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## 14. Russia and South-West Asia: a view from the region

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### I. Introduction

This chapter explores the main direction, purposes and priorities of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation in South-West Asia<sup>1</sup> as it evolved in the 1990s. Like tsarist Russia, the former Soviet Union was a powerful force in this region. A weakened Russia in the 1990s has lost its predominant position in much of South-West Asia. Primarily because it forms Russia's turbulent 'south' and strong geopolitical interests are at stake, however, South-West Asia and its several subregions continue to occupy an important place in the country's foreign and security policies.

The more than two dozen countries in the region share several characteristics which cumulatively affect Russia's outlook on the region. First, except for Israel they all are Third World countries in terms of socio-economic and political indicators and prone to internal instability. South-West Asia has been dubbed the 'arc of crisis' for several decades now, marked by interstate and civil wars, revolutions, *coups d'état* and external interventions. Both the Soviet Union and present-day Russia have been major actors in some of these conflicts.

Second, South-West Asia has a history of great-power involvement. The Soviet Union and the United States were deeply involved in several subregions during the cold war as part of their rivalry in the Third World. The Soviet Union's strategic retreat, begun under the 'new thinking' of President Mikhail Gorbachev, radically changed the great-power balance. Much to the chagrin of many in the Third World,<sup>2</sup> as well as the domestic critics of the early pro-Western policy of President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, the United States has remained the sole superpower capable of projecting massive conventional power and influence to the Middle East, the Persian Gulf, the eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea and even Central Asia.

<sup>1</sup> South-West Asia can be defined broadly or selectively. A broad definition would include the space from Central Asia to the Mediterranean, including Afghanistan, the southern Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia), Turkey, the countries of the Persian Gulf and the Middle East including Iran, Iraq, Israel and Syria. The focus of the chapter is on Russia's outlook on the southern Caucasus and the Middle East/Gulf region because they have a higher priority in Russian policies. In order to minimize the risk of overlap with other chapters in this volume, discussion of Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey has been kept to a minimum.

<sup>2</sup> El-Doufani, M., 'Yeltsin's foreign policy: a Third World critique', *The World Today*, vol. 49, no. 6 (June 1993), pp. 103–108. See also Mesbahi, M. (ed.), *Russia and the Third World in the Post-Soviet Era* (University Press of Florida: Gainesville, Fla., 1994).

Third, South-West Asia is home to some of the world's richest fossil fuel reserves—in the Gulf and the Caspian Sea Basin, potentially inviting rivalry and tension between the great powers for access to their resources. The entry of the Caspian Basin into the calculations of global energy politics has unleashed a sort of 20th-century 'Great Game' among regional and international actors, potentially pitting them against Russia which, as the former hegemon, wishes to preserve its monopoly position over such strategic resources as oil and natural gas.

Fourth, Islam appears to be a potentially important unifying force, except in Jewish Israel and Christian Orthodox Armenia and Georgia, notwithstanding the fact that its role in state and society has varied radically between and within the countries of the region. The rise of radical Islamism in the entire stretch of South-West Asia has been a seriously destabilizing force in the 1990s, generating profound concern in Russia.

Together these features make Russia's periphery in South-West Asia a deeply uncomfortable, even risky, environment—an environment which is systemically unstable and yet one over which Russia is no longer in a position to exercise the powers and privileges of a superpower capable of imposing stability. Yet an important potential opportunity exists as well—the inherent anti-Western and 'Third World-ist' ideological bent of a great number of the countries and societies in South-West Asia. This inner regional dynamic could serve as a potential source of strength for Russian foreign policy in the event of Russia's deciding that exploiting it would serve its national interests.

This chapter attempts to explain how Russia has coped with challenges to and opportunities for its national interests in two subregions of South-West Asia, namely, the southern Caucasus and the Middle East/Persian Gulf region, at a time when its power position has been reduced from that of a superpower to that of a regional power.

Clearly, the two regions differ substantially in their importance for Russia. The southern Caucasus, as part of the former Soviet south, is of direct and at times urgent relevance to Russia's security and geopolitical interests. It has therefore topped the list of Russian foreign and security policy priorities from the very beginning. The Middle East ranks much lower on the list because Russian interests there are indirect and long-term. It is important, however, as offering Russia the possibility to realize broader foreign policy objectives, such as securing prestige and influence as a great power, competing for geopolitical influence with the United States, cultivating partnerships and perhaps alliances, and promoting trade and investment. Hence the qualitative differences in the substance and style of Russian foreign policy towards the two areas—differences that are brought out in the following sections.

## II. Russia's 'south' in historical context

Historically the term 'south' denoted Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey. In the post-Soviet era it generally refers to a core made up of the former Soviet south (the southern Caucasus and Central Asia), Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey, surrounded by an outer ring comprising the Middle East/Gulf region, and perhaps even the eastern Mediterranean. In the post-Soviet era the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia have come to be seen both in Russia and in the West as a single geopolitical unit, essentially because of the potential power of common history, culture and religion to mobilize and pull the peoples and the countries of these regions together, at least around some issues.<sup>3</sup> This conceptual linkage, envisaging a deepening of relations between the Islamic countries in the Middle East and the Gulf, the former Soviet republics of Islamic faith and Afghanistan, has encouraged the view that this space could eventually be transformed into a 'greater' or 'expanded' Middle East.

In retrospect it can be argued that neither the nature nor the intensity of the interactions among the countries of the regions since 1991 permits the conclusion that a 'greater' or 'expanded' Middle East has in fact emerged as a political entity with its own boundaries and patterns of regular interaction. The newly independent states in Central Asia and the southern Caucasus have chosen to diversify their relations, looking very much in a western direction, while at the same time engaging in policies aimed at containing the influence of Islam. Nevertheless, since 1991 Russia has had to contend with a stretch of geography along its southern rim where the inherently unifying force of Islam has the potential to draw the former Soviet republics and the countries of the Middle East and the Gulf into a sort of 'greater' or 'expanded' Middle East.

Russia is extremely interested in developments along its southern periphery, above all for national security and geopolitical reasons. For Russia, the southern Caucasus presents an especially imminent security threat not only because instability has dominated the region but also because it is viewed as a potential transition belt that would relay security challenges, such as 'Islamic extremism',<sup>4</sup> originating in the expanded Middle East to Russia's south.

History offers antecedents to current Russian perceptions. Both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union were intensely sensitive to challenges emanating from the periphery in the south. In tsarist times, the British Empire posed the greatest threat to Russian rule in Central Asia—hence the 19th-century 'Great Game'. In the Caucasus, the Ottoman and Persian empires, the former rulers, seemed poised to challenge Moscow's rule.

The cold war era invited a new global actor as a source of threat from the south—the United States. US-led military alliances encircled the entire southern

<sup>3</sup> Blank, S. J., 'How new the new Russia? Russia's return to Mideast diplomacy', *Orbis*, vol. 40, no. 4 (fall 1996), pp. 519–20.

