

The Southern Caucasus: Ethical Challenges Informing the Application of American Power

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*No region of the world equaled the Caucasus in proving how bloody
and messy the death of a large empire can be.*

—Robert Kaplan, *Eastward to Tartary*

No one has ever been quite sure where Europe ends and Asia starts.

—*The Economist*, 27 November 2017

Context and Scope

This paper supports the 2018 CGSC Ethics Symposium by examining the ethical implications posed by applying U.S. elements of power, including potential military operations, in the South Caucasus region. So it looks at some of the underlying forces “that might not be well understood by U.S. participants,” in the words of the symposium announcement. Greater knowledge of the Southern Caucasus enhances a more effective application of The Army Ethic: “In war and peace, we recognize the intrinsic dignity and worth of all people, treating them with respect.”¹ Additionally, acquiring in-depth knowledge of any region, not solely this one, is a pre-requisite to acquiring the necessary military expertise in order to apply landpower successfully in any given context. In particular, this paper supports the “moral-ethical” as well as the “political-cultural” fields, two of the four areas deemed critical to expert knowledge in ADRP 1, *The Army Profession*. The latter, for example, applies to Army organizations dealing with outside organizations—“particularly with unified action partners and civilian populations, both foreign and domestic, in all civil-military relations.”² It is this intent of this paper to contribute to the development of more expert knowledge on the South Caucasus region.

Hopefully, the observations in this paper will add depth and nuance to knowledge of a region that is already somewhat familiar to the current CGSOC student or graduate. While the “GAAT” scenario (Georgia-Azerbaijan-Armenia-Turkey) has been present in the CGSOC core curriculum for well over a decade, there is a tendency to focus on the region’s broader contextual themes, whether they be actor driven (the role of regional hegemony such as Russia or Iran) or issue driven (energy or regional stability, for example). This paper will add depth and breadth to an understanding of perhaps less well-known aspects of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, with ethical ramifications for the United States as well as U.S. European Command—the combatant command whose area of responsibility encompasses this region.

Its role as a key scenario in the CGSOC curriculum aside, the South Caucasus region merits study in its own right. The region has routinely been characterized as a land bridge between Europe and Central Asia or as a “geopolitical fault line.”³ Others see the South Caucasus as a region in search of an identity, consisting solely of individual countries that lack any coherent integration. Journalist Robert Kaplan, a long-time observer of the region, once characterized it as “Russia’s Wild West, [where] since the seventeenth century,

Russian colonialists have knocked their heads against the walls of steep gorges trying to subdue congeries of unruly peoples.”⁴ Indeed, closed land borders and frozen conflicts involving multiple countries help to bolster this view.

There are multiple observations on the current and future state of affairs in the South Caucasus. Some are pessimistic and do not see a positive outcome in the offing: “The region has been the most unstable part of the former Soviet Union in terms of the numbers, intensity and length of its ethnic and civil conflicts.”⁵ Some see what’s happening in the region today as a redux of “the Great Game,” in which the world’s great powers are vying for influence and territorial hegemony over this vulnerable portion of the former Soviet Union, especially in light of Russia’s recent revanchist tendencies. Still others, such as author Parag Khanna, view the Southern Caucasus and its three independent republics in a positive light, with endless opportunities for connectivity and infrastructure growth. Regardless of viewpoint, the region merits study for a number of reasons that will hopefully be made evident by this paper.

For purposes of this article, the Southern Caucasus consists solely of the states of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. It does not attempt to tackle Jeffrey Mankoff’s “Big Caucasus” formulation,⁶ which includes the seven Russian republics of the Northern Caucasus, nor does it include Russia, Turkey or Iran themselves—although they exert tremendous influence over the actions of the three smaller states and will be mentioned frequently in this paper. Indeed, as a DJIMO instructor I often liken the region to “three metallic objects surrounded by three magnets of varying strength,” indicating that Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan respond in varying degrees to the surrounding powers vying for hegemonic influence over them.

