

**Sir Garry Johnson**

## **SECURITY SECTOR REFORM IN THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS**

The dissolution of the Soviet Union left its former nations and those of the Warsaw Pact with a mammoth task of reform and restructuring to be carried out in all the political, social and economic spheres of national life. The fundamental challenge facing these countries was simple: could they modernise all the relevant aspects of their society well enough, and quickly enough, to claim a space in the successful community of the Western nations which had emerged strengthened from the Cold War while the window of integration opportunity remained open?

This contribution addresses security reform in the Caucasus from the perspective of a unique international organisation with experience of working in the field of security sector reform in some of the countries of the Former Soviet Union, namely the International Security Advisory Board, or ISAB for short<sup>47</sup>. Although my focus will be on the Caucasus, I will draw upon the experiences of ISAB in the Baltic States as these are relevant both to that and in general terms for the future. I will start with a description of ISAB and how it works.

The International Security Advisory Board was set up under my chairmanship in 1995 at the request of the Foreign and Defence Ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with the objective of offering strategic advice to the Governments of the Baltic States in the field of security sector reform. Membership of the Board was to be a single member from a number of countries most relevant to the aspirations of the Baltic States: in addition to the United Kingdom, these were seen as being the United States, Germany, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and, later, France. The members were all senior and respected national figures from a range of background in the security sector. The collective background of the Board covered high rank experience in international

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<sup>47</sup> For more information consult: [www.protocol-learning.net/Advisory\\_Board.html](http://www.protocol-learning.net/Advisory_Board.html).

organisations such as the UN and NATO, in all functions of the military and the security sphere, in diplomacy, and in the field of politics, NGOs and institutes. I insisted that the Board should work at the strategic level directly to Heads of State and Ministers in the receiving nations and that no Board member should hold a position in his own government agencies, thus allowing the advice offered by the Board to be independent and objective and not constrained by the national interests of the supporting nations. There was to be no permanent office, no secretariat and a minimum of paperwork. Funding for the Board was a simple arrangement: supporting nations would meet the costs of their Board member and the receiving nations would fund the in-country costs during Board visits. The Board would carry out a regular programme of visits to the receiving countries, at intervals of around a month or six weeks at the most.

This arrangement worked efficiently and well in the Baltic States where the programme was brought to a close in 1999, by which time the reform process was embedded and the three nations were well set on the path to membership of NATO and the EU.

In 1999 a similar programme was set up at the request of the Government of Georgia. On this occasion the Board initially comprised three members with, besides myself, members from the United States and Germany. In 2001 one member from each of the three Baltic States was added. The ISAB programme is ongoing in Georgia with early 2005 set as the date for closing down the official programme, after which I expect there to be a continuing liaison as there has been in the Baltic States since 1999.

The problem facing the Board in both regions, namely what advice to give, was relatively simple. It is not a difficult matter to elaborate the principles and logic of the reform process, the steps which must be taken and the relationship of these steps to each other. Implementation is another matter.

The foundation of reform has to be a clear elucidation of foreign policy objectives and security policy by the government in terms which can be

understood externally by other countries and supported internally by the population. It suits countries from time to time for their foreign policies to be somewhat opaque, but in general terms it is helpful that the objectives of a country are made clear to the international community. Similarly it is necessary in a free and independent state that the foreign alignment is supported by the people and that it has some form of democratic endorsement. Many countries find it helpful to express this foreign policy orientation in the form of a security concept document which gains parliamentary approval. This prime requirement has been particularly important for the nations of the former Soviet Union, particularly for those seeking a western orientation, where a clear stance leads both to external support and sets the patterns and models to be followed in the transformation process.

Having set the direction to be followed, it is clear that the reform process should be on lines which will be acceptable to the institutions and organisations which the country aspires to join or be closely associated with. Thus reform in the military sphere must be NATO-compatible and reform in the interior agencies must be EU-compatible. In this simple statement of the obvious lies much difficulty in implementation.

It is equally clear that security sector reform requires democratic supervision and public support, which in turn calls for an increased sophistication of understanding of these matters in an arena outside the previously closed worlds of the defence and security professionals of the state.

Finally, the correlation of the sector components must be correctly managed, the timing of change carefully calculated and the stability of the security sector must remain untroubled during the transitional process.

