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Russian policy and military posture

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Cover: A Russian frontier post in Khushet village on the Russian-Georgian border.
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Sammanfattning

Denna studie analyserar Rysslands inställning till väpnade konflikter i Kaukasienregionen efter 2014. Kaukasien fortsätter att vara en konflikttyngd del av Rysslands närområde, där den största risken för krig är ett förnyat och utvidgat krig mellan Armenien och Azerbajdzjan över Nagorno-Karabach. Av de tre regionala stormakterna – Ryssland, Turkiet och Iran – har endast Ryssland militära baser i Kaukasien och är den enda som är redo att agera militärt i regionen.

Ryssland förefaller för närvarande nöjd med *status quo* i Sydkaukasien. De olösta konflikterna i Nagorno-Karabach, Sydossetien och Abchazien passar Rysslands mål och det är därför osannolikt att de kommer att lösas inom överskådlig framtid. Den växande intressekonvergensen för de tre externa regionala makterna avseende Syrien och Mellanöstern påverkar också Kaukasien. För alla tre är Mellanöstern viktigare på kort sikt, vilket innebär att de alla är intresserade av att hålla Kaukasien så stabilt och förutsägbart som möjligt.

Rysslands militära hållning i Kaukasien är överdimensionerad och är inte utformad för lokala konflikter i regionen utan för en potentiell storskalig konflikt i den södra krigsskådeplatsen, inbegripande även Mellanöstern. Moskvas tillvägagångssätt inom Sydkaukasiens säkerhetssfär innefattar också att använda lokala konflikter för att behålla de berörda staterna i ett konstant tillstånd av ryskstyrd instabilitet. Allt detta illustrerar hur Ryssland operationaliserar sin intressesfär i Kaukasien.

Nyckelord: Kaukasien, Kaukasus, Ryssland, Armenien, Azerbajdzjan, Georgien, Nagorno-Karabach, Abchazien, Sydossetien, Nordkaukasien, väpnad konflikt, militär konflikt, intressesfär

Summary

This study analyses Russia's approach since 2014 to armed conflicts in the Caucasus region. The Caucasus continues to be a conflict-ridden part of Russia's neighbourhood, the biggest risk of war being a renewed and expanded war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Of the three regional external powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran – only Russia has military bases in the Caucasus region and is the only one seemingly ready to act militarily.

Russia currently appears satisfied with the status quo in the South Caucasus. Unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia suit Russia's objectives and are therefore unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. The growing convergence of interests of the three external regional powers on Syria and the Middle East affects the Caucasus as well. For all three, the Middle East is more important in the short run, which means that they are all interested in keeping the Caucasus as stable and predictable as possible.

Russia's military posture in the Caucasus is over-dimensioned and is designed for a potential large-scale conflict in the Southern war theatre, including the wider Middle East, rather than just local conflicts in the region. Moscow's approach to the South Caucasus in the security sphere also includes using local conflicts to keep the states concerned in a constant state of Russia-controlled instability. All this illustrates how Russia operationalizes ns a sphere of interest in the Caucasus.

Keywords: the Caucasus, Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, North Caucasus, armed conflict, military conflict, armed conflict, sphere of interest

Preface

Russia is explicit about its ambitions to strive for a sphere of privileged interests in its neighbourhood. What does this mean for the Caucasus? What leverage does Russia have, both in terms of policy instruments and military means? This report analyses these questions and provides an impressive overview of the region.

The report is produced within the framework of the Russia and Eurasia Studies Programme (Russian foreign, Defence and Security Policy) at the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), which provides analyses for the Swedish Ministry of Defence. The programme focuses on research in Russian security studies, including Russia's neighbourhood, military, economic and domestic affairs.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

a/c	aircraft
AC	Army Corps
AA	Air Force and Air Defence Army
AAslt	Air Assault
AB	Air Base
ABL	Administrative Boundary Line
AD	Air Defence
ADD	(theatre-level) Air Defence Division
Army	Combined-Arms Army (on map)
Arty	Artillery
AShM	Anti-Ship Missile
ASW	Anti-Submarine Warfare
Bde	Brigade
Bn	Battalion
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BTC	Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (oil pipeline)
C4ISR	Command, Control & Communications Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance
CAA	Combined-Arms Army
CBR	Chemical, biological and radiological (protection)
CEPA	Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement
CDB	Coastal Defence Brigade
ChRI	Chechen Republic of Ichkeria
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
Comp	composite
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area

Def	Defence
Div	Division
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
Eng	Engineers
EOP	Enhanced Opportunities Partnership
EU	European Union
FSB	Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti (Federal Security Service)
Ftr/Bmb	fighter-bomber
GDP	gross domestic product
HQ	Headquarters
IDP	internally displaced person
IK	Imarat Kavkaz (Caucasian Emirate)
IS	Islamic State
JCC	Joint Control Commission
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JISCO	Joint Inter-Service Combat Operation
JPKF	Joint Peace-Keeping Force
JSC	Joint Strategic Command
LACM	land-attack cruise missile
Log	logistics
MB	Military Base
MChS	Ministerstvo po Chrezvychainym Situatsiiam (Emergency Control Ministry, EMERCOM, of Russia)
MD	Military District
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MoD	Ministry of Defence
Mil	Military
MRB	Motor-Rifle Brigade
MRD	Motor-Rifle Division
mtn	mountain

MVD	Ministerstvo vnutrennykh del (Ministry of the Interior)
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NInf	Naval Infantry
NN	Unknown
OMON	Otriad Mobilnyi Osobogo Naznacheniia (Special Purpose Mobile Unit of the Federal Police within the Rozgvardiia). Before 2011 Otriad Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniia (Special Purpose Police Unit) of the Russian Ministry of Interior
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Prot	Protection
RC	Regional Command
Recce	Reconnaissance
Reg	Regiment
SAM	surface-to-air missile
SF	Special Forces
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
spt	support
sqn	Squadron (here = 10 a/c or helicopters);
SSM	surface-to-surface missile
Sub	Submarine
Terr Def	Territorial defence
Tp	Transport
Trp	Troops
TVD	Teatr Voennykh Deistvii (war theatre)
UN	United Nations
UNOMIG	UN Observer Mission in Georgia
US	United States
USD	US dollar

Contents

1 Introduction

During the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, the Russian military crossed national borders to attack a sovereign state for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Six years later, in 2014, the Russian military aggression against Ukraine – i.e. the illegal annexation of Crimea and the instigation of a separatist war in Donbas – became yet another reminder of the central objective in Russian foreign policy to secure the post-Soviet space as its sphere of interest. Although these Russian ambitions were not new, they became further emphasized and closely tied to the strengthening authoritarian rule in Russia after the return of President Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012. Altogether, Russia's repeated use of military force to achieve political goals emphasizes the need to study Russia's approach to influence its sphere of interest, the post-Soviet space. Understanding how Russia actually approaches this in word and deed in the Caucasus region is important for analysts and policy makers dealing with Russia and former Soviet republics.

1.1 Aim and methodology

The objective of this study is to analyse Russia's approach to armed conflicts in the Caucasus region since 2014. This means covering Russia's policy as expressed in political and strategic documents and official statements and its military posture in terms of the forces nominally available for deployment in the region and factors that affect their deployment if conflicts escalate. We also outline the political response from the Caucasus states[1] as a context for Russia's policy dynamics.

