

THE GREATER CAUCASUS IN RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS: MAIN TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

The author analyzes the dynamics of Russian-American relations in the Greater Caucasus throughout the twenty-odd post-Soviet years, reveals the main development trends, and assesses the degree of confrontation and possibility of cooperation on the key regional issues in the context of the latest developments.

KEYWORDS: *the U.S., Russia, the Greater Caucasus, geopolitics, interests.*

Introduction

Throughout the more than two decades that have passed since the Soviet Union's disintegration, Russian-American contradictions in the Greater Caucasus have been following the dynamics of their relations elsewhere in the world. On the one hand, under the pressure of America's Caucasian policy, Moscow has had to elaborate its own strategy in the region, which has been gradually moving away from its sphere of influence. While on the other, the range of regional problems has stretched far and wide—from geopolitics in the Southern Caucasus to human rights issues and the anti-terrorist operations in the Northern Caucasus.

Russia invariably interprets many of America's initiatives in the region as a challenge to its national interests and security. The war in South Ossetia is gradually retreating into history, yet in August 2008 it shattered relations between Russia and the United States. The "resetting" policy

pushed the Caucasian context onto the backburner—it was tacitly agreed that the region should be left in peace for a while. It seems that in the late 2000s, there was an attempt to defrost one of the regional conflicts, either in Nagorno-Karabakh or in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Today, the confrontation between Moscow and Washington in Ukraine has spread beyond its geographical limits to become anti-Russian sanctions and bans on European agricultural products and foodstuffs, etc. A repetition of the peak of Russian-American contradictions we saw in the Caucasus might be possible.

Russian-American Relations in the Greater Caucasus: Confrontational Context

Washington's policy in the post-Soviet space, of which the Caucasus is a part, has become a "headache" for Russian diplomats and politicians and one of the pet subjects of the expert community. Traditional regional and extra-regional players started moving into the Caucasian geopolitical vacuum the Soviet Union left behind after seventy years of its presence in the region. America was and remains the strongest irritant for Moscow and its diplomacy for three reasons.

- *First*, relations between Moscow and Washington are still dominated by the "inertia of the Great Power confrontation" on the South Caucasian front among other places—the success of one side is interpreted as the failure of the other. In the tug-of-war in the Caucasus, the two countries manipulate the following mutually exclusive arguments: the South Stream vs. Nabucco; CSTO vs. GUAM; Georgia vs. South Ossetia/Abkhazia, etc.
- *Second*, the zero sum game tolerates no compromises. From the very beginning, Russia has regarded the post-Soviet space as an area of its "vital interests," the Caucasus being the most sensitive area security-wise; destabilization in the Southern Caucasus echoes in the Northern Caucasus, and vice versa. To use Churchill's famous formula, the Caucasus is Russia's "soft underbelly." Today, more obvious and more acute transnational risks are making the Russian political and expert community even more aware of the region's vulnerability, which calls for closer attention and efficient protection.
- *Third*, throughout the two decades that separate us from the last days of the Soviet Union, the dynamics of South Caucasian developments were strongly affected (directly or indirectly) by the United States. If squeezed into artificial geopolitical constructs (Greater Central Asia or the Greater Middle East), the region will become a source of collateral threats and challenges for Russia's policy in the neighboring regions.

Suffice it to say that in the two post-Soviet decades, relations between Moscow and Washington in the Caucasus have remained practically unchanged.

Very much as in the 1990s and mid-2000s, the U.S. is involved (albeit on a smaller scale) in all the major regional political, economic, and military projects. Washington insists that its priorities are of a purely economic (sometimes political) nature. Most of its foreign policy acts in the region, however, are related to regional security, something which causes concern in the diplomatic community of Russia and among its foreign policy planners.¹

¹ See: B. Coppieters, "A Regional Security System for the Caucasus", *Caucasus Regional Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 1&2, 2000.

Post-Soviet American strategy in the Caucasus has lived through three major stages, which roughly coincide with the presidencies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, and has been invariably riveted to U.S. policy elsewhere in the world.

Three Stages of America's Regional Policy and Russia's Response

On 25 December, 1991, after recognizing the independence of the former Soviet republics, the United States was one of the first to establish diplomatic relations with the three newly independent states in Transcaucasia: on 7 January, 1992, Washington established diplomatic relations with Armenia and opened its embassy in Erevan in February; on 19 February, 1992, it established diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and opened its embassy in Baku in March²; and on 24 March, Washington established diplomatic relations with Georgia and in April opened its embassy in Tbilisi.

