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CAUCASIAN CHESS OR THE GREATEST GEOPOLITICAL TRAGEDY OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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The meaning of the concept of security is constantly changing due to technological progress and globalisation. There is no single definition of the term security; however, the traditional approach to security in International Relations during the Cold War era has focused on military aspects of national security, mainly associated with the state's sovereignty and independence, in regard to sustaining the conventional balance of power in world politics. While for realists of all strands, world politics is a constant struggle among nations over power and security in the absence of an international authority, liberals argue that cooperation is a key to maintain peace among the states in an anarchic world. Meanwhile, a broader understanding of security that goes beyond the military-political element of the subject includes economic, environmental, cultural, human, ideological, societal and other aspects. For instance, the state's security concerns can reflect the nation's economic power, if the poor countries' security needs would be the provision of food and clean water, the developing countries may deal with ethnic conflicts and military interventions, and the developed countries may face industrial espionage, cyberwar or pollution. Moreover, states' perception of security concerns may vary depending on regime types, whereas current threat of terrorism can be regarded as either a threat to the very existence of the nation or a legitimate tool of one's foreign policy (Spiegel, Matthews, Taw, and Williams, 2009, 239). With the changing nature of threats, the concept of security in International Relations can no longer be associated solely with the military aspect of the subject and must include new elements that will reflect current issues and challenges in world politics.

Prior to discussing Moscow's security policy in the Caucasus, it is useful to examine Russia's security challenges from a historical perspective. The geographic placement of Russia and its desire to expand to the south towards the open sea (Black Sea) can be considered as one of the most decisive factors in Russian foreign and security policy in the Caucasus starting with the Tsarist conquest of the region in the seventeenth century (see Figure 26.1). Hence, regional location plays a vital role in whether neighbours will be strong or weak, many or few, whereas the topography of the area determines the nature of those relations with neighbouring states (Spykman, 1938, 213). Hegemony over the Black Sea steppe was crucial for Tsarist Russia in determining the political fate of Moldavia and Walachia in the West and the Caucasus in the East. However, steppe colonisation carried heavy protection costs since it was an apple of discord among the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire,



Figure 26.1 Caucasus Mountains Map

Source: FreeWorldMaps.net

Poland-Lithuania, and Russia. Consequently, the main feature of Russian state policy from the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1533–1584) to Peter the Great (1689–1725) was an attempt to control the steppe despite the challenge by the Tatar Khans and the Ottomans (Arakelyan, 2017, 83). Nevertheless, what began as a defensive policy of Russia's security changed over the course of the eighteenth century into an expansionist approach that has dominated the state's foreign policy in the region over the last four centuries.

The Caucasus has always occupied a special place not only in Russian politics but also in its literature. Gavril Derzhavin, Aleksandr Griboedov, Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Leo Tolstoy just to name a few prominent Russian writers and thinkers inspired by the rough natural beauty of the region, which they depicted in their work. However, for some of those writers, the Caucasus represented also a violent land in need of a taming hand. After all, Russians believed that the locals epitomised a warrior culture, no wonder that the conquest of the Caucasus became the longest-running military conflict in its history. Charles King writes that more than two generations of generals and soldiers were consumed with the battle that affected Russian culture and Moscow's geopolitics (King, 2013). Yet, the North Caucasian territory (the part of Russia that considered to bridge Europe with Asia) never produced a modern nation-state, unlike the South Caucasus where three nation-states were formed as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Moreover, the North Caucasian Federal District, one of the most ethnically and geographically diverse regions of the Russian Federation, was colonised by Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century and has been a subject of imperial conquest and local resistance for centuries – before, during, and after the annexation by the Empire. The region still presents governance and counterterrorism challenges to the Putin administration, since the resistance movement was superseded by Islamic extremism¹ that allow(s) Russia security forces to undertake counterterrorist operations often marked by human rights violation. According to the Human Right Watch report, Russian law enforcement and security forces, involved in

counter-insurgency, often treating all adherents of Salafism, an Islamic religious denomination in Dagestan, as criminals, and, in general, pursue ruthless counter-insurgency methods (Lokshina, 2016).