The plan of this paper is to lay out in successive sections (loosely based on the PMESII framework of joint doctrine) broad challenges in the Southern Caucasus countries that may pose ethical questions for the U.S. and EUCOM in the application of national/military elements of power. A framing question accompanies each section to help the reader focus on the potential issues at hand. At the end of each section’s analysis, I attempt to answer the “so-what” question by providing some broad recommendations to confront each ethical challenge. While some may not be entirely original or particularly innovative, they will provide students and readers alike with some additional context for understanding this complex region from an ethical perspective.

Zero-Sum Game

“How does the United States and EUCOM remain neutral in a region beset by regional conflicts and internal strife?”

There is something striking if one looks at a historical map of the Southern Caucasus during the Soviet period (1952-1991).⁷ The geographic outlines of the major frozen conflicts besetting the region today are clearly visible. The Nagorno-Karabakh, perhaps the most intractable problem facing the Caucasus today, appears with clear borders as an autonomous oblast (equivalent to a province) within the Azerbaijani Soviet Socialist Republic (S.S.R). To the north, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are likewise visible as autonomous entities (A.S.S.R) within the borders of Georgia. The bottom line is that most of the Southern Caucasus conflicts are well rooted in the past, some having cultural and ethnic origins traceable to ancient times. They are not simply a product of the Soviet period, nor are they an entirely recent phenomenon.

There is a reason the Southern Caucasus has garnered the reputation as the most troubled part of the former Soviet Union. Among the three countries—Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan—there are a number of conflicts—some frozen, some not so frozen, others festering based on long-held grievances. These conflicts manifest themselves politically and geographically into a hodgepodge of a map featuring breakaway territories, enclaves, exclaves and closed borders—all of which can be quite bewildering to someone trying to understand region for the first time. Indeed, a very cogent question is whether or not the Southern

Caucasus is a “region” at all, or simply a conglomerate of three disparate republics trying to go it alone, based on a number of ethnic or religious tensions and grievances either between or amongst them. Strategist George Friedman evidences another standard characterization of the region:

The Caucasus remains a flashpoint, and the Russians have increased the temperature by signing a long-term treaty with Armenia and sending a substantial number of troops there. This puts Georgia, a country supported by the West, in a pincer between Russia and Armenia. And it also threatens Azerbaijan, the major alternative to Russian energy for Europe.⁸

Thus, there remains the persistent idea that the Southern Caucasus could erupt at any time—at worst, resulting in a conflagration involving the world’s great powers; at best, resulting in a renewed war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contentious Nagorno-Karabakh that would be far more lethal and destructive than the 1992 conflict.

Perhaps the defining and most intractable of the region’s conflicts is the Nagorno-Karabakh, the disputed territory within the country of Azerbaijan but occupied by Armenia since 1994. Roughly translated using a mixture of Russian and Turkish-Persian words as “mountainous black garden,”⁹ the Nagorno-Karabakh is symbolic of what author and strategist Parag Khanna calls “devolution”—“Everywhere empires are splintering and authority is dissipating away from central capitals toward provinces and cities that seek autonomy in their financial and diplomatic affairs.”¹⁰ The Nagorno-Karabakh is a conflict zone marked by a real world “Line of Contact (LoC),”—essentially a no man’s land—and contested by two of the three Southern Caucasus states who refuse to compromise, based on long-standing political and ethno-cultural claims to the territory. Despite multiple attempts by the Minsk Group (Russia, the U.S. and France) of the Organization for Security Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE)—in addition to international pressure—to resolve the long-standing conflict, the situation remains unresolved to this day.

Except for frequent incidents along the LOC, there has been no major escalation by the two sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh—that is, until April 2016—when large-scale fighting broke out once again. With a resurgent armed forces rebuilt largely on revenues from its significant oil and natural gas reserves, Azerbaijan undertook a four-day offensive, utilizing new technologies including “suicide” drones, which took Armenia by surprise and wrested away some previously Armenian-held territory. Between 60-200 personnel on either side were killed, but Azerbaijan declared victory with reclamation of strategically significant territory.¹¹ While many observers predicted a major conflagration to follow, Russia stepped in, mediated a cease-fire, and the situation has since remained stable, though not without much consternation and continued calls for international involvement to end the crisis once and for all.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is symbolic of the zero-sum game nature of the Southern Caucasus—complex, intractable, and without an end in sight. Parag Khanna underscores this point with an observation on Russian aggression in 2014.

