

EURASIA INSIGHT

THE ROLE OF GUUAM IN THE INTERNATIONAL ANTI-TERRORIST STRATEGY

A EurasiaNet Commentary by Taras Kuzio, 28 October 2001

The United States' reinvigorated interest in relations with Eurasian countries raises prospects for a dormant regional security alliance known as GUUAM. The US-led anti-terrorism campaign provides new impetus for the organization to act as a stabilizing force and vehicle for economic growth in the region. But before GUUAM's goals can be realized, conflicts among the member states and Russia must be resolved.

GUUAM comprises Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova. It began to take shape in 1997, although participating states adopted the organization's charter only in June 2001. A primary aim of GUUAM, whose members tend to have a robust distrust of Russia, is to serve as a counterbalance to the Moscow-dominated CIS Security Pact. In seeking to gain leverage in their dealings with Moscow, GUUAM members tend to have Western-oriented policies.

Since the collapse of the former Soviet Union, tension and suspicion have defined GUUAM members' relations with Russia. Such tension is readily evident today. In Georgia, for example, violence in the Kodori Gorge region has claimed at least 40 lives in clashes involving a combined Georgian-Chechen guerrilla force and Abkhaz separatists. Georgian officials have repeatedly criticized Russia for supporting the Abkhaz separatists, and for not condemning reported attempts to assassinate Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. Russian officials, in return, have accused Georgia of providing a safe haven for Chechen rebels.

Similar acrimony defines Uzbekistan's military relationship with Russia. Uzbek Foreign Ministry officials have advised their Ukrainian counterparts of their deep suspicion that Russia has been playing a double game in Central Asia. On the one hand, Russia has openly backed the Northern Alliance against the fundamentalist Taliban movement in Afghanistan. On the other hand, some local observers believe that Moscow has provided support for the Taliban-backed Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has waged a three-year insurgent campaign to oust President Islam Karimov.

The balance of power has shifted dramatically since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Uzbekistan has emerged as a key US ally in Central Asia. The country has offered its bases as a staging ground for US military transport planes, attack helicopters, and 1,000 US troops from the 10th Mountain Division.

Through Uzbekistan's bilateral and multilateral cooperation arrangements with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), GUUAM stands to receive a boost as a regional bloc with which security cooperation dialogue must be maintained.

Even prior to September 11, the United States and NATO were taking steps to expand military cooperation to include coordination among security services, customs and border troops in GUUAM states. Joint cooperation with undoubtedly increase, potentially helping to mitigate political instability in member countries like Azerbaijan and Georgia.

This summer, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine participated in the annual Peace Shield exercises in Western Ukraine and the NATO Cooperative Partner naval exercises in the Black Sea. The naval exercise included the landing of a combined U.S.-Turkish-Greek-Ukrainian-Georgian marine unit on the Georgian coast to establish a bridgehead against hostile forces. Ukraine has welcomed the reform and enlargement of NATO in expanding security and stability in Europe.

Building on that warmth, Russia could make progress toward reducing GUUAM distrust. The September 11 attacks and the anti-terrorism campaign offer opportunities for Moscow and Washington to strengthen and renew post-Cold War ties by battling a common enemy. Hope for improved ties is supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin's opening of Russian air space to American planes carrying military and relief cargoes to Central Asian republics for deployment in Afghanistan. Yet there is little reason for concern that this heightened cooperation will undermine GUUAM's role as a stabilizing force in Eurasia.

The United States clearly has an interest in the continued independence of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine and the other former Soviet states, and will work to ensure this. The assumption that Central Asian states are under a Russian sphere of influence has proven to be fictitious. Among the GUUAM members, Russian influence

is low in Uzbekistan, as well as in autocratic Turkmenistan, which considers itself neutral.

Of the CIS members, Belarus and Armenia are the most pro-Russian in outlook, but they cannot influence the antiterrorism campaign much. Both countries have always ruled out sending their troops beyond their respective states.

Kazakhstan has acted more like a pro-West GUUAM member, supporting the US position independently of Russia. Only Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan consulted with Russia over how to react to the US attempt to create an international anti-terrorist coalition. That dynamic gives GUUAM a chance for new strength. Until now, member states have not demonstrated the political will needed to give GUUAM substance. But that could change.

The GUUAM grouping has the potential to free its members from dependence on Russia in the sphere of energy transportation routes and supplies. GUUAM could also possibly give members liberty to chart their own course in dealing with the separatist movements they believe to have been covertly and diplomatically backed by Russia.

Uzbekistan is particularly poised to gain from the anti-terrorism campaign. Uzbek President Islam Karimov hopes to extract a medium to long-term commitment from Washington.

At present, Georgia appears to be GUUAM's weakest link. Georgia is grappling with political, economic and social upheaval, and the authority of President Eduard Shevardnadze's government is tenuous in many parts of the country. Nevertheless, if President Karimov succeeds in realigning Uzbekistan, Shevardnadze may feel emboldened to deal in a more assertive manner with Russia.

The GUUAM group regards the CIS as a 'civilized divorce' between Russia and its former Soviet states. In the GUUAM view, the CIS should function as a forum for debate that facilitates bilateral economic relations and nothing more. The CIS Anti-Terrorist Center, based in Moscow and dominated by Moscow, exists more on paper than in reality, as is true of most CIS structures.

Uzbekistan and Georgia withdrew from the CIS Collective Security Treaty before joining the GUUAM. If GUUAM can define itself as a

problem-solving agency, it may achieve a real divorce from Russia without living in fear of that state.

Editor's Note: Taras Kuzio is a leading Ukrainian scholar, based in Toronto. He provided this commentary to EurasiaNet.