

COLLOQUY

Covering the Perspectives of the US Foreign Policy in the South Caucasus

Glen Howard*



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The United States of America has always been an important player in the geopolitical scene of the South Caucasus, ever since the region regained its independence from the collapsing Soviet Union in 1991. While the US has never had the same level of interest or involvement in the South Caucasus as the region's three immediate neighbors, Russia, Turkey and Iran, relations with the US have always been very important for the South Caucasus countries as a counter-weight against the overwhelming influence of bigger neighbors, particularly that of Russia. US engagement with the South Caucasus countries has waxed and waned during the course of the past two and a half decades, depending on the global processes and the specific strategies of the administrations in Washington. It experienced its peak during the Bush Administration's military campaign in Afghanistan and has recently seen a significant decline after the Obama administration initiated the reset policy with Russia in 2009.

Now, marking the 25th anniversary of bilateral relations between the South Caucasus countries and the US, there are numerous questions up about the strategy of the new US president, Donald Trump, toward the region. CI discussed the historical background, present, and future US policy in the region with Glen Howard, President of the Jamestown Foundation, a leading American research and analysis center on the Eurasian region. Mr. Howard has previously served as a consultant to the private sector and

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governmental agencies, including the US Department of Defense, the National Intelligence Council, and major oil companies operating in Central Asia and the Middle East. His articles have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, the Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, and Jane's Defense Weekly. The Jamestown Foundation is a publisher of Eurasia Daily Monitor, a prominent online journal that analyzes the emerging security realities and long-term trends defining Eurasia and the post-Soviet space.

CI: We would like to start by discussing the general foreign policy interests of the US in the South Caucasus region. Why do you think this region is important for the US, and what kinds of interest have been driving the US policy in the region over the last 25 years? How successful was Washington with regard to its regional policies during the last quarter-century?

Glen Howard: I think during the last quarter of a century, US regional policies toward the South Caucasus region have been defined by helping the countries of the region to solidify their statehood and independence with strengthening of their sovereignty. This has been based on helping these states to build the instruments of statehood, and establish ties with the outside world via important multilateral institutions – UN, IMF, OSCE, etc. With a weak northern neighbor like Russia, this was an optimal time to create and strengthen state sovereignty. US policy helped to achieve this goal by backing strategic projects like the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline that helped solidify a role for the South Caucasus in US grand strategy. This remains, to date, the crowning achievement of the US and for that matter the Clinton Administration. Where the US goes in its policies toward the region over the next twenty-five years remains to be seen. Transportation issues like BTC pipeline and the Southern Gas Corridor helped transform the South Caucasus in US strategic thinking, as it went from some overlooked part of Eurasia to a key engine of energy development for both oil and gas. It also helped countries like Kazakhstan further strengthen their energy independence as well by providing Astana with other transportation routes to export its oil by rail through the South Caucasus and by sea using Baku’s port capacity.

US security policy entered another phase with the tragic events of 9/11. The war in Afghanistan also caused the US to think strategically about Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus as a major air transit corridor to Afghanistan; Baku became a key air hub for US forces transiting to our bases in Central Asia. The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline transformed Azerbaijan into a transport hub, but the war in Afghanistan also transformed the way American policymakers viewed Azerbaijan as a strategic air corridor to Eurasia. It is safe to say that Azerbaijan was defined again by its role as a strategic crossroads between Europe and Asia with these developments, just as it did during the days of the old Silk Road.

CI: *We have seen declining US interest in the South Caucasus since Obama’s ‘reset policy’ with Russia was initiated back in 2009. How would you evaluate the attitude of the Trump Administration towards the region – do you think that there is a possibility of increased US engagement with the regional countries, or will US interests in the region further decline, taking into account Trump’s isolationist foreign policy agenda?*

Glen Howard: The Trump Administration's attitude towards the South Caucasus will be vastly different to that of the Obama Administration, due to Obama's effort to retrench American power. Every American president tries to take steps that distinguish their administration from the previous government. Obama tried to do so by distancing himself from Bush's policies, and now Trump will be 'anti-Obama' in his policies. The Obama Administration was somewhat engaged in the South Caucasus but it was never a high priority and suffered during the US-Russia reset because we essentially forgot about the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and forgave Moscow for its actions. I think the period of 'wait and see' for Trump is over, as his critics have argued that Trump would be eager to accommodate Putin - which has clearly not happened. Trump's national security advisers, H.R. McMaster, Mattis, and Tillerson, are no pushovers when it comes to Russia and in the last several months

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they have put Moscow on notice. This has stunned Moscow as they now view Trump as being unpredictable, and this is a good thing. It will make the Kremlin more cautious.