Geographically, by the Caucasus region we mean both the North Caucasus (e.g. the North Caucasian Federal District of the Russian Federation) and the South Caucasus (the independent countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: see Map 1.1 and Appendix 2). In the military assessment the corresponding area is Russia's potential Southern war theatre, covering the Southern Military District, the South Caucasus, the Middle East and the Black Sea and Caspian Sea region (see Map 4.1).

The sources used in the study are first and foremost interviews conducted during two research trips to Moscow in June 2017 and to the South Caucasus (Yerevan, Tbilisi and Baku) in September 2017. During these trips, 45 interviews were conducted with officials, regional experts, analysts, journalists and diplomats. Institutions visited for this study are listed in Appendix 3. The written sources are primarily Russian primary sources as strategic documents (the Military Doctrine, the National Security Strategy and the Foreign Policy Concept), but also Russian, Caucasian and Western secondary sources such as newspaper articles, Internet

[1] The significantly smaller armed forces of the three South Caucasus states are unlikely to deter Russian military action in the Caucasus and are therefore not discussed here.

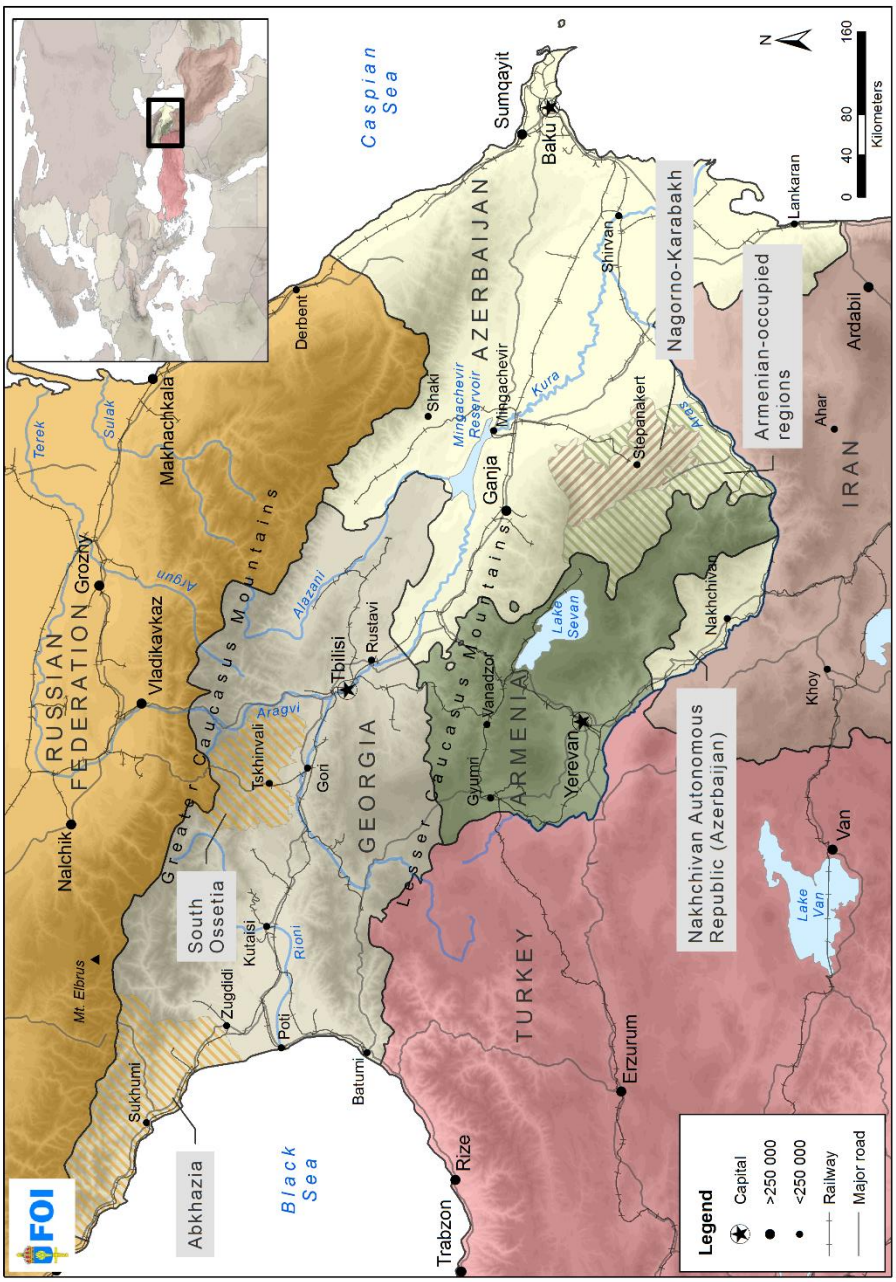
sources and research reports. Russian domestic policy documents pertaining to the North Caucasus have not been studied here since the focus is on the foreign policy aspects of Russia's approach to the Caucasus. The military analysis contains an update of the assessment of Russia's Armed Forces and the Southern war theatre that was presented in the FOI report *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016*.[2]

In the military sphere we limit the study to Russia's military assets in Russia and in former Soviet republics. In addition, Russia has sizeable stand-off warfare assets and its nuclear forces, although they have not been part of this analysis. The report only deals with Russia's approach to the Caucasus in terms of policies and assets for dealing with armed conflict, not other Russian policy areas such as economic affairs and energy. The period studied in the report is from Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 through 2017, except for when historical background to the conflicts is needed (see also Appendix 1 for more detail about the unresolved conflicts).

The outline of the report is as follows. Chapter 2 discusses Russia's general approach to armed conflicts and the importance given to the Caucasus as reflected in Russian strategic doctrines and concepts. Chapter 3 analyses the dynamics in the particular conflicts we are studying in the Caucasus region and Russia's approach to them. In the North Caucasus, Russia is challenged by Islamist Jihadi separatism and potential ethnic conflicts. In contrast, in the South Caucasus the dominating conflicts are between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh and between Georgia and Russia over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Chapter 4 analyses Russia's nominal military assets in the Southern war theatre. Chapter 5 analyses the changes in the balance of power in the South Caucasus and in the broader region, which has dramatically shifted in recent years due to such factors as the ongoing developments in the Middle East and the reduction of Western activity in the South Caucasus. Chapter 6 gives the study's conclusions and discusses possible Russian considerations about the use of military force in four cases of escalating conflicts in the Caucasus. As mentioned, background on the unresolved conflicts is to be found in Appendix 1 and a table outlining the ethnic groups in the North Caucasus in Appendix 2.

[2] Westerlund, Fredrik and Norberg, Johan "The Fighting Power of Russia's Armed Forces in 2016" in Persson, Gudrun (ed.) (2016) *Russian Military Capability in a Ten-Year Perspective – 2016*, FOI-R--4326--SE, December, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, pp. 78-79.

Map 1.1 Overview over the Caucasus region



Map: Per Wikström

2 Russia's approach to the Caucasus and to armed conflicts

Russia's weakness in the 1990s meant that it was still amenable to cooperation with Western actors in order to prevent escalation of conflicts and further destabilization of its immediate neighbourhood. However, from the Russian perspective, the pattern shifted in the 2000s to competition for regional influence with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). The rivalry continued over the Russia–Georgia war in 2008 to escalate through the outbreak of the crisis over Ukraine in early 2014.[3]

2.1 The importance of the Caucasus for Russia

The Caucasus region is important to Russia for at least five reasons. First, the region is of great geo-strategic importance in linking the European continent with the Middle East and the Black Sea with the Caspian Sea. This is particularly important given the energy riches found in the Caspian Sea and further illustrated by the pipelines – the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and the South Caucasus Pipeline (gas) – which run through Azerbaijan and Georgia to Turkey, bypassing Russia.