<sup>4</sup> Official Russia distinguishes between Islamic fundamentalism and extremism. See, e.g., Sevastianov, I., 'Islamic fundamentalism and extremism are not the same', *International Affairs* (Moscow), vol. 42, no. 3 (1996), pp. 171–81.

rim of the Soviet Union. It leapfrogged this ring to form friendships and alliances with Egypt (until 1973), Syria, Iraq, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Yemen, Libya and Algeria. As the friend and ally of the Third World in general, and of the Arab world in particular, and capable of backing up its diplomacy with generous military and economic assistance, the Soviet Union enjoyed enormous power and influence in many parts of South-West Asia until the late 1980s, when it began a strategic withdrawal.<sup>5</sup>

Four influences have guided Russian policies towards the 'south' in the 1990s: (a) ethnic separatism in the Caucasus; (b) the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the expanded Middle East and its perceived impact on the south; (c) regional and extra-regional encroachments into Russia's 'sphere of influence'; and (d) Russian neo-imperial impulses concerning the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Sections III–VI discuss these issues.

### III. Ethnic separatism in the southern Caucasus

According to Anatoliy Chekhoyev, Deputy Chairman of the Committee for CIS Affairs in the Russian State Duma, after hearings on the southern Caucasus in April 1997, 'The Transcaucasian region remains an area of vital interest for Russia, a fact which is defined by the importance of the region's geopolitical position for Russia's security and for the prospects of its economic development'.<sup>6</sup> His views reflect a broad consensus that the most serious external challenges to Russia's security interests lie in the southern Caucasus, which is immediately adjacent to the northern Caucasus—the most problematic and troubled region in the Russian Federation.

The deep security concerns felt in Moscow stem from the fact that among the former Soviet lands the southern Caucasus has been gripped by the greatest number of conflicts of an ethnic-separatist nature.<sup>7</sup> Armenia and Azerbaijan have fought over Nagorno-Karabakh; Georgia has fought Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists. Ceasefires have held in both cases for several years now.

Russia has played a dominant third-party role in the regional and international efforts at crisis management and conflict resolution.<sup>8</sup> The paramount guideline in Russia's approach to crisis management and conflict resolution in general and to peacekeeping in particular in the CIS has been to keep them primarily, if not exclusively, a Russian or CIS responsibility. In February 1993, President Yeltsin asked the UN and the Conference on Security and Co-operation in

<sup>5</sup> Kanet, R. E. and Alexander, J. T., 'The end of the cold war and the "new world order": implications for the developing world' and Kremenyuk, V. A., 'Russia's "new thinking" and the Third World', ed. Mesbahi (note 2), pp. 192–225 and 125–46, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> Yevdokimov, Y., 'Duma hearings held on Transcaucasus situation', ITAR-TASS, 30 Apr. 1997, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report—Central Eurasia (FBIS-SOV)*, FBIS-SOV-97-120, 30 Apr. 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Naumkin, V. V., *Ethnic Conflict in the Former Soviet Union* (Russian Center for Strategic Research and International Studies: Moscow, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> On Russia's role in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, see Kazimirov, V. (Russian Ambassador at the negotiations), 'A history of the Karabakh conflict', *International Affairs* (Moscow), vol. 42, no. 3 (1996), pp. 182–95.

Europe (CSCE) for a kind of international mandate for Russia to act freely on the former Soviet territory: 'The moment has come when responsible international institutions, including the United Nations, should grant Russia special powers as guarantor of peace and stability in the region of the former [Soviet] Union'.<sup>9</sup> Popularly labelled the Russian Monroe Doctrine, the request was never conceded. Russia counted on force projection as the ultimate resort to stabilize conflicts on the periphery.<sup>10</sup>

Russia's role as regional stabilizer has been controversial both among regional actors and abroad.<sup>11</sup> It is generally believed to have actively backed Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatism. For example, Russian and north Caucasian 'volunteer' troops reportedly made up the bulk of the Abkhaz forces which routed Georgian forces in September 1993.<sup>12</sup> The Russian military often took policy initiatives on such key issues as brokering ceasefires and arrangements for force projection and deployment. In the autumn of 1993 Azerbaijan and Georgia were pressured into joining the CIS and signing the 1992 Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security in return for Russia's pledge to help uphold their territorial integrity. Between 1993 and 1995, Defence Minister Pavel Grachev secured agreements for two military bases in Armenia and three in Georgia, and for Russian border troops to patrol the borders of these countries with their neighbours, Iran and Turkey. Some Russian officials and the Azerbaijani leadership began to allege publicly in 1996 that Russia had illicitly supplied weapons worth \$1 billion to Armenia, its staunchest ally in the south, since 1993.<sup>13</sup> Such charges could not but seriously damage the regional and international credibility of Russia as an honest broker. There are also serious allegations of Russian instigation of ethnic unrest and separatism, and complicity in *coups d'état*, especially in the southern Caucasus, aimed at consolidating Russia's dominant position in the region by further destabilization.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Financial Times*, 1 Mar. 1993, p. 1. On Russian peacekeeping, see Allison, R., *Peacekeeping in the Soviet Successor States*, Chaillot Papers (Western European Union Institute for Security Studies: Paris, 1994); Jonson, L. and Archer, C. (eds), *Peacekeeping and the Role of Russia in Eurasia* (Westview Press: Boulder, Colo., 1996); and Trenin, D., 'Russia and Western interests in preventing, managing and settling conflicts in the former Soviet Union', eds B. Coppeters, A. Zverev and D. Trenin, *Commonwealth and Independence in Post-Soviet Asia* (Frank Cass: London, 1998), pp. 171–91.

<sup>10</sup> Baev, P. K., 'Conflict management in the former Soviet south: the dead end of Russian interventions', *European Security*, vol. 6, no. 4 (winter 1997), pp. 111–29; and Nichol, J., 'Transcaucasus newly independent states: political developments and implications for US interests', CRS Issue Brief for Congress, Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, 20 Dec. 1996, URL <<http://www.fas.org/man/crs/95-024.htm>>.

<sup>11</sup> Baev (note 10), p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> Nichol (note 10).

<sup>13</sup> According to the late Lev Rokhlin, Chairman of the Duma Defence Committee, between 1993 and 1996 Russia supplied Armenia with weaponry from the Group of Russian Forces in the Caucasus. Anthony, I., SIPRI, *Russia and the Arms Trade* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998), pp. 13, 224–25. According to Stephen Blank, the equipment allegedly transferred to Armenia included, among other things, 8 SS-1 Scud surface-to-surface missile launchers, 32 SS-1 Scud B surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs), 349 SA-4 Ganef surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), 40 SA-8 Gecko SAMs, 945 AT-4 Pigot anti-tank missiles, 36 D-30 122-mm towed guns, D-20 152-mm towed guns, 18 D-1 152-mm towed howitzers and 18 BM-21 multiple-rocket launchers. Blank, S., 'Instability in the Caucasus: new trends, old traits, part II', *Jane's Defence Review*, vol. 5, no. 5 (May 1998), p. 20.

<sup>14</sup> Allegations by regional officials tend to be made in vague and indirect language. President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia, the target of several failed assassination attempts, said after another attempt on

These policies and practices have raised the question whether Russia has reverted to a neo-imperialistic course in the newly independent states on the territory of the former Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup> This is considered in section VI below.

### Russian fears

Russia has feared that the destabilizing effects of these conflicts would spill over into the neighbouring northern Caucasus, its ethnically most diverse and politically most unruly region and home to the greatest concentration of Muslims in the federation. The two-year war in Chechnya vindicated Moscow's worst fears, even though Chechen separatism is home-grown.