With this in mind, Russian security policy in the Caucasus² can be analysed through the analytical lenses of what Barry Buzan calls regional security complex, which holds that, in order to study the national security of a given state, we should look at the international pattern of security interdependence in which it is meshed (Buzan, 1991, 187). Moscow's security approach in the North and South Caucasus should be viewed as an issue of regional security, since the primary interests of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the European Union (EU) are situated in the region in the spheres of military and economic security. Moreover, given the rise of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus, the latter has been a source of instability for Russia since the Tsarist conquest of the region during the period of 1600–1850s, Moscow will be viewed not only as an actor but also as a target in terms of security and its counter-insurgency efforts in the region.

Russian traditional foreign policy in the Caucasus

After the end of the Cold War, the concepts of security and security threats underwent significant transformations due to the change from bipolarity to unipolarity, and more recently to multipolarity within the international system. The collapse of the bipolar security order initiated a balance between the economic, political, and military requirements of security, as well as brought attention of International Relations scholars and policymakers upon the institutions and international regimes. In addition, the emergence in the international system of newly independent states, which had little experience in enforcing national security on their own, presented a challenge for Russia and the West to maintain a partnership after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. According to regional complex theory, there is a difference 'between the system level interplay of the global powers, whose capabilities enable them to transcend distance, and the subsystem level interplay of lesser powers whose main security environment is their local region' (Buzan and Wæver, 2003, 9). As the following analysis suggests, Russia's security policy in the Caucasus presents a clear example of Moscow's ability to create security interdependence within the region, since local players' securitisation and/or desecuritisation are so interlinked that their security issues cannot be examined apart from one another. In addition, this chapter uses four levels of analysis: domestic level, state-to-state relations, region's interaction with neighbouring regions, and the role of global powers in the regions to examine Russia's security policy in the Caucasus.

The Russian expansion into the Caucasus that was concluded in the nineteenth century was meant to strengthen the Empire's presence on the Black Sea coast, in order to have a gateway to the Mediterranean. It coincided with the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the fading power of Persia. The Greater Caucasus, from a geopolitical perspective, was an insecure frontier that had been considered dangerous to Russians, as well as providing opportunities to weaken Iran and Turkey. The region served as a buffer zone among the three major powers bordering it: Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which had competed to establish its influence in the Caucasus over the prior three centuries.

It is no surprise that the Caucasus has long been a region of geopolitical struggle between the East and the West, since it is situated between two economically and strategically important regions, the Caspian Basin and the Black Sea. The outside actors, Turkey, Iran, Russia, Britain, and Germany, tried to invade the land, assimilate the local people, and exploit the natural resources of the area. Throughout the nineteenth century, Russia was

seen by Western states as an equal partner; however, with the creation of the Soviet Union in 1917, when a revolutionary regime was established on the European landmass with the intention to change the state system and to erase the class barriers, the perception of Russia by the outside world changed. As previously discussed, the original military aspects of security were changed to include political, economic, social, and environmental threats (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, 1998). Considering that the theory of regional security complexes focuses on the four levels of relations in the region: the vulnerability of the individual states in the region, the relations between the states in the region, the interaction of the region with the neighbouring regions, and the role of global superpowers in the region, it becomes clear that Bolsheviks desperately needed to be recognised not only by the outside world but also by the nations within the Russian Empire.

