Throughout much of its troubled history, the South Caucasus region has served as an arena for the competing interests of empires. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the three small countries in the region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—have struggled to overcome the legacy of seven decades of Soviet rule. The abrupt independence of these three states has been marked by the emergence of new threats from within, as the collapse of the Soviet system unleashed potent forces of separatism and secession, which challenge the sovereignty and territorial integrity of these states. This article examines the course of the conflicts, mediation approaches, and security implications of three secessionist entities: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabagh. Special attention is given to the US-funded “Georgian Train and Equip Programme” and the implications of Turkish-Armenian rapprochement on the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The article makes the case for promoting democratization, for engaging new political actors, and for promoting cross-border co-operation. It emphasizes the potential for progress on common issues as illustrated by the co-operation on combating wild-fires in the border area between Nagorno-Karabagh and Azerbaijan in 2006 led by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The article concludes that the real prerequisites for regional security and stability stem more from internal imperatives, ranging from legitimacy to leadership, than from external pressure or mediation. From this perspective, democratization must come first, prior to any effective or lasting resolution to the “frozen” conflicts of this “region at risk.”

Introduction

Historically, the South Caucasus region has served as an arena for the competing interests of larger empires. For the three small countries of the region—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—the competition for power and dominance has returned, as Russia, Turkey, and Iran seek to exert their own influences on the region. Along with these threats to stability and security, the region struggles to overcome the legacy of seven decades of Soviet rule; the successor states remain burdened by a
difficult course of economic and political reform, systemic transition, and nation-building. However, the fragility and vulnerability of the region also stems from an internal dynamic of secession, separatism, and self-determination, which has triggered ethnic clashes and war.²

Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are beset by three internal conflicts, which represent latent security risks and constant sources of tension. Following an unsuccessful war against Russia in August 2008, Georgia faces the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Meanwhile, Armenia and Azerbaijan continue to contest the status of the majority Armenian-populated enclave of Nagorno-Karabagh.³ These secessionist entities remain as unresolved impediments to lasting security and stability. As components of this “region at risk,” each of these three countries battles to either restore territorial integrity after the loss of separatist regions or to retain irredentist gains.⁴

From 1988 to 1994, Armenia and Azerbaijan waged war over Nagorno-Karabagh, home to the region’s first and most significant modern secessionist movement, which erupted well before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although effectively “frozen” by a lasting ceasefire reached in May 1994, the Karabagh issue continues to divide the region and has formed an obstacle to recent efforts to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey.⁵ For Armenia, the challenge is to ensure the status of Karabagh as either an independent state or as a part of Armenia itself. Armenia’s diplomatic strategy is to only offer concessions regarding Armenian-held areas of Azerbaijani territory beyond the borders of Nagorno-Karabagh.⁶ For Azerbaijan, the Karabagh conflict centers on the loss of its territorial integrity.⁷ The conflict serves as a painful reminder of the significant military defeat that Azerbaijan suffered after losing its war with the much smaller Armenia—a national humiliation that underpins its diplomacy regarding the conflict.⁸

Meanwhile, Georgia has long been plagued by an even more obvious erosion of its state authority and sovereignty. The dual conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia pose serious threats to its statehood. While Georgia’s loss of territorial integrity was as extensive as Azerbaijan’s loss, the implications are even more far-reaching for Georgia, as Russian power and influence is a key consideration for security and stability of the country.⁹ Importantly, the brief but dramatic August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia effectively thawed Georgia’s two “frozen” conflicts, raising new considerations over the question of sovereignty versus secession, and posing fresh concerns over the future of Georgia itself.
The first threat to Georgian statehood and sovereignty came in its initial stage of independence, with the outbreak of war for control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian forces sought to put down two separate secessionist movements, as South Ossetia initiated a campaign in 1989 to unify with neighboring North Ossetia in the Russian Federation, and Abkhazia declared outright independence from Georgia in July 1992.