Against this background Russia demanded changes in the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (the CFE Treaty) in order to increase its holdings of certain heavy weapons in the Northern Caucasus Military District.<sup>16</sup> At the First Review Conference in Vienna in May 1996, Russia was allowed to keep almost three times more weapons than the old flank limits permitted and to shrink the size of the area where flank ceilings applied.<sup>17</sup>

One of the first acts of Yevgeny Primakov upon becoming Prime Minister in September 1998 in the middle of a grave economic crisis was to chair a meeting on ways of establishing order and stability in the northern Caucasus.<sup>18</sup> The economic crisis was expected to stimulate separatist movements in the Russian Federation. Kalmykia did challenge Moscow in mid-November, considering itself 'outside the Russian Federation' and 'an associate member of the federation' because of 'the failure of Moscow to send money'.<sup>19</sup> However, in the face of calls in the Duma for it to be punished, its leadership soon retracted.

his life in Feb. 1998: 'They [unnamed Russian circles] cannot forgive me Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall, the troop withdrawal from Europe, the oil pipeline and Central Asia-Europe transit corridor . . . I cannot rule out further attempts. Behind such attempts stand very powerful forces'. 'Shevardnadze targeted in assassination attempt', *Prism* (Washington, DC), vol. 4, no. 4, Part I (20 Feb. 1998), URL <<http://www.jamestown.org>>. For a concise but perceptive analysis of the tactics of Russia and more significantly of former Defence Minister Pavel Grachev and his local commanders and troops in the southern Caucasus, see Trenin, D., 'Russia's security interests and policies in the Caucasus region', ed. B. Coppieters, *Contested Borders in the Caucasus* (Vrije Universiteit Brussels Press: Brussels, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> Kazimirov (note 8), p. 191 records that such apprehensions were entertained by members of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Minsk Group in the negotiations that led to the cease-fire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh.

<sup>16</sup> Ponomaryov, M., [Moving away from flank limits], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 21 Oct. 1993, p. 3, in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press (CDSP)*, vol. 45, no. 43 (24 Nov. 1993), pp. 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> 'Russia allowed time to fulfil CFE Treaty', *Moscow Times*, 4 June 1996, p. 3. See also Lachowski, Z., 'Conventional arms control', *SIPRI Yearbook 1997: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997), pp. 476-84. Disagreement between Russia and Turkey over the southern flank was a major stumbling block in the Vienna-based negotiations on the modernization of the CFE Treaty, under way since 1997. The 2 countries reached a compromise in bilateral negotiations in Jan. 1999, paving the way for the endorsement of the modernized treaty at the OSCE summit meeting to be held in Istanbul in Nov. 1999.

<sup>18</sup> *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 174 (23 Sep. 1998), URL <<http://www.jamestown.org>>.

<sup>19</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 2, no. 223, Part I (18 Nov. 1998), URL <<http://www.rferl.org/newslines>>.

#### IV. Islamic fundamentalism in the expanded Middle East

Russians have been greatly disturbed about the possible implications for Russia of the growing power of radical Islamist movements in the Muslim world in general and in Russia's vicinity in particular because Russia, where 'almost 20 million citizens profess Islam, is partially included in the giant mass of the Moslem world'.<sup>20</sup>

Chechnya's embrace of Islam as part of its national identity, signs of the spread of Wahhabism—an Islamic sect in Saudi Arabia—in the northern Caucasus,<sup>21</sup> the unresolved struggle in Tajikistan and the near-complete victory of the Taleban in Afghanistan, taken together, seem to have brought the fundamentalist threat to Russia's doorstep in the south. As a result worst-case scenarios hypothesize the emergence of an Islamic superstate or confederation of states in Russia's south, the radicalization of Russia's Muslim populations from the northern Caucasus deep into the Volga region, and the eventual consolidation of separatist movements among Muslim and Turkic populations against Moscow.<sup>22</sup>

Russia's troubles in Chechnya did not cease with the treaty of May 1997 which formally normalized relations between Moscow and Grozny. The statement by Chechnya's President Aslan Maskhadov on 4 February 1999 declaring that all spheres of life of Chechen society should be radically reformed in accordance with Sharia law<sup>23</sup> will probably encourage a new level of instability in the northern Caucasus and further complicate Moscow's relations with the region.

The future prospects of Afghanistan and the type of Islam that will eventually take control over the country continue to be profoundly troubling issues for policy makers in Moscow nearly a decade after the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the country. The Sunni Taleban, the most orthodox of the Islamist factions fighting in Afghanistan, owe their political life and military victories to Pakistan, which is itself sliding towards a greater role for the Sharia in the affairs of the state. The tacit alliance between the two has been a source of instability throughout the region, troubling not only in Russia but also in India, Iran and the Central Asian republics.

With the Taleban apparently consolidating their power, the spectre of a radical Islamic regime on the doorstep of Russia and the Central Asian republics might seem more real today than it did previously. The threat of an Afghanistan under the control of the Taleban will most likely enhance Russia's role within the CIS in the search for a united front against Islamic radicalism. On the other hand, Afghan society is deeply fractured along tribal, ethnic and

<sup>20</sup> Sevastianov (note 4), p. 171.

<sup>21</sup> On official attempts to fight Wahhabism, see 'Conference in Russian Caucasus discusses separatism', Moscow Radio Rossii Network, 31 July 1998, FBIS-SOV-98-210, 7 Aug. 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Titorenko, V.Y., [Islamism and the interests of Russia], *Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya*, no. 1 (Jan. 1995), pp. 3, 34–41, in FBIS-SOV-95-056-S, 23 Mar. 1995, pp. 11–16.

<sup>23</sup> 'Russia: President Maskhadov introduces Shari'ah law', ITAR-TASS (Moscow), 4 Feb. 1999, BBC Monitoring Service, in Reuters, 5 Feb. 1999, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin/>>.

sectarian lines. Given the inherent weakness that stems from these contradictions, it is conceivable that Afghanistan's neighbours will escape the unwanted consequences that Islamic radicalism is perceived as posing for their respective societies. Hence, while the threat of Islamic radicalism is real in many ways, it must be kept in perspective.

## V. Encroachments by regional and extra-regional powers

Russia fears that the power vacuum in the former Soviet south, a traditional Russian sphere of interest or its 'backyard', is being filled by regional and extra-regional powers at the expense of its own security and geopolitical interests. There is a feeling that regional instability in the southern Caucasus could prompt such powers as Iran, Pakistan, Turkey and the United States to exploit it in order to enhance their respective influences in the region.

