

The Caucasus in transition

Part Three - The Great Game

by David Hoghton-Carter, UK Defence Forum Research Associate

Today, in this concluding part of our "Caucasus in transition series", we move on from examining the complex web of religious, ethnic and nationalistic grudges which marks out the Caucasus to considering how Russia and the other great powers could act to mitigate the risk of future conflict. As considered here on Viewpoints during March, Russia is developing a new foreign policy agenda for a rapidly-evolving future. The role of the 'West' in this whole mess is itself complex. We see the competing demands of autonomous national foreign policy coming out of USA and Britain, in addition to NATO policy, EU policy and a web of strategic and economic multilateral relationships.

Once upon a time, not too long ago, Tony Blair said that we have entered a time where the world is in flux. The rules of the great geopolitical game have been muddied in the wake of two decades of rapid change, with the end of the Cold War, the terrible events of 9-11, the rise to prominence of political Islam, and the various conflicts around the world in which religion, ethnicity and nationalism have played a strong role. Some months ago, I urged the creation of a new Treaty of Westphalia to help firm up the rules of the game as it is played today. With all that has come to pass around the Caucasus, largely away from the spotlight of the Western media but certainly under the wary eye of European and US diplomacy, we need to be certain about the scope for national reach and the boundaries of international collective action.

So where do we go from here? In the years to come, Russian leadership will be crucial in preventing the Caucasus from deteriorating into a fractured mire of ethnic and religious conflicts, defined by a range of disparate issues but fundamentally linked by a shared legacy which stretches back to Middle Ages. The complex geopolitics of the region arguably leaves little room for the higher ideals of Western democracy, as Putin no doubt knows very well. It may be that we here in the West will need to give Russia a lot of leeway to deal with the problems on its doorstep as its leaders see fit. No preaching about human rights, no sermons about civil liberties, no rhetoric about government by the people or the rightful use of force. It's liable to get messy out there before the old ghosts are fully exorcised.

Russia, then, faces the need to deal with the myriad troubles of the Caucasus autonomously and effectively as a key player in the great geopolitical game. America, Britain and the WEU allies need to recognise its right to manage this simmering crisis and to take what action must be taken in order to bash some heads together and prevent the whole region from slowly and inexorably sliding into conflict as centuries-old tensions boil over. The time has come for Russia to step up and take a leading role in responsible diplomacy and the responsible use of military power.

If we are to uphold our right to intervene in Afghanistan and vindicate our occupation of Iraq, we

need to step back and let Russia do what it must do, just as we have done in acting against Al-Qaeda. Trusting Russia as an ally, sharing intelligence and giving it room to act against threats to the international community which persist in its back yard will be much more productive than reverting to Cold War suspicions. Trying to deny it a right to constructively participate as a net provider of international security and stability can only be counter-productive. For its part, Russia needs to be willing to "think outside of the box" and take on board the lessons that other nations have learned the hard way about how to deal with the myriad vectors of domestic terrorism.

The recent Moscow bombings put into stark relief how dangerous a period the Caucasus region is in, as the transition from the Soviet era to a new order begins to reach its endgame. The question is whether that transition will be one to a stable community of states which can participate effectively in international politics and trade, or we will see a transition to an even more unstable region characterised by a succession of conflicts which may have immense repercussions for whole international community. Only time will tell.