The implications of the South Ossetia conflict were in some ways more serious, involving Russian interests as the Osset secessionist movement sought to join the Russian Federation. However, the scale of the fighting was rather limited, with an estimated total number of deaths of between 2,000 and 4,000 and the displacement of some tens of thousands of people. Interestingly, the conflict was triggered not by the 1989 move for unification by the Ossets, but by the harsh and repressive response by then-Georgian President Gamsakhurdia. In June 1992, Russia succeeded in brokering a ceasefire agreement, calling for the formation of a tripartite peacekeeping mission, comprised of Georgian, Ossetian, and Russian troops, to operate in a delineated “special security zone” around Tskhinvali, South Ossetia.

The Abkhaz conflict escalated as Russian and North Caucasian “volunteers,” who reportedly constituted the bulk of the Abkhaz separatist forces, successfully routed Georgian forces in 1993. At this stage, the war had left over 10,000 dead and resulted in over 200,000 displaced persons, mostly ethnic Georgians forced from their homes in Abkhazia. This forced exodus of Georgians remains one of the thorniest issues in the conflict, as the Georgian authorities demanded the return of their people prior to any negotiations over the status of Abkhazia. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz insisted on full recognition of their independence as a precondition to any large-scale repatriation.

These conflicts failed to reach any conclusive resolution and ended with fragile ceasefire agreements, which maintain a simmering degree of insecurity. The wars over South Ossetia, which lasted from 1990 to 1992, and Abkhazia, which spanned a shorter period of 1992 to 1993, were marked by cycles of refugee flight and significant numbers of displaced persons. The ceasefire agreements of 1992 and 1993 brought a suspension of armed hostilities, which was not accompanied by any political reconciliation. Since then, the stalemate has been consolidated, as the separatist regions were backed by varying degrees of Russian support, while international mediators engaged in peacekeeping efforts lack the political will or leverage to attempt any longer-term “peacemaking.”
This stalemate continued as the political, economic and even military institutions of “proto-statehood” were formed and consolidated in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.\textsuperscript{20}

The “frozen” and unresolved nature of these conflicts was complicated by the introduction of military “peacekeepers,” which contributed to the separation of forces along artificial borders. In Abkhazia, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was formed with a mandate to monitor the ceasefire agreement, while peacekeeping duties were carried out by a Russian-led force comprised of soldiers from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).\textsuperscript{21} In South Ossetia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission in Georgia was mandated to monitor the CIS peacekeeping mission. Prior to the August 2008 war, there were approximately 2,000 Russian “peacekeeping” troops stationed in Abkhazia and another 1,000 deployed in South Ossetia.\textsuperscript{22}

The specific characteristics of each actor contribute to the stalemate. Abkhazia had a long record of relative autonomy and enjoyed a degree of economic self-sufficiency, while South Ossetia had close ethnic, political, and commercial links with North Ossetia. Under several consecutive Georgian governments, Tbilisi consistently failed to offer any real political or economic incentives to entice either Abkhazia or South Ossetia to seriously consider returning to subordination under the Georgian state.\textsuperscript{23} In the long-term, this lack of vision by Georgian officials, coupled with a stubborn refusal to compromise, only entrenched the determination of the majority of the Abkhaz and Ossets to reject any possible return to Georgian rule.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Approaches to Georgian Security}

During its first decade of independence, Georgia experienced a breakdown of central authority, the spread of lawlessness in several regions, and the emergence of paramilitary groups and “warlords” in some areas.\textsuperscript{25} The governments of both the first elected leader, nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and his successor, former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, faced significant challenges from such “warlordism,” manifested through the localized power of small militias and armed gangs operating with near impunity.\textsuperscript{26} Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze both attempted to combat these armed militia—with varying levels of success. The rise of these militias demonstrated the failure of the Georgian armed forces to either effectively incorporate them into the military
structure, as in the case of Armenia, or to disarm and disband them, as in Azerbaijan.  

