

THE UNITED STATES AND GUAM: FROM TACTIC TO PARTNERSHIP

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The relationship between the United States and GUAM has undergone a remarkable evolution over the decade of that group's existence. Prior to the 11 September terrorist attacks, Washington viewed GUAM as a key element in Western efforts to secure access to the oil

and gas of the Caspian basin and the demontage of the post-Soviet world. And GUAM viewed Washington as a key supporter in the efforts of both the organization and its member states to gain effective independence from Moscow.

But in the years since those attacks, both Washington and GUAM have changed their focus. Washington has come to see GUAM less in terms of these two initial goals than as a major player in the war against terrorism, and GUAM has come to view Washington less as its primary source of outside support and more as one resource among many which can help the organization and its member countries achieve their goals.

For both sides at the present time, this relationship is both less important and more than it was, a paradoxical situation that helps to explain why some analysts view GUAM as an organization certain to acquire even greater importance in the future and why others view it as one that arose as a result of the specific conditions of the

collapse of the Soviet Union and that is destined to disappear as the significance of some unified post-Soviet space declines.

Rather than trace the evolution of GUAM itself—there are many useful studies available, including others featured in this issue¹—the present essay examines the factors at work on both sides in defining the initial relationship between GUAM and its member states and the very different set of factors affecting the United States and GUAM that not only define this bilateral relationship at the present time but which are likely to do so over the next five to ten years.

¹ For the basic history, see: T. Kuzio, "The Decade of GUAM," available at [http://www.taraskuzio.net/media/pdf/DECADE_OF_GUAM.pdf], and his article "Geopolitical Pluralism in the CIS: The Emergence of GUUAM," *European Security*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Summer 2000, pp. 81-114 (cf.: Yu. Kochubei, "GUUAM and Equal Regional Cooperation," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (14), 2002; P.C. Latawski, "The Limits of Diversity in the Post-Soviet Space: CIS & GUUAM," *CSRC*, March 2001, available at [<http://www.csrc.ac.uk/pdfs/G93-chap18.pdf>]).

From a Useful Tactic...

For the United States, GUAM initially represented a unique channel for the construction of a pipelines to carry Caspian basin oil and gas to the West, an organization that could promote the independence and stability of its member states without being so direct a challenge to Moscow that the Russian Federation would be ready to react harshly, and another step in what Kuzio has called "the pluralization" of post-Soviet structures, that is, the creation of multiple cross-cutting rather than unitary and reinforcing institutions, a step that reduced the influence of the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States.

These American interests were reflected in the way in which GUAM emerged and operated. Indeed, they so defined the organization that many in Moscow at least viewed that grouping at the time as a U.S. cat's paw directed against Moscow. The presidents of the four GUAM countries first came together at the Vienna CFE meeting in October 1997. They then agreed to cooperate to promote the TRACECA oil and gas pipeline routes westward. And the GUAM leaders actively sought to recruit other CIS states, succeeding at least for a time in attracting Uzbekistan, a member between 1999 and 2005.

Not only did most early GUAM and then GUUAM meetings take place as sidebars to larger Western gatherings like CFE and OSCE, but the organization's key publication was a newsletter put out by the GUAM embassies in Washington, D.C.² Moreover, most of the contacts between the U.S.

² For a run of this publication, see: [<http://www.guam.org/general/browse.html>].

and GUAM occurred in these venues rather than at GUAM meetings in the capitals of its member states, an arrangement that led many to view this organization as a tactical tool of the Americans rather than a strategy of the member states.

During this period, observers had even more reason to draw that conclusion given that the interests of the GUAM states generally closely paralleled those of the United States. Like the U.S., they wanted to find a way to export their hydrocarbons in a way that bypassed Russia and thus allowed them to boost their economies without paying a significant political price. Also, the GUAM states believed that involving the United States in their activities was critical to their progress as independent countries. Not only did the Americans welcome this evidence of cooperation, but Washington's focus on the region meant that its involvement with GUAM as a group could only help the member states. And finally, at least some GUAM leaders accepted the idea that their organization could displace the CIS if they succeeded in recruiting enough additional countries from among the former Soviet republics to gain a majority in CIS councils.

Because of these shared visions, because the U.S. had few alternatives economic or political in a region Washington still considered to be central to its foreign policy concerns, and because Moscow in the last years of the Yeltsin presidency was not in a position to challenge these arrangements and efforts, GUAM was able to function but ultimately in ways that won time rather than solidified it as an organization whose goals were broader and more united than those of its member states.

Consequently, by early 2001, many analysts argued that it was unlikely to become a major player in the region, especially since it was not able to attract other countries to become members and because a variety of institutions, private as well as public, had emerged to address the issues of oil and gas transit. Moreover, with the coming to office of Vladimir Putin, Russia appeared to be ready to challenge GUAM more directly, something that made many in the United States rethink Washington's close backing of this regional grouping.

But then 11 September happened, an event that reordered American foreign policy considerations and made Washington's ties with GUAM both very different and in some ways far more important than they had been up to then.

...Toward a New Partnership

It has become a commonplace to say that 11 September changed everything, but it is an observation that is fundamentally true. On the one hand, the U.S. shifted its attention away from the post-Soviet space to the Middle East and especially its Arab and Afghan components. The former was simply not as important to Washington as it had been earlier. And on the other, America's relationships with other countries quickly came to be defined not by economic or broad political calculations but by narrower but deeper national security questions of military and intelligence cooperation. Those governments prepared to cooperate became Washington's friends; those not prepared were increasingly left to their own devices.