At this stage, the U.S. pursued the following aims in the region:

- protection against new threats quite possible in the region at the very beginning of state development³ and prevention of the emergence of “rogue states” in the post-Soviet space;
- protection of the new energy-related projects;
- military cooperation with the newly independent states in an effort to limit the impact of Russia and other states Washington perceived as unfriendly.⁴

This stage perfectly fitted Clinton's “enlargement strategy,” the centerpiece of the U.S. global agenda at that time. It meant, among other things, that the East European countries and Soviet successor-states should be drawn into the American sphere of influence through NATO membership and that Russia's influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus should be limited.⁵

On the whole, starting in 1993, the United States used the following eight years to build up a solid foundation for its further cooperation with the South Caucasian republics on several key issues. It was an important and relatively integral stage of America's policy in the region, even though many the spheres remained unspecified; some of the initiatives were illogical, while its foreign policy interests remained vague. The well-known 907th amendment to the Freedom Support Act and the less known Wilson Amendment⁶ and Porter Amendment⁷ can serve as the best illustration of America's efforts to sort out its relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia locked in the Karabakh conflict.

² Azerbaijan opened its embassy in Washington on 6 March, 1992.

³ For more details, see: I.A. Istomin, “Zakavkazye v globalnoy strategii SShA,” in: *Situatsionnye analizy*, Issue 2, Textbook of MGIMO (U) at the Foreign Ministry of Russia, Chair of PAMP, MGIMO University, Moscow, 2012, pp. 134-154.

⁴ See: *Prospects for Prosperity in the Caspian Basin: Twenty Years of Diplomatic Relations with the U.S.*, CSIS Conference, Washington D.C., 27 March, 2012.

⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the U.S. policies in the post-Soviet space, see: J. Goldgeier, M. McFaul, *Power and Purpose. U.S. Policy toward Russia after the Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2003, 467 pp.

⁶ Adopted in January 1996, the amendment authorized direct provision of aid to Azerbaijan if the White House felt that assistance at the level of NGOs was insufficient.

⁷ Adopted in 1997 by the House of Representatives, the amendment envisaged that “for every six dollars in U.S. aid to Azerbaijan, one dollar should go to Nagorno-Karabakh,” which meant that it “regarded Nagorno-Karabakh as an independent entity.” Baku's violent rejection, supported by the White House and the Department of State in view of the planned fuel-related projects, forced the Senate to vote for the formula “assistance to Azerbaijan including the Nagorno-Karabakh.”

At this stage, the U.S. institutionalized its interests and its presence in the region by adding another department⁸ and workgroup to the U.S. National Security Council. In 1998, the newly created post of Special Advisor to the President and Secretary of State for Caspian Basin Energy Diplomacy went to Richard Morningstar.⁹

It is commonly believed that the Clinton Administration concentrated on its economic interests in the Southern Caucasus.¹⁰ Some experts believe that at that time America's interest was driven by the following:

- “the perceived role of energy production in strengthening the sovereignty of the regional states;
- “support of U.S. corporate interests;
- “the role of the Caspian as an important source of non-Middle Eastern energy. These factors explain the persistent and official U.S. support of the concept of Multiple Pipelines.”¹¹

The Contract of the Century signed in 1994 gave four American companies (Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Devon Energy, and Amerada Hess) nearly 40 percent of the oil production in Azerbaijan.¹² Immediately after that the sides set up the Azerbaijan International Operation Company (AIOC). The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, the world's second longest (after Druzhba) pipeline (1,773 km), was built with U.S. assistance at the cost of nearly \$4 billion, which made it the largest economic project in the Southern Caucasus.¹³

In Russia, the U.S. hectic “oil diplomacy” was interpreted not so much as a desire of the United States to ensure its business community a stronger position in the key segment of Eurasia as its desire to promptly move into the South Caucasian “vacuum” as a dominant force. Russian politicians and experts were convinced that Washington was trying to undermine Russia's position in the region and started talking about “new containment,” a post-Cold War coinage.¹⁴

The cooperation agenda of each of the Transcaucasian states was brimming with NATO-related issues, Washington's favorite instrument and a usual source of Russia's concerns. The Kremlin feared that, on the one hand, NATO might help legitimate America's presence in the region and, on the other, would draw the post-Soviet states into the sphere of Euro-Atlantic integration.

The active phase of the first half of the 2000s, which followed the preparatory stage of the 1990s, confirmed these apprehensions. The 9/11 terrorist act changed America's foreign policy strategy and its goals in the Caucasus. It gained additional geopolitical weight as one of the key Eurasian footholds to be used in the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan and Iraq and for building up the

⁸ See: *Secretary of State Warren Christopher's Message to State Department Employees and Implementation Directives on Reorganization*, Department of State Reorganization, U.S. Department of State Dispatch, Washington D.C., 5 February, 1993, pp. 27-35.

