

Ashot Manucharyan: Russia's Policy in the Southern Caucasus

In the first years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union (1991), there was not a single political concept in Moscow that could have shown what importance Russia would accord to the Caucasus in the future. After Russia's declaration of independence, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the establishment of the CIS, the government in Moscow was busy dealing with its own domestic and foreign-policy problems, which had top priority for the time being. This explains why Moscow did not respond directly to what was happening in the Caucasus for such a long time. Nevertheless, Russia was anxious to consolidate its relations with the newly-founded states there so as to give them no chance of detaching themselves completely and irrevocably from Russia's sphere of influence. It was mainly the Ministry of Defence and the Russian Armed Forces on the spot which backed up this policy, arguing that Russia should endeavour to recover 'these lost territories' as quickly as possible.

By the mid-'90s, Russia's policy in the Southern Caucasus had revealed its ambivalent character, closely interweaving 'imperialist' and 'democratic' ideas. Another important factor that prompted Moscow to return to power politics in the Caucasus was the intervention of external players in the region, such as the USA, Turkey, and Iran, who intended to fill the security-policy vacuum left behind by Russia. Aiming for the secession of the Caucasian countries from Russia, these endeavours alarmed Moscow's political and military leaders, inducing them to pay more attention to the Caucasus. Following a policy of maintaining the 'balance of power', Russia planned to control all conflicts so that none of the parties involved could win a military victory. The actual shape of Russia's relations with the Caucasian republics depended mainly on their willingness to join the CIS (Community of Independent States). Thus, the regimes in Georgia and Azerbaijan, which refused to accede to the CIS, were destabilised systematically. The method that was found most effective, however, was to exploit ethnic conflicts in order to inflict a military defeat on any 'unfriendly republic' or, alternatively, to stage military putsches against unpopular governments. Setting up military bases in the Southern Caucasus would help Russia to keep the states there under control, suppress separatist movements in the Northern Caucasus, and deprive Turkey of any opportunity to expand its sphere of influence beyond the Southern Caucasus to Central Asia.

Moscow took advantage of the two nationality conflicts on the territory of Georgia, i.e. in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, to interfere actively with the politics of that Caucasian republic. Although the Caucasus policy pursued by Russia under the presidency of Boris Yeltsin did succeed in certain respects – in forcing Georgia and Azerbaijan to join the CIS in 1993, for instance, or in motivating the two states to accede to the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security – it is generally regarded as a failure. Thus, Moscow's weakness stood revealed when the Baku government changed course, deciding against the establishment of Russian military bases with the support of the USA and Turkey. However, Russia reached its all-time low in the Southern Caucasus at the OSCE summit in Istanbul in December 1999, when Moscow indirectly agreed to withdraw its troops from Georgia. In addition, it suffered a severe defeat in energy policy when plans were made to build a pipeline to transport oil from Baku directly to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Jeyhan. By carrying oil from the Caspian region and Central Asia directly to its market without touching Russia, it would vastly lessen the dependence of both producers and consumers on Moscow's policy.

It was Armenia that saved Russia's policy in the Southern Caucasus from absolute defeat. Thanks to Turkey's policy towards that country, Russia succeeded in remaining present in the Southern Caucasus, for it was the acute danger of a military confrontation with Turkey which prompted Armenia in 1993 to agree to the establishment of Russian military bases and, by the same token, to return to Russia's 'sphere of influence'.

After the Russian presidential elections of March 26, 2000, the winner, Vladimir Putin, began to consolidate the power of government in a consistent process. With regard to the Southern Caucasus, this process showed some permanent features, such as a destructive attitude towards any conflict solutions that would serve the interests of the titular nations of Georgia and Azerbaijan. As both countries refused to harmonise their foreign and security policy with the Kremlin, the only way for Moscow to defend its interests was to maintain the status quo in the Southern Caucasus. Highly indebted, Russia lacked the resources that would have been necessary to interfere more actively with the political scene in the Southern Caucasus. President Shevardnadze's decision to invite American soldiers to Georgia heralded the end of Russia's military presence in the country. By contrast, Putin's government vehemently opposed the deployment of US and/or NATO troops in the region and attempted to keep the Caucasian republics from acceding to NATO. Having troops of its own in the Southern Caucasus was the only way for Moscow to implement this intention. In addition, Russia obstructed political and military cooperation within the region, as indeed it had done under Yeltsin's presidency. Even so, Russia's Caucasus policy under Putin suffered one defeat after another on the international plane. Massively supported by the USA, Georgia keeps calling for the withdrawal of Russia's troops, particularly within the OSCE. Russia would like to see any solution for the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh deferred into the dim and distant future, for any solution supported by the hostile parties might cause Russia to lose its influence in the Southern Caucasus for good.

As Georgia and Azerbaijan were not interested in military cooperation with Russia, the last card played by the Putin government to assert its interests in Southern Caucasus was to strengthen economic relations. This was why Russia enhanced its economic power on the spot, while at the same time intensifying its military cooperation with Armenia.

The war over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan demonstrated that Russia was ready to do anything to elbow the two regional powers of Turkey and Iran out of the Caucasus. In Moscow's opinion, Turkey forms an advance guard for NATO and the USA in the Southern Caucasus. Russia uses Armenia as a bastion to contain Turkey's expansion. It is obvious today that Russia's suspicions were aroused when NATO appeared as a new regional player in the Southern Caucasus, for the military and political pressure on Georgia has been enormous ever since President Putin came into office. Given the situation, security-policy considerations suggest that the management of the crisis in the Southern Caucasus should be entrusted not to NATO, which is a political and military block, but to the European Union. Whereas Russia had welcomed the European Union's policy in the Southern Caucasus under President Yeltsin because the EU was not regarded as a potential opponent in the region, that attitude has been changing ever since May 2003. America's military presence in Russia's post-Soviet 'backyard' revealed the country's powerlessness vis-à-vis the USA and 'the West' in general. Since that time, Russia has been perceiving the European Union as an outpost of the USA and NATO in the Southern Caucasus. What is more, the EU is now speaking with one voice in the Southern Caucasus under its European neighbourhood policy (ENP). In Moscow, the political class is watching the close relations between the Caucasian states and the Europeans with mistrust although, properly speaking, Russia should not obstruct the activities of the EU but regard it as a partner on the way towards peaceful development in the Caucasus.