

Elkhan E. Nuriyev

SOUTHERN CAUCASUS: IN QUEST OF A NEW VISION FOR A COOPERATIVE SECURITY STRATEGY

Twelve years after the collapse of the USSR, scholars and political scientists are still puzzled. The post-Soviet life of the three independent states of the South Caucasus remains critically complex. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are still in transition and despite reform efforts, they are not more than weak nations with fragile statehood and a long way to go until peace, stability and viable democracies will be irreversibly established. For today, however, the question is whether the three countries have developed strategic visions and made available the necessary resources to attain this primary goal.

The Southern Caucasus region is fragmented; largely due to existing unresolved conflicts which prevent Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia from pooling their efforts in order to jointly address current challenges that the region as a whole faces. The lack of unity of the three countries and the absence of progress in breaking up the stalemates regarding the secessionist republics indicate the seriousness of the crisis in the Southern Caucasus and create new challenges and threats.

Another major obstacle standing in the way of reaching regional unity and stimulating cooperation are the different security perceptions among the three states. Although they aspire to regional security, they all have their own foreign policy strategies and priorities. Moreover, there are clear distinctions in their individual perception of threats and national security concerns. The Southern Caucasus needs a new vision of how it will respond to existing and future challenges in a rapidly changing world. The restoration of territorial integrity, the elimination of corruption and the consolidation of democracy are absolutely necessary to keep that vision strong. The Southern Caucasus needs a comprehensive strategy and major changes that would transform the

region from an area of confrontation into an open politico-economic system where, instead of conflicting interests, there would be a mutual accommodation, or even coincidence, of interests.

If the Southern Caucasus countries fail in their security sector reform and democratization efforts, they will lose much of the support they now enjoy from the international community. This in turn will result in a considerable reduction of the international commitment to solve the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also in a decrease of the international financial and technical assistance and, eventually, in the loss of importance of the region.

The three countries should therefore devise a new agenda, which would allow them to transform themselves into stable democracies with guaranteed sovereignty and a strong market economy. Certainly, much of the homework is to be done by Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians themselves. However, the international community, and the U.S., EU and Russia in particular, should come up with their part of the new agenda as the major contributors to future success of the region. The new agenda should be based on the recognition that there are time, financial and political resources to utilize. Also, the U.S. and the EU should better coordinate their policies to send a clear response to those inside and outside the region who do not wish to see the three countries develop free and transparent societies. These forces are easily identifiable, as are those who best serve the interests of their country and the region.

Obviously, one way for the region to help foster stability and secure economic viability is through an active interaction of constructive forces, which can work in concert to enhance cooperation between the states and with regional and international organizations. The post-Soviet countries will succeed if they all aim at formulating a comprehensive policy strategy based on sound changes, a new thinking and mutual understanding through dialogue.

Elkhan E. Nuryiev
Baku