Thus, one of the hallmarks of Soviet foreign policy became a principle of self-determination of nations within the Russian Empire, although Vladimir Lenin used this concept selectively, mainly to destroy the Tsarist regime. After the Bolsheviks' victory, when the new Soviet government was able to bring back into the Union the former imperial territories, including the Caucasian states, Lenin found the idea of establishment of ethno-territorial federalism attractive, since it enabled his government to rebuild damaged Russia's authority and to win political loyalty in the ethnic Russian regions. Bolsheviks used the Tsarist 'divide-and-rule' strategy in order to undercut organised and effective opposition to the Soviet regime, by tailoring the boundaries among the Soviet states according to their loyalty to communist principles and their government rather than by reflecting their ethno-national make-up. Thus, administrative territorial divisions formed in 1917–1918 represented one of the most powerful tools of Soviet foreign and security policy, which overlapped traditional territories and administrative boundaries to create 'fifth columns' within the Union to foment ethnic conflicts and divisions in the Caucasus, as well as in other parts of the USSR (Arakelyan, 2017, 100). In regard to the Caucasus, in order to tighten its grip on the region, over the centuries Tsarist Russia, the Soviet government, and lately Putin's administration have all instigated hostility among the local actors, while St. Petersburg and then Moscow served as a saviour of last resort to 'solve' all the disputes among the regional rivals. For instance, in the Caucasus, there were quite a few issues to unravel thanks to the Stalin legacy, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the disputes over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the Soviet crimes perpetrated against the Chechen people followed by the two Chechen Wars in 1994–2004. On February 23, 1944, Joseph Stalin deported one million Chechens to Siberia and Central Asia, under the charge that they were Nazi sympathisers. One-third of the population died on the journey, others did not survive the exile.

The peculiarity of the Russian security approach in the Caucasus has rested on the concept of great pragmatism borrowed by the Soviet government from Tsarist authorities. An example of this pragmatism can be seen in the formation of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast in July 1923 that was followed by more than two years of intense argument among Nariman Narinamov and Alexander Miasnikian (representing, respectively, the newly formed governments of Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet Armenia) and Sergo Ordzhonikidze and Sergei Kirov (the emissaries of Central Soviet power in the Caucasus), Georgi Chiherin (the Soviet People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs), and Joseph Stalin (People's Commissar for the Affairs of Nationalities at the time). The first settlement was to recognise the disputed territories of Zangezur and Nakhichevan as integral parts of Soviet Armenia and grant Nagorno-Karabakh, with a predominantly Armenian population, the right to self-determination,³ the latter was further confirmed by a decision of the plenary session of the Caucasian Bureau of the Russian Communist Party Central Committee

(Kavbiuro) on June 3, 1921. However, under pressure from Stalin, whose main concerns were to appease Kemal Ataturk and Azerbaijan with its oil-rich resources and the truculent Muslim population, which was being subdued by the Bolsheviks, the final decision to attach Karabakh and Nakhichevan (the latter located on Armenia's southwestern side) to Azerbaijan was made at another plenary session of Kavbiuro on July 5, 1921 (Zverev, 1996, 18–19). Thus, the ethnic Armenian region situated in the heart of Azerbaijan was given to Baku as a way of cementing the Kremlin's role as arbiter between the two nations.

To analyse the dispute over Abkhazia, one should consider the ethnic affiliations of the peoples concerned. Thus, the Abkhazians are closely related to the Abazinians, who live in the foothills of the northwest Caucasus, and distantly to both the Circassians and the Ubykhs. The latter along with many Circassians, Abkhazians, and other North Caucasian people migrated (by some accounts they were forcefully removed) to the Ottoman Empire following Russia's annexation of the North Caucasus in 1864 (Hewitt, 1996, 190–194). It is important to add that Abkhazian rulers were in nominal vassalage to various Georgian kingdoms and principalities until Abkhazia came under the control of Tsarist Russia's in 1810, when administrative regions were formed and altered in various ways thereafter. Despite the fact that an independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed on March 31, 1921, this status lasted until 1931, when the republic was incorporated into the Georgian state as an autonomy and the Abkhaz alphabet was changed to a Georgian base by 1944–1945. Furthermore, all Abkhazian schools were closed and replaced by Georgian ones, and the Abkhaz language was banned from administration and publication. Abkhazians also made a few attempts to secede from Georgia and join Russia during the period of the Soviet rule (Potier, 2001, 10).