### The 'Turkish threat'

Russia has been especially apprehensive about Turkey's presumed Pan-Turkic aspirations in the Caucasus and Central Asia, openly accusing Turkey of collusion with Chechen separatists. During a visit to the Caucasus in January 1998, Yegor Stroyev, Chairman of the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian Parliament), registered 'categorical disagreement' with the 'political itch [on the part of some officials] to establish a Confederation of Transcaucasian Peoples including Turkey, Chechnya and probably other republics of the North Caucasus'.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly Turkey is an active player in the southern Caucasus and Central Asia. Its basic motive is to help the newly independent states consolidate their independence and to deepen economic relations rather than to promote Pan-Turkic or Pan-Caucasian projects. Pan-Turkism is only a marginal force in Turkish society and is largely confined to pockets of intellectual and political circles. Since independence is an anti-imperial force, however, it is not surprising that Turkey is in general seen in a negative, anti-Russian light by part of the Russian elite. Sergey Karaganov, a prominent member of the Russian political elite, summarized Russian views of Turkey's interest in the southern Caucasus in an interview in 1996: 'These places are Russia's backyard. Nobody can play in these fields without Russia's consent'.<sup>25</sup>

For its part, Turkey is much disturbed at the support extended to the separatist Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) by some members of the Duma. Relations between Russia and Turkey came under serious strain in the winter of 1998–99,

<sup>24</sup> Yermakova, L., 'Russia's Federation Council delegation to visit Caucasus', in Reuters, 20 Jan. 1998, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin>>. For the perception that Turkey is the biggest threat in the south, see Baluev, D., 'Moderation in the national idea', *International Affairs* (Moscow), vol. 42, no. 5/6 (1996), p. 107, and for a milder version see Kortunov, S., 'Russia in search of allies', *International Affairs* (Moscow), vol. 42, no. 3 (1996), p. 162.

<sup>25</sup> Sezer, D. B., 'From hegemony to pluralism: the changing politics of the Black Sea', *SAIS Review* (Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies), vol. 17, no. 1 (winter/spring 1997), p. 18.



when Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the PKK, sought political asylum in Russia with the support of some Duma members, although Primakov's public renunciation of cooperation with terrorists in general and with Öcalan in particular seemed to restore Turkish confidence in the Russian leadership.

It is important to note, however, that Turkey's significance for Russian security stems primarily from its membership of NATO.<sup>26</sup> Theoretically speaking Turkey confronts a potential adversary in its surrounding regions with the advantages of belonging to the most potent military alliance in the world today. Turkish territory is alliance territory, allowing access to NATO bases, for example, for US forces. The possible scenarios raised by these considerations with respect to Russia's security interests, in particular in the Black Sea region and the Caucasus, greatly reinforce Russian concerns about Turkey at a time when Russia is finding its conventional military muscle much diminished.

### The 'NATO threat'

Russia seems to be especially apprehensive about the USA's and NATO's growing military influence to its south at a time when its own diminished power base has left it with weakened leverage. Several developments give it cause for concern—the US-led joint military exercises such as those of the Central Asian Battalion (CentrasBat) in 1997 and 1998 in Central Asia;<sup>27</sup> the deepening of military cooperation between NATO and the southern newly independent states under the Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme; the increasingly vocal allusions to NATO as an agent of peace and stability in the southern Caucasus by both President Heidar Aliyev of Azerbaijan and President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia; and intimations that NATO forces could be an alternative to Russian peacekeepers in the southern Caucasus.<sup>28</sup> NATO Secretary General Javier Solana visited Tbilisi and Baku in 1997 and 1998.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly the most threatening, if implausible, scenario in the Russian mind is eventual NATO expansion to the southern Caucasus.<sup>30</sup> Indeed there is widespread speculation that in their hearts both Shevardnadze and Aliyev want NATO membership but would settle for NATO peacekeeping in regional con-

<sup>26</sup> For the views of a Russian specialist on military affairs on this point, see Felgengauer, P., 'Tensions force change in military doctrine', FBIS-SOV-93-048, 15 Mar. 1993, pp. 66–67.

<sup>27</sup> See also chapter 8, section V, in this volume.

<sup>28</sup> Saradzhyan, S., 'Georgia seeks UN not Russian peacekeepers', *Moscow Times*, 5 Aug. 1998, in Reuters, 5 Aug. 1998, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin/>>; 'Azerbaijan: Chief state adviser praises NATO efforts in Caucasus', BBC Monitoring Service: Former USSR, 3 Oct. 1998, in Reuters, 3 Oct. 1998, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin/>>; 'Azerbaijan: Aliyev–Baku backs NATO in consolidating European security', Interfax, 14 Feb. 1997, in FBIS-SOV-97-032, 14 Feb. 1997; and 'Azerbaijan: Baku sees NATO as guarantor of worldwide security', Interfax, 26 May 1997, in FBIS-SOV-97-146, 26 May 1997.

<sup>29</sup> For views on NATO's interest in the southern Caucasus, see de Witte, P., 'Fostering stability and security in the southern Caucasus', *NATO Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (spring 1999), pp. 14–16.

<sup>30</sup> A 'Draft armed forces reform' published by the Institute for Defence Studies (INOBS) in Moscow in Feb. 1996 is reported to have named presumed NATO discussions concerning the possibility of providing the Caspian Sea states with the sorts of guarantees made to Persian Gulf oil producers as a major potential southern threat to Russia. Herd, G. P., 'Waking the restless Russian bear?', *Parliamentary Brief* (London), C/C/7/96, in Reuters, 31 July 1996, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin/>>.

flicts and NATO protection of the prospective oil pipeline that would transport the 'main oil' from the Caspian Sea.<sup>31</sup> Russia has not really come to terms with NATO's eastern expansion and would probably react violently to expansion in the southern Caucasus.

### **Caspian Sea fossil fuels**

Russia is also extremely nervous about the potential adverse impact on its geopolitical position of the regional and international scramble for a generous share of the Caspian Basin's prospective fossil fuel wealth.

Broadly speaking the Russian Foreign Ministry has tried to preserve Russia's dominance in the former Soviet Union primarily by manipulating the economic dependence of the newly independent states on Russia for energy sources, as in the case of Ukraine, and for pipelines for outlets to the world markets, as in the case of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.<sup>32</sup> On the question of new pipelines to transport Azerbaijani oil to world markets, it has pursued a zero-sum strategy, implicitly rejecting the 'multiple pipelines' position advocated by the United States. The Baku–Ceyhan pipeline proposed by Turkey to carry the 'main oil' from Azerbaijan has been strongly opposed by Russia on economic and geopolitical grounds.<sup>33</sup> The Russian alternative is the Baku–Novorossiysk pipeline through which 'early oil' has been flowing since the autumn of 1997.

In contrast to the Foreign Ministry, the powerful private energy company Lukoil has taken a more liberal view and joined the international consortia for the development and export of non-Russian Caspian Sea oil, thus securing for Russia a substantial decision-making role on issues critical to Russian national interests in this area.<sup>34</sup> Another leading interest group, Gazprom, has concluded multi-billion dollar energy deals with Turkey.

### **The former Soviet south as a zone of US vital interests**

The USA's public designation of Central Asia and the southern Caucasus in the summer of 1997 as areas of its vital interest<sup>35</sup> seemed like the last straw, and drew sharp criticism from Yeltsin in September 1997 when he accused 'some circles in the US of wishing to oust Russia from the CIS'.<sup>36</sup> The leading role assumed by parts of the US oil industry in the development of the region's

<sup>31</sup> On concerns over possible NATO peacekeeping in the region, see Golotuk, Yu., 'Moscow is losing monopoly for peacekeeping in the former USSR', *Russkiy Telegraf*, 9 July 1998, p. 1, in Reuters, 13 July 1998, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin>>.