Although the Shevardnadze government faced a daunting challenge, with conflicts already flaring in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, its inability to counter or contain the threat from warlords contributed to national instability and state insecurity. The Shevardnadze period also marked a loss in authority over areas other than Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as central control over the southwestern Ajarian Autonomous Republic and the pro-Gamsakhurdia western provinces diminished greatly. The breakdown in military control over these areas eroded the credibility of the Georgian state, weakened economic and political reforms, compounded corruption, and endangered overall legitimacy.

After the "Rose Revolution" of November 2003, in which a group of young reformers led by former Justice Minister Mikheil Saakashvili forced the resignation of Shevardnadze, there were new hopes for a break-through in the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts. However, the optimism was short-lived, as the Saakashvili administration’s focus on defense spending represented the first commitment to building up the military after several years of neglect. The move to prioritize the Georgian military signaled a wider strategy to restore central control and authority. This approach was more ambitious than previous attempts to intimidate or coerce Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indeed, the Saakashvili strategy marked the start of a campaign designed to check the erosion of central government power that had continued unabated since the fall of the Soviet Union.

In many ways, the Saakashvili government acted on the basis of the recognition that it inherited a collapsing state, teetering on the brink of becoming a “failed” state. Although the central Georgian government was still years away from being able to retake the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force, the new government sought to restore its control over the remainder of the country while ensuring its own political survival by leveraging its new-found nationalist credentials and by producing immediate economic results. The Georgian government also exploited the Georgian Train and Equip Program (GTEP), an American project to build up the Georgian army for its own long-term interests.

**The Georgian Train and Equip Program**

In March 2002, the United States responded to the danger of Georgian “state failure” by launching a new $64 million programme of military
assistance—the GTEP, which provided specialized counter-terrorism training for two thousand elite Georgian troops. Designed as a flexible, time-phased training initiative, the GTEP supplemented the existing bilateral military-to-military relationship between Georgia and the United States, but was not designed to provide the Georgian military with offensive capabilities that would upset the already delicate balance of power in the region.\textsuperscript{36}

Through innovative “train-the-trainer” efforts, US Army Special Operations personnel served as an important—and often the only—force to professionalize and modernize the Georgian armed forces.\textsuperscript{37} Operationally, the programme centered on a counter-terrorism mission and served as a component of other US counter-terrorism efforts underway in the region in a broader campaign to bolster stability and counter Russian influence in the South Caucasus. The programme also shared similarities with the US effort to train and equip Colombian forces involved in counter-insurgency and counter-drug operations.\textsuperscript{38}

The GTEP suffered from two fundamental deficiencies. First, the early model of US military engagement in Georgia did little to address the reality of Georgia’s internal vulnerability. While the United States saw this effort as a symbolic affirmation of American commitment to Georgian statehood and sovereignty, the perception among many within Georgia—and by some in Moscow—was starkly different. The Georgian military viewed such US military assistance and training as the quickest and cheapest way to acquire the capabilities needed to retake control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia by force.\textsuperscript{39}

\textbf{Implications of the 2008 War for Georgia}

Misperceptions of both the scale of the US commitment to Georgia and the scope of the military benefits for Georgian forces fueled over-confidence regarding Georgian military capacity.\textsuperscript{40} The dangers of this were most evident in August 2008, when the Georgian response to an escalation of Russian provocations led to a seven-day Georgian-Russian war, which culminated in the near-final loss of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.\textsuperscript{41} This loss was consolidated in late August 2008, when Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

What are the prospects for reconciliation? Without any long-term strategy aimed at bridging the divide between the central Georgian government and the separatist movements in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the efficacy of international efforts at mediation will be limited. It must also be recognized that such external mediation will only be effective as
long as there is political will on all sides to find a negotiated resolution. The need for a political commitment to mediation by all sides is a daunting prerequisite. There is another equally formidable obstacle to resolution: the stark absence of any attractive incentive from the central authorities, rooted in the consistent failure of consecutive Georgian leaders to recognize the need for concession and compromise with the Abkhaz and Osset peoples. Given the lack of accommodation and incentives from the Georgian side, Russian offers of security and political and economic support were readily welcomed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Perhaps the only viable hope for the future of a reintegrated Georgia presents itself as the “missed opportunity” to recast Georgia into a confederation or federation. However, in the wake of Russian recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war, even a belated move by Georgia to present new incentives and inducements could be seen as too little, too late for the Abkhaz and Ossets. It seems that the “resolution” to Georgia’s two “frozen” conflicts was forged neither by concession nor compromise, making negotiations at this stage both unlikely and unrealistic.