⁹ In April 2009, President Obama appointed Richard Morningstar Secretary of State's Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy; in 2012, he was appointed U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan.

¹⁰ For more details, see: *Twenty Years of Independence in the South Caucasus*, CSIS Conference, Washington D.C., 15 September, 2011, available at [<http://csis.org/event/twenty-years-independence-south-caucasus>].

¹¹ S. Cornell, “US Engagement in the Caucasus: Changing Gears,” *Helsinki Monitor*, No. 2, 2005, p. 112.

¹² See: O.N. Barabanov, “Politika SShA v Tsentralnoy Azii i Zakavkazye”, *Yuzhny flang SNG. Tsentral'naya Azia-Kaspiy-Kavkaz: Vozmozhnosti i vyzovy dlia Rossii*, ed. by M.M. Narinskiy, A.V. Malgin, MGIMO (U), Foreign Ministry of Russia, INO-Tsentr, Logos Publishers, Moscow, pp. 336-350.

¹³ For more details about U.S. involvement in the project, see: N.A. Gegelashvili, “Politika Vashingtona v gosudarstvakh Yuzhnogo Kavkaza i Tsentralnoy Azii,” *SShA/Kanada: ekonomika, politika, kultura*, No. 5, 2007, pp. 35-52.

¹⁴ See, for example: S.S. Zhiltsov, I.S. Zonn, A.M. Ushkov, *Geopolitika Kaspiyskogo regiona*, Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniya, Moscow, 2003, p. 223; A.V. Fenekko, “Transformatsia sderzhivaniya,” *Rossia v globalnoy politike*, Vol. 7, No. 6, November-December 2009, pp. 77-98.

operational potential of America's armed forces in the Greater Middle East.¹⁵ In this way, the region was drawn into a new and important development stage.

The Republican Administration widened and strengthened the strategic basis of cooperation with Transcaucasia set up by the previous Democratic Administration, which had remained in power for eight years. The revised system of military-political documents was no longer limited to traditional security guarantees to the local states by building cooperation in the military sphere,¹⁶ but armed the U.S. with an instrument of democracy promotion.¹⁷ Moscow was very aware of the hazards—Washington could use a concept that allowed broad interpretation in any part of the world at its will.

According to the new American doctrines, the Caucasian developments could be used to promote “security, prosperity, and freedom of action of the United States and its partners by securing access to the key regions, lines of communication, and the global commons.”¹⁸ To realize these aims “the United States will seize the strategic initiative in all areas of defense activity—assuring, dissuading, deterring and defeating,” which was described as “active layered defense.”¹⁹ The National Military Strategy of the United States said: “Our first line of defense is abroad and includes mutually supporting activities with U.S. allies to counter threats close to their source.”²⁰

In January 2004, when Saakashvili and his team came to power in Georgia, America's regional policy received fresh impetus. Interpreted as President George W. Bush's main foreign policy triumph realized in the form of the Rose Revolution,²¹ it maximized the advantages of the previous military agreements, opened new spheres of cooperation, and allowed the U.S. to build up its military potential in the Southern Caucasus.²²

There is a widely supported opinion in Russia that the revolution was “a Washington-inspired attempt to replace Moscow with the West as the main dominant force in the near abroad.”²³ Some experts regarded the Rose Revolution as a dress rehearsal of regime change in Russia.

The money that the U.S. poured into groups and individuals (the sums cannot but impress) was not Washington's only contribution to the Rose Revolution. The numerous programs organized by Georgian and American NGOs to support democracy, academic exchanges for young leaders and assistance extended to the pro-Western structures of civil society, created the atmosphere of popular consent in which President Shevardnadze was removed from power.²⁴

¹⁵ For more details about the role of the Caucasus for the U.S. post-9/11 foreign policy, see: C. Nation, *Russia, the United States and the Caucasus*, US Army War College, The Strategic Studies Institute, Washington D.C., February 2007, 40 pp.

¹⁶ See: *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, Washington, D.C., September 2002, 31 pp.

¹⁷ For more details, see: A.V. Fenenko, “Sovremennye voenno-politicheskie kontseptsii SShA”, *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2009, pp. 66-83.

¹⁸ *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., March 2005, pp. 6-7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ *The National Military Strategy of the United States of America. A Strategy for Today a Vision for Tomorrow*, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Washington D.C., 2004, p. 2.