<sup>32</sup> Blank, S. J., *Energy, Economics, and Security in Central Asia: Russia and Its Rivals* (US Army War College: Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 10 May 1995).

<sup>33</sup> See figure 5.1 in this volume.

<sup>34</sup> Blum, D. W., 'Domestic politics and Russia's Caspian policy', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Apr.–June 1998), pp. 145–49.

<sup>35</sup> Speech by Strobe Talbott, US Under-Secretary of State, at the Paul Nitze School, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Md., 23 July 1997.

<sup>36</sup> 'Yeltsin and Gore disagree over US influence in CIS countries', BBC Monitoring Service, *Summary of World Broadcasts: Former USSR*, 26 Sep. 1997, in Reuters, 26 Sep. 1997, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin>>.

energy resources, on the one hand, and the USA's increasingly visible demonstration of support for the independence of the republics in the southern Caucasus, on the other, are generally seen in Russia as a manifestation of a broader US design ultimately aiming to eliminate Russia's influence in its backyard.

## VI. Neo-imperialist impulses in the 'near abroad'

The CIS acquired a priority place in Russian foreign policy during the great foreign policy debate of 1992–94.<sup>37</sup> Broadly speaking, the debate was polarized between the pro-Western Atlanticists and anti-Western Eurasianists. The latter argued that Russia should redirect its foreign policy from what some called infantile pro-Americanism<sup>38</sup> to embrace the countries of the 'near abroad'. Ultimately a broad consensus emerged, reinforced by the victory of the communists and radical nationalists in the elections to the Duma in 1993 and 1995. According to one Russian analyst, 'The new key political guideline (for Russia) was to assume the role of "security guarantor" in the CIS and to turn "near abroad" into Russia's sphere of influence'.<sup>39</sup> Something akin to the Monroe Doctrine seized the imagination of the political elite.<sup>40</sup>

The new reorientation to the 'near abroad' and the policies to support it have given rise to a general suspicion in the West and in some of the CIS countries that Russia may have become neo-imperialist.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the generally negative reception in the West of the new assertiveness towards the newly independent states and the CIS, however, the West did not react forcefully, first because, driven by a 'Russia first' policy, it did not wish to undermine Yeltsin's power, and, second, because it was not willing to shoulder the costly responsibilities of managing conflicts in the former Soviet space. Some analysts argue that Russia's behaviour did not match its neo-imperialistic rhetoric<sup>42</sup> while others maintain that it was merely indulging in typical great-power behaviour in its backyard.<sup>43</sup> In 1994 others went further,

<sup>37</sup> For the highlights of the debate, see Arbatov, A. G., 'Russian national interests', eds R. D. Blackwill and S. A. Karaganov, *Damage Limitation or Crisis: Russia and the Outside World*, CSIA Studies in International Security no. 5 (Brassey's: Washington, DC, 1994), pp. 54–67; Kortunov, A., 'Russia, the "near abroad" and the West', ed. G. W. Lapidus, *The New Russia: Troubled Transformation* (Westview Press: Boulder, Colo., 1995), pp. 143–92; Covington, S., 'Moscow's insecurity and Eurasian instability', *European Security*, vol. 4, no. 3 (autumn 1996), p. 451; and Sergounin, A. A., 'Russian domestic debate on NATO enlargement: from phobia to damage limitation', *European Security*, vol. 6, no. 4 (winter 1997), p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Quotation from Vladimir Lukin, Chairman of the Duma Committee on International Affairs, cited in Hermann, R. K., 'Russian policy in the Middle East: strategic change and tactical contradictions', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3 (summer 1994), p. 460.

<sup>39</sup> Baev (note 10), p. 116.

<sup>40</sup> Arbatov (note 37), p. 60.

<sup>41</sup> For one of the most representative opinions, see Brzezinski, Z., 'The premature partnership', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2 (Mar.–Apr. 1994), pp. 67–82. For a strong rebuttal by a Russian analyst of overall Western criticism of Russian behaviour in Eurasia, see Mikoyan, S. A., 'Russia: the US and regional conflict in Eurasia', *Survival*, vol. 40, no. 3 (autumn 1998), pp. 112–26.

<sup>42</sup> Adomeit, H., 'Russia as a "great power" in world affairs: images and reality', *International Affairs* (London), vol. 71, no. 1 (1995), pp. 35–68.

<sup>43</sup> Rubenstein, A. Z., 'The Asian interior: the geopolitical pull on Russia', *Orbis*, vol. 38, no. 4 (fall 1994), pp. 567–83.

suggesting that the West had no important interests in those regions<sup>44</sup>—a view that stands in sharp contrast to the views of the US Government that had evolved by 1997. Implicitly, therefore, the West was content to have Russia volunteer to act as the single dominant regional stabilizer.

This does not mean, however, that the international community did not attempt to interject itself as a third party to mediate conflicts in the CIS. In October 1992 the UN Security Council approved the first UN observer mission to a newly independent state, the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), to help in a settlement between Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>45</sup> With limited mandate and manpower, UNOMIG served mainly a symbolic mission, while Russian troops, formally acting as CIS peacekeepers, were deployed in June 1994 in a security zone along the Inguri River, which divides Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia.<sup>46</sup> The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) initiated the Minsk Group talks in June 1992 to help the adversaries find a settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Azerbaijan. Russian mediation provided a parallel forum in Moscow. With strong US backing, the OSCE at its Budapest summit meeting in December 1994 agreed to send up to 3000 OSCE peacekeepers to the region under the aegis of the UN if a political settlement could not be reached.<sup>47</sup> No peacekeeping force for Nagorno-Karabakh has materialized, however, not only because of Russian and Armenian opposition but also because no major Western power is willing to assign troops to it.

Reactions in Azerbaijan and Georgia have recently become more defiant of Russia. Presidents Shevardnadze and Aliyev, who in late 1993 desperately sought Russia's intervention to save their respective territorial integrity, have been publicly complaining that Russia has failed as a regional stabilizer. Both have deepened their relations with the West and are moving to reduce their dependence on Russia. For example, a Russian–Georgian agreement of 3 November 1998 pledges a reduced role for Russia in guarding Georgia's border.<sup>48</sup>

## VII. The Middle East: a partner in the search for a multipolar world order?

Russia perceives political, economic and geopolitical interests for itself in the Middle East. Its geographic proximity, its position as the epicentre of the Islamic world and its potential as a market for Russian exports have given the Middle East an important place in Russian foreign policy. Compared to the Soviet era, however, the scale of these interests and the means Russia has at its

<sup>44</sup> Blackwill, R. D. and Karaganov, S. A., 'Introduction and conclusions', eds Blackwill and Karaganov (note 37), p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Nichol (note 10), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Nichol (note 10), p. 9.

<sup>47</sup> Nichol (note 10), p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> *RFE/RL Newswire*, vol. 2, no. 214, Part I (5 Nov. 1998), URL <<http://www.rferl.org/newsline/search/>>.

disposal to promote them are much diminished. Russia's inner weakness and the resulting strategic withdrawal from a world role are behind the modest progress that Russia has recorded in its efforts to become a major influence in the region. Even in the area of economic relations, viewed as a leading interest, the record has been modest, with arms exports more or less monopolizing the agenda.<sup>49</sup>

### Positive engagement

In the changed circumstances of the 1990s, Russian policy towards the Middle East has gone through two phases: (a) low-profile diplomacy in 1992–93 under Foreign Minister Kozyrev, largely with conservative regimes and primarily for economic motives; and (b) activist diplomacy in 1994–98 designed to influence major regional developments and in the hope that a bigger, perhaps a central, role and influence in the Middle East would confirm Russia's independence from the West as well as its great-power status.

