

U.S. FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS FROM INSIDE
WASHINGTON, DC'S POLICY CIRCLES

*Taniel Koushakjian**

A majority of articles written about the Caucasus seem to focus on Azerbaijan and Caspian energy. Therefore, it is no surprise that talk about U.S. and European policy toward the region is devoted to those two aspects. Some even describe them as a top priority for U.S. interests in the region, above and beyond democracy and civil freedoms, which have been on the decline in recent years. At first glance, many Americans might ask: what does the United States have to do with Europe's energy needs? To put it plainly, why do we care? Vincent O'Brien, Chief of Staff to Richard Morningstar, Special Envoy for Eurasian Energy at the U.S. Department of State, raised that exact question at the Woodrow Wilson Center earlier this year¹. He stated that the United States and the European Union (EU) have the largest trade relationship in the world, so it is natural that European concerns are in our interest and vice versa. In 2009 the U.S. and the EU established a bi-lateral Energy Council². According to O'Brien, the central theme to the US-EU Energy Council is energy security – making sure the gas keeps flowing to Europe. The U.S.-EU Energy Council is focused on energy security and new markets, energy efficiency, research and development for carbon capture and storage, new and renewable resources, emissions and environment,

*Grassroots Director, Armenian Assembly.

¹ Author attended presentation entitled "The Future of U.S.-E.U. Energy Cooperation" at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on February 9, 2011.

²Id.

and adopting universal standards and policies¹. A strategic goal of the Council is to link the South Caucasus and Eurasian countries to the West – and to Western markets – through our energy policy. As Philip Gordon, Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State testified, “U.S.-European cooperation is and remains essential to achieving our strategic objectives.”² When O’Brien was asked which specific project or pipeline does the U.S. support, his response was that we support the least expensive and most easily transportable energy project.³

Also this year, the Center for Strategic & International Studies held its second annual conference on the South Caucasus entitled “Outlook for U.S. Strategy in the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian.” The Atlantic Council’s Ross Wilson, a former U.S. Ambassador to Turkey and Azerbaijan, reflected on the origins of American foreign policy in the region and its current state of affairs. According to Wilson, four objectives defined American foreign policy over the last 20 years: newly independent states should stay independent; promote open, free market democracy; integrate the region into the Euro-Atlantic community and global economy; and help where we could with messy conflicts.⁴ Wilson stated that although our interests have not changed, “I would be dishonest if I say that we are where we wanted to be.” Wilson also stated that as Georgia is sliding into a long haul stalemate, Armenia and Azerbaijan are sliding out of one, alluding to the increasing likelihood of a renewed war in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵ According to the International Crisis Group, “an arms race, escalating front-line clashes, vitriolic war rhetoric and a virtual breakdown in peace talks are increasing the chance Armenia and Azerbaijan will go back to war over Nagorno-Karabakh. Preventing this is urgent.”⁶

¹ Id.

² Overview of U.S. Relations with Europe and Eurasia, Testimony of Philip H. Gordon, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, before the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe and Eurasia, Washington, D.C., on March 11, 2011. Available online at: <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2011/158214.htm>

³ Author attended presentation entitled “The Future of U.S.-E.U. Energy Cooperation” at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. on February 9, 2011.

⁴ Author attended presentation entitled “Outlook for U.S. Strategy in the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian” at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. on February 18, 2011.

⁵ Id.

⁶ International Crisis Group, Europe Briefing No. 60, “Armenia and Azerbaijan: Preventing War,” February 8, 2011.

Stephen Blank from the U.S. Army War College followed Wilson, arguing that the U.S. lacks a South Caucasus strategy. In regards to the U.S.-Russia “reset,” Blank commented that according to Russian press and analysts, the United States accepts the South Caucasus as Russia’s sphere of influence and that Russia in turn doesn’t view the South Caucasus states as independent, sovereign states.¹ Blank goes on to elaborate the positive and negative aspects of Obama’s “reset” policy. Positive outcomes to the reset policy include increased cooperation and collaboration on Afghanistan and the signing and ratification of the START treaty. A negative aspect of the reset is our decreased involvement or attention to South East Europe, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Blank plainly revealed the pattern that had emerged in practically all of the Washington policy discussions held on the South Caucasus over the last few years – the U.S. doesn’t have a specified South Caucasus strategy and our current approach is twofold – no war and peace along pipelines.

Now that we know that we do not have a detailed strategy towards the South Caucasus, other than the fundamentals of preventing war and ensuring peace along pipelines, and that we need to re-engage the region, there are some important policy recommendations that are currently being discussed on how to do just that. Last year Samuel Charap, Associate Director for Russia and Eurasia at the Center for American Progress, co-authored with Alexandros Peterson, Senior Fellow from the Atlantic Council, an important piece in Foreign Affairs entitled “Reimagining Eurasia.” There are some key points that sound great in theory and some which require further debate, especially in the “Reimagining Azerbaijan” segment that appeared separately. Charap and Peterson reflect that “U.S. policy toward countries in the region essentially became a derivative of Russia policy as a result. We failed to forge long-term partnerships and instead sought leverage, neglecting engagement that provided no benefit in the push and pull with Moscow.”²

¹ Author attended presentation entitled “Outlook for U.S. Strategy in the Southern Caucasus and the Caspian” at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. on February 18, 2011.