²¹ See, for example: R. Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2010, 254 pp.

²² See: Ch. King, “A Rose among Thorns: Georgia Makes Good,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2, March/April 2004, pp. 13-18.

²³ D.V. Trenin, “Post-Imperium: evraziyskaia istoria,” Moscow Carnegie Center, Rossiyskaia politicheskaiia entsiklopedia (ROSSPEN), Moscow, 2012, pp. 112-113.

²⁴ For more details of how the Rose Revolution was organized, see: L. Mitchell, *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2009, 180 pp.

The wide range of political instruments and diversified soft power methods the U.S. used in the region can be described as its main advantage. Strange as it may seem, despite the region's geographic proximity and common history, Russia was unable to oppose America's "influence" in Transcaucasia.²⁵

Under Bill Clinton, USAID came to the fore as one of the key instruments of America's influence in the world. It regulated crises and armed conflicts, encouraged economic growth in the Caucasus, and opened markets for American products (see the table).

The numerous American NGOs and NCOs, an important element of the system of U.S. public diplomacy, have become an inalienable part of Caucasian politics. These "diplomacy multipliers," to borrow the term from Anthony Lake, National Security Advisor to President Clinton, are designed to create, together with exchange programs, certain ideas about American policy among the young local elites.²⁶ Since the early 2000s, bankers and businessmen of Azerbaijan have been and remain the target group of the American exchange programs; in Georgia and Armenia, the U.S. has been concentrating on lawyers, including attorneys and judges, and leaders of political parties. In these countries, the exchange programs covered the most active members of civil organizations and students, particularly in Armenia and Georgia.²⁷

In this way, by the mid-2000s, America's presence in the Southern Caucasus was no longer a fact, but a geopolitical factor.²⁸ The Clinton Democratic Administration set up an "institutional base" of American policy in the region; the George W. Bush Republican Administration set up a conceptual base in the solar plexus of Eurasia, so to speak.

Washington regarded its cooperation with Georgia as the best example of military cooperation between America and its allies, especially successful from the point of view of "opposing terrorism and securing peace and stability in the region."²⁹

The Caspian Guard Initiative launched by the United States European Command in the fall of 2003 can serve as an example of cooperation between the American and Azeri military and civilian departments, as well as private companies in building a new regional security element in the Caspian.³⁰

Washington consistently strengthened its cooperation with Azerbaijan; its great and growing geostrategic importance allowed the United States to expect that its interests would be realized in many respects. Azerbaijan was an important element of what was described as the encirclement strategy. It was applied to Tehran when relations between the U.S. and Iran deteriorated once more to make an American military operation against Iran a possibility. The military operations in the Gulf and Afghanistan not only threatened to disrupt energy supplies to the United States, but also led U.S. relations with the Islamic world into a dead end. This explains America's geopolitical interest in oil-rich and secular Azerbaijan.

Russia's response was painful. Naval exercises were interpreted as a threat to its interests in the Caspian, while the gradually mounting anti-Russian trend of joint initiatives of Tbilisi and Washington forced Moscow to look for adequate responses.

²⁵ A. Yepifantsev, "Russia in Transcaucasia: What's Gone Wrong?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 3, July/September, 2011.

²⁶ For more details, see: A. Fominykh, "'Miagkaia moshch' obmennykh program," *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, Vol. 6, No. 1, January-April 2008, pp. 76-85.

²⁷ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia*, US Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/23602.htm>], January 2003.

²⁸ See: I.M. Muradian, *Politika SShA i problema bezopasnosti regiona Iuzhnogo Kavkaza*, Antares, Yerevan, 2000, 195 pp.

²⁹ See: J.L. Jones, *Written Statement before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, 7 March 2006*, Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington D.C., 2006, p. 29.

³⁰ See: S. Abdullayeva, V. Shulman, "U.S., Azerbaijan Begin 10-Day Naval Exercise", Itar-TASS News Service, 26 January, 2004.

