Technical Cooperation and Stability in the Caucasus

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Abstract

One of the highest U.S. foreign policy priorities is to support the constructive transformation of Russia and the Newly Independent States. Promoting security, stability and nonproliferation is an important part of this transformation. The Caucasus has a number of threats to stability including disputed territories, ethnic hostility, smuggling, terrorism and crime. Technical cooperation can provide non-political opportunities for regional cooperation and a foundation for sustainable peace. Specifically, cooperative monitoring technologies can be tailored for particular needs of the parties involved. In order for this approach to work, the countries themselves will have to agree on the areas of cooperation, but the U.S. and other interested outside parties can promote appropriate technical collaborations.

This paper will identify some of the regional security issues and discuss possible cooperative monitoring systems that could be applied to these different concerns. Border monitoring, water management and quality monitoring, and ecological and epidemiological monitoring are some examples of cooperative monitoring applications that could augment regional security and stability and enhance U.S. interests in the region.

Introduction

Stability and security in the border region of the Caucasus is not only important to Russia, but also to the United States and Europe. How will Russia end conflict around its southern borders? What will the United States, Europe and the international community do to facilitate stabilization of the region and promote regional cooperation? What are the countries of the Caucasus willing to do in order to bring peace and economic prosperity to their respective peoples? These are important questions about a region that has experienced many episodes of instability in its history. Competing empires, religions, and ethnicities are some of the factors in a long history of tension and mistrust. These factors continue to play pivotal roles in today's alliances and borders of the region.

U.S. national security interests are at stake in the Caucasus. It is estimated that up to 20 per cent of the world's oil and gas reserves are located in the greater Caspian region, and these resources are just beginning to come on line. For this reason, the U.S. has backed a $2.5 billion pipeline
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plan that will transport Caspian crude oil from Baku through Georgia to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan by 2004. Because the region borders the key states of Russia, Turkey and Iran, it is in the interest of U.S. national security that the states of the Caucasus remain economically and independently viable. For this reason, the U.S. has invested significantly in promoting the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Moreover, the U.S. and the United Kingdom have supported the creation of a functional border control and enforcement of a legitimate customs system, both of which discourage cross-border smuggling, black-market activity and terrorism.

Key elements for long-term stability in the Caucasus are:

- Peace between Azeris and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabak
- Economic and political development so that the states in the region can sustain independence

Necessary steps for achieving these primary goals:

- Regional cooperation to focus on shared priorities rather than differences
- Increased and expanded efforts by the international community

**Situation Today**

Russia’s weak economic situation and low political morale has sharpened a traditional proclivity to halt attempts at further splintering of the country. Russia’s southern neighbors are all too aware of this pattern. Russia’s need for security on its borders often translates into increasing political power or pressure over its neighbors. With the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, historical ethnic and territorial disputes emerged that had previously been held in check by rigid Soviet rule and control. The experience of living under authoritarianism resulted in hatred and paranoia directed against the state. Many people remember the horrifying experience of different groups being moved across the continent because they displeased the state. Since 1991 ethnic and religious disputes among numerous different peoples have exploded into territorial strife and even military conflict.

Current examples of regions where ethnic hostility and territorial disputes have resurrected themselves include Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabak (Azerbaijan-Armenia), Ossetia, and Abkhazia (Georgia). The territorial Nagorno-Karabak dispute involves different ethnic groups and religions. The Chechen and Abkhaz conflicts are religiously and ethnically driven independence movements that have both erupted into military strife.

These disputes have created other sources of instability in the region. A significant number of refugees, at least 1.5 million, now exist in the region. Georgians, who were forced out of their
homes in Abkhazia in the early and mid-nineties, want to return and reclaim their properties. Small pockets and villages of one ethnic group located in the territory of another want to feel secure in their homes or be moved to a safer and more comfortable environment. Many Armenians and Azeris have long lived isolated in an area dominated by their rival group. The economic and psychological difficulties faced by refugees foster ethnic and religious hostilities and thwarts regional stability.

A second source of instability in the region is the depressed economic situation. There has been major disruption of industrial and agricultural productivity, which has declined as much as 80% and 50% respectively, following the Soviet period. Environmental degradation has also occurred. Although Georgia’s and Azerbaijan’s access to oil and natural gas resources in the Black and Caspian seas provide potential for economic growth and increased national wealth, the economic outlook in Armenia is bleak. Both Turkey and Azerbaijan have stopped trading with Armenia as a result of the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the planned Baku-Ceyhan pipeline will not pass through Armenia and thus will not provide any direct economic benefit to Armenians.