Ossetians were Christianised in the nineteenth century as a result of ongoing political and cultural alliances with Russia and migrated from the North Caucasus to the neighbouring region, which is now South Ossetia. Ossetians were always a majority within their own territory and fought against Georgians in support of Bolsheviks. In 1922, the Bolsheviks divided Ossetia between the South Ossetian autonomous region in Georgia and North Ossetian autonomous region in Russia. On the one hand, South Ossetians always considered Russians as their allies against Georgians, on the other, the latter conceived of Ossetians as late-coming colonists lacking the Abkhaz's historical roots (Horowitz, 2005, 92). After Georgia accepted new laws aimed to restore a national identity in 1989, the Ossetians, who did not speak Georgian, reacted in a series of protests and violent clashes as well as voted to upgrade South Ossetia's autonomous status within Georgia. In order to oppress the Ossetian opposition, Gamsarkhudia organised a march of Georgian citizens on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali. However, Soviet troops prevented large-scale clashes, although there were numerous small-scale clashes between two ethnic groups (Horowitz, 2005, 96). Ossetians continued to demand for more autonomous and, on September 20, 1990, declared South Ossetia a democratic republic within the USSR (Potier, 2001, 14).

Post-Soviet regional security in the Caucasus

The demise of the Soviet Union left institutional, political, and power vacuums in post-Soviet space. In the case of the South Caucasus, weakened state structures along with political and economic crises, as well as centuries-old animosities between local ethnic groups, have created permissive conditions for the outbreak of ethnic conflict in the region. As a result, despite the fact that Russia, along with the key external actors in the region – Turkey Iran, the EU, and the United States – has tried to establish new approaches to conflict management in the region, a nationalist genie came out of the bottle and there was no way to put it back.

Current Russian security policy in the Caucasus features the similar trends that were used before: the policy of *prestige*, *leadership*, and *provocation*. Mr. Putin approved a new national security strategy for the Russian Federation on December 31, 2015. According to the prestige and leadership strategies, the Russian government is not only solving all the important international problems with which the United States and the EU are not able to deal but also taking care of maintaining 'peace' in the former Soviet space. While we will analyse the policy of provocation below, it is worth mentioning that Putin's government follows in the footsteps of its spiritual masters, such as Empress Catherine, in seeking to re-establish Russia as a great nation in the world and the leader in the former USSR territory, including the Caucasus, to show the state's prestige and leadership in the international system. Thus, the current Russian government also turned its gaze inwards rather than westwards when it came to deal with civil or military disobedience in its former empire.

Meanwhile, the Soviet government's behaviour in the dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region during Gorbachev's rule was very suspicious, to say the least. Existing literature on ethnic conflicts in the former USSR focuses on the role of the KGB, stating that the conflict had occurred under mysterious circumstances not without the participation of the KGB's Fifth Chief Directorate that was responsible for the infiltration of minority groups within the Soviet Union (see Hill and Jewett, 1994; Leitzinger, 1997; Shafir, 1995).

This chapter adds to the existing literature by proposing that the Russian government is successfully continuing the policy of *provocation* of its predecessor and has been intervening in the conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory in such a way to promote its escalation and continuation instead of cessation. Russia provides weapons to Armenia at a discount as its Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) partner and maintains its military base in Gyumri. Simultaneously, Moscow supplied over 80 per cent of the armaments recently purchased by Azerbaijan, citing 'a strategic partnership' with the two Transcaucasian countries, and, arguably, using arms trade to maintain parity while assuming the role of peacekeeper in the region. It is safe to suggest that the Kremlin uses its strategy of *provocation* to maintain *leadership* and *prestige* not only in world politics but also in the Near Abroad with the intention to decline the outside actors' aspirations through pressures.