The first phase was marked by Russia's gravitation towards the Persian Gulf countries. Russian officials visited the area to normalize relations with the Gulf monarchies and Israel. According to an interesting content analysis of the Russian press between early 1992 and April 1994, about 50 per cent of official meetings between Russian and Middle Eastern delegations involved the Gulf monarchies.<sup>50</sup> Ruslan Khasbulatov, then speaker of the Russian Parliament, in a speech in May 1993 emphasized that Russia's interests in the Gulf were the same as those of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>51</sup> The desire to foster stability in the region by cooperating with moderate regimes and to promote economic relations that would contribute to Russia's economic reforms by funnelling money and credits from the Gulf monarchies were the leading considerations in the early 1990s.

The second phase was a product of the heated foreign policy debate of 1992–94 that demanded a shift from an exclusively pro-Western foreign policy.<sup>52</sup> This stage is marked; (a) by initiatives to obtain a rightful place in the Arab–Israeli peace process as one of the co-chairman of the Madrid Conference

<sup>49</sup> Reliable current data on the total volume and value of Russian arms sales to the Middle East are difficult to locate. One useful source is US Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA), *World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1997* (ACDA: Washington, DC, 1998), in which table V lists the 'number of major weapons delivered to regions and groups, by supplier type'. According to ACDA, Russia delivered to the Middle East in the period 1991–96: 470 tanks; 150 artillery pieces; 680 armoured personnel carriers and armoured cars; 145 other surface combatants; 2 submarines; 40 helicopters; 20 surface-to-air missiles (SAMs); and 20 anti-ship missiles. Sales contracted for delivery in the future do not appear on this list. With this caveat, it can safely be concluded that Russian arms sales to the region have lagged seriously behind those of the USA and compete for second place with sales by China and the UK. At the International Defence Exhibition and Conference, a major arms show that took place in Abu Dhabi in Mar. 1997, the Russian pavilion was one of the biggest attractions, featuring 500 exhibits by more than 80 Russian arms manufacturers. Lancaster, J., 'Russia wheels and deals Gulf arms', *International Herald Tribune*, 5–6 Apr. 1997.

<sup>50</sup> Kasatkin, A., 'Will the Middle East become a Russian priority?', *International Affairs* (Moscow), no. 7 (1994), p. 60.

<sup>51</sup> Hermann (note 38), p. 457.

<sup>52</sup> See note 37.

in 1991; and (b) by attempts to resolve a host of issues emanating from Iraq's loss of full sovereignty over its territory under the UN sanctions regime.

The government's critics claimed that Russia, a great power itself, had been unfairly treated in the new world order as a result of the unidirectional, pro-Western policy of the Russian leadership. They argued that Russia's foreign policy had to reflect and reinforce its status as a great power and to reaffirm its equality with its partners in the West.<sup>53</sup> To achieve these aims, it had to be guided by Russian national interests instead of lofty ideals such as 'universal values'. Its national interests could at times require an independent stance— independent from the West and the USA. For example, national interests dictated Russia's refusal to join the US-sponsored sanctions on Iraq, Libya, Iran and Yugoslavia as a result of which Russia has lost billions of dollars.<sup>54</sup> The remedy, according to these critics, was for Russia to redirect its policy not only to the CIS but to Asia and the Middle East where friends and allies of the former Soviet Union represented a potential reserve of goodwill.

Deep down, the rethinking in Russian foreign policy implied the need for a search for friends and allies, or potential allies, in order to pull Russia out of its perceived exclusion by the West and to win recognition for its claim to the status of a great power. Under great domestic pressure, therefore, Yeltsin and Kozyrev swiftly moved to diversify Russian foreign policy in an eastern and southern direction.

The evolving strategic partnership with China has had pride of place in Russia's assertive new foreign policy orientation. As strategic partners both China and Russia are winners in the sense that they are potentially forging a new balance in the Asia-Pacific region that could set up constraints on the USA's freedom of action.

### **The Middle East peace process**

In the Middle East the record is less clear. Two issues have preoccupied Russia here: (a) the peace process itself; and (b) controversies arising from Iraq's problematic status as a half-sovereign state under international sanctions.

The normalization of Russian-Israeli relations was one of the fundamental achievements of the early years, a process begun in Gorbachev's time.<sup>55</sup> Israel's confidence would be critical to Russia's success in engaging in a meaningful mediating role in the peace process.

Russia supported the September 1993 Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements (the Oslo Agreement). In February 1994, Yeltsin proposed, unsuccessfully, a Madrid-2 conference to save the peace talks stalled over the Hebron massacre. In April 1994, Yitzhak Rabin paid the first

<sup>53</sup> Covington (note 37), p. 451.

<sup>54</sup> Kasatkin (note 50), p. 61, quoting from *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 15 Mar. 1994, puts Russia's losses at \$16 billion.

<sup>55</sup> Freedman, R. O., 'Israeli-Russian relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union', *Middle East Journal*, vol. 49, no. 2 (spring 1995), pp. 232-47.

visit to Moscow by an Israeli Prime Minister. The positive direction in Russian–Israeli relations was sustained until the breakdown in Palestinian–Israeli negotiations in 1996 when Israeli politics reverted to a hard line under then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Russia, also gripped by a political shift to the left, has since been generally more sympathetic to Arab positions.<sup>56</sup> Russia's continued disregard of Israel's arguments against its assistance to Iranian nuclear and missile programmes has also spoiled relations.

As Foreign Minister from January 1996 to September 1998, Primakov, a prominent Middle East expert, was active in the diplomacy surrounding the effort to restart the peace talks. In the autumn of 1996 he made a six-nation visit to the area, offering his services as a mediator. A major positive input to the peace process and to regional stability in general has been Russia's frequent denunciations of terrorism.

On balance, however, Russia's influence on the peace process has remained limited. Its co-chairmanship remains symbolic, as it was when the Madrid Conference began in 1991. Russia was not present during the recent negotiations between President Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian National Authority and Prime Minister Netanyahu that led to the Wye River Memorandum, signed on 23 October 1998 with the direct intervention of the US President.<sup>57</sup>

## Iran

In operational terms Iran, isolated by the USA's 'dual containment' policy, has emerged as Russia's primary partner in the Middle East. Influential circles in Russia had already seen in Iran a potential ally in maintaining regional stability in Central Asia and the Caucasus, above all by the containment of Islamic fundamentalism, and in checking Turkish influence in these lands.<sup>58</sup> Russian–Iranian cooperation for the completion of the nuclear plant in Bushehr and Russia's sale of dual-use missile technology have been sustained despite strenuous US objections.

