A REASSESSMENT OF REGIONAL POLITICS
AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN THE SOUTH
CAUCASUS*

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One way to begin a reassessment of the situation in the Caucasus and Central Asia following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., is to ask the question: What has changed or will change in the way international relations are conducted as a result of September 11? Will that horrendous act cause a radical change, will it merely accelerate existing trends, or will things in essence continue as they were?

The short answer is that September 11 has accelerated and facilitated existing trends and processes. There is no doubt of the depth of the horror, the sense of solidarity with the US and American people as a victim immediately following the attacks, and the desire to transcend differences felt around the world. But these were soon subverted by governments and non-state actors who used their collaboration with the US or the new environment to the benefit of their own causes, assisted by a sense that the US as well was using September 11 to pursue domestic and foreign policy agendas long in place. Rather than the horrendous nature of the crime imposing a new sense of international community, it is already altered agendas and strategies that are defining the nature- and utility—of the crime. September 11 has both justified and facilitated trends in American strategic thinking and the relation of American power to the rest of the world that predated the attacks. The radical change and predisposition to act differently were introduced with the coming of the new Bush administration in January 2001.

A longer answer requires a closer look at September 11. September 11 has highlighted the particular characteristics in the Western perceptions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. The response is more likely to bring to the surface the weaknesses of these perceptions and the fault-lines of the region.

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We are dealing with a multidimensional problem, the understanding of which is essential if the response is to be constructive as well as effective in the long run. For discussion purposes, September 11 can be analyzed on four levels.

At the most immediate and obvious level, we are dealing with pathology; when a group of people can imagine, plan and commit acts of such horror and horrendous enormity, regardless of any given or underlying causes. It takes a particular kind of person and persons to undertake such operations.

The second level is made up of the political causes that are articulated in the discourse of the first group, as well as those who may condemn acts of terrorism but see some legitimate or quasi-legitimate motivations. The presence of US troop in Saudi Arabia, the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and even Kashmir are the most clearly articulated though not the only ones.

The third is the historical level: Here we are dealing with a vaguer but wider grievance that subsumes the political issues but interprets them as part of a process that has a history and a historical logic. Political issues are interpreted as a manifestation and seen from the prism of Western, and in recent decades specifically US, strategic goals that are pursued at the expense of vulnerable peoples and countries whose interests and future are made subservient to neo-imperialistic designs.

To the extent that economic factors (hydrocarbon resources, expansion of markets, in today's terms globalization) play a significant role in motivating such historical processes, and given the challenge which Western penetration tends to present to traditional societies and dislodge systems, September 11 involves also a fourth level of conflict where the US and its interests are seen as part of an aggressive culture characterized by crassness, materialism, exploitation, and a sense of superiority. It has thus been possible to move the discourse toward a clash of social values couched in terms of religious/cultural/civilization confrontation. Aggrieved groups have determined that a deeper form of racism is at work, this time with religious undertones.

These different levels interact with and feed on each other. The multiplicity of dimensions and their interaction explain the spectrum of reactions from the Arab/Muslim/non-Western/non-US quarters and the difficulties in distinguishing between cause and excuse, rhetoric and real grievance.