

The Caucasus as a border region between three regional powers, yesteryear empires...

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The curtailment of Russian influence in the Caucasus following the demise of the USSR without a doubt encouraged the arrival of new actors such as Turkey, Iran, Washington and others. In Abkhazia, Ajaria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Lenkoran and Chechnya armed conflicts broke out almost simultaneously. With them mushroomed organised crime groups, trafficking everything from organs and people to arms and narcotics.

Turkey took advantage of the situation to lend support to Chechen separatists, sending arms and facilitating the transfer of mercenaries to the latter and also Nagorno-Karabakh¹.

Tehran inaugurated its sponsorship of Shia Muslim communities in Azerbaijan, seeking to create a powerbase for its own interests in the region.

Washington on the other hand approved its first USAID programmes for the three Caucasian republics. In 1992, the US granted a total of \$35 and \$21 million to Armenia and Georgia respectively, while in 1994 earmarking \$64 million for Azerbaijan.² These policies helped Washington establish an initial presence in the region.³ With new geopolitical realities at the start of the 1990's, the Caucasus, which lived its most, and presumably only period of political stability in history under the USSR, turned back to its unstable dynamics of yesteryear and the tinderbox that has characterised it for centuries. One of the principal reasons for this was the fractioning of political power in the hands of diverse ethnic groups and local clans, thereupon fomenting new conflicts and creating challenges for Moscow's national security.

In terms of languages and ethnic communities, the sheer demographic diversity of the Caucasus region surpasses that seen in many other parts of the world. Caucasian peoples form a mosaic of ethnic communities, each with their particular language, traditions and culture. History here is full of rivalries and constant clashes between these communities, where the loyalty to

¹Vasilev, Alexander: "The Black Sea region in Turkish Foreign Policy Strategy: Russia and Turkey on the Black Sea", *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, [online], num 2, 2010.

²United States Agency for International Development Economic Analysis and Data Services, Aid Trends. Available at: <https://explorer.usaid.gov/aid-trends.html>.

³US Government personnel from different agencies such as the Department of State, Department of Defence, USAID and the Peace Corps among others opened offices in the three Caucasian republics to manage the newly-established diplomatic relations.

these communities, where the loyalty to one's group, or in some cases one's clan⁴ unites entire populations against one another in contentions which can last generations. It is important to stress that centuries under imperial rule and policies of imposed assimilation have not been an impediment for many local ethnic groups to live in a relatively independent manner. Maintaining their traditions, leaders of local clans and other socio-political formations politically allied themselves from time to time with imperial powers for either personal gain or group benefit. The fractioning of political power has its very origins in these constantly shifting alliances between the innumerable local communities and regional powers⁵. Internal factors contributing to the fragmentation of political power include the personal benefit or aspiration of local chiefs or their communities, while among the external factors one can clearly distinguish the geopolitical aspirations of empires and other foreign powers. These two determining factors of political division would unequivocally feed off one another contributing to politically highly volatile situations in the region. This context has been and continues to be surprisingly favourable for many conquering powers, as this fragmentation can be used and abused as leverage to destabilise and debilitate the positions of a dominating power.