Particularly Russia’s effective dismemberment of Ukraine raised alarm bells that world is retreating into zero-sum territorial logic. The former Soviet space certainly presents other live cases: From Estonia to Moldova to the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia constantly manipulates ethnic Russian minority populations with passports and propaganda.¹²

The “live case” in the Caucasus is obviously multi-faceted, with Russia’s role key to any conflict resolution. Not only does Russia play a critical role as arbiter on the Minsk Group of the OSCE, it incongruously provides arms to both Armenia and Azerbaijan—generally defensive to the former and offensive to the latter.¹³ Additionally, Russia continues to maintain a military presence of about 5,000 armed forces at the 102d military base in Gyumri and has extended that lease with Armenia until 2044.¹⁴ Indeed, Russia’s military presence throughout the Southern Caucasus is well known and acknowledged by EUCOM

Commander General Curtis Scaparrotti in his posture statement of 8 March 2018 before the Senate Armed Services Committee.¹⁵

Aside from the Nagorno-Karabakh, CGSOC students are already familiar with some of the other geographic flashpoints and issues of the “zero-sum game” variety. While Armenia and Azerbaijan wrestle over the N-K, Georgia and Russia haggle over two of the vestiges from their brief 2008 conflict—Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both are breakaway regions which resulted in the internal displacement of ethnic Georgians (IDPs), as well as the permanent stationing of Russian troops inside both breakaways, to the consternation of Georgia and in violation of the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement. In Abkhazia, Russia concluded an agreement for a base until 2059—potentially 2074, including up to 5,000 military personnel with sophisticated arms, both offensive and defensive.¹⁶ Similarly, Russia stages 1,200 personnel in Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, with similar weaponry and a long-range lease.¹⁷

Given this complex scenario, and returning to the question posed at the beginning of this section, the central ethical consideration for U.S. policy and potential EUCOM military operations must be, in the words of Kuchin and Mankoff—“First, do no harm.”¹⁸ This is a difficult path to tread, and perhaps precisely for this reason American involvement in the region, both from a national as well as a military perspective, has been relatively light in comparison to others. Thus, remaining neutral is a primary imperative, given the zero-sum game nature of the conflicts in the region. “Doing no harm” in this context means not taking sides in the highly contentious Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and not exacerbating the already tense situation between Georgia and its two occupied territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Of course, there are multiple factors that challenge America’s ability to remain neutral regarding both flashpoints. Regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia is a “first among equals” on the Minsk Group of the OSCE, charged with resolving the conflict. Yet at the same time, it clearly backs Armenia while supplying weaponry to both it and Azerbaijan. Indeed, there are many who believe it is to Russia’s advantage to prolong the conflict in the N-K. On the opposite side of the conflict, Turkey—for political and ethno-cultural reasons, stands with Azerbaijan in its claims to regaining the disputed territory, and has closed its borders with Armenia, at least since 1993, due to the conflict. To complicate matters, Turkey is a long-standing NATO member and refuses to acknowledge the 1915 genocide of Armenians on the Anatolian peninsula. Regarding Georgia, the U.S. supports the nation’s integrity and recognizes neither Abkhazia nor South Ossetia. It also supports Georgia’s eventual accession into NATO, a process, along with Ukraine’s, that lags due to Russian aggression as well as European intransigence on the issue.

“Doing no harm” does not mean, however, that the U.S. should disengage from the region. From a national perspective, America should take a more pro-active role in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh through the Minsk Group, emphasizing the diplomatic element of power and seeking to better understand the perspective of both the Armenians as well as the Azerbaijanis. The U.S. should not acquiesce to Russian leadership in this regard, nor should it take action that favors either side. Because the N-K conflict is the flashpoint with the greatest potential to embroil the region in future conflict, the U.S. should exercise due caution, “do no harm,” and prevent this from happening.

