



CACI Roundtable: The U.S. and Security in the South Caucasus: Old Wounds, New Dynamics

September 14, 2018

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; International Economics and Trade; Caucasus; Central Asia; Russia

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On September 14, 2018, the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute hosted an off-the-record roundtable discussion on U.S. Security Challenges in the South Caucasus. Speakers at the event included Former U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan Robert Cekuta, Senior Director at Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and International Engagement Dr. Michael Carpenter, and American Foreign Policy Council Senior Fellow Dr. Stephen Blank. CACI Director Svante Cornell moderated the event.

The roundtable started with a discussion on changing variables within the region. The speakers acknowledged key issues currently affecting U.S. relationships with the states of the Caucasus and major players outside of the region. These issues include a lack of U.S. policy focus in the region, the loss of Turkey as a model for states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, political leadership that is fearful of a resurgent Russia and Iran, and the influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative in the region. The participants agreed that the U.S. should respond now rather than later as a loss of influence, business operations, and spreading corruption all affect U.S. relationships with countries in the South Caucasus.

One participant argued that the U.S. needs to be more involved in the region and utilize opportunities with countries willing to accept and welcome U.S. involvement. The example of Georgia and its territorial defense program was mentioned in this context. It was suggested that the U.S. should help redesign the national security of the Georgian executive branch, as well as present new military and tactical ideas, such as using the terrain to the Georgian advantage. The restructuring could have a major impact with minimal U.S. resources. Another key issue discussed was the relationship with Azerbaijan. There is a potential to improve relations with the U.S. by means of security cooperation, particularly maritime security. The previous administration was distracted from the region, and both Azerbaijan and Armenia now need reasons to place trust back in the U.S.

The topic of Black Sea Security was raised, and the roundtable agreed on the necessity of increased security in the Black Sea. One participant discussed increasing NATO presence and maritime domain presence. However, Russia could consider these actions as provocative. Still, the importance of the Black Sea to European allies was noted, as was the close link between European security and Caucasus security. Concerning the Black Sea, it was noted that a Romanian port is needed as there are currently only land forces in the area and the naval base in Rota, Spain is too distant. Maritime presence in the area would act as power projection.

Two important opportunities for the U.S. to take advantage of were noted: the first is the 2018 Armenian Revolution, and the second is the Caspian Convention. Focusing on the importance of the Caspian Convention, the argument is that this agreement lays the groundwork for a possible gas pipeline to Europe, enhances Azerbaijani importance to Turkey, and causes the South Caucasus to have more strategic importance as an energy provider to Europe in the long run. It was noted that Russia continues to play Armenia against Azerbaijan to prevent democratic values from reaching Armenia. This will stall democracy and prevent the gas pipeline from materializing. To prevent this scenario, the U.S. must provide support and convince Armenia that sustaining the conflict with Azerbaijan is counterproductive to its own interests, and the U.S. should ramp up its role in the conflict resolution process. This would entail committing U.S. resources as incentives towards economic revitalization to encourage peace.

During a discussion of the prospect of energy pipelines across the Caspian, a note of caution was issued: the U.S. has been against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and for the Southern Gas Corridor. Delays to construction through Italy though, could lead to a situation where Nord Stream 2 is built while the Trans-Adriatic pipeline, part of the SGC, falters. This would reduce U.S. credibility, and thus, before attempting to build Trans-Caspian pipelines, the U.S. should ensure the TAP pipeline is successfully constructed.