**Nagorno-Karabagh: The Last “Frozen” Conflict**

The Nagorno-Karabagh conflict, which resulted in approximately fifteen thousand casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons in both Armenia and Azerbaijan, represents a political and diplomatic challenge. Since the August 2008 Georgian-Russian war, the Karabagh conflict is now arguably the last remaining “frozen” conflict in the region.

The Nagorno-Karabagh issue “thawed” towards the end of the Soviet era. As early as 1988, within the context of the Gorbachev reform period, self-determination for Nagorno-Karabagh emerged as the core element of a revived Armenian nationalism. Following the outbreak of pogroms (campaigns of targeted ethnic violence) against Armenians in several Azerbaijani cities, the Karabagh issue rapidly descended into open hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result, the Karabagh conflict came to symbolize Armenian unification and mobilization and had important implications for the political, economic, and military development of independent Armenia.

Militarily, the conflict was well beyond the control of the then-Soviet-Armenian state, with military action in Karabagh dominated by small paramilitary units operating under autonomous command of Armenian commanders. By 1993, the unification of these paramilitary
groups into a new “national army” was one of the more understated achievements of the first post-Soviet government, led by President Levon Ter-Petrosian. In the latter stages of the conflict, the unified Armenian forces consolidated control over most of Nagorno-Karabagh and seized several districts of Azerbaijan beyond the Karabagh borders. With both military victory and the seizure of territory—rare achievements in Armenian history—this success encouraged the militarization of Armenian society.\(^{47}\)

Politically, the lack of legitimacy of the Soviet-Armenian state only strengthened the appeal of those bold enough to challenge the regime. Guided by Ter-Petrosian, the so-called “Karabagh Committee”\(^ {48}\) was able to outflank the Soviet-Armenian leadership, maximizing the Karabagh issue and garnering both popular appeal and legitimacy.\(^ {49}\) During the first stage of Armenian independence, this new elite emerged from a virtual “state of war” in Nagorno-Karabagh, which served as the primary determinant of Armenian politics at the time. Indeed, the avenue to political and economic power for the Armenian elite was the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. More moderate politicians were lost amid the rhetoric of Armenian nationalism.\(^ {50}\)

For Ter-Petrosian’s government, it was increasingly apparent that this new elite threatened to impede the overall course of democratic and economic reform. When the ceasefire of 1994\(^ {51}\) halted hostilities, but merely “froze” the underlying conflict, the resulting uneasy period of “neither peace nor war” enabled this new political elite to consolidate greater power. Steadily securing power from within the Ter-Petrosian government, the elite was quickly dominated by Defense Minister Serge Sarkisian, Prime Minister Robert Kocharian and former Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian. The first two were natives of Nagorno-Karabagh—Serge Sarkisian had led the small but impressive Karabagh armed forces, and Kocharian previously served as the Karabagh head of state. As their power and ambition grew, the men came to be seen as a new political force, and, in 1996, they collaborated to force the resignation of President Ter-Petrosian.

The rise of Kocharian, who became president in subsequent elections in 1998 and 2003, demonstrated the ascendancy of the Karabagh elite, which set out to consolidate many of the country’s networks of crime and corruption. Thus, the Karabagh conflict—in military, political, and economic terms—was the first and only source for legitimacy and power beyond the confines of the collapsing Soviet system. The initial disparity between the development of the military and the emergence of the state within the post-Soviet context served as the foundation for the subsequent militarization of the Armenian state, with important implications
for the intractability of the conflict, such as the general “institutionalization” of rigid nationalism and a weakening of more moderate political discourse.