The North Caucasus

With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Russia lost more than 20 per cent of the Soviet territory, almost half of the population of the USSR, and quite a few strategic regions, including resource-rich Caucasus and South Asia (Arakelyan, 2017). Although, Boris Yeltsin, then head of the Russian Soviet Socialist Federative Republic, gave regional leaders a green light to acquire as much sovereignty as they could 'swallow' in 1990, Moscow could not afford losing a tiny, oil-rich province in the North Caucasus, Chechnya, whose new leader, Dzhokhar Dudaev, proclaimed independence from Russia as soon as he came to power in 1991. In the beginning, the Soviet Russian government, just fresh from surviving an attempted coup d'état, did not pay much attention to Dudaev's proclamations. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Provisional Council of the Chechen Republic, led by Umar Avturkhanov, the pro-Russian head of the Upper Terek region, was appointed to act as a counterweight to Dzhokhar Dudaev. Avturkhanov appealed to the Russian government for support when on August 2, 1994, fighting broke out between supporters and opponents of Dudaev. As a result, Boris Yeltsin, then president of the Russian Federation, signed a decree to restore constitutional law and order across Chechnya. On December 11, 1994, Russian troops crossed the border into the region, war had been declared that lasted

a decade, and considered to be one of the most brutal in contemporary history that created severe instability in the Caucasus (Muratov, Shchekhochikhin, and Sokolov, 2014).

Meanwhile, since the mid-1990s, radical Islamists from the North Caucasus, spurred by historical grievances, have been behind the majority of terrorist attacks that hit Russia's main cities. Chechnya, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan republics have been an Al-Qaida hotbed in the region with transnational ties between Islamist militants across the North Caucasus and their Arab and Central Asian counterparts (Dugulin, 2016). The decline of the Caucasus Emirate, and the formation of a new Islamic State's governorate, Vilayat Kavkaz (the Caucasus Province), in June 2015, created a new power shift in the North Caucasus. While most insurgent groups in the region had sworn their allegiance to the Islamic State, there are still small groups in Kabardino-Balkaria and Dagestan that remained loyal to the Caucasus Emirate. The strict security measures undertaken by pro-Russian President of Chechnya Ramzan Kadyrov shifted the Islamist insurgency's operational centre to Dagestan, and with Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, both the Islamic State and Al-Qaida have called for continued attacks against Russia. Yet, there is also a threat of the potential return of violent extremists who had been radicalised by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq. According to the Soufan Group, there is a significant rise of foreign fighters from the former Soviet states traveling to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State and other violent groups in the region. Some estimates suggest a near 300 per cent increase in known fighters since 2014 ('Foreign Fighters', 2015).

We shall note that Soviet policies of the twentieth century contributed to the present instability in the North Caucasus. The Soviet government formed the autonomous republics for ethnic groups, codifying ethnic divisions in the region, and thus ultimately planted the seeds for interethnic animosity. For instance, many Chechens found their land distributed upon their return from the exile, which, in return, inflamed many interethnic tensions (Laub, 2005).

The South Caucasus

As mentioned above, another tool of Russia's security policy in the Caucasus is *provocation*, when the Kremlin instigates one or more independent actors, in this case, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, to commit acts that are then will be condemned, and followed by the desired counter-reaction. As a matter of fact, *provocation* is followed by *cover-ups*, when Moscow seems to be neutral, but will employ 'peacekeepers' to keep the rival countries under its radar. Thus, Russian troops appear at the scene as 'mediators' to pacify the conflict they caused.

The South Caucasus during the last 30 years has mainly been associated with frozen conflicts. The region remains war-torn in Nagorno-Karabakh, Ossetia, and Abkhazia. Moreover, a sharp escalation in fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2014–2016 is considered to be the deadliest since the two states signed a ceasefire in 1994. Despite the strategic alliance between Moscow and Yerevan, Russia pursues political-military cooperation with Azerbaijan, which means that the Kremlin will be hesitant to defend Armenia in case of war with its neighbour. There is speculation that Putin offered to return some part of Artsakh to Azerbaijan if the country joins the Eurasian Union. For instance, during the four-day war in April 2016, which considered to be an unprecedented escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, both sides accused each other in launching the military action. Given that Armenia defeated Azerbaijan in 1994 and since then controls not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also the surrounding territories, it seems clear that Baku took the initiative and managed to shift the front line in its favour. The recent

escalation of the conflict between Yerevan and Baku is beneficial for Moscow, since it will definitely impede the current cooperation between the West and Azerbaijan in the energy sector and will highlight Russia's role as a peacemaker and a guarantor of the stability in the South Caucasus. After all, the fighting ended as suddenly as it began, and President Vladimir Putin held telephone conversations with then President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, and President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. The latter used the symbolic victory to boost his declining popularity in the country and to divert attention from the difficult socio-economic situation in Azerbaijan.