Second, the region is the scene of unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia which hold a potential for escalation. The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in particular has been highlighted since 2014, when the number of armed incidents started to rise, peaking during the "Four Day War" in April 2016. The unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space benefit Russia in the sense that they guarantee Moscow's leverage on the countries concerned. This is particularly true when it comes to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although these conflicts have not stopped Georgia strengthening contacts with the EU and NATO, they prevent Georgia from achieving membership in these Western organizations. NATO, in particular, explicitly does not accept new members that have unresolved conflicts with their neighbours.

Third, as noted above, the South Caucasus is still perceived by Moscow as a matter of rivalry between Russia and the West. The three South Caucasus states have taken different positions in their relations to Russia and the West. For Georgia, fears and threat perceptions concerning Russia have strengthened the wish for a closer relationship with the EU and NATO. Armenia has taken the opposite position, linking its economy and security to Russia. Russia has a military base in

[3] Fischer, Sabine (ed.) (2016) *Not Frozen!: the Unresolved Conflicts over Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh in Light of the Crisis in Ukraine*, SWP Research Paper 9, Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, p. 6.

Armenia and Russia's Border Troops guard Armenia's border with Turkey, a NATO country. Azerbaijan, finally, is in the middle, keeping a distance from both sides, a position made possible by its own sizeable energy resources.

Fourth, the Caucasus is also important for its diversity of ethnic groups. There are more than 50 ethnic groups living in the region, many with their own unique language, culture and traditions. This mosaic of ethnic groups, especially in the Russian North Caucasus (see Appendix 2), has been a cause of unrest and political commotion throughout history, from the Russian conquest of the region from the Turks in the 19th century to the two Chechen Wars in the 1990s and early 2000s. For Moscow, the predominantly Muslim peoples in the North Caucasus republics represent a challenge to Russian policies that increasingly emphasize Orthodox Christianity despite Russia formally having four official religions, one of which is Islam.

Furthermore, in Russia there is a commonly expressed "domino theory" according to which Russia's territorial integrity is at stake in the North Caucasus. Any type of secession in the North Caucasus would generate pressure for similar religious and ethnic insurgencies and secessionist movements in the likewise predominantly Muslim Volga-Ural regions of Russia's heartland.[4] The ethnic mosaic of the North Caucasus is a factor connecting the area to the South Caucasus, and this factor also increases Russia's interest in dominating the South Caucasus as well. A potential war in the South Caucasus would risk spreading to the North as some of the peoples (Lezgins, Azeris and Avars in Dagestan and Azerbaijan, Ossetians in North and South Ossetia, and others) live on both sides of the Greater Caucasus mountain range. Therefore, for Russia, an old saying goes that "he who wishes to control the North Caucasus must also control the South."[5]

Fifth, the region's proximity to the Middle East and the recent wars in Syria and Iraq play an increasingly important role in the Caucasus. The key dynamic is Islamist extremism. Russia has been fighting Islamist extremism in the North Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 2014, when the Islamic State (IS) declared the Caucasus as a priority region and sphere of interest, the issue of Jihadi warriors going from the Caucasus to fight in the Middle East and, presumably, returning to continue the fight in their own neighbourhood has been added to the agenda both in Russia and in the South Caucasus.[6]

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[4] Blank, Stephen and Kim Younkyoo (2016) "The North Caucasus: Russia's Other War", *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 197.

[5] Sherr, James (2017) "Nagorno-Karabakh Between Old and New Geopolitics" in Cornell, Svante E. (ed.) *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" & European Security*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 52.

[6] Markedonov, Sergey (2015) "Islamskoe gosudarvstvo: Ugroza dlia bolshogo Kavkaza", *Russian International Affairs Council*, 9 November, http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/islamskoe-gosudarstvo-ugroza-dlya-bolshogo-kavkaza/?sphrase_id=1833977 (accessed 26 October 2017).

2.2 Russia's strategic documents on the Caucasus and the world

During Vladimir Putin's third presidency, Russia updated its main security and strategic documents: the Military Doctrine in 2014 (hereafter the Doctrine), the National Security Strategy in 2015 (the Strategy) and the Foreign Policy Concept in 2016 (the Concept). The three new strategic documents replaced earlier versions (from 2010, 2009 and 2008, respectively), marking a shift from Dmitriy Medvedev's presidency (2008–2012).

In addition to the three published documents, Russia also has a classified Defence Plan up to 2020. The original document was signed by President Putin in late 2012 and updated in 2015.[7] Its contents have not been possible to analyse and it will not be discussed further here.

Neither the Strategy nor the Doctrine explicitly mentions the Caucasus region or any of the South Caucasus states. However, they both mention Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Strategy singles them out as key areas of Russian foreign policy. The Doctrine stresses the interaction with these entities in order to ensure joint defence and security.[8] In the Concept, the first priorities of Russian foreign policy are all devoted to developing Russia's bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the post-Soviet space within organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Union State of Belarus and Russia.[9] Of the Caucasian states, only Armenia is a member of all the three organizations (the CIS, EAEU and CSTO), Azerbaijan is a member of the CIS only and Georgia is not a member of any.

In bilateral relations, the Concept also gives high priority to assisting the establishment of Abkhazia and South Ossetia "as modern democratic states, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and socioeconomic recovery", as well as settling the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict "by

[7] Hedenskog, Jakob, Persson, Gudrun, Vendil Pallin, Carolina "Russian Security Policy" in Persson, (ed.) (2016), p. 98.

[8] National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015) *Ukaz Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 31.12.2015 g. No 683 "O Strategii Natsionalnoi bezopasnosti Rosssiiskoi Federatsii"*, 31 December, http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/40391, para 17; and Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014), *Voennaia Doktrina Rossiiskoi Federatsii (utverzhdena Prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii 25 Dekabria 2014 g. No Pr-2976)*, http://www.scrf.gov.ru/security/military/-document129/ (accessed 3 October 2017).

[9] Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016) *Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Federatsii (utverzhdena prezidentom Rossiiskoi Federatsii V.V. Putinym 30 Noiabria 2016 g.)*, http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/-content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_CptICkB6BZ29&_-101_INSTANCE_CptICkB6BZ29_languageId=ru_RU (accessed 2 October 2017).

working together with the other States that are co-chairs in the Minsk Group of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)". The Concept also sets out Russia's interest in "normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus".[10]

The three strategic documents are all anti-Western and blame the West for turbulence in the international system. According to the Strategy, for instance, instability in global development has increased and Russia's independent foreign and domestic policy has led the US and its allies to reveal their political, economic, military and informational pressure on Russia. Furthermore, the Strategy notes that the West's goal of counteracting the integration processes in Eurasia has a negative impact on Russia's national security. The US and EU are pointed out as responsible for developments in Ukraine by having supported an "anti-constitutional coup" that led to "deep divisions in Ukrainian society and the emergence of an armed conflict".[11] Thus, in addition to describing the US and NATO in a negative light, which previous documents also did, the Strategy also points to the EU as hostile to Russia.