Aside from diplomacy, the U.S. should continue its foreign assistance to all three countries, contingent upon factors such as human rights performance and in support of U.S. objectives for the region. Much of the goodwill from the Southern Caucasus’ support of U.S. and coalition efforts in the War on Terror has seemed to dissipate; while all three countries supported OIF, OEF and to varying degrees the Northern Distribution Network, only Georgia receives appreciable amounts of foreign aid today. According to State Department’s Foreign Assistance website, in FY 2017 Georgia received \$60.16 million while Armenia and Azerbaijan received \$26.07 million and \$14.97 million, respectively. For FY 2019, the planned funding figures are \$31.1 million, \$6.04 million, and \$4.00 million, respectively. These figures are reflective of Georgia’s

commitment to U.S. and EUCOM initiatives in the region, as well as the human rights performance of Armenia and especially Azerbaijan (see next section). Also obvious is the downturn in U.S. foreign assistance in general, when compared to the previous Administration.

In the fictitious “GAAT” scenario, major war occurs as a U.S. led-coalition defends Azerbaijan against an attack by “Ahurastan,” a fictitious breakaway region of northern Iran largely comprised of ethnic Azerbaijanis seeking to consolidate its gains with the seizure of the Kura River basin. In the “real world” Southern Caucasus, the U.S. is not likely to go to war soon, either in defense of Georgian interests or on either side of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Major combat operations are not likely, however; the ROMO spectrum encompasses multiple activities to include theater security cooperation, security force assistance, and other forms of engagement.

Again, the guiding ethical principle should be “do no harm.” U.S. Forces should again remain neutral and take no actions to exacerbate regional tensions. U.S. Forces should abide by the Leahy Amendment in all security cooperation activities, which specifically prohibits providing assistance to any security forces of a foreign country if determined to have committed a gross violation of human rights by the Secretary of State.¹⁹ As will be shown in subsequent sections of this paper, this is an issue that potentially affects both sides of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. During engagements and exercises, EUCOM should emphasize professional ethics in all aspects. Additionally, potential engagements with host nation PME institutions, especially in Armenia and Azerbaijan, should reinforce topics found in both the NATO Partnership Action Plan on Defence Institution Building Reference Curriculum, as well as the NATO Generic Officer Professional Military Education Reference Curriculum. With respect to the former, of particular importance are the ethics and leadership blocks dealing with the individual in the profession, the profession at work and the profession and society.²⁰ Concerning the latter, U.S. Forces should emphasize and/or reinforce topics such as human rights, protection of civilians, rules of engagement and standards of behavior on the battlefield.²¹ Since all three countries have Individual Partner Action Plans (IPAP) under NATO, there exists the basis for future engagement with Armenia and Azerbaijan.²²

Maintaining a neutral stance and doing no harm will continue to be an ethical challenge for the United States and EUCOM, given the zero-sum game interpretation of the regional situation by the multiple states involved. Indeed, there are many who feel that the states of the Southern Caucasus can make no real progress until they overcome brinksmanship and seek real solutions to problems. This will be up to the individual states, as no externally directed efforts have had any lasting impact on any of the major flashpoints despite years of effort and negotiation.

Fledgling Democracies and Fragile States

“How should the U.S./EUCOM deal with countries that fall short of the bar with regard to the rule of law?”

There are no Jeffersonian democracies in the Southern Caucasus. Nor should we expect that there be—with Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan gaining independence only as recently as 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At best, they are fragile or weak democracies, seeking to tread the difficult path between identification with the West, deepening connections with the Russian Federation, or some combination of both.

The problem is complicated by the countries’ desire to identify with the West: “The question of where Europe’s eastern border lies has bedeviled statesmen for centuries. It has proved equally difficult for the European Union, which must decide how to deal with countries to its east that would like to join the club.”²³ A key example in this regard is the European Union’s Eastern Partnership program which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.

One of the most respected global indices for measuring the strength of governments is Freedom House's "Freedom in the World." Freedom House is an NGO whose work tends to get the attention of governments and publics worldwide. In essence, the countries of the South Caucasus are found wanting. As an example, according to Freedom House—which measures the strength of freedom around the world based on 25 indicators—none of the countries in the region is rated "Free"—the highest rating and one given to 45% of the 195 countries rated, or 88 total.²⁴ To make matters worse, none of the surrounding regional powers fares any better—Russia and Iran are rated "Not Free," while perhaps the most disturbing recent trend is Turkey's downgrading in 2018 to "Not Free," based on President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's brutal repressive measures following the Turkish military coup of 2016. So much for leadership by example.