Table

**Cumulative Funds Budgeted (1992-1999)
for Major NIS Assistance
(\$m, rounded off to the nearest \$10,000)**

FREEDOM Support Act	Armenia	Azerbaijan	Georgia
<i>USAID</i>			
NIS Special Initiatives (Humanitarian, etc.)	222.37	53.90	81.54
Energy Efficiency and Market Reform	55.37	0.08	16.71
Environmental Policy and Technology	0.53	—	0.64
Health-Care Improvement	6.83	0.47	3.73
Private Sector Initiatives	29.47	—	22.94
Food-Systems Restructuring	1.07	0.41	3.68
Democratic Reform	16.09	2.30	9.13
Housing-Sector Reform	9.44	—	—
Economic Restructuring and Financial Reform	22.93	—	6.60
Eurasia Foundation	10.48	0.60	3.69
Enterprise Funds	2.54	2.47	2.47
Exchanges and Training	10.22	2.3	3.27
<i>Other USAID Programs</i>			
Humanitarian Assistance—Armenia (155-0001)	10.78	—	—
Presidential Medical Initiative (156-0001)	5.00	—	—
“Farmer-to-Farmer” Program & OFDA	1.29	—	0.32
Transfers to Other USAID Bureaus	2.14	—	0.35
Total USAID:	406.54	62.24	155.06
<i>S o u r c e:</i> U.S. Department of State, <i>Cumulative Funds Budgeted for Major NIS Assistance Programs by Country (FY 1992—1999)</i> , available at [http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/2378.pdf], 30 September, 1999.			

At that time, the Georgian and American ruling elites preferred a minimum Russian presence in the Southern Caucasus. In the 1990s, Russia was not strong enough to oppose America's presence in the region; later, however, Putin's administration demonstrated much more determination in defending the zone of Russia's "vitally important interests" and much more readiness to act accordingly.³¹

This approach was confirmed by factors of fundamental importance, such as the domestic context caused by the final stage of the Chechen war and Russia's efforts to bring the Northern Caucasus back to normal. The Russian leaders were very negative about America's criticism of Russia's policies in the region and about the Western intrigues there. The North Caucasian dimension still remains the most dramatic and least studied phenomenon of Russian-U.S. relations.

Since the first Chechen campaign, most American analysts, journalists, and human rights activists have regarded Russia's North Caucasian policy as disproportionate use of force and human rights violations. On the one hand, they often relied on an incorrect historical analogy of the Caucasian War of 1829-1864 waged by the Russian Empire.³² On the other, many of them believed that Russia was concealing its true intention to suppress freedom behind the smokescreen of the "counterterrorist operation" and "struggle against extremism."

This was when two mutually exclusive narratives appeared. Russia spoke of its struggle "against jihadists and extremists," while the U.S. and the West tried in general to present the "jihadist fighters and extremists" as "freedom fighters" and "rebels" who allegedly resisted Moscow's "neocolonialist policy."

The 9/11 terrorist act bred short-lived hopes of a more constructive dialog. Russia managed to convince the U.S. Administration that the two countries faced common threats represented by Islamic fundamentalism and international terrorism. America's invasion of Iraq and a chain of color revolutions dealt a blow to the two countries' bilateral relations. The Kremlin hawks from President Putin's closest circle and the "war mongers" close to President George W. Bush consolidated their positions. In this way, the imperatives of geopolitical domination closed the "window of opportunity" for engaging in cooperation against extremism for the next ten years or more.

At this stage, the Caucasus, previously one of NATO's margins, became its key transit zone. The Americans claimed the main role in this metamorphosis. The Caucasus, "the solar plexus of Eurasia" in the early 1990s, became one of the main elements of the "geopolitical constructs" in 2008. The situation taking shape in the region was spreading far and wide to the neighboring areas. This happened not only because the region has major regional players as its closest neighbors, but also because the Caucasian states became incorporated into the American military-political system (in many ways, NATO included) and Europe's energy security system. At that time, the United States extended considerable financial and military assistance to the three Transcaucasian states.³³

The South Ossetian conflict aggravated the far from simple relations between Russia and the United States³⁴ and brought Moscow and Washington to the brink of another Cold War.³⁵

³¹ For more details, see: A. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press, 2014, 360 pp.

³² See: A. Applebaum, "Ethnic Cleansing, Russian Style," *The Weekly Standard*, 20 December, 1999, available at [<http://www.aneapplebaum.com/1999/12/20/ethnic-cleansing-russian-style/>].

³³ See: *Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Armenia*, United States Department of State, Office of the Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/fs/140589.htm>], December 2009.

³⁴ See, for example: S.M. Rogov, "Vozmozhna li novaia 'kholodnaia vojna' mezhdru Rossiei i SShA?" *Rossia i Amerika v XXI veke*, No. 3, 2007, available at [<http://www.rusus.ru/?act=read&id=60>].

³⁵ See, for example: N.A. Kosolapov, "Porogovy uroven i veroiatnost konflikta SShA s Rossiei," *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2008, pp. 15-25; A.I. Shumilin, "Vliianie Iugo-osetinskogo krizisa na otosheniia mezhdru SShA i Rossiei: Amerikanskije ekspertnye otsenki," *Rossia i Amerika v XXI veke*, No. 3, 2008, available at [<http://www.rusus.ru/?act=read&id=94>].