The three documents challenge the Euro-Atlantic security order. They accuse the West of double standards. The Strategy claims that the current international security system does not provide security for all states. Furthermore, in an increasingly unstable world order, "some countries use information and communication technologies to achieve their geopolitical objectives, such as the manipulation of public opinion and falsification of history", including inciting "colour revolutions". This is a clear reference to the US and the West. Furthermore, the Strategy points to NATO expansion and its approach to the borders of Russia as "a threat to Russia's national security".[12]

Furthermore, the Foreign Policy Concept mentions the eroding of the "global economic and political dominance of the traditional western powers". On the one hand, the vacuum in the international order created by the fading of the West has been filled by extremist groups such as the Islamic State. The Western withdrawal from Afghanistan "of all but a few international contingents" also poses a security threat to Russia and the other members of the CIS in Central Asia. On the other hand, the West's weakness also opens opportunities for Russia.[13] The Concept implies that Russia, being "a multi-ethnic and multi-religious state with a track record of harmonious coexistence among various peoples", is more capable of acting as an intermediary in resolving international conflicts.[14] The Concept seems to imply that Russia can transform its own internal experience in defusing threats

[10] Ibid., para. 57-58.
[11] National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015), para. 17 (accessed 1 October 2017).
[12] Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 116-117.
[13] Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (2016), para. 97 (accessed 2 October 2017).
[14] Ibid., para. 38.

posed by extremism and fundamentalism in the North Caucasus as an asset in international conflict resolution.

2.3 Russian definitions of military and armed conflicts

The Military Doctrine is a system of officially adopted state views on preparation for the armed defence and armed protection of the Russian Federation. It takes into account the main provisions of the National Security Strategy and the Foreign Policy Concept and other strategic documents.[15] The 2014 Military Doctrine distinguishes between a military conflict and an armed conflict. A military conflict is described as a type of solution for interstate or intra-state tensions through the use of military force. Three different kinds of war are listed: local war (*lokalnaia voina*), regional war (*regionalnaia voina*), and large-scale war (*krupnomash-tabnaia voina*). A local war is said to have limited military political objectives, and involves mainly the states that are opposed. A regional war involves several states in a region and is conducted with national armed forces or with a coalition of armed forces. Each party is striving for important military-political objectives. A large-scale war is one between coalitions of states or between the great powers of the world. It could be a result of an escalating armed conflict, a local, or a regional war. A large-scale war requires mobilization of the country's total material and spiritual resources.[16] For this analysis, armed conflict, i.e. conflict on a more limited scale, pertains to the conflicts that have taken place in the Caucasus since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Doctrine's notion of military conflict, i.e. also including large-scale conflict, justifies discussing a possible wider military conflict in the Caucasus involving external regional powers or coalitions.

While the Concept assesses the danger of war between major powers as generally low, it also warns that major powers may find themselves drawn into local wars which might in turn escalate to the point of a great-power clash. According to this definition the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is a typical local war. All the three kinds of war mentioned could, therefore, apply to a potential war in the Caucasus region, depending on the spread of the conflict and the involvement of surrounding states and military alliances.

The Doctrine also points to the belief that "political forces and civic movements financed and controlled from abroad" are used in contemporary conflicts. The most important difference from the previous military doctrines is the view that a protesting population is seen as a part of contemporary conflicts. Political and

[15] Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014), para. 8 (accessed 3 October 2017).
[16] Ibid.

other organizations are seen as a part of the war. Some of this reflects the official rhetoric of the Russian political leadership on Ukraine where Russia is said to be exposed to this kind of warfare by the West. This reveals a militarized view of "colour revolutions".[17] The Doctrine's approach was confirmed in the Strategy in 2015 in which colour revolutions were explicitly mentioned.[18]

A fairly recent example in the Caucasus, which illustrates Moscow's obsession with colour revolutions, was the social tensions in Armenia in 2015. During the summer, thousands of protesters took the streets in Yerevan and other cities protesting against a 16 per cent rise in the price of electricity announced by Electric Networks of Armenia. The demonstrations were leaderless, arose spontaneously and were directed not against Russia but against Armenian politicians, although participants also expressed criticism of the Russian company InterRAO as owner of the local electricity grid operator. Nevertheless, the protests fitted the Russian narrative of "colour revolutions". Russian commentators frequently castigated them as an "Armenian Maidan" and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov insinuated that they were initiated with foreign financial backing.[19]

2.4 Conclusions

Russia's strategic documents have a bureaucratic role in unifying the views among state institutions and thus have a lowest-common-denominator aspect to them,[20] but also indicate Moscow's world visions and security concerns. The West (NATO, the US and the EU) is perceived as the major challenge to both Russia's great-power ambitions and security in the Caucasus as well as in the rest of the post-Soviet space. In a seemingly contradictory fashion, however, Russia also perceives the West's power as weakening, which gives Moscow both new problems and opportunities. The strategic documents stress the importance of indirect and asymmetrical threats in military operations and view "colour revolutions" as part of contemporary conflicts. They are specifically mentioned as a threat in the Strategy and it is likely that Russia can also apply these methods in military operations. In short, the strategic documents reveal that Moscow perceives the Caucasus as a natural Russian sphere of interest, but also as an area of competition with an antagonistic West and a source of instability.

[17] Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 108-109.
[18] National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation (2015), para. 43 (accessed 1 October 2017).
[19] Smolnik, Franziska and Halbach, Uwe (2016) "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine" in Fischer, (ed.) (2016), p. 69.
[20] Hedenskog, Persson and Vendil Pallin in Persson (ed.) (2016), p. 98.

3 Russia and the conflicts in the Caucasus

This chapter outlines Russia's policy towards the Caucasus region, first the North and then the South Caucasus. To provide a basis for discussion in the final chapter, each of the two sections ends with an assessment of possible paths of escalation on each side of the Greater Caucasus range that would require additional Russian military reinforcements to manage. The third section offers conclusions on Russian policy for the North and the South Caucasus respectively.

3.1 Moscow's approach to the conflicts in the North Caucasus

The conflicts in the North Caucasus are, primarily, connected to the activities of the armed Islamist insurgents, who are particularly active in Russia's ethnically-based republics, Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and to a lesser extent in Kabardino-Balkaria and other parts of the North Caucasus.

3.1.1 The armed Islamist insurgents in the North Caucasus

While the first war in Chechnya (1994–96) was driven by the secular Chechen elites' secessionism, the second war (1999–2000) was more driven by Islamist motives. The "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria" (ChRI), as proclaimed by the separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudayev in 1991, transformed itself into a radical Islamist project after Dudayev's death in 1996. Islamist militants from the North Caucasus – not only Chechens – took hostages in a Moscow theatre in 2002, and at a school in Beslan, North Ossetia, in 2004, and raided Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria, in 2005. These terrorist attacks together killed several hundred people.

In 2007, the then "President" of the ChRI, Doku Umarov, declared that he had created the Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz, IK), where the ChRI was to be one province (*vilayat*) among others and which would encompass all the republics of the Russian North Caucasus.[21] In the following years, besides conducting a low-intensity war in the North Caucasus against Russian state institutions, particularly the military and the police, the IK also claimed responsibility for several terrorist attacks and suicide bombings in other parts of Russia. These were the bombing of

[21] Mozzhukhin, Andrey (2015) "Traditsionnogo Islama na Severnom Kavkaze net", *Lenta.ru*, 4 March, https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/03/04/salafism (accessed 16 May 2016).

the Nevskii Express fast train between St. Petersburg and Moscow in 2009, the two bombings in the Moscow underground in 2010, a bomb at the Domodedovo airport outside Moscow in 2011, and two bombings in Volgograd in the end of 2013, which all together claimed more than 150 lives.[22]

Since 2001 Moscow has adopted a policy of Chechenization in order to pacify the Chechen Republic. Under this policy, pro-Moscow leaders (first Ahmad Kadyrov and, from 2007, his son Ramzan Kadyrov) have been elected in elections organized and controlled by Russia. The aim of the Chechenization policy has been to let regional authorities in Chechnya, rather than Moscow, become responsible for fighting insurgents. A symbolic culmination of this process was the ending of Russia's anti-terrorist operation in the republic in March 2009.[23] The operation had been in place since the end of the second war in 2000.