As for the Southern Caucasus countries, the Freedom in the World 2018 report designates Armenia and Georgia as "Partially Free," while Azerbaijan has the lowest designation of "Not Free." (As a point of comparison, 58 of the 195 (30%) countries Freedom House rates are "Partially Free," while 49 or 25% are "Not Free.")²⁵ Despite Georgia's rating, Freedom House has designated the state as "one to watch" in 2018, mainly because the ruling Georgian Dream Party has enacted reforms that assures its own power, while emasculating potential opposition. Additionally, the report highlights the undue influence of power broker Bidzina Ivanishvili, who holds no elected office but wields considerable control behind the scenes.²⁶ Armenia's rating suffers from governmental corruption, constitutional reforms that consolidate the regime's power at the expense of opposition groups, and police repression against mass demonstrators and journalists.²⁷ Azerbaijan distinguishes itself among the Caucasian states as the only country rated "Not Free." Perhaps buoyed by oil wealth that gives it more freedom of maneuver than other states, President Ilham Aliyev continues to take repressive measures that "draw global attention to the country's dismal human rights record."²⁸ Azerbaijan is noted for government repression against the political opposition, journalists and the media, and human rights activists. Indeed, Azerbaijan's increasingly negative human rights record has concerned many potential donor nations, including the United States. Freedom House's observations on the human rights performance of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are supported by other indices as well, including Amnesty International's 2017/2018 report and Human Rights Watch's World Report 2017. Both note the decline in Georgia following the accession of Georgia Dream to power, the uneven performance of Armenia, and the continuing crackdown in Azerbaijan against opposition parties, the media, civil rights activists and NGOs.²⁹ When it comes to the countries of the Southern Caucasus, Azerbaijan is in a class by itself, underscoring the increasing authoritarianism under President Aliyev.

What are the ethical implications of dealing with countries that do not quite meet standards when it comes to issues such as democracy, fragility, corruption and human rights? This has always been a difficult issue, because those countries most in need of U.S. and international support normally cannot meet the minimum qualifications for international loans or key developmental programs such as the U.S.'s Millennium Challenge Account. So the ethical question is does the United States provide much needed aid to such countries, or withhold it until they show improvement in governance and human rights performance?

America tends to hold countries accountable for their human rights record, even withholding aid when it could benefit publics in the receiving countries. As an example, the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed a compact Armenia in 2006 to include improvements to irrigation networks and road construction. In 2011, MCC closed the agreement, citing "concerns about the status of governance in Armenia."³⁰ Subsequently, the World Bank assumed funding for the original MCC-planned construction. A more complex example involves Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, passed by Congress in 1992 with strong advocacy by the powerful American Armenian lobby. The act prohibited the U.S. from providing any direct foreign aid to Azerbaijan, until the President determined that the country ceased its blockade against Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh. In response to Azerbaijan's support of the U.S. in the War on Terror, however, Congress passed legislation that allowed the President to waive Section 907 if it was necessary for counter-terrorism purposes or the operational readiness of U.S. or coalition forces.³¹

In the application of its elements of power, America must once again exercise caution and emphasize neutrality low-cost, low-visibility programs that emphasize democracy building. That is precisely what the U.S. is doing now; the only recommendation is to restore foreign aid to its previous FY17 levels.³² The United States should continue to abide by the Leahy Amendment regarding assistance to security forces, and apply the 907 waiver judiciously, based on real progress in Azerbaijan. In its strategic communications, themes and messaging, America must continue to emphasize democracy and encourage civil rights compliance in all three countries of the South Caucasus region. EUCOM should emphasize similar themes as it executes theater security cooperation (mostly with Georgia) at the lower end of the ROMO spectrum, emphasizing professionalism, the law of armed conflict, respect for human rights, protection of civilians, and similar themes.

Culture, Narratives and IDPs

“How should the U.S./EUCOM accommodate multiple cultures and ethnicities, genocidal narratives and internally displaced persons in its engagement with the Southern Caucasus?”