More importantly, as the recent US cruise missile strikes on Syria demonstrated, President Trump will be very 'Nixonian' in his use of military force to back up American statements, goals and objectives. The chief problem with this new administration is the question of time. Trump needs time to fill his administration with key positions and find the personnel who are capable of matching his vision for America, economically, strategically, and militarily. The appointment of McMaster as his National Security Adviser was a step in this direction. McMaster is a fan of the strategic concept 'Deterrence by Denial', which is a concept developed during the Cold War that now may re-enter American strategic thinking.

Aside from McMaster, we also have the new Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, who I know quite well. Mattis understands the utility of American military power, and he knows when to use it and when not to use it. Mattis also does not believe in a sphere of influence between Russia and the United States in the borderlands of the former Soviet Union. A case in point is the February 16 meeting of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joe Dunford in Baku, where he met the Chief of the Russian General Staff Valeriy Gerasimov. This meeting was focused primarily on Syria and was a chance for

the United States to talk directly to the Russian military about conflict ‘de-escalation’. Also, interestingly enough, the meeting in Baku demonstrated to Moscow that it does not consider Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus to be a part of the Russian sphere of influence. The Pentagon rejected Russian offers to meet in Moscow and also in Minsk for that meeting, which by itself is interesting. The two sides finally decided to meet in a country that it did not deem to be in the Russian sphere of influence - Azerbaijan. Therefore, the meeting in Baku can also be interpreted as American recognition that Azerbaijan is not outside the US sphere of interest. The fact that General Dunford stayed in Baku after the meeting with Gerasimov to meet with Azerbaijani officials at the Ministry of Defense for a meeting lasting several hours also underscores my point. Remember, the meeting in Baku with the Russians was to inform Moscow that the US planned military action in Syria and also to discuss ‘deconfliction channels’ to avoid an accidental conflict with Russia in Syria. By sending Dunford to Baku, Mattis, in my opinion, wanted to make it clear to the Russian military that he did not want Moscow to interfere in the US war against ISIS in Raqqa. This mission was accomplished and it also sent a powerful signal to the Kremlin. I think one of the key things about Trump is he knows how to make Moscow respect American military power, unlike Obama. When Trump says there is a red line that another country should not cross, he really means it. This differentiates Trump from his predecessor. The recent US cruise missile strikes on the Syrian air base at al-Shayrat on April 6 with over 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles showed that Trump knows how to use American military power in a calculated way.

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I also think that as a private businessman Trump knows the economic value of the South Caucasus, as these are two areas where he, or his friends and partners, have invested. As an industrialist, Trump believes in commerce and trade. I remain optimistic, and perhaps not immediately, but in the next year of the Trump administration, the US will pay closer attention to Azerbaijan, particularly in light of your neighbors to the North, and South, and to the renewed threat coming from the Taliban in Afghanistan. If relations remain tense with Russia, and with Pakistan, then the air corridor from Baku to Kabul becomes even more important to US national interests as it

prepares to renew its military role in Afghanistan due to the revived threat from the Taliban.

CI: How might the developments around Syria and Ukraine affect the Trump administration's policies in the South Caucasus? Will these developments push the South Caucasus to the bottom of the US foreign policy agenda, or might they increase the importance of the region for US policymakers? Moreover, does the new Administration consider the South Caucasus as a part of Eastern Europe or the Greater Middle East, which presumably would influence its policy priorities in the region?

Although the Trump Administration does not have a policy for the South Caucasus region at this time, eventually it will have such a strategy. Until that day arrives, the policy, for the time being, will be to push back when necessary against Moscow.

