

**NATO REEVALUATES STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS IN
CAUCASUS, CENTRAL ASIA**
A EurasiaNet commentary by Taras Kuzio: 12/17/01

During his brief December 15 visit to Georgia, US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld voiced a desire for continuing strategic cooperation between Washington and Tbilisi. Many indicators, however, suggest that Georgian efforts to integrate into Western military structures are suffering because of the geopolitical changes brought on by the anti-terrorism campaign.

Since September 11, US and NATO attention has fixed on Uzbekistan, which is playing a key support role in the anti-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan. To a lesser extent, the US military has bolstered strategic links with Azerbaijan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Meanwhile, Georgia - a country that is struggling to contain domestic political and economic upheaval, and which also lacks facilities that could be of use to the anti-terrorism coalition - has seen its strategic importance fade in the eyes of Western political and defense officials.

Georgia is among several CIS states that have attempted in recent years to broaden military contacts with NATO with the aim of counteracting Russian pressure. Tbilisi has been active in both NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and in the GUUAM group, a regional multilateral effort by states to establish a security and economic framework independent of Russia.

Many Eurasian states, including Georgia, initially saw PfP as a first step towards NATO membership. In January 2000, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze said that he would be applying to join NATO by 2005. More recently PfP is seen more realistically as only providing a source of security and none of the ten aspirant states with Membership Action Plans (MAP) are from the CIS.

NATO military cooperation with CIS states increased greatly between 1994-1997. Bilateral assistance programs were therefore already underway with Caucasian and Central Asian states before the increased US interest in the region after September 11. US special forces, for example, had been providing military assistance to Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan since the late 1990s.

In recent years, Georgia had been a major beneficiary of NATO, US and Turkish security cooperation. After the creation of the Military Policy and Bilateral Relations Department within the Georgian Ministry of Defense in September 1998 its main dealings have been with NATO and the West. The United States has provided \$20 million in military assistance each year to provide helicopters and helicopter pilot training, coast guard vessels, and control and communications gear for Border Troops. Georgian officials have also benefited from training programs sponsored by both the United States and Turkey.

Georgian officials had hoped closer cooperation with Western multilateral organizations would help Tbilisi restore the country's territorial integrity, including a lasting settlement to the Abkhazia question. However, the anti-terrorism campaign has helped to reorder the strategic priorities of the United States and NATO. Initial ideas that PfP cooperation within PfP could lead to future NATO membership for CIS states has now been replaced by pragmatic attempts to obtain benefits to deal with domestic and external security concerns based on their geopolitical value to NATO, the USA and Turkey.

Georgia, unfortunately, lacks assets, such as military facilities or natural resources, that can be of value to the West. Compounding Georgia's difficulties is its increasingly chaotic domestic situation. The country has experienced a renewal of guerrilla warfare between Georgian and Abkhazian units and mass demonstrations that prompted a government overhaul in early November. In addition, Shevardnadze characterized domestic economic conditions as "catastrophic," according to a December 15 television report.

Tbilisi in recent months has also faced growing pressure from Russia. Georgia and Russia have wrangled over the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgian military bases. The two countries have also clashed over the presence of Chechen separatists in Georgia [[For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archives](#)].

Georgia's task of defending its sovereignty from Russian encroachment now appears more complicated than at any point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia was already uneasy prior to September 11 about the growing cooperation between NATO and Western countries with non-Russian members of the CIS.

Still, Russian opinion remains divided on the issue of Western strategic cooperation with CIS states. On the one hand, some Russian observers

say the United States now recognizes Russia's right to a "natural dominance" in the former Soviet Union, but others are wary of an increased US influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia as a consequence of the anti-terrorism campaign.

Russia had always sought to dominate the CIS and utilize the organization a tool to advance Moscow's foreign policy agenda. This approach dovetails with Russia's view of the CIS as a "near abroad" having limited sovereignty. Precisely because Russia's approach has come across as disrespectful to the decade-old sovereignty of CIS states, it has been largely unsuccessful.

However, the terrorism issue presents Russia with a new opportunity to achieve its objectives concerning the CIS. Speaking at a meeting of CIS prime ministers on 28 September, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the CIS must unite to fight "terrorism." Putin called the CIS states "brothers" because they shared with Russia a common heritage. This call for closer security cooperation has not fallen on deaf ears. In the aftermath of September 11, some CIS states are re-evaluating their attitudes towards closer security cooperation in the face of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism.

Editor's Note: Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Centre for Russian & East European Studies at the University of Toronto.