² Charap, Samuel and Alexandros Peterson, “Reimagining Azerbaijan,” Center for American Progress, August 23, 2010.

In their recommendations, Charap and Peterson state that “U.S. policy makers must abandon the tired Russia-centric tack and develop new individualized approaches to the states of the greater Black Sea region and Central Asia” in the attempt to “...avoid re-creating a nineteenth-century-style Great Game.”¹ They further state that “The Obama administration may have ‘reset’ relations with Russia, but it must now develop a clear parallel strategy of reimagining its policies toward Eurasia – ones tailored to the specific U.S. interests at stake in each country and transparent to all other states.” These statements imply developing multiple foreign policies based on detailed bi-lateral relationships with all the nations in the region. In fact, Charap recommends that the U.S. “deepen bi-lateral U.S. engagement with Azerbaijan,” clearly referring to Azerbaijan’s energy potential while discounting its horrendous human rights record and recent crackdown on media and civil liberties.² Of the three South Caucasus states, only Azerbaijan was listed as “not free” in the 2010 “Freedom in the World” report by Freedom House.³

However, an alternative approach offered by Thomas de Waal, Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, looks at the region in a much broader view. He states that “almost no one in Washington is thinking of how to approach the South Caucasus as a region, whose economic needs and security problems are inter-connected and best resolved by a holistic approach.”⁴ According to de Waal, “Narrow bilateralism is an abiding problem in Caucasus policy – a problem complicated by the multiple policy agendas of a country such as Russia or the United States.”⁵

Returning to Charap and Peterson’s assessments, they argue that “playing the game not only brought Washington to the brink of confrontation with Moscow (in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War) but also distorted the United States’ pri-

¹ Charap, Samuel and Alexandros Peterson, “Reimagining Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2010.

² Charap, Samuel and Alexandros Peterson, “Reimagining Azerbaijan,” *Center for American Progress*, August 23, 2010.

³ Freedom House Country Report on Azerbaijan, *Freedom in the World 2010*. Available online at: www.freedomhouse.org

⁴ de Waal, Thomas, “Call Off the Great Game,” *Foreign Policy*, September 13, 2010.

⁵ *Id.*

orities in Eurasia and hollowed out U.S. relationships with states in the region.”¹ Eerily reminiscent of Hollywood’s 1983 film “War Games,” Charap and Peterson conclude that “the only way for Washington to ‘win’ is not to play the game.”²

These alternative approaches to encouraging a solid and just, long-term relationship with the people of the South Caucasus are thought-provoking in their own right and deserve much credit. Yet when we bring these issues back home, faced with the daunting challenge of reducing the U.S. national debt, it is difficult to see where this reality fits into these policy recommendations. In fact, of all the discussions attended by the author since the global economic crisis hit, only on one occasion did a panelist ever raise the question of how these challenges can be met if we are reducing foreign aid. At a Center for American Progress discussion, Dr. Fiona Hill, Director and Senior Fellow at Brookings Institute, questioned, “Do we, the U.S., have the resources and the people to underpin the years of policy that the people of the region want?”³ As all politics are local, it was refreshing to hear this domestic reality mentioned when discussing the formulation of U.S. foreign policy towards the region. It appears that House Budget Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI) attempted to answer that question when he released his 85-page plan calling for a drastic 44% cut in international affairs and foreign assistance spending over the next 5 years.

Whether or not the entirety of Congressman Ryan’s “Path to Prosperity” is cemented, U.S. domestic challenges cannot be overlooked when formulating a new strategy to an important and delicate region. At the same time, our approach to the South Caucasus region should not follow but rather stem from efforts to promote greater civil liberties and media freedoms, freer and fairer elections, enforcement of the rule of law, and more open free-market economies. However, we have to be mindful of how far these young republics have come in the 20 years since their independence. Our policy should reflect a long-term investment

¹ Charap, Samuel and Alexandros Peterson, “Reimagining Eurasia,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 20, 2010.

² *Id.*

³ Author attended presentation entitled “Reimagining Eurasia: Devising a Strategy for U.S. Engagement with the States of the Greater Black Sea Region and Central Asia” at the Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C. on October 20, 2010.

in and understanding of the people of the region, their culture and religion and, most importantly, support for their struggle for a more peaceful and democratic society; especially since that policy can shape the lives of thousands who work to see it implemented over the course of the next century, and millions who have to live with its outcome.

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