Limited water resources and freshwater contamination and pollution represent other serious regional problems. Currently, the countries do not have the infrastructure to address these issues. The overwhelming majority of industrial and municipal sewage in the region is discharged directly to rivers and lakes without any treatment. The rivers and the Caspian and Black seas are considered highly polluted, exceeding 10 to 20 times the maximum permissible levels (MPLs), metals 10 to 100 times the MPLs, and fertilizers or pesticides 5 to 10 times MPLs. 60% of the land is subject to erosion due to poor land management practices, leading to sediment loads of 45 million tons per year. It is anticipated that all three countries will face a severe shortage of water resources within ten years. These water-related problems span across national boundaries. The Kura and Araks rivers, which flow from Georgia and Armenia respectively into Azerbaijan, provide the primary surface water for the largest urban areas in Azerbaijan. As a result, pollution introduced into the Kura and Araks in Georgia and Armenia contaminates a majority of Azerbaijan’s surface water. It is expected that pollution levels in the Kura and Araks will rise, and the quality of Azerbaijan’s water resources will fall, as the Georgian and Armenia populations and economies grow.

An inadequate legal system, a thriving black market, routine smuggling throughout the region and cross-border crime also contribute to regional instability. Consequently, the region is at great risk of becoming a focus of terrorist activities and emerging WMD (particularly nuclear) proliferation. Even though there are some laws in place, there exists little means or will to enforce them. The only known nuclear facility is an old and poorly maintained Armenian nuclear power reactor that is located on a fault line. In addition, the Soviets scattered facilities that use nuclear materials all over their territories, and their military frequently used radioactive sources. Unfortunately, the Soviet system for securing, controlling and accounting for nuclear materials was not comprehensive, safe or reliable. The newly independent states do not have documentation on Soviet use and storage of nuclear materials in their territories, and thus the presence of nuclear materials in the Caucasus can not be ruled out.
The economic depravity and geopolitical realities of this region provide great motivation for individuals to acquire and sell nuclear materials to the highest bidder or to facilitate the transport of WMD materials across their territories. Ethnic hatreds and access to WMD materials raise the possibility of WMD terrorist activities. Strong national rivalries could even inspire government-sponsored WMD proliferation in the region.

Regional Stability through Technical Collaborations

Monitoring technologies can be used as tools to address some of the outlined problems. In the event of military disengagement and disarmament, the parties could use remote monitoring and on-site inspections in a system that could monitor troop withdrawals from contested territories and account for the destruction of weapons and the protection of stored-weapons facilities. Seals and tags could uniquely identify weapons-storage containers. Optical sensors, such as cameras, video and infrared imaging, could provide verification data by sending information to a collection station. The data could be subsequently shared through use of an Internet web-site.

Security for refugee movement and resettlement of civilian populations could be augmented with vehicle tracking technologies, border monitoring and specially designed communication lines. Such monitoring, bolstered by chemical detectors that can identify hidden stocks of weapons, explosives or narcotics, can also assist custom agents in detecting smugglers and reducing cross-border crime.

Public health could be improved by monitoring animal, plant and human populations and assessing the background presence of infectious disease and the effect of ecological changes over time on animal, plant and human health. The monitoring of animal and plant populations could assess the background presence of infectious disease (including zoonotic disease), vectors for disease spread and the effect of ecological changes over time on animal and plant health. Epidemiological and medical surveillance of people in the region could identify the presence of water-borne (primarily Hepatitis A, B and C) and respiratory (influenza) diseases. Meteorological monitoring, including the collection of wind, rainfall, solar flux and other environmental data, could strengthen ecological and epidemiological remediation strategies.

To improve emergency preparedness, cooperative monitoring of energy infrastructure systems could include perimeter security systems, remote sensors and satellite imagery as well as an exchange of information about operations and maintenance. In the event of an earthquake, environmental catastrophe, accident or sabotage, emergency response could be planned and implemented based on a reliable status of the infrastructure system. Technical monitoring could also form the backbone of a network of experts and a complementary infrastructure that could enhance emergency management and response to disasters, such as earthquakes, fires, and floods. Progress has already been made in terms of regional cooperation in this area. In a major break with recent tradition, Armenia recently came to the aid of Turkey following a series of devastating earthquakes.
Monitoring could be used to measure the quantity and quality of regional freshwater resources, and to evaluate potential remediation and management strategies. A hydro-meteorological monitoring system can take measurements of flow rates and water quality, transmitting data automatically to a central station for further analysis. High and low resolution aerial and commercial satellite imagery along with on-site inspections and a data-sharing system could show patterns in deforestation, erosion, agricultural practices, urban and residential land use and sustainability of fisheries. A seismic monitoring system could be used to address the threat to dam stability caused by earthquakes in the region. All of this data could be integrated into a regional watershed model that could provide the analytical basis for identifying methods for improving regional water quality and concluding regional water-management and water-sharing treaties and agreements.

Conclusion

Regional cooperation begins with identifying common interests and concerns as opposed to focusing on more contentious disputes. In the Caucasus, the starting point can be addressing shared resources. The need for drinking water, electricity and heating oil, as well as a desire for improved industrial and agricultural production are essential priorities throughout the region. Economic opportunities and public health and well-being in the Caucasus will depend on the quality of the environment as well as the stability of the governments. In addition, the protection of the pipeline and preparation for disaster relief are regional necessities.

Technical monitoring can improve the sustainability of regional resources while building regional confidence and trust. Such technical cooperation could eventually lead to joint efforts at demining conflict areas and addressing critical refugee problems. Ultimately, technical monitoring could even form the basis for resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and promoting stability, peace and security in the Caucasus.

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