

## STEPHEN JONES

Last week (18 June) attended CAMCA Regional Forum. CAMCA = Central Asia, Mongolia, Caucasus, Afghanistan. Attended by, among others, Donald Rumsfeld, former Sec of Defense, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, Zalmay Khalizad, former US Ambassador to UN and Afghanistan, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Eurasia from 2003 to 2007, Tinatin Khidasheli

- What struck me was language - lang of geopolitics Most of the speeches explained and predicted international political behavior based on geographical variables such as location, natural resources, infrastructure, and alignment with regional neighbors or focused on the activities of the Great powers dominating the world today, such as Russia, China, and the US. Much of the talk was about the relationship of big powers to little powers located in geographical regions of the world that were experiencing bloody wars, frozen conflicts or instability connected to struggles over resources or the intervention of Great powers. Middle East, Central Asia, Afghanistan and Caucasus.

- Right now, working on First Republic. Language was identical to that used by diplomats of the early 20thc. at the table of Versailles, such as Lord Curzon, Georges Clemenceau, and Lloyd George. Cauc and C Asia, then as now was subject to the manipulations of regional and great powers in a time of confused alignments and physical insecurities among small states in the region. Lang in early 20thc was more openly imperial, as were policies. In 1918 Georgia and the Caucasus were part of the Eastern Question, and the great powers had interests there because of oil (in Baku ) and transit infrastructure to Eastern markets. Germany planned a railway from Berlin to Baghdad to challenge British dominance in the Middle East, part of its own Ostpolitik. Lord Curzon was claiming at this time that Caucasia was the key to “the entire future of the Eastern world.” In Curzon’s view, Georgia was the Caucasian pivot; it would act as a buffer against Russia and provide access to raw materials. When I was listening to our politicians and strategists at the CAMCA conference, it was clear we had moved on. The West no longer decides the fate of these countries with the stroke of a pen, but the legacy of big powers talking about the fate of little powers, and the focus on the defense of Western interests in the region (as against rising China, Iran and Russia), and the emphasis on geography as a determining factor were all still there.

- So next question I asked myself, was if diplomats and politicians still talk like that, and think like that, then we are still in a world determined by Meternich, Talleyrand, Kissinger and Brzezinski, the ideas of grand strategy, a world focused on regional influence, balance of power and client states. We expected a new world based on international trade and exchange, economic integration, and liberal trade policies. Liberal internationalism would be its

corollary in international politics. But what did we get instead? Economic crises, market volatility, and a revived form of geopolitics, where small economically impoverished countries like Georgia were left with more or less the same options they had in 1918. For Georgia, internal balancing, as the neo-realist Kenneth Waltz puts it - or an increase in economic or military capability, was not much of an option. Rather, Georgia would have to rely on what geography gave it (transit and some resources), and protect itself through clever strategies, bandwagoning (attaching itself to the stronger power), and international alliances. The echoes with the great competition for power in the Caucasus during and after WW1 are evident.

- Today, as in 1918-21 when there were small Caucasian states striving for security from external interference, we see a vast chasm between what Caucasia's sovereign powers want and what they can get. The constraints are economic, structural (state capacity), population size, military capability, the nature and policies of external powers, and location. It's the old problem of small states located in strategically competitive zones. In some ways, it looks in the Caucasus that we are still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- Not suggesting a repeat of Great Game, nor is it the revenge of geography, as Robert Kaplan. Too many things have changed to just look at a map to understand international politics. But what we do see is a language and policies, which combine great power political ambition with geographically-based visions of influence and control. Examples: Caucasus as a "bridge." China, US, Russia, AND Georgia all buy into this concept of the Eurasian Corridor and the Caucasus as its bridge. China's One Belt One Road, may be seen as promoting connectivity, but it is also an aggressive geopolitical move focused on geographical influence through control of strategic infrastructure. It's really designed to transform political alignments, as is happening in Central Asia. Its soft power with a hard edge. The US's vision of a New Silk Road, promoting the BTC pipeline, pouring billions into new road construction in CAsia, and currently the TAPI (Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan India) pipeline are all mechanisms for pol. influence in the region. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union is a pretty clear method for reasserting Russian hegemony through a common market dominated by the larger Russian economy.

- Looking at Georgia over the last 100 years, and indeed back to the Middle Ages, as recorded by Kartlis Tskhovreba, we can see the historical pattern has been a weak and divided Georgia surrounded by powerful empires (Byzantium, the Mongols, the Iranian Safavids, the Ottomans, the Russians). Georgia's geographical location in the borderlands, sitting astride profitable trade routes, has always had a major impact on its foreign policy options which have been focused on forging alliances with dominant powers, seeking patronage, and adapting to the demands of powerful neighbors. Georgia's location brought undoubted benefits; Tbilisi was the natural trading center of the Caucasus, and Georgia was a central node for transit across the Caucasian isthmus, but both rail and oil raised its importance to neighboring powers with geopolitical ambitions. Russia's promotion of separatism in Abkhazia and S. Ossetia

complicated story, but I believe the geopolitical factor was dominant. Looking at the map, Russian generals undoubtedly prized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as strategic geographical gains. The Abkhazians had a strategic coastline on the Black Sea, and S. Ossetia was a platform for potential military regulation of the South Caucasus.

- Comparing the foreign policy of the first republic with that of subsequent republics after 1991, its clear Georgia has always had to find seek ways to convert its geographical vulnerability into strategic advantage. national survival for Georgia, especially in conditions of threats brought on by post imperial collapse, means foreign patronage and alliances with Great Powers. In 1918 ?? Von Kressenstein (who he) wrote: "The Caucasus is for us a trampoline for political activity in Persia, Central Asia and in the Russian lands between Ukraine and the Urals. Control of the Caucasus is a cornerstone in Germany's Eastern policy (Ostpolitik)." In return for its patronage of Georgia in 1918 (more specifically protection from Ottoman Turkey) Germany demanded control of the railways and Georgia's resources such as manganese; the Georgian government, despite its antipathy to imperial Germany, agreed. It was a rational external policy for Georgia faced as it had been many times to destruction and dismantlement. It was a gamble on the wrong bandwagon as it turned out. When Germany lost the war, Georgia turned its attention to a new patron, Great Britain, to ensure its survival, wishing for protection against two aggressive Russias. Less of a gamble, but with no better result

- The international env. for Georgia in the 21st century is very different. But the geographical factor retains its impact. Location and resources (transit) still attract predatory states and underpin alliances with patron states like the US and organizations like the EU and NATO. Georgia's entire foreign policy focus today is on integration with its Western patrons. This is determined also by Georgians' own sense that they belong to Europe, both geographically and culturally.

Georgia's 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> history of independence illustrate the constancy of Georgian foreign policy produced by the inelasticity of its geography as well as its self-perception as a European country. Georgia is a small state, which identifies with the West; strategically located between contending Great Powers, its independence is both generated and threatened by a competitive international state system (Reynolds). In these conditions security depends on strategic alliances.

- The problem for Georgia is West's inconstancy. Georgia's geography is an incentive for Western involvement, but also a disincentive given its peripherality and Georgia's neighbors, in particular Russia. In 1918-21, the pattern was the same. Western states in the end proved to be unreliable allies.

- Rethinking of foreign policy? Shift to balance of power (multivectoral - Iran and Turkey, Azerbaijan and Armenia are alloportunities) rather than obsessive fixation with NATO and the EU. But geography still raises the question in the Caucasus: can small states play a security role? Can they do without Great Powers?