Russian–Iranian nuclear and missile cooperation and the questions it raises about the role of Russia in Iran's presumed nuclear weapon programme are taken very seriously in the region, not only in Tel Aviv but in Ankara and other capitals. Russia maintains that its assistance to Iran's peaceful nuclear programme does not violate the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). For its part it urges Israel to join the NPT. Turkey is especially sensitive to Russia's arms exports to the region given that their ultimate deployment would raise potential threats to Turkish security. The sale of SA-10 (S-300PMU-1) surface-to-air missiles to the Greek Cypriot Government contributed to the escalation of tensions in the eastern Mediterranean, although they were somewhat defused by

<sup>56</sup> Smirnov, V., 'Israel: what is beyond the horizon?', *International Affairs* (Moscow), vol. 42, no. 4 (1996), p. 26.

<sup>57</sup> The text of the Wye River Memorandum is reproduced in *SIPRI Yearbook 1999: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1999), pp. 189–93.

<sup>58</sup> Arbatov (note 37), p. 71.

the decision not to go ahead with deployment. The question whether Greece will deploy them on Crete remains open.

Clearly, the new relationship makes both Iran and Russia big winners geopolitically. It is against this background that the USA's timid reception of the overtures of Iranian President Seyyed Mohammed Khatami should be evaluated.

## Iraq

An Iraq under UN sanctions is only a potential future partner. Russia has pursued a pro-Iraq line since 1994 when Kozyrev and later Primakov aimed to interject Russia as an independent mediator in Iraq's long-running disputes with the UN and the USA. Russian policies have had two main aims: to prevent the use of force against Iraq and to bring about the lifting of UN sanctions in return for full compliance by Baghdad with its disarmament obligations. The removal of sanctions would open up Iraq to Russian oil companies and allow it to repay an estimated \$5–7 billion it owes to Russia.<sup>59</sup>

Russia achieved its most impressive diplomatic success in February 1998 when Primakov mediated a breakthrough in the stand-off between Iraq and the UN Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM) and averted threatened US air strikes against Iraq. This episode prompted some US analysts to accuse the Clinton Administration of permitting Russia, which had previously been effectively excluded from the Arab–Israeli negotiations, to re-enter the Middle East as a great power.<sup>60</sup> Russia's ability to check the behaviour of the USA in the world's conflict zones has, however, remained constrained. Refusing to bow to the objections of China and Russia, in December 1998 the UK and the USA made a new round of air strikes in response to a new confrontation over UNSCOM inspections. In protest, Russia temporarily withdrew its ambassador to Washington, signalling the damage the US unilateralism had inflicted on long-term Russian–US relations.

Clearly, behind the eight-year impasse over Iraq lurks a more fundamental question—the future of Iraq. Russia has consistently upheld the principle of the territorial integrity of Iraq. However, this would be compromised if, in the best Soviet tradition, Russia were to support Kurdish movements in Iraq seeking autonomy and ultimately independence. This is a difficult dilemma for Russia, as it has been for the USA, because it involves the sorting out of multiple loyalties. Unsurprisingly, Russia has been critical of Turkish military operations in northern Iraq for their violation of Iraqi sovereignty, while the Duma has been inclined to view Kurdish separatism in Turkey as a welcome development contributing to Turkey's enfeeblement, if not eventual partition.

<sup>59</sup> For some of the agreements signed by Russian companies with Iraq for the development of the latter's oilfields and the training of Iraqi technicians in the post-sanctions era, see Perera, J., 'Cooperation with Russia', *Middle East International*, 22 Nov. 1996, p. 9.

<sup>60</sup> Hoagland, J., 'Primakov rushes to fill Clinton's policy vacuum', *International Herald Tribune*, 22–23 Nov. 1997.



## Syria

Syria occupies a special place in Middle East politics because of its position as a direct party to the Arab–Israeli conflict. Even President Hafez Assad, a man not known for his flexibility and whose country remains on the USA’s list of states sponsoring terrorism, was drawn into the radius of US diplomacy in the early post-Oslo period aiming to produce a peace treaty between Israel and Syria. A visit to Damascus by Kozyrev, postponed several times until then, took place in November 1994 against the background of a peace process in which Russia seemed to have little if any diplomatic weight. As a Russian journalist suggests: ‘It is clear that Moscow hopes Syria will become Russia’s main partner in the region now that cooperation with other clients of the former USSR, such as Libya and Iraq, has been frozen . . . great hopes are pinned on Assad with respect to a Middle East settlement. It is hoped that he will help Moscow return to the foreground of regional politics after it was pushed aside by the United States’.<sup>61</sup>

While on a tour of the Middle East in October 1996, Primakov also visited Syria in the hope of performing a go-between mission between Israel and Syria. However, with the peace process in an impasse, Russian mediation attempts impressed no one. Russia supports Syria in its basic positions on peace with Israel, specifically in its demand for the return of the Golan Heights.

On the escalation of tensions between Syria and Turkey in late 1998, Primakov counselled the use of diplomatic channels to resolve the issues.<sup>62</sup>

Russia resumed arms exports to Syria only in 1994 when the latter began modest payments on its \$10–12 billion debt, which it had refused to do apparently on the argument that Russia was not the legitimate heir of the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> However, military cooperation seems to be gaining momentum. According to the Israeli daily *Ha’Aretz*, the delivery of 1000 laser-guided anti-tank missiles from Russia constitutes the first sale of advanced weaponry to Syria since the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>64</sup> Bilateral cooperation has involved military training exercises held in 1997. Syria is also interested in acquiring air-defence missile complexes and modern armoured vehicles.<sup>65</sup>

### The post-Soviet world order and Russia’s place in it

Russia’s vision of a world order is one in which several power centres exist as opposed to the current one in which US supremacy is the defining feature of the international system. The yearning of the political elite for a multipolar world

<sup>61</sup> Eggert, K., [Hafez Assad as the Russian Foreign Ministry’s last hope], *Izvestiya*, 4 Nov. 1994, p. 3, in *CDSP*, vol. 46, no. 43 (16 Nov. 1994), p. 24.

<sup>62</sup> ITAR-TASS, ‘Russia: Primakov: Russia ready to help end Turkey–Syria standoff’, 8 Oct. 1998 (in English), in *FBIS-SOV-98-281*, 10 Oct. 1998.

<sup>63</sup> Matveev, K., ‘The direction of Russia’s new Middle East policy’, *Middle East International*, 19 Jan. 1996, p. 20.

<sup>64</sup> ‘Syria: Russian missiles’, *Middle East International*, 19 June 1998, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Interfax, 15 Nov. 1998, in *FBIS-SOV-98-319*, 15 Nov. 1998.

has crystallized more and more clearly through the domestic debate on foreign policy in the mid-1990s.