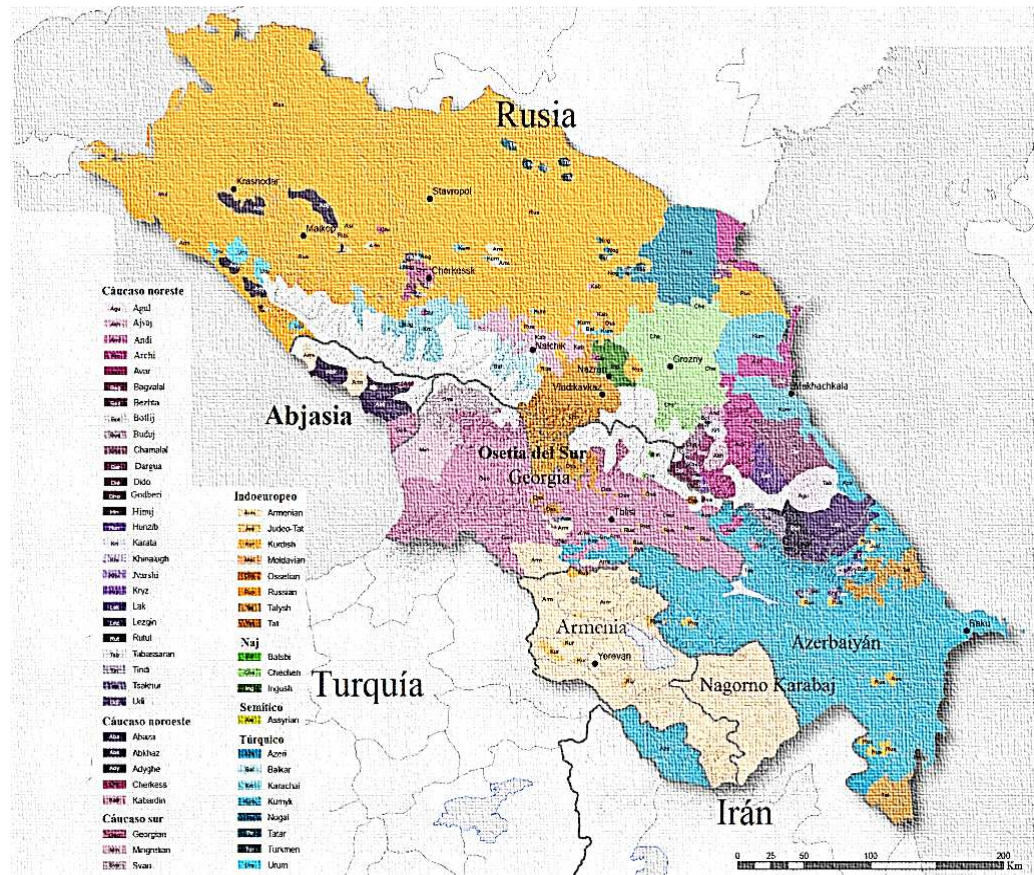
The factor of national security and its importance for the regional neighbourhood can be analysed turning to history. All of the wars that the Russian Empire fought with the Ottoman (1550-1918) and Persian Empires (between 1650 - 1830) took place in the Caucasian theatre, and concluded in Russian control of the region by the Turkmenchay agreement of 1828 with Persia and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1917 with the Ottomans. Between the Ottomans and Persians at least ten wars were waged between the 16th and 19th centuries, the vast majority in the Caucasus. The *casus belli* in almost all cases were closely related to the security and defence of the three mentioned empires. After the demise of the USSR, the creation of three relatively weak States that failed to gain control of the totality of their respective territories, with the exception of Armenia, fuelled new dangers for regional security. The new poles of political power outside government control and grey areas promoted more than favourable conditions for drug, arms, organs and people trafficking along with other illicit, yet lucrative, activities.

⁴The clan is particularly important in societies such as those of the Chechens, Ingush and others in Dagestan, which have had little contact with actors outside of the region. Until today these social structures remain intact, especially in rural areas.

⁵ Some alliances are even intra-ethnic in nature, as divisions and factions exist within many communities as well on socio-political lines. Often, local noble families and princes of different communities were rejected by their subjects as they often allied themselves with imperial-dominant powers, something that unquestionably created divisions within communities. Nonetheless, on many occasions we find examples of entire ethnic communities, particularly those of Turkic-Mongol origins, who were more inclined to accept the authority of their leaders. As some leaders were under less scrutiny by subjects, due to historic customs, traditions, social, economic or political structures, they were free to forge and undo with alliances without major internal disturbances.

The Caucasian corridor formed by Azerbaijan and Georgia has also become a transit zone for trafficking and smuggling⁶ which generates problems not only for the three regional powers of Russia, Turkey and Iran, but also the European Union. Tehran sees its national security threatened by not only Washington's presence on its northern borders, but also the Israeli presence in Azerbaijan, who it accuses of espionage and assassination attempts against its nuclear scientists. Turkish authorities on the other hand are distressed by the growing Russian presence in Armenia, where an airbase with around twenty last-generation fighter-bombers are stationed along with a base housing thousands of troops just a few kilometres from its eastern border. The impact of developments in the Caucasus on the national security of regional powers is as important as has been for centuries.

Ethnic communities in the Caucasus



Source: Map updated by the author, se footnote below⁷

⁶Giragosian, Richard: "Networks of Crime and Corruption in the South Caucasus", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, [online], September 2009, pags. 2-4.

⁷See Bibliography, *Sources of Map IV*.

To achieve control of the region, Persians historically maintained important positions on the high plateau surrounding the city of Yerevan, Armenia. This was considered the front line of defence against the Ottomans; control of the area was exerted by propping up the local elites⁸ Tehran's current interpretation of national security follows similar traits as before: the Caucasus remain a front line of defence against US, Turkish and Israeli intromission. At the same time Russia's national security emphasises this *foreign* intromission, which creates poles of power that escape its control. The involvement of other powers offers alternatives to local communities and essentially competes with the Kremlin's already waning influence. Foreign intervention, combined with the fragmentation of political power, have fuelled armed conflicts in places such as Chechnya and have been a major factor in instabilities in Dagestan and Ingushetia.

Control of the Caucasian corridor, besides facilitating Moscow's control over trade in the Black Sea and projecting its influence in the Mediterranean Sea¹, will undoubtedly defend its internal security. This geographical space, politically divided and highly instable, becomes a priority for the national security of Russia, Iran and Turkey, all of which bear the brunt of the regional developments. One can conclude that due to the aforementioned factors, the Caucasus has not lost its importance as a geographical space for centuries.

¹King, Charles: *The Ghost of Freedom: a history of the Caucasus*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2008, p. 35.