Glen Howard: First of all, the fact that the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Dunford visited Baku in February to meet with his counterpart, the Russian Chief of the General Staff, Valeriy Gerasimov was clear evidence to me that the South Caucasus region is indeed part of the Greater Middle East. Whether or not that was the strategic intention of the Trump Administration in asking for the meeting in Baku is another thing, and not altogether clear. Although the Trump Administration does not have a policy for the South Caucasus region at this time, eventually it will have such a strategy. Until that day arrives, the policy, for the time being, will be to push back when necessary against Moscow. That, to a certain extent, will affect how the US views the South Caucasus. Early on it was visible that President Trump has a deep interest in maintaining strong relations with Turkey and keeping Turkey as a strategic ally of the United States. And this is a good thing for Azerbaijan in its balanced diplomacy.

The developments around Syria and Ukraine will affect the Trump Administration in a different way. What you have seen occur since Trump became President in January is the creation of several steps to isolate the problem created by ISIS and President Trump's determination to fulfill his election pledge to the American people to destroy ISIS.

The first thing our friends in the South Caucasus must understand is that President Trump came into office with no specific plan to eradicate ISIS, and since appointing Jim Mattis Secretary of Defense those plans are only starting to be conceptualized. In terms of US grand strategy, what you have seen since January is an attempt by

Secretary Mattis to go to the Middle East to meet our allies there and first familiarize himself with their concerns and learn their perspectives on ways to defeat ISIS and obtain their perspectives, before developing a strategy. To avoid an unnecessary conflict with Russia, Secretary Mattis dispatched Dunford to Baku in mid-February to create de-escalation channels to avoid a clash on Syria.

Instead of traveling to the region, Secretary Tillerson followed a different strategy than Mattis. Tillerson opted to hold a diplomatic meeting with his counterparts in Washington on March 22, convening a two-day meeting at the State Department with the foreign ministers of 68 different states to listen to the concerns of American allies. The results of this meeting were to feed this into the planning and strategy for developing a diplomatic component for US plans to defeat ISIS. I might add that the first briefing Tillerson asked for when he became Secretary of State was on Turkey, which reflects his concern and interest in this important country that is so close to Azerbaijan.

With a primary goal of defeating ISIS, the Trump Administration has not necessarily created a strategy toward Ukraine or the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It still remains early for the US to do so, as the new administration has only just passed its first 100 days. What they have done, however, is to push back against Moscow when necessary to remind the Kremlin that the post-Soviet space is not a part of its sphere of influence. Influenced by Vice President Mike Pence, Trump has sought to reassure Ukraine that the United States will support its territorial integrity, and reinforced the idea that the US is ready to support Ukraine against Russia. The visit to Lithuania in May by Secretary Mattis was a part of this strategy, and was designed to reassure the nervous Baltic States about US support for their security, particularly as the major Russian military exercise Zapad looms on the horizon.

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being said, all of the items above can be construed as a form of push-back against Moscow and a form of US messaging to the Kremlin that the US was prepared to distance itself from the complacent policies of the Obama Administration. In short, you are seeing American pushback in the post-Soviet space with a goal of securing the flanks in advance of the key strategic goal of eliminating ISIS. How Trump may balance these efforts remains to be seen, particularly as NATO ally Turkey remains upset about future US cooperation with its Kurdish-led proxy, the SDF in Syria. Maintaining a balance in all these efforts, juggling ties with Ankara, Moscow, and to a certain extent with China during a crisis in North Korea has dominated the agenda of the Trump Administration, not too mention a domestic uproar at home over the recent dismissal of the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, James Comey.

CI: How, in your opinion, will the attitude of the United States towards the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict change during the Trump administration? Recently there has been comparatively little US activity with regard to conflict resolution, and Russia seems to be acting as the leading, if not a sole, broker in the process. Do you think that this trend will continue or will we see changes as the priorities of Trump's foreign policy become clearer in the near future?

Glen Howard: The absence of US activity in Karabakh is a temporary phenomenon and will not last too long. First of all, what is often overlooked is that this is not the Azerbaijan of 1991. It is much different country now and for the first time since independence is developing a modern Army to defend its national interests. The days of being totally dependent on the Minsk Group process or the United States are much different today than 20 years ago. Please do not get me wrong, the role of the United States and the OSCE remains important, but as the recent fighting from a year ago last April, and more recently in mid-May demonstrate, Azerbaijan is prepared militarily to push back and defend itself when pressed and its army is an instrument of its national policy. It is true that the Trump Administration policy toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is obviously taking a back seat to the other issues outlined earlier in my interview, namely defeating ISIS. The American path to defeating ISIS will revolve around bilateral relationships with Turkey, Russia, the Assad government in Damascus, our NATO allies, and Iraq.