**Mediation Approaches to the Karabagh Conflict**

Militarily, the May 1994 ceasefire effectively froze the conflict and established an informal “line of contact” running from the northern border of the Nagorno-Karabagh enclave to the south-eastern sector abutting the border with Iran. Since then, the conflict has been subject to an international mediation effort aimed at forging a negotiated resolution. The mediation effort has been managed by the Commission on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE)—now the OSCE—through the so-called Minsk Group, a body co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States working in close and effective co-operation with the parties to the conflict.

The long record of diplomatic activity in mediating the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict has been characterized by a period of shuttle diplomacy, with the Minsk Group mediators engaging each of the parties (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabagh) in talks, informal meetings, and formal summits. During 1997 and 1998, the Minsk Group formulated and presented no less than three separate peace proposals, although each was rejected by one or another of the parties. The mediation effort then assumed a new level in 1999, as the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents pursued direct talks, culminating in a March 2001 summit in Paris presided over by the French president.

The Paris summit led to a follow-up summit meeting in the United States directed by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell that brought Armenian President Kocharian and his Azerbaijani counterpart, Geidar Aliyev, to Key West, Florida, in April 2001. The Key West summit came closest to resolving the conflict, as each side made significant progress, yet failed at the last minute to conclude a comprehensive settlement.

In the wake of the summit, the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents continued their talks and held a symbolically important meeting at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in August 2002. With the death of President Aliyev in 2003 and the onset of presidential elections in both countries in that year, the negotiation process slowed.

In 2004, the OSCE mediators initiated a series of meetings in Prague between the Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers, focusing on specific details to be negotiated on a ministerial level in preparation for subsequent presidential talks. This format became known as the “Prague
Process,” which was designed to “reinvigorate” dialogue between the parties. The Prague Process continues to this day and has been bolstered by additional talks between the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents, with the most recent meetings continuing into late 2009. The current peace talks focus on a draft document known as the Madrid Proposals, which were presented to the conflict sides by the Minsk Group mediators in November 2007 as the most recent starting point for concrete negotiations.

However, any real progress in the diplomatic approach to the Karabagh problem seems both unlikely and, perhaps, unreasonable, for two reasons. First, despite a long record of mediation, there has been little to show for such diplomatic engagement. Nonetheless, the very fact that the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders are meeting and discussing the conflict could be a positive development. Second, the situation on the ground has remained virtually unchanged since a ceasefire was signed sixteen years ago. The Armenian and Azerbaijani mediators have little domestic leverage, and since France, Russia, and the US have competing interests in the Caucasus, any real break-through over the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict depends more on the regional leaders themselves.

**Nagorno-Karabagh: The Missing Dimension of the Turkish-Armenian Protocols**

A regional breakthrough on Nagorno-Karabagh is more possible in light of advances in Turkish-Armenian diplomacy. In October 2009, the foreign ministers of Turkey and Armenia signed two protocols: one on the establishment of diplomatic relations, the other on the development of relations between the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Turkey. Despite the controversy raised by the protocols and the opposition of the Armenian Diaspora, these developments represent a shift in the fragile diplomatic balance between Armenia, Turkey, and Turkey’s traditional ally, Azerbaijan. The relationship between Ankara and Baku has suffered as a result of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement. It is in Turkey’s interest to promote negotiation between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabagh. Any progress in 2010 would affirm Turkish strategy and convince Azerbaijan that the future lies more in opening borders than in maintaining blockades. However, Turkey has little leverage to promote this progress since it de-linked the Karabagh issue from negotiations on the protocols with Armenia. Consequently, Turkey stands on the sidelines, making demands but exerting little significant power.
Even after the Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents met six times in 2009 alone, there are few expectations for any breakthrough in 2010. The momentum generated by Turkish-Armenian diplomacy has yet to impact on Karabagh. In Azerbaijan, stubborn diplomacy demands nothing short of the return of all of Nagorno-Karabagh and its territories, something that Armenia sees as a maximalist and unreasonable starting point for diplomatic negotiations. More disturbingly, Azerbaijani defense spending now exceeds $1.3 billion annually, exacerbating the threat of a forced military resolution to the conflict. A day before meeting his Armenian counterpart in November 2009, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev warned that “Azerbaijan is spending billions on buying new weapons, hardware, strengthening its position on the line of contact,” stressing that “we have the full right to liberate our land by military means.” Such a war of words has hardened positions and postures in each country. It has also placed Turkey in a vulnerable position, as each step closer to Armenia is a step away from Azerbaijan.