There is a possibility that Azerbaijan did not act alone, since the Kremlin has been trying to enhance its influence over the region for quite a while to no avail with the exception of Armenia, which, besides being a member of the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union, is a traditional Russia's ally and heavily depends on Moscow in the military, economic, and political spheres. Thus, to strengthen its grip on power in the South Caucasus, Russia needed to change the status quo and the format of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh to impose a resolution on the warring sides, including the introduction of Russian peacekeeping forces in the conflict zone, which only Moscow could guarantee. Recently, Azerbaijan became the 17th largest importer of conventional weapons and bought more than 80 per cent of its weapons from Russia, the main strategic ally of Armenia. Moreover, Moscow sold the Smerch and Solnsepek fire systems that Azerbaijan used against Armenian side in the four-day war, as well as T90S tanks, Mi-35M helicopters, BMP-3 armoured vehicles, and other military equipment to Baku (Galstyan, 2018). It is important to note that the four-day war occurred while the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan were in Washington D.C. at the nuclear summit, and despite the fact that Putin immediately called for the armed clashes to cease, Moscow let the fighting to run its course. Yerevan, one of the members of the military-political bloc, did not receive any support from its allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, despite the continued escalation of the fighting. Suddenly, the Russian media (not Armenian or Azerbaijani) announced the ceasefire, which was reached between the chiefs of staff of Armenia and Azerbaijan during their meeting in the Russian capital (Jarosiewicz and Falkowski, 2016). Moscow not only managed to pose itself as a conciliator, and to prove the powerlessness of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) Minsk group, but also gained the popularity among the citizens of the de facto state Nagorno-Karabakh, who over the span of 30 years see Russia as their protector and might follow the fate of Abkhazians and South Ossetians in the near future.

The regional security complex includes the principles of power, rivalry, and alliances among the key actors in the region. The cooperation or hostility at the regional level is impacted by historical and political factors, and material conditions. Georgia, for instance, remains the country where Russia exercises its so-called hybrid tactics, including the use of military force, diplomatic pressure using Moscow's control over the two breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and economic dependencies as the means to punish or reward Tbilisi. Despite the fact that Georgia signed the Association Agreement with the EU in 2013, and established a visa-free regime in 2016, Tbilisi is doing its best not to aggravate Moscow, in order to avoid the fate similar to that of Ukraine. The 2008 Russian-Georgian War left a sense of distrust between Tbilisi and Moscow and the two breakaway states, Abkhazia and South Ossetia that are under Kremlin's control. In fact, the Georgian government treats these conflicts as Moscow's attempts to continue its assertive foreign and security policy in the South Caucasus rather than the struggle for independence by Abkhazians and Ossetians.

Abkhazia won a secessionist war with Georgia in 1992–1993, and formally declared independence in 1999. After the Russia-Georgia War of 2008, Russia became one of the few

states which formally recognise Abkhazian independence. Moreover, in 2014, Moscow and Sukhumi signed a 'strategic partnership' agreement, thus establishing official ties between Russia and Abkhazia in the social, economic, and humanitarian spheres. In addition, the agreement also foresaw a joint 'defence and security' space with a unified group of Russian-Abkhazian forces. As a result, the Russian influence on the region's economic, political, and social developments cannot be underestimated.

South Ossetia proclaimed its independence from Georgia in 1991 and is recognised by five states, including Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Tuvalu. In 2011, Moscow and Tskhinvali signed a 49-year agreement allowing Russia to build a new military base (with about 4,000 Russian troops) on its territory, while the Kremlin continues to exercise total control over the de facto state.