This is all very clear when set out in an academic manner, but life in practise is never so simple. So let me look now at the problems which the countries I have mentioned faced in their efforts towards modernisation.

Somewhat to my surprise the foundation step caused some difficulties in both regions. The senior leaders in all countries have from the days of early independence asserted their intentions that their countries should be part of the Euro-Atlantic community and its organisations and institutions. In the Baltic States all three countries declared their strong desire to join NATO as the prime security guarantor and followed this closely, but more quietly, with a declaration of intent to join the EU. A decade later both those intentions are about to be fulfilled, but there were times in the early days when, despite the three nations being self-evidently part of the European homeland and heritage, it seemed that the Western European nations would, without the urging of the United States, still be dragging their feet. Nor could internal political support be taken for granted. There were, and still are although in decreasing numbers, those who regretted the certainties of former times and who feared that they would be swamped by the political and economic power of the West. It took clear political will and courage to win the case in the Baltic States, but it was done and the foundation was secured in good time.

This is not yet the case in Georgia, where the issues are less clear. President Shevardnadze has always reached out to the West and has recently declared his intention that Georgia should become a member of NATO and the EU in addition to all the other organisations of which it is already a member. Given the proximity of Russia, the complexities of the region and the greater distance from the heart of Europe, these intentions are less easy to make convincing, although Georgia's support for the United States actions in Iraq has brought increased support from that country. Georgia also has difficulty in expressing the intentions in explicit foreign policy terms. After several attempts at drafting a security concept document, a final version is now being considered by the government, but when and how it will receive democratic endorsement is still undecided.

Even having set the course, all former Soviet countries faced, and still face a number of major difficulties in carrying through the reform process. I will refer to four of these.

The first of these is a lack of resources. This takes two forms. Firstly and crucially, there is a lack of money. With governments struggling to build economies and the people desperate for social underpinning and stability, there is little political mileage in putting money into defence which could be spent on school, hospitals or even paying pensions. Eventually, as their economies strengthened, the Baltic States accepted that setting a percentage target of their GDP for defence expenditure which approximated to the NATO average of around 2% was a necessary political signal of intent. The case for Georgia is far more difficult. The GDP is largely unquantifiable and the revenue largely uncollected. The exchequer is always on the brink of emptiness. The security sector ministries put in annual budgetary requests, which are usually cut by around a half, and of which only around a half reaches the ministries. Salaries are low and often paid in arrears, leading to corruption and 'moonlighting'. The ministries struggle to keep their heads above water, and there is no money to pay redundancy to those who should return to civilian life or to carry out the necessary structural, infrastructure and equipment reform programmes.

The second lies in the lack of human resources. There are many extremely intelligent, dedicated and patriotic young men and women in the countries in which I have worked, both civilian and military, who are the hope for the future and without whom the state sector would be in great difficulty. The training of these people improves steadily, but their numbers do not, as many find the comparison between official and private sector salaries to be hugely to the disadvantage of themselves and their families. Again, with increasing national prosperity, that problem is being overcome in the Baltic States, but it remains a serious issue in Georgia.

Another obstacle to progress is within a form of cultural gap which seems to have been exacerbated by the long period of isolation of Soviet society. This is most noticeable in the differing approaches to problem solving which have evolved. The contrast is between a relatively closely focused and pragmatic western model and a more collegiate, discursive Soviet model. Thus the drafting process for a security concept document in the western style would be driven by a fairly small team of drafters

who seek comment from wider participants as the shape comes quickly clearer, whereas in Georgia such matters tend to be handled by unwieldy committees of largely academic members, with the outcome being a longer, less precise product formed over a lengthy time-span. The dangers of displaying initiative within the old system have left their mark and a cautious and slow way of responding is evident throughout the official sector, where the lack of financial resources referred to earlier provides no spur for greater speed. To this must added, as another factor, that of national character. The farther east the traveler goes the more it is noticeable that problems are more readily acknowledged than addressed, more often borne than solved and, when solved, more often done so by consensus and the pressure of events than by confrontation and design. Thus we should not be surprised that the progress of reform is slower the Caucasus than it was in the Baltic.