The third stage of the U.S. Caucasian strategy began with Russia's de facto recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and the changed balance of power in the region.³⁶ Despite its general foreign policy principles, the structure of America's economic aid was readjusted accordingly. In 2009, the U.S. spent 22%³⁷ of the total sum of U.S. spending on economic assistance to Azerbaijan against 26% in 2008.³⁸ In Armenia, the sum increased to 22%³⁹ (from 17% in 2008⁴⁰), while the amounts sent to support the institutions of state governance dropped from 33% to 21%.

Georgia lost more than its neighbors: in 2008, the share of security spending was 34%⁴¹; in 2009, it dropped to 7%. Infrastructure and the economy, which suffered in the war, became the priority with 67% of America's assistance to Georgia.⁴²

There was no agreement in the American political establishment and the expert and academic communities on how America should act in the world⁴³ and in the Southern Caucasus in the next four years of the new Democratic administration. Since Barack Obama's "engagement strategy" presupposed fewer declarations, the ideological rhetoric was replaced with pragmatism at first.

At the new stage, America concentrated on the following five main trends: postwar aid of \$1.2 billion; implementation of the Charter on Strategic Partnership; reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁴⁴; development of democratic institutions; and a new plan of membership in NATO.⁴⁵ The Democratic administration tacitly accepted Russia's Karabakh-related initiatives.

The disagreements between Washington and Moscow in the region survived despite the so-called resetting policy, even though the U.S. moved away from public declarations to show Moscow that it was interested in closer cooperation on the problem of religious extremism in the Northern Caucasus.

³⁶ See, for example: V.G. Baranovskiy, "Mezhdunarodnaia bezopasnost posle kavkazskogo krizisa," *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia*, No. 4, 2009, pp. 8-12; E. Piadysheva, "Five Days which Changed the World," *International Affairs*, No. 11, 2008; N. Silaev, "How the August War Affected the Caucasus," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 3 (57), 2009, pp. 7-18.

³⁷ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2009 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Azerbaijan*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy09/136823.htm>].

³⁸ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2008 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Azerbaijan*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy08/117312.htm>].

³⁹ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2009 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Armenia*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy09/136822.htm>].

⁴⁰ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2008 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Armenia*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy08/117311.htm>].

⁴¹ See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2008 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Georgia*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy08/117314.htm>].

⁴² See: *U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia. FY 2009 Foreign Operations Appropriated Assistance: Georgia*, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, available at [<http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rpt/eurasiafy09/136825.htm>].

⁴³ See: T.A. Shakleina, "'Poriadok posle Gruzii' ili 'poryadok pri Obame'", *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2008, pp. 4-14.

⁴⁴ For more details, see: S. Charap, C. Welt, *A More Proactive U.S. Approach to the Georgia Conflicts*, Center for American Progress, Washington D.C., February 2011, 70 pp.

⁴⁵ See: L. Mitchell, A. Cooley, "After the August War: A New Strategy for U.S. Engagement with Georgia," *The Hariman Review*, Columbia University, Vol. 17, No. 3-4, May 2010.

The Northern Caucasus and the Anti-Extremist Struggle: A New Item on the Bilateral Agenda

On 26 May, 2011, the U.S. suggested that the Caucasus Emirate be added to the list of terrorist organizations (in 2010 its leader Doku Umarov had already been listed as an international terrorist)⁴⁶; Moscow responded with cautious optimism. The United States moved to a much more adequate position on what was going on in this Russian region, even though many of the American diplomats and experts were still talking about the “conflict in Chechnia;” they refused to replace the term “nationalist” agenda with “global jihadist” agenda⁴⁷ and to admit that the Caucasus Emirate had close ideological, financial, and operational ties with al-Qa’eda.⁴⁸

This was done to persuade the American political establishment that cooperation with Russia should be limited to several carefully chosen items on the international agenda, which would inevitably slow down the positive developments in their bilateral relations.

The American and Russian experts still disagree on the following issues:

- Whether there are contacts between North Caucasian terrorists and the global jihadist movement;
- Whether the Caucasus Emirate is a hierarchical and rigidly structured military-political organization;
- Whether there is mutual influence between the Salafi (jihadist in the Russian official parlance) ideology and local cultural traditions and local specifics.⁴⁹

In Russia, experts have not arrived at unified opinions on many issues. They prescribe different “medicines” for the same ailment even though they agree on the aims and nature of terrorism in the Russian Federation and condemn its methods. In the absence of an agreement in the American academic community, the United States, likewise, cannot arrive at a common position on the issue. These gaps do nothing for bilateral discussions and possible bilateral political decisions.