Analysing the regional security complex in the Caucasus

Arguably, the ex-Soviet bloc states of Central and Eastern Europe considered Soviet Russia as the main guarantor of stability and peace in the region over the seven decades of its existence. With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1991, the international choices and political behaviour of the former Soviet states (the FSU states) have changed. Whereas some of the states became members of the EU or maintain close relations with the West (the Baltic states, Georgia, Ukraine), others joined the Moscow-led Eurasian Union (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), and finally, the rest of the former Soviet republics are either playing off both sides against each other to maintain a favourable foreign policy (Azerbaijan), or are governed by friendly authoritarian regimes and present no threat to the Kremlin's security policies in the region (the Central Asian states). The changing nature of the international system, which shifted from bipolarity to unipolarity after the end of the Cold War, and then headed towards a multipolar world order after Putin's Russia gained economic and political power in the beginning of the 2000s, in addition to the rise of the BRICS countries, contributed to the continuation of the Kremlin's foreign and security approach in the Caucasus, that featured a 'divide-and-rule policy', adopted by the Tsarist Russia in the nineteenth century. This well-calculated strategy ensured imperial peace and cemented hostility among the regional actors, who, instead of rebelling against the Russians, fought with each other.

Consequently, the regional security complex in the Caucasus is built, in part at least, on enmity between Armenia and Azerbaijan due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, between Georgia and Russia (which controls Abkhazia and South Ossetia) over the two de facto states, and among the North Caucasian nations, such as the Chechens, Dagestani, and Ingushetians, and Russians over the discriminatory policies of the Kremlin, as well as the terrorist threat. The Caucasus represents a classic example of the interrelatedness of security concerns, which defines the security of a given state as directly related to that of other states situated in the same region.

Russia as the top target of Jihadists

The security environment in the South Caucasus is also affected by Islamic radicalisation in the Middle East and the North Caucasus. For instance, the Islamic influences from Iran (Shia) and Turkey (Sunni) create new dividing lines between Azerbaijani Shia and Sunni Muslims. Thus, Azerbaijan, one of the three states of the South Caucasus, found itself on the edge of religiously inspired civil protest. In November 2015, Azerbaijani law enforcement carried out a special operation in Nardaran, a township located 25 kilometres (15 miles) northeast of the

capital's centre, to break the backbone of the Muslim Unity Group, a military Shiite organisation. The authorities seized from the group's members four sub-machine guns, 12 grenades, 3 explosive devices, and 10 Molotov cocktails. Two police officers and four extremists were killed during the operation, the group's Shiite cleric and leader, Taleh Bagirov, was arrested along with 14 accomplices, which led to mass protests in Nardaran (Suleimanov, 2015).

The Caucasus region has become an important recruiting ground for the Islamic State. As mentioned previously, the number of foreign fighters from the former Soviet Union has increased since June 2014: from the Russian Federation alone, 2,400 Russians had joined the Islamic State by September 2015. The Soufan Group calculates that there are at least 4,700 fighters from the post-Soviet space. The majority of fighters come from Chechnya and Dagestan (the North Caucasus). However, some estimates have put the combined total from Azerbaijan and Georgia at around 500 (Paul, 2015). There is a general pattern within Azerbaijan by which Islamic State recruits come from several towns such as Sumgait, Shabran, and Quasar. According to other sources, an estimated 1,500 people from Azerbaijan joined the Islamic State in Syria, and many of them are returning home where they pose a serious threat not only to their nations but also to other neighbouring states. Anton Bredikhin claims that many young Azerbaijanis have been encouraged by ISIS to believe that if they serve its ranks, they will liberate the Nagorno-Karabakh region, which is controlled by Armenians since the end of the war in 1994 (Bredikhin, 2015). It is important to note that many of the fighters from Azerbaijan came from predominantly Sunni districts in the northern part of the country (Azerbaijan is traditionally two-thirds Shiia), and they claim that the Azerbaijani government itself, with its harsh policy against the Salafis, is driving them into the hands of ISIS (Goble, 2015).

Pankisi, situated in northeastern Georgia, is home to 8,000 ethnic Kists, a Muslim minority group related to Chechens in the North Caucasus which had already gained a reputation as a refuge for militants during the Chechen Wars in the 1990s–2000s. Currently, Pankisi has once again become a jihadist hotbed. Sergey Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, claims that the Islamic State of Levant and Syria fighters are using the town as its training base 'to train, rest and restock their supplies' (Lavrov, 2016). While Zurab Abashidze, the Georgian Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Russia, rejected these claims, stating that the Georgian government is in control of the region, he also admitted that up to 30 locals from the area travelled to Syria to join the Islamic State ('ISIS Fighters', 2016). Moreover, one of the most famous commanders of the Islamic State, Abu Omar al-Shishani, came from a small village in Georgia's Pankisi.

The Islamic State has created a powerful recruitment machine that attracts a global following and encourages Muslims around the world to join them in their battle against Christian and Jewish 'unbelievers' and Western 'crusaders'. While Georgian Muslims (just 10 per cent of the total population) are not traditionally devout, they became an easy target for ISIS because of the Georgian government's failure to develop an appropriate policy on religion that could avert the alienation of Georgian Muslims from the rest of the predominantly Christian country, which, in turn, could prevent their radicalisation. The foreign fighters from Azerbaijan and Georgia are joining ISIS, in order to find the solution to the religious, social, and economic grievances that they face in their home countries.

Conclusion

The Caucasus is still the most turbulent region for Russia. The region is linked with the North Caucasus, an integral part of the Russian Federation, and the Kremlin treats Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia as a strategic region. The security concerns of the three Transcaucasian states are linked to the neighbouring countries, while for Moscow, Tehran, and Ankara, the

Greater Caucasus remains an important part of their foreign and security policies. In this chapter, we have analysed Russian security policy in the Caucasus through the analytical lens of Buzan's regional security complex. In order to study the national security of the Kremlin, we examined the international pattern of security interdependence in which it is meshed – the primary military and economic security interests of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the EU overlap in the region. In addition, given the rise of Islamic extremism in the North Caucasus, Russia was analysed not only as an actor but also as a target in terms of security-wise and its counter-insurgency efforts in the North Caucasus. Russia's security policy in the Caucasus presented a clear example of regional security complex theory, since there was a difference between the system-level interplay of Moscow, Tehran, Ankara, and Brussels, whose capabilities enabled them to transcend distance, and the subsystem-level interplay of the South Caucasian and North Caucasian states whose main security environment is their local region. As the following chapter suggested, Russia's security policy in the Caucasus presented an empirical evidence of Moscow's ability to create the security interdependence within the region, since local players' securitisation and/or desecuritisation are so interlinked that their security issues cannot be examined apart from one another. We showed that Russia's security policy in the Caucasus is better studied through a four-level analytical framework: domestic level, state-to-state relations, region's interaction with neighbouring regions, and the role of global powers.

Notes

- 1 The Caucasus Emirate (the local branch of Al-Qaeda) was an Islamist military organisation in the North Caucasus founded by a Chechen separatist warlord, Doku Umarov, in 2007. The group aimed to establish an independent Islamic State in the North Caucasus ruled via sharia law. The Caucasus Emirate declared allegiance to the global jihadi movement in April 2009, but Russia remained the main enemy. By 2015, Russian security forces eliminated the key leaders of the group, including Doku Umarov, virtually destroying the Caucasus Emirate. However, after several North Caucasus commanders transferred their allegiance to Islamic State, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, an ISIS spokesman, announced the creation of the 'Vilayat Kavkaz', or Caucasus Province, on June 23, 2015.
- 2 The South and North Caucasus, or the 'Big Caucasus', include Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, the disputed regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and Russia's seven North Caucasus republics: Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, North Ossetia-Alania, Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia.
- 3 At the same meeting, Ordzhonikidze spoke about ceding Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia; later Stalin did the same in the issue of Pravda of December 4, 1920 (Zverev, 1996, 19).

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