The fourth obstacle lies in human nature. Change is always a challenge, particularly when it seems to threaten personal interests or welfare. Change is more difficult to accept the older one becomes. There are many in official positions in the former Soviet countries who feel threatened by the changes which are sweeping through their countries and the natural reaction of such individuals is to resist to change, either actively or passively. There is a great issue to face around how such people are to be handled. Some will bow to the inevitable and modernise themselves. Others will be unable or unwilling to change themselves. These must not be allowed to obstruct progress and must be removed if they prove intractable, but it has to be remembered that these people have served their country well under a different system, and they must be allowed to stand aside with dignity. At the heart of the reform process it must be recognised that change management is a most important issue to be recognised and addressed.

Moving from philosophical to more factual issues, let us look briefly at the steps of the reform process and see how they stand in Georgia. The requirements for the various sectors are fairly clear. In the military it requires a move from quantity to quality, a reduction of numbers and an enhancement of capability to provide a more flexible military which is interoperable with NATO and other western forces. In the Interior

Ministry it means moving from Interior Troops in the military model to a gendarmerie force which is essentially an enhanced police component. In border security it means changing the military Border Guards to a largely civilianised security agency for border security and control, which is again essentially a form of police control. In the Security Ministry it means moving to a plain-clothed agency basis, with no place in the prosecuting procedures. The thread which runs through all these requirements is that of demilitarisation, for security is not just about tanks in the modern era. It also means an acceptance of some form of democratic oversight and an understanding of how to apply that without it turning into an unreasonable and potentially dangerous form of political control.

In Georgia, these strategic requirements were set out in the first ISAB Report to the National Security Council in 2000, and were accepted and endorsed for action by the President. Subsequent annual ISAB Reports, the last issued in July of this year, have monitored progress and made further recommendations. Steady progress is being made.

An essential facilitator of progress is outside assistance, which is now being provided in increasingly useful programmes by a number of nations, and therein lies another problem: that of coordination. Too often the aid programmes are not adequately coordinated nor tied in closely enough to supporting the reform process plan and timetable. On the military side NATO provides some of the cohesion required through the PfP and other programmes, but NATO only deals with the defence component. The EU, although it puts a great deal of financial and technical assistance into Georgia, is less good at coordinating its efforts and curiously reluctant to mirror NATO's lead role in the non-military parts of the security sector. In the absence of effective official international coordination mechanisms much reliance is placed on the efforts of embassy staffs in country and on quasi-international organisations such as ISAB. There are improvements in sight in this area.

With regard to security sector reform elsewhere in the Caucasus, the ongoing dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia has prevented serious

attention being paid to reform in the former as it has hindered external assistance to that objective. Armenia's adherence to the Russian security interests has similarly been an obstacle to outside participation in meaningful modernisation there, as it has elsewhere in the Central Asian countries of the former Soviet Union. Regional cooperation has been almost non-existent to date. However, here too, there are encouraging signs that some progress can be anticipated, and the need to provide security for the pipeline system will be a driver here.

What are the major lessons which can be learned from these experiences which might be useful elsewhere? I suggest the importance of the following:

- clarifying at the outset the political and security framework within which reform is to take place;
- setting an overall strategic plan for the whole security sector;
- Government approval, at the highest level, of the major issues of the reform process;
- Government control and political support of and for the process;
- Coordination of external assistance, and a direct linkage to the development of the overall reform process.

Finally, some thoughts on the ISAB concept. Experience shows that to be successful an advisory group such as ISAB must:

- Have access to the highest levels in the receiving country. It must therefore be composed of individuals whose standing and experience qualify them for such access, and must work to an influential point of contact;
- Be trusted by the receiving government to provide objective, independent, experience-based advice, and by the supporting governments to act responsibly with regard to their own national policies and interests;
- Work across the whole security spectrum and those in society connected to it and affected by it. This implies a wide span of experience within the group;

- Be prepared to make a short-term time commitment of around three years, followed by a follow-up contact period;
- Be available as required by the receiving government. A schedule of formal visits should be supplemented by an ‘on call’ capability;
- Be aware of local politics and of the effect of group recommendations in that sphere, whilst being scrupulously, and demonstrably non-political and non-partisan;
- Be patient, and seek a good and workable outcome, rather than strive for a swift and unobtainable perfection.

The concept developed by ISAB over the last several years is unique. There is no other body, official or semi-official, which works across the whole security spectrum at the strategic level in a continuing process. It is a proven success. It is inherently flexible and cost-effective. It is capable of application in a wide variety of circumstances.

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