As Foreign Minister, Primakov was one of the most articulate proponents of a world order based on a balance among several great powers. His ideas as a staunch advocate of the supremacy of Russia's national interests, defined independently from the West, and of the importance of defending Russia's equal status in relations with the West are also well known.<sup>66</sup> As the head of the Foreign Intelligence Service, he issued in the autumn of 1993 the first report by a government agency highly critical of possible NATO expansion.<sup>67</sup>

Speaking before the UN General Assembly in September 1998, the new Foreign Minister in the Primakov Government, Igor Ivanov, reiterated that one of the broad goals of Russian foreign policy was 'building up a multipolar world . . . in order to settle international problems by political means'.<sup>68</sup>

It therefore seems likely that key countries in the Middle East, in particular Iran, have come to be seen in Russia as potential centres of power in the construction of a multipolar world. President Yeltsin explicitly stressed this aspect of the importance of the Middle East in his 1995 message to the Federal Assembly, saying: 'Countries in the Middle East, where there are strong misgivings about the unipolarity of the new world order, see in Russia an indispensable factor for a global and regional balance'.<sup>69</sup>

The Middle East has thus emerged as a region offering potential strategic allies to Russia against a world order dominated by the West in general and the United States in particular. In a similar mode of thinking, Russia seemed to contemplate using its friends in the Middle East as a counterweight to NATO expansion. In Cairo during his tour of the Middle East in October 1996, when the debate against NATO expansion was raging in Russia, Primakov alluded to such calculations: '[Russia intends to] rectify its geopolitically disadvantageous situation by searching for new partners and allies'.<sup>70</sup>

Against this background, conservative critics in the West argued that Primakov's ultimate goal was to forge a new Russian–Chinese–Iranian alliance to challenge the USA from the Persian Gulf to the Taiwan Straits.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>66</sup> 'Primakov starts with the CIS', Transcript of Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov's news conference, *Moskovskiy Novosti*, 14–21 Jan. 1996, p. 13, in FBIS-SOV-96-029-S, 12 Feb. 1996), pp. 1–2; [Russia is seeking a new place in the world: interview with Primakov], *Izvestiya* [no date], in FBIS-SOV-045, 6 Mar. 1996, pp. 11–15; and Pribytkov, K., 'Primakov warns against cold war winners and losers', ITAR-TASS, 4 Sep. 1996, in FBIS-SOV-96-172, 4 Sep. 1996, pp. 6–7.

<sup>67</sup> 'Foreign Minister Primakov: NATO deal victory for Russia's national interests', BBC Monitoring Service, *Summary of World Broadcasts: Central/Eastern Europe*, in Reuters, 27 May 1997, URL <<http://www.briefing.reuters.com/cgi-bin/>>.

<sup>68</sup> 'Statement by Igor S. Ivanov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Russia, at the 53rd Session of the UN General Assembly, 22 Sep. 1998', *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4, no. 174 (23 Sep. 1998), URL <<http://www.jamestown.org>>.

<sup>69</sup> Chistyakov, A., 'The Middle East in the light of geopolitical changes', *International Affairs* (Moscow), no. 8 (1995), p. 51 fn.

<sup>70</sup> Sychova, V., [Willpower is the main trump card], *Kommersant Daily*, 5 Nov. 1996, in *CDSP*, vol. 48, no. 44 (27 Nov. 1996), p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> 'Cold warrior showdown with Iraq puts Russia back into big-power game', *Wall Street Journal*, 13–14 Feb. 1998, p. 1.

## VIII. Conclusions

The two subregions of South-West Asia examined in this study differ substantially in terms of the priority they enjoy in Russian foreign policy, as has been mentioned. The southern Caucasus tops the list of Russia's security and geopolitical priorities, while the Middle East, because of its indirect relevance to Russian national interests, is much lower on the list.

From this comparative perspective, therefore, Russian policies in the southern Caucasus have to be measured against a more demanding yardstick in terms of results and achievements than those in the Middle East. Russia has tried, first and foremost, to recreate a secure environment in the southern Caucasus. Such an environment would also serve its long-term geopolitical and geo-strategic interests. Some in the political elite were certainly driven by neo-imperialist motives. Yet the perception of threat to the integrity of Russia was genuine.

Still, however, Russia's southern periphery in the Caucasus is no more secure today than in 1991–92 when everything began to unravel. It is perhaps even more insecure. Two of the three newly independent states in the southern Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Georgia, are doing their best to get out of whatever residual control rests with Russia. Armenia remains loyal largely for security reasons. The northern Caucasus is in deeper turmoil, threatening the integrity of the federation. This suggests that something has gone seriously wrong in Russia's approach to the region's numerous problems in the post-Soviet era. This is not the place for exhaustive debate on this assertion but a few brief ideas are offered below.

First, Russian policies were too harsh, too untrusting and too condescending of the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. They were too crudely coloured by a 'divide and rule' mentality to instil trust among the many warring parties. Russia's formal recognition of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and Georgia lacked credibility and this in turn has damaged its credibility as a crisis manager.

Second, the behaviour of the Russian political elite towards regional problems was heavily shaped by a historical aversion to Turkey and its presumed Pan-Turkist projects. It is true that in the early post-Soviet period Turkish leaders went beyond reasonable limits to profess their love of their Turkic brethren in Central Asia and Azerbaijan, thus bringing Pan-Turkist scenarios back to life in the minds of the Russian political elite. Time has shown, however, that for a host of reasons Turkish influence in these lands can only be limited. A wiser strategy for Russia as the former hegemon would have been to offer to cooperate with Turkey rather than to aim to exclude it from the region. Apparently it was too difficult for Russia to recognize that Eurasia had indeed changed and that the international system favoured the opening up of the newly independent states, including the southern republics, to different systems of relations. Russian–Turkish cooperation could have provided an alternative new framework for the newly independent states to relate to. Even today Russia refuses to consider Turkey as a potential partner, as opposed to Iran and Greece.

This is 'old thinking'. The 'new thinking' should detect, first, the scaling down of Turkey's aspirations in the former Soviet south and, second, the enormous amount of goodwill that has developed in Turkey for Russia and the Russian people since the time of Gorbachev. This new climate offers valuable opportunities for substantial cooperation.

Russia's Middle East policy should be evaluated by a more modest yardstick—the degree of its diplomatic successes—because its goals here were much less ambitious and concrete.

Russia has remained a marginal force in the Middle East concerning the two big issues that hang over the region's prospects for peace and stability: (a) the Arab–Israeli peace process; and (b) the security of the Persian Gulf. The protracted crisis emanating from Iraq's status as a country under international sanctions is an offshoot of the fundamental issue of Gulf security.

Russia has largely been sidelined from a meaningful role in the Arab–Israeli peace process. The United States has monopolized the intermediary role. On the broad question of Gulf security, Russia has practically no voice except in indirectly supporting Iran's position that the security of the Gulf is the responsibility of the Gulf states. It has gone along with the UN-imposed interim status quo since the end of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It has shown greater autonomy and intervened diplomatically only when the use of force was threatened by the United States. However, from this angle Russian mediation has been an important, in fact imperative, positive force in managing the crisis without resort to arms. Furthermore, its high-profile diplomatic activity in the Middle East, especially under Foreign Minister Primakov, has revived at least part of its former prestige as a great power and created openings for it to press for a bigger role as a mediator. This was most brilliantly done in February 1998 when Primakov wove an anti-air strike coalition of China, France, Greece, Iran, Russia and several Arab countries, boosting for a while Russia's global image as a great power.

The Middle East has not been turned into an anti-Western coalition of states. The United States remains the world's hegemon and the dominant external power in the region. On the other hand, Russian–Iranian cooperation is a strategic gain for Russian foreign policy in the south. It will turn into a source of regional instability if it acquires a strongly anti-Turkey character or if it becomes a force contributing to Iran's presumed intentions to 'go nuclear'.