Another difficulty to be faced in 2010 comes from the Armenian side. Even if the Armenian leadership chose to make a concession on Karabagh, it would be “political suicide” to do so after recently sparking such opposition to the Turkish-Armenian protocols. With this “war of words” between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkish leaders face a difficult challenge in 2010. Ankara has gone too far on the road to normalizing relations with Armenia to turn back now. At the same time, the removal of the Karabagh issue from the protocols as a direct precondition makes it much more difficult for Turkey to demand a concrete concession over Karabagh in the future.

Looking beyond the Parameters of Conflict

Against this backdrop of protracted mediation efforts and a fragile military situation, the imperative is to address the underlying lack of trust among the parties to the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. One of the most attractive measures may be to seek to create a new environment conducive to fostering a more active, but more limited, round of negotiations among all parties to the conflict, including Nagorno-Karabagh. Such a measure would be buttressed by policies to build confidence and trust on a basis of “bridging divides” and “spanning generational divisions.”

More specifically, such an initiative would offer a new approach of forging a forward-looking strategic analysis of the Nagorno-Karabagh conflict. By offering a long-term analysis focusing on the next five to ten years, this initiative may provide key decision makers and influential elit-
es in each country with a new opportunity for “thinking strategically” about Nagorno-Karabagh. What makes this effort especially attractive is that this approach has been largely absent from the debate and dialogue in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabagh.

**Recommendations**

1. **Look beyond Vested Interest Groups**

   One of the most important aspects of engaging the political and economic elites in each country is to look beyond the current group of officials and leaders and focus on three specific subgroups: (1) the emerging political elite, including military and security officers, many of whom have completed Western training programmes; (2) commercial and business leaders, especially those engaged and interested in regional or global business opportunities beyond their home base; and (3) student groups, university faculties and societies, and internet-based media sources.

2. **All Politics Are Local: Finding Common Issues**

   An interesting approach is illustrated by the “wild-fires” issue, which arose in August 2006, when the Azerbaijani government turned to the OSCE for assistance in dealing with a series of brush fires which damaged more than sixty square kilometers in the eastern parts of the Armenian-held areas of Azerbaijan beyond the border of Nagorno-Karabagh. The largest areas affected were reportedly concentrated in uninhabited areas and in several deserted former Azerbaijani villages. Although this tended to limit damage and prevented the need for any relocation of inhabitants, it fostered some suspicions of a deliberate campaign to inflict environmental damage prior to a new round of Minsk Group negotiations that discussed the possible return of the Armenian-held areas.

   The fire issue quickly became politicized in July and August 2006, as Azerbaijan accused Armenia of starting the fires deliberately. Officials in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabagh rejected the accusations, arguing that brush fires are commonplace in the area and pointing to natural factors as the triggers of the fires. Significantly, the Azerbaijani allegations were also dismissed by the personal representative of the chairman-in-office of the OSCE. In 2006, the OSCE coordinator of economic and environmental activities carried out preliminary inter-ethnic work regarding the outbreak of summer “wild-fires” along the border area between Nagorno-Karabagh and Azerbaijan. This effort il-
lustrates that environmental and economic issues offer an important area of shared interests that could overcome the parameters of the conflict. Most importantly, common interests on environmental and economic issues are predominantly local in nature. This provides leaders in border areas with a chance to explore shared interests with their counterparts across the border.