Russia is worried about the fact that at least five U.S.-based Islamist organizations extend financial support to the North Caucasian terrorists, the Nation of Islam and the Haqqani Sufi Order of America among them.⁵⁰ It should be said that the ip-addresses used by the Kavkaz-Center site, the Caucasus Emirate information vehicle, belong to two American companies, CloudFlare and Staminus Communications.

Russia and the United States have gained enough experience⁵¹ to fight terrorism and extremism together—potentially a very efficient trend in their bilateral relations. A poll conducted by the ana-

⁴⁶ See: S. Markedonov, “‘Emirat’ poschitali,” POLITKOM.RU, available at [<http://www.politcom.ru/12029.html>], 30 May, 2011.

⁴⁷ For more details, see: S. Markedonov, *Radical Islam in the North Caucasus: Evolving Threats, Challenges and Prospects. A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*, Washington D.C., 2010, 13 pp.

⁴⁸ The following works stand apart: B.G. Williams, “Allah’s Foot Soldiers: An Assessment of the Role of Foreign Fighters and al-Qaida in the Chechen Insurgency,” in: *Ethno-nationalism, Islam and the State in the Caucasus: Post-Soviet Disorder*, ed. by M. Gammer, Routledge University Press, 2007, pp. 156-178.

⁴⁹ For more details, see: G. Hahn, “Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right,” in: *A Report of the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program*, Washington D.C., August 2011, p. 1.

⁵⁰ See: *Atlas sotsialno-politicheskikh problem, ugroz i riskov Yuga Rossii. Vol. V. Severny Kavkaz: problemy i perspektivy razvitiya. Spetsialny vypusk*, ed. by G.G. Matishov, L.V. Batiev, I.V. Pashchenko, I.V. Romanov, YuNTs RAN Publishers, Rostov on Don, 2011, p. 129.

⁵¹ On the problem of the Islamist structures in the United States, see: I.A. Istomin, “Politicheskaiia propaganda radikalnykh islamistskikh organizatsiy v SShA,” *Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta*, No. 6, 2012, pp. 94-103.

lytical Al-Monitor portal revealed that 58.5% agree that “the United States and Russia should coordinate their responses to the Islamic State [Iraq and Syria] and the Caucasus Emirate, respectively,” 31.5% disagreed with the statement, while 10% answered “I don’t know.”⁵²

The “American pivot toward Asia,” turbulence in the Arab Spring countries, and the problems at home were too expensive to allow America’s continued involvement in the Caucasus; public discussions of the Caucasian developments lost much of their previous relevance.

The Boston marathon bombings of 15 April, 2013 rekindled an interest in the Caucasus and Chechnia (items that had remained shelved for a long time). Very much as before, however, American politicians and experts proved unable to correctly assess the situation in the region. However, this and 9/11 opened a new window of opportunity for the two countries’ joint anti-terrorist struggle.⁵³ The window did not remain open for long. It was closed by another round of bilateral strategic disagreements (the Syrian conflict), public rebuffs (the Snowden file), and the exhausted “reset” agenda.

Another problem—the Circassian question—surfaced on the eve of the Sochi Olympics.⁵⁴ It disorganized relations between the two countries still further and dominated the agenda of the expert community’s conservative part for nearly five years. Although it never reached the official circles, this minor point of bilateral discussions triggered a “war of conferences and publications.” As a prominent issue in the information space it remained within the scope of the attention of decision-makers, figured high on the bilateral agenda, and strongly affected what the public thought about the Sochi Olympics-2014 and the Ukrainian crisis.

Prospects for Russian-American Relations in the Caucasus: Post-Afghan Settlement and the Ukrainian Crisis

The fourth stage of the U.S. foreign policy in the Caucasus was associated (before the Ukrainian crisis) with Afghanistan. The coalition’s pullout was expected to revive the geopolitical and logistic significance of the Caucasian corridor for the U.S.⁵⁵ Those who rely on geopolitical theories are convinced that if the U.S. loses its key position in the Middle East, caught in a web of dramatic changes, it might start looking for geopolitical pivots in the neighboring regions, of which the Southern Caucasus looks like an obvious choice.

This will add tension to relations between Russia and America in the highly competitive energy sphere in the Caucasus (the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, Nabucco, and the relatively recent project of the Trans-Adriatic gas pipeline) and vehemence to their rivalry there.⁵⁶

⁵² See: M. Suchkov, “Islamic State Gains Victory for Chechen Jihadists,” *Al-Monitor*, 17 July, 2014, available at [<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/07/islamic-state-chechen-caucasus-emirate.html>].