The Kremlin's Chechenization policy has resulted in the stabilization of the situation in the republic and its reconstruction after the devastation of war. It has, however, also created the dictatorial regime of Kadyrov, who dominates Chechnya's political, economic and ideological instruments. In exchange for stabilizing the republic by using all means, Kadyrov has received Moscow's guarantees that he can remain in power, obtain regular funding from the federal budget and have a free hand in ruling Chechnya. But Moscow's policy has also strengthened, and in many respects accelerated, four socio-political processes in Chechnya since the early 1990s: the de-Russification of the republic, its Islamization, the strengthening of Chechen nationalism, and nihilism in relation to the Russian legal system.[24]

Kadyrov's brand of Islam is highly puritanical and takes its cue from Sharia on issues of manners and morale. For instance, alcohol consumption is strictly monitored and gambling is officially banned. Broadcasting of Western music on local TV stations has decreased, while the number of programmes dedicated to Islam has increased. Restrictions imposed on women have multiplied in recent years, including an obligation for female students and women who work in the public sector to wear the hijab.[25] Other examples illustrate how Chechnya defies Russian law. There are press reports about polygamy, bride kidnapping and

[22] Hedenskog, Jakob (2013) "The Terrorist Threat against Sochi 2014" in Petersson, Bo and Vamling, Katarina (eds) *The Sochi Predicament: Contexts, Characteristics and Challenges of the Olympic Winter Games in 2014*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, pp. 184-185.

[23] Falkowski, Maciej (2015) *Ramzanistan: Russia's Chechen Problem*, Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, Point of View, No. 54, p. 10.

[24] Ibid., p. 6.

[25] Laruelle, Marlène (2017) *Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as Tool of the Kremlin?*, Russia/NIS Center, Russie.Nei.Visions 99, pp. 20-21.

persecution of homosexuals.[26] Kadyrov has even threatened to kill Russian law-enforcement officers operating in Chechnya without his consent.[27]

Throughout the North Caucasus, Jihadi insurgents largely associate themselves with Salafism, a strict Sunni interpretation of Islam with its roots in Saudi Arabia. These Salafists claim to be true Muslims who have long suffered discrimination from representatives of the majority of Muslim communities in the North Caucasus, which traditionally align themselves with Sufism, a more moderate interpretation of Islam with elements of mysticism. Today Muslim communities in the North Caucasus, particularly in Dagestan, the most multi-ethnic and Islamized region of Russia, are undergoing a transformation whereby the Salafi movement is growing in popularity and becoming increasingly accepted as mainstream in the societies.[28]

During recent years, the level of violence from the Islamist insurgent movement in the North Caucasus has fallen dramatically.[29] According to the website Caucasian Knot, during 2010–2012 there were more than 700 deaths annually in the North Caucasus of civilians, insurgents and Russian and local *siloviki* (i.e. policemen and soldiers) due to the armed conflicts in the North Caucasus (with 500 to 1,000 injured each year in addition). By 2015–2016 this number had fallen to around 200 deaths each year (and fewer than 100 injured).[30] Reasons suggested for the decline include the deaths of high-ranking commanders of the insurgency, such as Doku Umarov in September 2013. Also, Russian forces have increasingly

[26] Walker, Shaun (2017) "Russia investigate 'gay purge' in Chechnya", *The Guardian*, 26 May, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/26/russia-investigates-gay-purge-in-chechnya; Umarova, Amina (2010) "Despite official measures, bride kidnapping endemic in Chechnya", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 October, https://www.rferl.org/a/Despite_Official_Measures_Bride_Kidnapping_Endemic_In_Chechnya/2197575.html (accessed 25 January 2018); and Bovt, Georgy (2015) "Will Moscow Allow Polygamy in Chechnya?", *The Moscow Times*, 13 May, https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/will-moscow-allow-polygamy-in-chechnya-46523 (all accessed 24 January 2017).

[27] Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2015) "Russian Interior Ministry Slams Kadyrov's 'Shoot-To-Kill' Remark", 23 April, https://www.rferl.org/a/kadyrov-authorizes-shooting-of-security-oustide-chechnya/26974169.html (accessed 31 January 2018).

[28] Hedenskog, Jakob (2012) "Putin and Russian Counter-terrorism Policy in the North Caucasus" in Hyodo, Shinji and Vendil Pallin, Carolina (eds) *Neighbourhood Watch: Japanese and Swedish perspectives on Russian security*, FOI-R--3519--SE, October, pp. 128-129.

[29] Interview, Moscow, June 2017.

[30] Kavkazskii Uzel (2010) *Infografika. Statistika zhertv na Severnom Kavkaze za god 2010 po danym 'Kavkazskogo uzla'*, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/235593; *Infografika* (2011), http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/235594; *Infografika* (2012), http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/225256/; *"V 2015 chislo zhertv konflikta na Severnom Kavkaze snizilos vdvoe"*, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/277116/; and "*V 2016 chislo zhertv konflikt na Severnom Kavkaze vyroslo na 11%*, http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/297004/ (accessed 21 November 2017).

targeted the insurgents' support infrastructure.[31] A third reason is the exodus of insurgents to other conflict zones, such as Syria and Iraq, which were much more critical theatres for Sunni Jihadi fighters.

Starting in December 2014, middle-level commanders of the Caucasus Emirate began publicly switching their allegiance from the Emirate leader Aliaskhab Kebekov to the Islamic State (IS) leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, following al-Baghdadi and his group's declaration of a caliphate earlier in the year. The Caucasus Emirate continued to operate independently, but suffered further high-profile losses, including the killing by Russian security forces of Kebekov in April 2015, and his successor Magomed Suleymanov months later.[32] By late 2015, the insurgents still operating in Russia's North Caucasus republics had largely unified under the IS's Caucasus Province.[33] This split in the rebel movement benefited Russia, as it deflects the insurgents' strength and attention from the North Caucasus to pursuit of Islamic revolution in Syria and Iraq. However, the success of the IS in the wars in Syria and Iraq waned during 2016–2017, raising concerns about the potential threat of fighters returning to the North Caucasus. According to Russian experts, however, the Russian security service is closely and effectively monitoring returnees.[34]