The “wild-fires” issue is significant for three reasons. First, the brush fires demonstrated the shared nature of environmental threats, with a need for co-operation to address regional environmental challenges. Such shared environmental threats, including soil degradation and air and water pollution, recognize neither national borders nor artificial military conflict zones. All parties must recognize common ecological threats and admit that greater environmental policy co-ordination is in each country's national interest. Second, the brush fires presented an opportunity for each side to demonstrate a new maturity, as well as contributing to confidence-building. Some examples of confidence-building measures include greater exchanges and co-operation among civil society groups, journalists, and artists, allowing each side to garner greater personal and professional contacts with each other. Such efforts, which can bolster earlier efforts at “track-two” diplomacy and “people-to-people” exchanges, may supplement ongoing efforts now underway between Turkey and Armenia. Finding solutions to these environmental problems should be seen as a positive-sum game, offering benefits to both sides. Third, the brush fires presented an opportunity for the OSCE to deepen and expand ties between the OSCE and the relevant state bodies from each side. Moreover, the OSCE may also serve as a facilitator for some initial local co-operation, perhaps between local municipal and village leaders on both sides. Thus far, one of the most promising areas for pursuing new contacts and co-operation between all sides to the conflict has been the most neglected. The local level on all sides, which includes village and municipal officials, school teachers and administrators, small civic groups, and non-government organizations, offers substantial opportunity for reaching beyond the confines of politics and closed borders.

Conclusion

The lingering “frozen” conflicts of the South Caucasus have garnered great international attention and external mediation to resolve the disputes over sovereignty and territory. While the prospects for the resolution of Georgia’s two “frozen” conflicts appear bleak in the near future,
the Karabagh issue is still firmly on the agenda of both international mediators and regional politicians. However, within this regional game of chess, it is hard to predict the impact on Nagorno-Karabagh of any developments. This article presents the argument that the regional reality of these “frozen” conflicts is increasingly defined by local politics and economics, leading us to the conclusion that democratization must come first, prior to any hopes for an effective or lasting resolution to the “frozen” conflicts in the region. Most clearly, the institutions of democracy are more important for real democratization than individual politicians. Consequently, the regional regimes themselves hold the key to their future. Only then can the South Caucasus hope to graduate from its beleaguered status as a “region at risk.”

Notes


3 The word nagorno means “mountainous” in the Russian language.


One of the main differences between the Abkhaz and Osset conflicts was the geopolitical ramifications of the South Ossetia case, which was a quest to unify with neighbouring North Ossetia in the Russian Federation. Rather than an outright separatist bid for independence, like the Abkhaz conflict, the South Ossetia conflict invoked a direct Russian interest. Nevertheless, both conflicts posed separatist threats to Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity.


The first ceasefire agreement was mediated by Russia in September 1992, although further agreements were signed in May and July 1993; see John Mackinlay and Evgenii Sharov, “Russian Peacekeeping Operations in Georgia,” in *Regional Peace-


19 See Mackinlay and Sharov, “Russian Peacekeeping Operations,” 76–82.

20 In this context, the institutions of “proto-statehood” refer to the development of state institutions that can be seen as embodying much of the framework of state sovereignty, such as democratic elections, civil society, diplomatic activity, and other essential government services, albeit without formal recognition. The emergence of such a parallel state is especially important in cases of the separatist areas where there was a history of little or no central authority by the official titular government.


22 For details on the composition of the Russian peacekeepers, see Mackinlay and Sharov, “Russian Peacekeeping Operations,” 63–87.