With Rex Tillerson as the Secretary of State, there are a lot of positive things that Azerbaijan can look forward to under his leadership. As a former senior executive at Exxon-Mobil, Tillerson naturally has an interest in this part of the world and knows the Caspian region well. He understands the players and strategic interests of the competing parties in the South Caucasus and might be considered a younger version of James Baker, the former Secretary of State. This knowledge of the Caspian region will help equip Tillerson with a better sense of understanding than most of the previous Secretary of States before him. Another aspect is his sense of realpolitik, and a likely tendency to avoid lecturing countries about their domestic policies. I think it is safe to say that the entire Trump Administration will be different in this respect. Once Tillerson develops a staff at State and is able to fill key positions as Secretary, then he will start to formulate his policy and vision of foreign policy under Trump. Before Tillerson can develop a policy toward Karabakh, he must have the personnel in the right positions at the State Department to implement his policy objectives and those of President Trump. The same applies to Mattis, who has over 53 positions at the Pentagon that remain unfilled. These should be filled sometime soon by political appointees. To a certain extent, no policy can be adequately developed until these positions at State and DOD are filled. Then there is a policy review process of developing a policy. A key adviser to Tillerson is former Secretary of State James Baker, Condoleezza Rice, and Robert Gates. These are great voices to listen to and are genuinely supportive of the need to maintain a free and independent South Caucasus. My deepest fear is that a prolonged entanglement of the United States in Syria following a planned offensive against ISIS in Raqqa might bog the United States down in Syria in a way that distracts the United States from its interests in the South Caucasus. This may tempt Moscow to continue its malicious behavior in the post-Soviet space.

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CI: The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains in a deadlock, as hopes for a breakthrough in the negotiations after the April 2016 escalation have faded. Local and international experts frequently claim that this deadlock paves the way to more violence, which might spiral into a fully-fledged war. Do you think that such a situation is dangerous for the interests of the US/West, and is there a clear need for more US contribution/involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process?

Glen Howard: Great question. Let me address this in the following way. The dangerous precedent created by Putin's invasion and annexation of Crimea is that one country will, by force of arms, seek to change the borders of another neighboring state. What the hybrid war in Donbas and Crimea demonstrated is that we have passed the age of the 1990s when Russia was a weak state and relied on dividing its neighbors by use of frozen conflicts is now over. Russia is back and the use of military force is back in its toolkit against its neighbors. In the 1990s, countries like Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova were weak states and barely had a functioning army. Russia could bully its neighbors, so the states affected by the frozen conflicts had to rely on outside support from the United States and other great powers to try to find a diplomatic solution to those conflicts. Of the three states affected by the frozen conflicts only one state – Azerbaijan - decided to build a real national army that is becoming a modern force in the South Caucasus. I fear that the deadlock in Karabakh is dangerously moving away from the auspices of the Madrid principles as agreed by the OSCE, and becoming a war of attrition along the line of contact. The events of last April and again this May show that open warfare can resume anywhere and anytime in Karabakh with deadly effect. Azerbaijan has a new defense minister who is building a modern army, and while peace remains a goal of Azerbaijan in resolving this dispute, Baku will defend its forces if provoked and will push back with a 'measured' degree of force to enhance its continuing diplomacy. Recent transfers of Iskander missile systems to Armenia by Moscow seem to be a dangerous turn in the arms transfer policies of Russia. A new phase is appearing in Nagorno-Karabakh, whereby Moscow is militarizing the Armenian side to a degree to correct what the Kremlin sees as a growing military advantage by Azerbaijan. In sum, Moscow seeks peace through the OSCE process but is arming both sides. The Trump Administration is busy sorting out its policies and strategy. Until they can do this I fear the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict will remain on the back burner of US policies for the near future.

**Interview was conducted by Azad Garibov,
Editor-In-Chief of the Caucasus International**