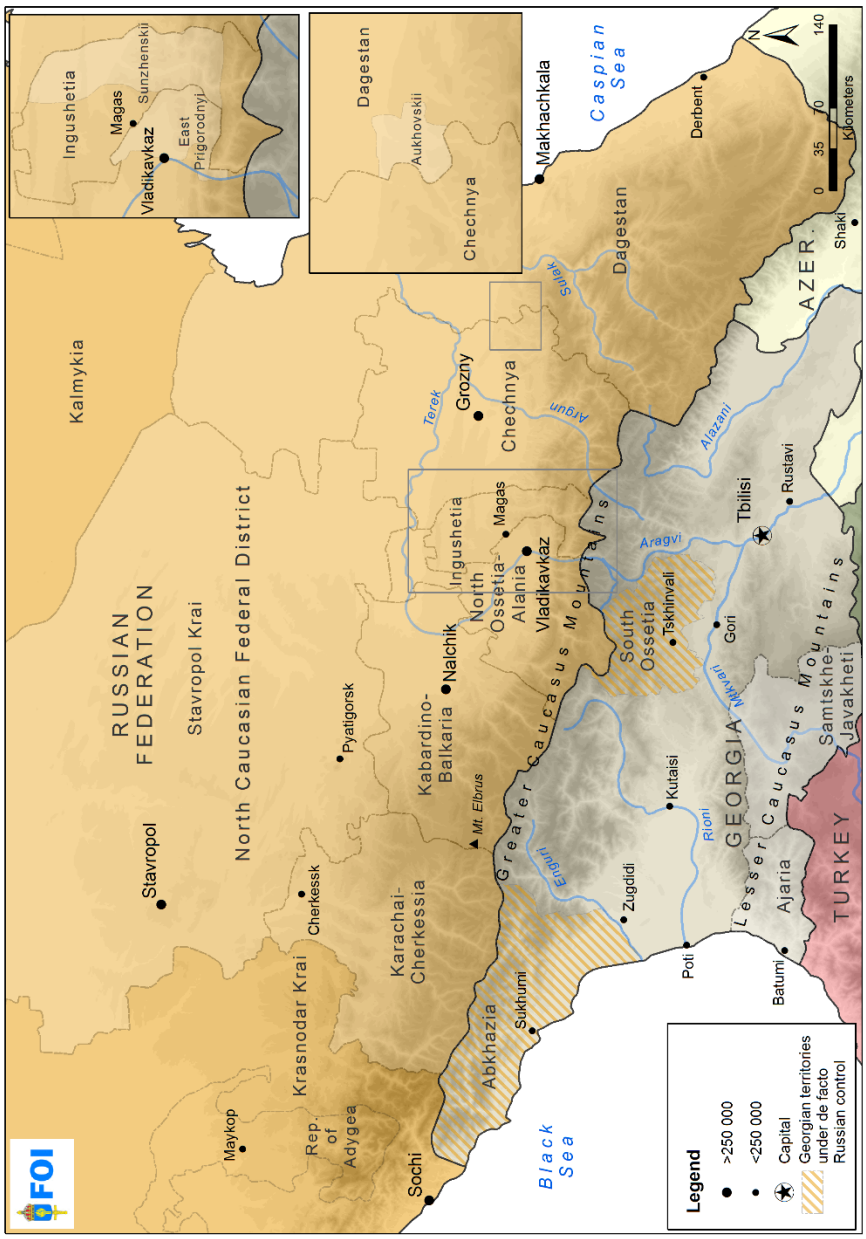
[31] Fuller, Liz (2015) "Why is the death toll tumbling in the North Caucasus?", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 10 February, https://www.rferl.org/a/insurgency-north-caucasus-terrorism-isis/26840778.html (accessed 21 November 2017).

[32] Hedenskog, Jakob and Holmquist, Erika (2015) "The Threat of the Islamic State to Russia's North Caucasus and Central Asia, *RUFS Briefing* No. 28, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, August.

[33] Vatchagaev, Mairbek (2015) "Islamic State Apparently wins its Competition with Caucasus Emirate", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12, Issue 27, The Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/islamic-state-apparently-wins-its-competition-with-caucasus-emirate-2/#.VklVaHYrLIV (accessed 22 November 2017).

[34] Interviews, Moscow, June 2017.

Map 3.1 The North Caucasus



Map: Per Wikström

3.1.2 Other conflicts in the North Caucasus

In addition to the Jihadi threat, the North Caucasus also has latent border conflicts and ethnic conflicts with a potential to escalate into a serious problems for Moscow (see Map 3.1). The ambitions of Ramzan Kadyrov in particular have made Chechnya's neighbouring republics in the Russian Federation – Dagestan and Ingushetia – concerned about potential disputes. In north-west Dagestan, this involves a former Chechen district (Aukhovskii) close to the Chechen border, which before Stalin's deportations in 1944 was inhabited by Chechens. After the deportation members of the other ethnic groups, Laks and Avars, moved in from the mountain areas of Dagestan and the district was split. Today representatives of the 100,000-strong Chechen community are raising the issue of restoring it as a district of Chechnya.[35] In Ingushetia, the dispute is about another district (Sunzhenskii), the greater part of which came under Ingushetia after the split between Ingushetia and Chechnya when Ingushetia was made a separate republic in 1992. Kadyrov considers this district part of Chechnya. Ingush leaders fear that Kadyrov has ambitions to reunite the two republics into one federal subject under his own reign.[36]

Ingushetia also has a territorial dispute with its western neighbouring republic North Ossetia-Alania (see Map 3.1). The East Prigorodnyi district became part of North Ossetia after the Soviet deportation of the Ingush people in 1944. During the late Soviet period, violent ethnic tensions rose. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ethnic violence led to a steady increase in the militancy of Ingush nationalists in the East Prigorodnyi district, despite the deployment of 1,500 Russian Interior Troops to the area. The autumn of 1992 saw regular fighting between Ingush and Ossetian militias. Russian OMON special police forces actively participated on the Ossetian side and sometimes even led Ossetian fighters in battle.[37] The fighting was the first armed conflict on Russian territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Nearly 500 people were killed during the first days of fighting and long after the clashes had calmed down hostage-taking, shootings and attacks on life and property continued. Tens of thousands of Ingush people –

[35] Dzutsati, Valery (2015) "Restoration of Chechen District in Dagestan May Reverberate across North Caucasus", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 122, Issue 48, The Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/restoration-of-chechen-district-in-dagestan-may-reverberate-across-north-caucasus/ (accessed 5 April 2016).

[36] RFE/RL (2013) "Chechnya, Ingushetia On Collision Course Over Border Dispute", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 March, https://www.rferl.org/a/chechnya-ingushetia-border-dispute/24919250.html (accessed 22 November 2017).

[37] Dzutsati, Valery (2010) "Ingush-Ossetian Relations Show Signs of improvement", *North Caucasus Weekly*, 27 September, The Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/ingush-ossetian-relations-show-signs-of-improvement/ (accessed 22 November 2017); and Human Rights Watch (1996) "The Ingush-Ossetian conflict In the Prigorodnyi region", https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm (accessed 23 January 2018).

the numbers vary due to the lack of accurate figures – residing in the East Prigorodnyi district or in North Ossetia as a whole were forcibly displaced by Ossetian troops, often supported by Russian troops. Only a few have returned.[38] Decades of meddling by Moscow have not resolved the issue of the return of Ingush internally displaced persons (IDPs) from East Prigorodnyi or the territorial dispute as such.[39]

In the western North Caucasus, Circassian claims for national rehabilitation have attracted international attention. Circassians are an indigenous people of the North Caucasus and speak a unique north-west Caucasian language. Between 700,000 and 800,000 Circassians live in the North Caucasus as Adyges, Cherkess, Kabardians and Shapsugs – of which the first two were invented during the Soviet period. The Circassians are thus today a titular nationality in the bi-national republics of Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachai-Cherkessia and in the Republic of Adygea (see Map 3.1). The Circassians in the diaspora number between 2 and 5 million, the majority of whom live in Turkey.[40] The Circassians managed to raise attention to their cause in connection with the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, which coincided with the 150th anniversary of the Russian deportation of the Circassians to the Ottoman Empire after their military defeat at Sochi in 1864.[41] Georgia became the first country, in 2011, to recognize the massive slaughter of Circassians in 1864 as genocide.[42] Since then, however, Moscow has been fairly successful in splitting the Circassian movement, buying its leaders off and isolating them from the Circassian diaspora, which nevertheless continues to raise the issue.[43]

In the eastern North Caucasus, Dagestan (see Map 3.1) has had a complex relationship with its southern neighbour Azerbaijan, based on differences in language, ethnicity and religion. Dagestan has a Caucasian-speaking majority and significant Turkic-speaking ethnic groups. Azerbaijan is a Turkic-speaking country with relatively small minorities. Dagestan is primarily Sunni Muslim, while Azerbaijan is Shia. An estimated 100,000 ethnic Azeris reside inside Dagestan, primarily in the Derbent area near Dagestan's border with Azerbaijan.