33 See Areshidze, Democracy and Autocracy, 230–2.


44 Beginning on January 13, 1990, a seven-day pogrom was launched targeting Armenians in the Azerbaijani capital Baku, culminating in a death toll of between
forty-eight and sixty-six, with most victims killed after being stabbed or beaten to
death. The Baku pogroms followed a similar series of ethnic violence in 1988. In
that incident, known as the Sumgait pogrom, violent mobs targeted the Armenian
population of the seaside town of Sumgait in then-Soviet Azerbaijan on February
27, 1988, killing some three dozen Armenians. See de Waal, Black Garden, 32; Yuri
Rost, The Armenian Tragedy: An Eye-Witness Account of Human Conflict and Natural
Disaster in Armenia and Azerbaijan (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1990), 27; Hu-
man Rights Watch, “Bloodshed in the Caucasus: Escalation of the Armed Conflict
in Nagorno-Karabakh,” Washington, DC, September 1992; and Stuart Kaufman,
Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War (New York: Cornell University
Press, 2001), 49.

45 See Mark Beissinger, Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Rutland, “Democracy and

46 See Rouben Zargarian, “International Legal Status of the Republic of Nagorno
Karabakh,” in Contrasts and Solutions in the Caucasus, eds. Ole Hoiris and Sefa Mar-
tin Yürükel (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1998), 343–5; Mark Saroyan, “The
‘Karabakh Syndrome’ and Azerbaijani Politics,” Problems of Communism 39, no. 5

47 The trend of a “militarization” of society was evident in the shift in the political
discourse, from a more moderate and inclusive politics to a more rigid debate of
strongly exclusive nationalism. The rise of a modern armed forces as a professional
and clean state institution among widespread and entrenched state corruption also
did much to magnify this trend. See Richard Giragosian, “Redefining Armenian

48 The most prominent and active members of the “Karabakh Committee” included
Levon Ter-Petrosian, Vazgen Manukian, Babken Ararktsian, Igor Muradyan, Sam-
son Ghazaryan, Ashot Manucharyan, and Raphael Ghazaryan; see Saroyan, “Kara-
bakh Syndrome”; and de Waal, Black Garden.

49 See Tadeusz Swietochowski, Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition (New

50 The clearest example was the forced resignation of former Armenian President
Levon Ter-Petrosian, allegedly after he sought to pursue a conciliatory policy toward
Turkey that was deemed to be insufficiently nationalist.

51 The Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement of 1994 was signed by Armenia, Az-
erbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabagh, as full parties to the conflict, and Russia pledged
to be the guarantor, although the OSCE later became the sole monitoring body to
enforce the ceasefire. See Liz Fuller and Richard Giragosian, “Nagorno-Karabakh:
What is the Sticking Point in the Peace Talks?” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June
12, 2006.

52 S. Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear, “Humanitarian Action and Politics: The
Case of Nagorno-Karabakh,” Occasional Paper No. 25, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Insti-


57 See De Waal, Black Garden, 109.


59 The Madrid Principles presented by OSCE Minsk Group in November 2007 stipulate the withdrawal of Armenian forces from Nagorno-Karabagh and its adjacent regions, including the district of Kelbajar and the strategic Lachin corridor that links Armenia to Nagorno-Karabagh; the demilitarization of these territories followed by the deployment of international peacekeeping forces there; arrangements for IDPs to return safely; and a referendum among the population of Nagorno-Karabagh to determine its future status.


62 The global Armenian diaspora is strongly opposed to the Turkish-Armenian protocols, arguing that the normalization effort would weaken the international campaign for recognition of the Armenian genocide. See Bridget Johnson, “Armenian Group Slams the White House for Pushing Turkey Agreements,” The Hill, October 3, 2009. Diaspora groups also created a website devoted to their opposition to the protocols, see http://www.stoptheprotocols.com (accessed February 25, 2010).


69 See Judson and Koker, “Turkey-Armenia Process.”


71 Interviews with OSCE officials and senior staff from the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

72 See OSCE, “Report on Fires.”

73 The UK group Conciliation Resources and the Armenia-based Civil Society Institute (CSI) have carried out a number of such programs in the past several years; see CSI, http://www.csi.am (accessed February 25, 2010); see also Haroutiun Khachatrian, “Intellectual Shuttle Diplomacy,” *EurasiaNet*, July 11, 2007.