⁵³ See: D. Trenin, “Boston Common,” *Foreign Policy*, 19 April, 2013, available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/04/19/boston_common_us_russia_cooperation].

⁵⁴ See: A. Malashenko, “Controversy and Concern Over the Sochi Olympics,” Carnegie Moscow Center, 10 April, 2013, available at [<http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=51456#>].

⁵⁵ See: A. Kuchins, “Why Washington Needs to Integrate the New Silk Road with the Pivot to Asia,” *Asia Policy*, No. 16, July 2013, p. 175-178.

⁵⁶ Greg Saunders, Senior Director, International Affairs at BP, believes that the next “Great Game is going to be about natural gas”.

The military infrastructure unfolding on the (Black Sea and Caspian) coasts of the Caucasus will whip up U.S.-Russia rivalry in the region, while new (state and non-state)⁵⁷ actors involved in the regional developments will further aggravate the situation.

On the other hand, there are *certain opportunities for continued bilateral cooperation*, one of them being the Caucasian segment of the Northern Distribution Network. Providing there is political will, it could be used to deal with the threats created by post-Afghan settlement.⁵⁸

The anti-terrorist struggle is the most promising sphere of possible cooperation, which so far is overloaded with problems. Its efficiency depends on coordinated international efforts to cut short conscription to the ranks of radical Islamists. To achieve this, the international community should demonstrate more resolution in its opposition to extremist ideology and even block extremist information resources if needed.

To achieve cooperation with Washington in this and other possible spheres, Moscow should specify its position on many issues, while keeping in mind the fundamental problems in its relations with Washington. It should decide where it needs involvement in the Great Silk Route strategy and to what extent.⁵⁹ This should be done before the project is implemented; otherwise, it will be carried out, at best, without Russia, or, at worst, contrary to its initiatives in the post-Soviet space.⁶⁰

Relations between Russia and the United States in the Caucasus will suffer under the weight of the Ukrainian crisis. Disagreements will become exacerbated, while sanctions and an information war will hardly help the sides to find common points, let alone promote common initiatives.

The expected flare-up of tension in Nagorno-Karabakh might bring the sides closer together even though they have different ideas about the settlement.⁶¹ Moscow and Washington are much closer to a compromise on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict than on the Abkhazia and South Ossetia issues. So far, the statements issued by the sides remain confrontational and the choice of mutually acceptable alternatives limited.

Some Western experts prefer the term “mutual insecurity”⁶² when talking about the Greater Caucasus. This means that each of the sides will be insufficiently secure if it continues to stir up trouble for the other.

The post-Soviet space remains an entity of uncompromising rivalry between Moscow and Washington, Ukraine being one of the chapters in this long story.

Past relations between Russia and the U.S. in the Caucasus show that their future cooperation there is less possible than in Central Asia. However, the sides should take advantage of the opportunities within their reach to overcome this stage of “mutual insecurity.”

⁵⁷ Israel is especially active in the region.

⁵⁸ For more details, see: A.A. Sushentsov, “Formirovanie mezhdunarodnogo rezhima protivodeystviia ugrozam, iskhodiashchim iz Afghanistana,” *Situatsionnye analizy*, Issue 3, ed. by T.A. Shakleina, MGIMO (U) MID Rossii, Moscow, 2013.

⁵⁹ For more details on the project’s early stages, see: S. Cherniavsky, “Velikiy shelkovy put’ i interesy Rossii,” *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia*, No. 6, 1999, pp. 95-98.

⁶⁰ The idea of a new Great Silk Road in Eurasia popular in the 1990s has been revived and developed by at least three institutes: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at the Johns Hopkins University has been working on the Silk Road Studies Program since 2002; the Eurasia Center in the Atlantic Council launched its New Silk Road Project in 2013; while Georgetown University plans a series of workshops for 2014-2015 under the title Critical Silk Road Studies.

⁶¹ See: A. Cohen, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: On the Brink of War?” *National Interest*, 8 August, 2014, available at [<http://nationalinterest.org/feature/armenia-azerbaijan-the-brink-war-11035?page=2>].

⁶² Th. De Waal, “The Search for Security in the Caucasus”, *Keynote presentation, the Rose Roth Conference*, Tbilisi, 29 April, 2013, available at [<http://m.ceip.org/2013/04/29/search-for-security-in-caucasus/g2t2>].