[38] Human Rights Watch (1996) "The Ingush-Ossetian conflict In the Prigorodnyi region", https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm (accessed 23 January 2018).
[39] O'Loughlin, John, Toal, Gerard and Kolossov, Vladimir (2008) "The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Eastern Prigorodnyi Rayon, North Ossetia", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 49, No. 6, pp. 6543-660.
[40] Funch Hansen, Lars (2013) "Sochi as a Site of Circassian Long-Distance Memorialisation" in Petersson and Vamling (eds), p. 96.
[41] Hedenskog, Jakob (2011) "Russian Worries over Terrorist Threat to the 2014 Winter Olympics" in Hellström Jerker; Eriksson, Mikael and Granholm, Niklas (eds) *Strategic Outlook 2011*, FOI-R--3210--SE, June, p. 24.
[42] Lomsadze, Giorgi (2011) "Georgia Recognizes Circassian Genocide", *Eurasia.net*, 20 May, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63530 (accessed 1 June 2011).
[43] Interviews, Moscow, June 2017.

Dagestani ethnic groups, primarily Lezgins and Avars, reside in Azerbaijan, although their exact numbers are not known. In the 1990s, the Russian-backed Lezgin terrorist organization Sadval ("Unity") threatened to launch an insurgency in northern Azerbaijan in order to carve out part of Azerbaijan's territory with a Lezgin population. While Kremlin support for the Lezgin movement eventually died down, Lezgin resentment against Azerbaijan survived.[44] For Moscow, these complexities may not remain purely domestic, but may, if they are exacerbated, also have consequences beyond Russia's borders.

In the summer of 2017, two territorial disputes—one between Stavropol Krai (territory) and Dagestan and the other between Stavropol Krai and the Republic of Karachai-Cherkessia – reappeared. The first dispute involves a long-simmering quarrel over 50,000 hectares of land in the predominantly ethnic-Russian territory that most Dagestanis believe they should have control over as a historic right. The second concerns control of a water reservoir on the border between the two federal subjects and is more immediately serious. Moscow has decided to side with the ethnic-Russian-majority region (Stavropol Krai) against the demands of the leaders of a non-Russian republic (Karachai-Cherkessia). Moscow is in a position to control how the water is used by the local authorities in these federal subjects. This is a powerful lever similar to that which Moscow repeatedly utilized in Soviet times when it exploited its supervision of water rights in Central Asia.

Thus conflicts based on ethnic, territorial or property grievances may set the stage for new conflicts in the North Caucasus (see Appendix 2 for a list of ethnic groups in the North Caucasus). Any change in administrative borders in the North Caucasus could generate additional pressure to break up the two existing bi-national republics, Karachai-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria, which titular nations combine Turkic peoples (Karachais and Balkars) and Circassians (Cherkess and Kabardians). In addition, it could open the way for efforts to restore a "Greater Circassia". It could also prompt demands by the leaders of the republics across the region for border changes to incorporate into their own territories lands they see as theirs on an ethnic basis, improperly handed over to others, such as Chechen areas presently included in Dagestan.[45] Moscow probably wants to avoid letting such grievances escalate into conflicts, especially if (as in the case of Dagestan's relation to Azerbaijan) they may have secondary effects south of the Greater Caucasus range, thus potentially causing both a domestic and an international conflict.

[44] Dzutsati, Valery (2014) "Widening Azerbaijani Investment in Dagestan Sparks Resentment among Lezgins", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 11, Issue 132, The Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/widening-azerbaijani-investment-in-dagestan-sparks-resentment-among-lezgins-2/ (accessed 10 November 2017).

[45] Goble, Paul (2017) "Inter-Ethnic Land Conflicts Threaten Borders in the North Caucasus", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, Issue 98, The Jamestown Foundation, https://jamestown.org/program/inter-ethnic-land-conflicts-threaten-borders-in-north-caucasus/ (7 September 2017).

Summing up, the key area in the North Caucasus where escalation may take place and require Russian military reinforcements is probably Chechnya. Possible causes could be the effects of an internal power struggle, either if the Kadyrov-based regime ends or as a result of Russia for some reason changing its current policy of allowing Chechens to handle the republic on Moscow's behalf. Another possible cause could be renewed Chechen demands for independence. Yet another could be the above-mentioned Chechen claims to territories belonging to neighbouring republics. Finally, if a large number of Jihadis return from fighting in the Middle East, they may choose to keep fighting for their version of Islam against any political arrangement organized by Russia. The Jihadi challenge, however, does not seem to be imminent. The factors listed here are specific to Chechnya, but may at least in part also apply in other parts of the North Caucasus.

3.2 Russia and conflicts in the South Caucasus

According to experts in the region, Russia's apparent goal with the unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus remains to keep the affected neighbouring countries in a state of instability which it controls.[46] Moscow relies on its military presence in the conflict areas in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and on the issuing of passports to their residents, as well as political and economic support for these secessionist territories' state-building efforts. Thus Russian influence is greatest in South Ossetia, somewhat restricted but increasing in Abkhazia and weakest in Nagorno-Karabakh.[47] Russia has no troops on the ground in Nagorno-Karabakh, shares no border with the conflict zone, and supports both sides in different ways. Its ability to control what happens in the Nagorno-Karabakh is limited.[48] Thus Moscow's control is smallest in the conflict which entails the greatest security risks for the region.

3.2.1 The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (see Map 3.2), with an average of about 25–30 deaths annually, is far from "frozen". Its explosive potential was demonstrated by the escalation in April 2016, which caused dozens of casualties on both sides. Both sides – Armenia and Azerbaijan – claim the region for themselves, declaring Nagorno-Karabakh the cultural birthplace of the nation.[49] Both sides have more

[46] Interviews in Yerevan, Tbilisi and Baku, September 2017.
[47] Fischer, (ed.) (2016), p. 6.
[48] de Vaal, Thomas (2016) "Solve the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Before It Explodes", *The New York Times*, 7 April, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/08/opinion/solve-the-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-before-it-explodes.html (accessed 11 December 2017).
[49] Smolnik and Halbach in Fischer (ed.) (2016), p. 63.

heavy armament such as tanks, artillery and surface-to-surface missiles today than they had in the early 1990s.

Map 3.2 The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

Map: Per Wikström

Russia remains the most influential foreign actor in the conflict, yet its role is complex. It is *primus inter pares* in the OSCE Minsk Group as co-chair together with the US and France (see Appendix 1 for background). However, Moscow usually prepares its initiatives alone and only involves the other co-chairs in the group at the last minute. This seems, however, to suit both Washington and Paris, who appear to have little of substance to add to Moscow's approach.[50]

Both parties to the conflict, Armenia and Azerbaijan, perceive Moscow as courting the other alternately, depending on which of the two is better able to bolster

[50] Interviews, Moscow, June 2017 and Yerevan, September 2017.

