth that of Ukraine, while Russia is building up, through conscription, fresh reserves that it could divert to Georgia if necessary.

³³ Baer, Daniel B. "The thaw on Russia's periphery has already started." *Foreign Policy*, October 14 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/14/russia-ukraine-war-caucasus-georgia-armenia-azerbaijan-moldova-balkans-periphery-geopolitics-power-vacuum/>.

³⁴ "Mercenaries or Ideologues? Examining the most famous foreign militia in Ukraine, the Georgian National Legion." *Military Watch Magazine*, November 8 2022. <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/georgian-legion-examine-militia-ukraine>; Sparks, John. "Ukraine War: Meet the Georgian Legion Joining the Fight Against Russia's Invasion." Sky News, November 7, 2022. <https://news.sky.com/story/ukraine-war-meet-the-georgian-legion-joining-the-fight-against-russias-invasion-12737984>.

Militarily speaking, it was open to Russia to conquer the whole of Georgia in August 2008, but French mediation and a Russian desire to soothe relations with Europe led Moscow to back off. Today, a Russian victory over Georgia would give the Kremlin the opportunity either to extract concessions from the West in return for restraint, or to humiliate America by crushing a U.S. partner. Alternatively, to prevent either of these scenarios, a U.S. administration might be tempted to intervene directly in the conflict. That, however, would bring about the scenario that the Biden administration has so far taken care to avoid in Ukraine: a direct clash between U.S. and Russian forces, with extraordinarily dangerous consequences.

The Biden administration should continue its current policy of prudent diplomacy in the Caucasus, and seek to help prevent new conflicts while avoiding new entanglements.

Neither morality nor U.S. national interests justify the United States encouraging this risk. Difficult though it may be for advocates of universal U.S. primacy to accept this, the United States has not historically possessed any important stake in the Caucasus at all – as it demonstrated by its having held aloof from regional conflicts after both the World War One and the end of the Soviet Union. Nor has Russia's presence in the Caucasus over the past 30 years inflicted any significant damage on the United States or the U.S.-led international order. The Biden administration should, therefore, continue its current policy of prudent diplomacy in the Caucasus, and seek to help prevent new conflicts while avoiding new entanglements.

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