One of the implications of the region’s characterization as a land bridge is that there have been multiple “flows” across it, in terms of both peoples and goods. Culturally, the countries of the Southern Caucasus are complicated—diverse and fragmented, with ethno-linguistic lines not coincident with political boundaries. To encapsulate this phenomenon, Robert Kaplan observes:

Today, the Caucasus is shared by four countries and about a dozen autonomous regions, with as many as fifty ethnic groups, each with its own language or dialect. Some are well known and numerous, such as the Georgians, the Armenians, the Azeri Turks of Azerbaijan, and the Chechens; others are smaller and obscure, such as the Ingush, the Ossetes, the Avars, the Abkhaz, the Balkhars, the Kumyks, the Mingrelians, and the Meskhetian Turks.³³

In a similar vein, Martin Cook poses this insightful question: “How does one deal with the fact that, in much of the world, membership in a particular ethnic group within an internationally recognized border is more an indicator of one’s identity than the name of the country one one’s passport.”³⁴ Indeed, close scrutiny of a cultural-linguistic map of the region³⁵ highlights many of the challenges. Ethnic Georgians largely inhabit Georgia, are generally of the Eastern Orthodox Christian faith, and are one of the group comprising the Caucasian group of peoples. Armenians, an Indo-European people, are found in Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh. Azeris, a Turkic people belonging to the Altaic group, tend to be Shia Muslim. Thus, one can consider the borders between Georgia-Armenia and Azerbaijan-Iran-Turkey as a “civilizational fault line” envisioned by Samuel Huntington.

There are significant cultural and religious differences that must be respected and recognized; perhaps most characteristic of the region is the Christian-Muslim split between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Once again, Robert Kaplan notes this stark contrast from his travels throughout the Caucasus:

For Armenians, Karabakh is the last outpost of their Christian civilization and a historic haven of Armenian princes and bishops before the eastern Turkic world begins. Azerbaijanis talk of it as a cradle, nursery, or conservatoire, the birthplace of their musicians and poets. Historically, Armenia is diminished without this enclave and its monasteries and its mountain lords; geographically and economically, Azerbaijan is not fully viable without Nagorny Karabakh.³⁶

The Southern Caucasus is replete with ethnolinguistic groups that defy political boundaries and are increasingly seeking self-identification. According to author Svante Cornell, ethnic minorities in the Southern (as well as Northern) Caucasus had several choices when it came to self-identification—the choices included the tribe/clan to which they belonged, the nation whose territory they lived in, or a supra-

national entity such as religion, as in the case of Islam. With the dissolution (or devolution) of the Soviet Union, many are choosing tribal or clan relationships in lieu of the other choices—the Abkhaz or Ossetes, for example in the two breakaway republics of Georgia. Unfortunately for the Caucasian republics, Cornell observes: “So far, it seems that most minorities have refused to adopt the national identity of their republic of residence.”³⁷ As noted previously, with 50 distinct ethnic and cultural groups in the region, this does not bode well for either state or regional identity in the Southern Caucasus. Cornell also warns that stronger group identity, and not discrimination by the state, is what is driving an “...increasingly conflictual attitude of minorities.”³⁸

Another issue in the Southern Caucasus is the presence of national narratives that includes themes of genocide and victimization. Foremost is the Armenian genocide of 1915 which has already been mentioned. Despite years of haggling over this issue, Turkey still refuses to acknowledge its role as a perpetrator of genocide. As a result, Turkish-Armenian relations are strained and land borders between the two countries remained closed. Rather than a mere vestige of the distant past, the Turkish ethnic cleansing of the Anatolian Peninsula remains a key driver in the relations between the two nations. Another example is the Khojaly massacre of 1992 during the Nagorno-Karabakh War, in which Armenian armed forces massacred a large number of civilian non-combatants, interspersed with a few militiamen—the total death toll estimated at 485.³⁹

A third issue in this section regards IDPs, which are a direct result of the previously “hot” conflicts in both Georgia and Azerbaijan. CGSOC students are already familiar with the number of persons displaced as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. That number is estimated to be as high as 724,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis from the N-K and 413,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan proper.⁴⁰ Perhaps less well known are the ethnic Georgians displaced from Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. An estimated 250,000 fit into this category.