Russia's regional goals. These include safeguarding its own borders, including that of the volatile North Caucasus, and preventing an increase in military activity in a region between Russia and Syria, where Russia remains deeply engaged militarily. As a result, Armenia and Azerbaijan question Russia's interest in resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and criticize Moscow's overly transactional approach. The absence of proactive Western participation has, however, left the two parties with no real alternative to Russian mediation.

Apart from its mediating efforts, Russia is also chief arms supplier to both Azerbaijan and Armenia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Azerbaijan's defence budget for 2015 was 3 billion USD, equivalent to 5.6 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Russia was the source of 80 per cent of Azerbaijan's arms supply, although materiel had been procured from other countries as well, notably Israel. Yerevan's defence budget was considerably smaller, at 447 million USD in 2015 (4.2% of GDP),[51] than Baku's.[52] Armenia receives Russian arms at discounted prices thanks to its membership in the CSTO, while Azerbaijan has to pay the market price for its Russian deliveries.[53] The Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan have widened the distrust of Russia in Yerevan, which fears Armenians being killed by Russian weapons.[54]

Some observers suspect a Russian role in the outbreak of the April 2016 Four Day War. The timing of the clashes was curious. Neither Azerbaijani President Ilham nor Armenian President Sergh Sargsyan was in his country as the clashes began on 2 April 2016. Both were returning from the Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, DC, a conference the Russian president did not attend. In Washington, on 1 April, the two presidents had had separate meetings with Vice-President Joe Biden, who affirmed the US's role in mediation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The timing of the escalation the day after these meetings seemed if anything to undermine that very idea.[55] By brokering the ceasefire on 5 April, Moscow demonstrated that it has the will to settle the conflict on its own

[51] SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (2016), https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex (accessed 15 December 2017).

[52] In 2016, both countries cut their defence spending. Falling energy prices forced Azerbaijan to reduce it from 5.6 per cent to 4.0 per cent of GDP (from around 3 bn USD to 1.9 bn USD). Armenia's cut was smaller, from 4.2 per cent to 4.0 per cent of GDP (from 447 to 423 million USD). Source: SIPRI Military Expenditure Database (2016), https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex (accessed 15 December 2017).

[53] Interviews, Yerevan and Baku, September 2017.

[54] Interviews, Yerevan, September 2017.

[55] Broers, Laurence (2016) "Global Powers Scramble to Contain Neglected Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict", Chatham House, 4 April, https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/global-powers-scramble-contain-neglected-armenian-azerbaijani-conflict (accessed 16 December 2017).

terms – sidestepping the other co-chairs in the Minsk Group.[56] Thus, Russia could both let the conflict happen and then stop it. This sent strong messages to both parties. For Armenia, the message was that Azerbaijan is strong and could, without Russia's support to Armenia, recapture Nagorno-Karabakh. To Azerbaijan, the message was that although Azerbaijan is stronger than Armenia, Russia will not allow Azerbaijan to use its military strength against Armenia without its own consent.[57]

So, besides being stubbornly at loggerheads over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as such, Yerevan and Baku, nevertheless, are united in mistrust of Russia's intentions. They see Russia as chiefly interested in expanding its military presence in the region by deploying troops in the conflict zone. Both parties rejected a suggestion in the so-called Lavrov Plan in 2015 about peacekeeping forces deployed in the conflict zone, fearing such a military presence would make them even more dependent on Moscow's shifting interests. The parties fear that the scenario of Russia using the event of a large-scale military confrontation to intervene in the conflict to prevent ethnic cleansing or serious violations of humanitarian law could be the prelude to a permanent military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh.[58]

3.2.2 The conflicts in Georgia

Since 2014, Moscow has clearly stepped up its influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (for a historical background, see Appendix 1). This suits South Ossetia's desire for unification with Russia, which Moscow is currently unwilling to grant. In 2017 South Ossetia renamed itself the "Republic of South Ossetia (State of Alania)", a symbolic step towards reunification with the Russian republic North Ossetia-Alania (see Map 3.1).[59] Abkhazia remains more sceptical about Moscow's dominance, although the change in government in Sukhumi in 2014 – when Moscow's preferred candidate Raul Khajimba took over as president – put Moscow in a better position to assert its interests in Sukhumi as well.

Moscow has also sought to cement its influence in Georgia's secessionist territories through formal agreements. In 2014 Moscow sought closer ties with Abkhazia through the Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership and in 2015

[56] Hedenskog, Jakob and Korkmaz, Kaan (2016) "The Interests of Russia and Turkey in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", *RUFS Briefing*, No. 35, May, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency.
[57] Interviews, Baku, September 2017.
[58] International Crisis Group (2017) *Nagorno-Karabakh Gathering War Clouds*, ICG, Europe Report No. 244, 1 June, pp. 27-28.
[59] OC Media (2017) "South Ossetia to be renamed 'Alania' as Bibilov wins presidential election", *OC Media*, 10 April, http://oc-media.org/south-ossetia-to-be-renamed-alania-as-bibilov-wins-presidential-election/ (accessed 21 December 2017).

with South Ossetia through the Treaty of Alliance and Integration. Taking Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's political, economic and military integration to a point just short of annexation was a symbolic response to Georgia's EU association process.[60] Annexing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as it did with Crimea, would, however, deprive Moscow of a lever of influence that could still be useful in the relationship with Tbilisi. South Ossetia, in particular, remains completely dependent on Russia.

One of the principal issues discussed at several rounds of the Geneva International Discussions – co-chaired by the OSCE, the EU and the UN (see Appendix 1) – is the commitment to the non-use of force. Georgia made a unilateral pledge of non-use of force in November 2010 and has since insisted that Russia should do the same. The Russian government refuses to follow suit, alleging that it is not a party to the conflict. Instead it wants Georgia to sign treaties envisaging non-use of force directly with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Tbilisi refuses to do on account of the entities being part of Georgia as a sovereign state. Russia has also regularly expressed its concerns over Georgia's relations with NATO and military cooperation with the US.[61] In addition to the internationally brokered discussions, Russia and Georgia also have a bilateral format with two deputy foreign ministers, Georgia's Zurab Abashidze and Russia's Grigory Karasin.[62]

Another major source of disagreement is the issue of the return of IDPs and refugees, mostly ethnic Georgians, which the Abkhaz and South Ossetian representatives, with Russian backing, refuse to discuss as long as Georgia is able to secure the yearly resolutions on IDPs at the UN General Assembly.[63] Topics discussed include the language of instruction in schools in predominantly ethnic Georgian areas of Abkhazia, freedom of movement and mobility, missing people and environmental and cultural heritage.[64]

What has become an issue in recent years is the process of "borderization". The Border Troops of Russia's Federal Security Service (Federalnaia Sluzhba Bezopasnosti, FSB) have repeatedly moved the Administrative Boundary Line (ABL) a few hundred metres deeper from South Ossetia into Georgian territory. Thus, local Georgian residents found that their land was in Russia-controlled

[60] Fischer, Sabine (2016) "The Conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Light of the Crisis over Ukraine" in Fischer (ed.) (2016), p. 60.
[61] Civil Georgia (2015) "At Geneva talks Russia Says Georgia's NATO Integration Poses Security Threat to the Region", Civil.ge, http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=28403 (accessed 15 December 2017).
[62] