

Introduction

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Intersected by high mountain ranges that extend between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea,² the Caucasus is traditionally presented as a strategic crossroads between Europe and Asia, comprising a mosaic of peoples.³ While the North Caucasus, also called Ciscaucasia, is made up of different regions and autonomous republics linked to the Russian Federation, the South Caucasus—or Transcaucasia, according to Soviet terminology—includes the independent republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The border countries of this region are not only Russia (a nuclear power), but also Turkey (a member of NATO), and Iran.

Having emerged from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have each inherited diverse conflicts with major consequences for security: territorial disputes, on one hand, between Azerbaijan and Armenians in the autonomous Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh and, on the other hand, between Georgia and both the autonomous Abkhazian Republic and the autonomous region of South Ossetia. The main issues of contestation were the legitimacy of the borders drawn by the imperial Soviet power and the economic and cultural repression of certain sectors of the population by national governments in Baku and Tbilisi. The election of nationalist leaders to the presidencies of both Azerbaijan (Ebulfez Elchibey) and Georgia (Zviad Gamsakhurdia) was also a matter of concern for ethnic minorities in these nations. At the close of military hostilities, the central powers found that they had actually lost control over the regions of conflict. Relative stability was achieved later, partly facilitated by the rise to power of Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze and Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev. Although cease-fire agreements were signed in 1994, putting a freeze on both military conflicts, a political settlement of the disputes remains yet to be reached.⁴

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² The average altitude of the range is above 2,000 meters. The culminating points are, in the north, Mount Elbrus in Russia, (5,642 meters), and, further south, Mount Kazbek in Georgia (5,047 meters).

³ More than 40 languages are spoken in the region, belonging to different linguistic families—Indo-European, Caucasian, and Altaic. See Yves Lacoste, ed., *Dictionnaire de géopolitique* (Paris, Flammarion, 1995), 388. Religious diversity is overlaid on top of this ethnic diversity, since Christian and Muslim peoples have been cohabiting in the region for centuries.

⁴ Concerning the foundations and stakes of these conflicts, see Alexei Zverev, “Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus, 1988–1994”, in Bruno Coppieters, ed., *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Brussels, VUB University Press, 1996), 13–71.

With the collapse of the Soviet empire, the South Caucasus has also been the theater of new power struggles. Throughout its history, the region has been invaded by Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians, Ottomans, and Russians, each of whom has exerted a decisive influence on the region. Today Russia, Turkey, and Iran, along with the United States (most notably through the activities of the Partnership for Peace and NATO⁵) and the European Union, have been developing their presence in the region, creating new axes of cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. This cooperation has at times taken the form of indirect interventions in internal conflicts, but has been focused above all on the stakes of exploitation and transportation of gas and oil from the Caspian Sea, the solution of which remains uncertain.⁶

Ten years have passed since Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia became independent. An analysis of the variables underpinning attempts to construct these new nation-states, of the evolution of stakes of security, as well as of the geopolitical environment of the region now seems to be possible. Beyond this examination, a reflection on the consequences for the Caucasus of the events of September 11 also appears to be necessary. Concerning internal conflicts, a process of political exploitation of the fight against terrorism has indeed developed in Azerbaijan⁷ as well as in Georgia,⁸ creating the risk of renewed outbreaks of violence in the region. As for rivalries over regional influence, they seem to be affected by a Russo-American rapprochement whose foundations, effects, and limits have yet to be ascertained.⁹

In order to comprehend the complexity of the South Caucasus, we have adopted an approach to the region using an image of concentric circles, distinguishing the three republics constituting the region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—from their neighboring powers such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as from other actors, external to the region but nonetheless involved, namely the United States and the European Union. The objective has been to appeal to different actors in order to foster, around common issues, the development of cross-analysis and the expression of different perceptions and sometimes even diverse interpretations of the events in question.

⁵ For a look at the activities of NATO, see Robin Bhatti and Rachel Bronson, "NATO's Mixed Signals in the Caucasus and Central Asia," *Survival* 42:3 (Autumn 2000), 129–145.

⁶ About energy issues, see Robert Ebel and Rajan Menon, *Energy and Conflict in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

⁷ "Azeri Foreign Affairs Minister Speaks about Armenian Terrorism at Istanbul Forum," *ANS TV*, February 12, 2002.

⁸ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Georgia: Attacks On Russian Checkpoints Heighten Tensions In Abkhazia," *RFE RL*, April 9, 2002.

⁹ "War of Words in the Pankisi Highlights Limits to US-Russian Rapprochement," *RFE RL Caucasus Report*, February 28, 2002, vol.5, no. 8.

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