So what are the ethical implications of this complex panoply of cultures, narratives, and displaced populations? American policy and EUCOM programs must emphasize respect for cultures, consideration of narratives, and protection of IDPs, especially in the case of future conflict. Regarding strategic themes and messages, the U.S. must be careful not to exacerbate existing tensions or to take actions that impart favor to one side or the other, especially in the case of the volatile Nagorno-Karabakh. Regarding narratives, the U.S. must be careful not to diminish ethnic minorities or ignore the importance of narratives to the affected publics. As Stratfor founder George Friedman observes, “The fact is that we all have memories, and all but the most powerful nations feel victimized by some wrong that cannot be made right. This is true in the Balkans, and this is certainly true in the Caucasus. Failure to understand the passions of others can lead you into grave political error.”⁴¹ Author Thomas de Waal recommends that Armenia and Azerbaijan develop a “third narrative,” one that emphasizes cooperation instead of recent animosities viewed through a single lens. Perhaps de Waal’s solution is the only one that can put an end to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict once and for all.

Protecting IDPs will be a critical issue in any future lethal application of the military element of power in the Southern Caucasus. Indeed, it characterizes the environment today, given the current state of affairs along the LoC in the Nagorno-Karabakh:

Given the close proximity of civilians to the front lines, heavy casualties would be likely from shelling or other military deployments. Both sides [Armenia and Azerbaijan] alleged that other engaged in atrocities during the April 2016 escalation, which Minsk Group co-chairs condemned in their December 2016 statement. Humanitarian agencies in the region are beefing up their capacities and developing contingency plans.⁴²

Should EUCOM find itself in a lethal war in the Southern Caucasus, protection of IDPs will be a key concern. The issue is made more complex by the fact that the region's host nation governments are not known for their strong record of human rights; indeed, Azerbaijan is heavily criticized for its repression of NGOs, which would play a key role in the protection of civilians in any future scenario.

Infrastructure

“How should the U.S./EUCOM protect U.S. interests in a region where energy resources and pipelines are ubiquitous and competition for new infrastructure is fierce?”

Perhaps no single area represents the potential future of the Southern Caucasus as does infrastructure. Indeed, despite the plethora of closed borders, frozen conflicts, enclaves as well as exclaves, a remarkable latticework of roads, railways and oil and gas pipelines overlays the region. Unfortunately, the lines tend to be either east west or north south in orientation, not fully incorporating all regional states, in particular Armenia.

An aerial view of the Caspian is revealing, as is any map of the Caucasus region that portrays oil or gas lines, roads or railroads. The region is truly being integrated into a modern day “Silk Road.” Parag Khanna, author of *Connectography: Mapping the Future of Global Civilization*, refers to this phenomenon as “inclusive remapping,” which he considers an imperative for progress in the future world order.⁴³ (This in contrasted with “exclusive remapping,” illustrated by Russia’s seizure of Georgian territory in 2008, as well its aggression against the Crimea and the eastern Ukraine in 2014). The author takes this argument farther, and considers inclusive remapping as an ethical imperative:

The touchstone of morality in a global society is leveraging connectedness for utilitarian ends: achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people. We must apply John Rawl’s test of societal morality on a global scale, judging ourselves by how we treat those at the bottom and justifying inequality to the extent that it improves the lives of the poorest... We are, in fact, on the right track: Globalization and connectivity have improved the quality of life for billions of people even if they have also made high inequality inevitable.⁴⁴

For the application of U.S. elements of power, particularly diplomatic and economic, there are multiple ethical implications of pursuing infrastructure improvements in the Southern Caucasus, in a manner similar to U.S. backing of the successful Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. (Indeed, Parag Khanna considers the completion of the pipeline as an “anti-clash of civilizations” example, where multiple states (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) overcame cultural barriers in the name of greater connectivity). First, the U.S. must again balance its interests with the realities of the region, taking into account the increasingly authoritarian government of Azerbaijan, for example. While energy companies don’t necessarily care about this issue, America must consider it in its foreign policy calculus. Additionally, several nations in the region have state-owned oil or natural gas concerns, particularly Gazprom in Russia and SOCAR—the State Oil Company of the Azerbaijan Republic—that immediately politicize any trans-regional infrastructure plans into potential zero-sum games, as discussed earlier in this paper. From a EUCOM perspective, protection of infrastructure is a potential concern, particularly in any future conflict involving use of force. While there are indications that even Russia purposely avoided damaging the BTC pipeline in during the 2008 Russo-Georgia War, there are no guarantees that future adversaries will avoid damage to the region’s extensive energy infrastructure. EUCOM would have to be prepared in its application of the joint function of protection, and consequence management should any of the network of pipelines be damaged.

Infrastructure improvements is perhaps one thing people can agree upon, from a policy perspective. Jeffrey Mankoff offers this recommendation:

Beyond energy, Washington should encourage the construction of new transportation links, such as roads, railways, and ports that will make it easier to link the Big Caucasus region [including the republics of the North Caucasus] to the outside world and to global markets.⁴⁵

If there is an ethical imperative to improve global connectivity, then the U.S. will have to balance that tendency with its national security calculus. If the Southern Caucasus is to benefit as a region, then a previously neglected state such as Armenia must take part in its “inclusive remapping.”

Conclusion

As has been shown by the preceding analysis, the Southern Caucasus countries present multiple ethical challenges that should inform the application of U.S. elements of power in the region. Because the U.S. is not likely to go to war anytime soon, most of these challenges influence elements of power applied at the lower end of the range of military operations spectrum. This is in spite of the April 2016 escalation of the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan and some analysts’ view that it marked a certain run-up to future conflagration. Thus, the laws of armed conflict, which ideally apply to all combatants, will most likely have less applicability for the United States and, by extension, EUCOM given the current situation in the Southern Caucasus. As in the past, much U.S. involvement in the region will be in the non-lethal realm at the lower end of the range of military operations spectrum.

For American policy, these areas include negotiation, state building, developmental aid and security assistance. For EUCOM, any operations along the ROMO spectrum will support GEN Scaparrotti’s overarching priority to deter Russia and defend against any potential aggression, especially within the bounds of the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI). At the present, the “heavy lifter” within the region is Georgia, which continues to support the Afghanistan mission (Operation Resolute Support) in much broader numbers than either Armenia or Azerbaijan. This is reflected in the relatively higher foreign assistance America provides to Georgia when compared with its two neighbors.

The ethical considerations in this paper, by no means exhaustive, are representative of the many challenges associated with this unique and historic land bridge between Europe and Asia. The Southern Caucasus continues to be a volatile region that seems to plod along with its frozen conflicts, closed borders and ethno-cultural tensions. Yet, it continues to command attention and respect for its energy resources, fledgling democracies and developmental potential. While overall American and EUCOM efforts in the region are relatively low when compared to other regions—due in no small part to increasingly authoritarian regimes—the potential exists for much greater levels of involvement. Either the region will continue to implode or devolve into major war, or it will adapt a version of de Waal’s “third narrative” and finally solve the long-term conflicts and grievances that beset the region. In either scenario, the ethical considerations presented in this paper will no doubt challenge decision makers as they navigate either course towards a more stable, peaceful and productive South Caucasus region.

End Notes

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- 5 Jim Nichol, *Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Political Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2 April 2014), 18.
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- 13 Alexander Clapp, “Prisoner of the Caucasus.” *The National Interest*, March/April 2017, 53.
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- 19 22 U.S. Code 2378d, “Limitation on Assistance to Security Forces.” Accessed January 26, 2018. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/test/22/2387d>.
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- 22 Regarding the comments on PME, the author has experience developing PME with another IPAP member, Moldova, during the period 2009-2014. Moldova is similar to Georgia, in that it has a Russian-occupied breakaway region, the Transnistria, on its eastern border with Ukraine. The Moldovan Armed

Forces were very receptive to the NATO curriculum and adopted key elements of it as they developed a “Master’s Course,” which replicates elements of both intermediate and senior staff colleges in the United States armed forces. While similar efforts are taking place in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan could follow suit in the near future.

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45 Mankoff, 30.