Not surprisingly, these shifts had an important impact on the U.S.-GUUAM relationship. At the first bilateral meeting after 11 September in New York on 14 November, 2001, the member states plus U.S. Under Secretary of State Marc Grossman redefined the relationship.

They jointly issued a statement saying that “the United States and the GUUAM states stand united against terrorism and together resolutely denounce the barbaric acts of terrorism that were committed against the United States on 11 September, 2001. The attacks represented an attack not only against the United States but on the whole of the international community and on people of all faiths and cultures. These monstrous acts and terrorism in general are a challenge to the fundamental values for which our societies stand.”

“Together,” it continued, “the United States and GUUAM will work to bring the perpetrators of the 11 September attack to justice and to fight terrorism. This conflict is a struggle to defend values common to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. [They] acknowledge that terrorism is not identified with any religion or culture. Together they will work in the coalition to fight terrorism. This effort will be long and sustained and will define a new era in international relations.”

“Already, the individual states of GUUAM are working closely with the U.S. on combating terrorism, and have agreed on the crucial importance of mutual cooperation, especially, in security of transport corridors, preventing drug trafficking, illegal weapon trade and migration. During their meeting, the Foreign Ministers of the GUUAM states and U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs explored possibilities for increased counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and GUUAM as an important regional organization.”

Not a word about economic issues or geopolitical competition within the CIS, a pattern that was continued at meetings in Yalta in July 2002, New York in September 2002, and in Tbilisi in May 2003. Indeed, it could be fairly said that GUUAM had joined the American war on terrorism as eager recruits, something that led some commentators to suggest that the organization remained essentially an American institution.

But such suggestions missed two important points. On the one hand, Washington was making expanded use of bilateral ties with each of the states and especially with oil production and transportation infrastructure within them, even as it focused on security questions with GUUAM as an institution. And on the other, U.S. officials, typically at the assistant secretary level or better, now attended GUUAM meetings in the region on a regular basis, rather than simply meeting with GUUAM officials when the latter travelled to international meetings in the West or most often dealing with GUUAM ambassadors in Washington.

In order to solidify this arrangement with GUUAM, the U.S. developed the so-called “framework program,” in order to provide funding and guidance in the development of security-related infrastructure in the member states and regularly dispatched military, intelligence and security officials to discuss the entire panoply of security issues. Indeed, by January 2003, an article in *The New York Times* could describe GUUAM not so much as a political alliance but rather an “anticrime group.”³

Moreover, as the security dimension of GUUAM and then GUAM’s cooperation with the United States displaced other matters, officials and observers in its member states, in Moscow and in Washington noted that the grouping was increasingly following the American approach even to the point of renaming itself, in 2006, the Organization for Democracy and Economic Development—GUAM, an echo of the Bush Administration’s recasting of the war against terrorism as a fight for the spread of democratic forms of governance.

For many inside GUAM, of course, there was an additional impetus for taking this step: It allowed them to present themselves as the democratic alternative to the increasingly authoritarian re-

³ D. Binder, “U.S. Supports Anticrime Group in the Caucasus and Central Asia,” *The New York Times*, 26 January, 2003.

gimes elsewhere in the CIS and thus attract the support not only of Western powers like the United States but also increasingly important regional ones like Poland.

Despite the presence of American officials at GUAM meetings and the enhanced security cooperation between its members and Washington, ties with Poland and Japan especially since 2005 have proved increasingly important not only because the U.S. was increasingly tied down elsewhere but also because Moscow under President Vladimir Putin was again seeking to block the emergence of any challenge to Russian influence in what he called “the near abroad.”

Part of that Kremlin effort involved warnings to Washington that the use of GUAM against it could be counterproductive, something the U.S. took seriously enough not to be nearly as publically support of the grouping as it had been, and efforts by the Russian government to peel away one or more of its members. That tactic worked with Uzbekistan, and Moscow has pursued it consistently if as yet unsuccessfully in Moldova especially since the election of a communist as president of that country.

Consequently, many in GUAM felt themselves simultaneously under threat and with fewer defenses, and to break out of that situation, they have reached out to regional powers like Poland, Rumania, and Japan via summit meeting invitations like those to Baku in 2007 in the hopes that such ties, not yet formalized in full membership, represented an effective riposte to Moscow—after all these countries were never part of the Soviet Union—and the best means available to them of regaining the initiative given the shift in America’s focus.

A Bright but Unexpected Future

By 2006-2007, as GUAM marked its 10th anniversary, analysts like RFE/RL’s Claire Bigg and Georgia’s Alexander Rondeli, could describe it as having come of age, as an organization with a sufficient level of activity and history to ensure that it will be in a position to move into the future not as a branch office of American foreign policy or as an anti-Moscow Trojan horse but as a group that in its own right can define its security issues and pursue and advance its growing economic interests.⁴ Most strikingly at this point, GUAM leaders are focusing on democratic governance and economic development more than on American-driven security concerns, a return to the organization’s earlier period and one that could for a time make it less central to the thinking of the United States than it was in the early 2000s. However, the economic clout and geopolitical location of these countries ensures that Washington will not be able to ignore them, and consequently, the odds are good that a maturing GUAM will again acquire a significant place in American thinking, albeit one that will take the place of a more balanced partnership than the arrangements that have existed either at the end of the 1990s or the beginning of this decade.

That is clearly the hope and even, given high energy prices and continuing instability in Eurasia, the likelihood. But the last 15 years and especially the 11 September attacks are a reminder that the international situation could change in sudden and dramatic ways, with the certainty that any such shifts would affect both GUAM and its relationship with the United States.

⁴ See: C. Bigg, “GUAM—A Regional Grouping Comes of Age,” *RFE/RL*, 24 May, 2006.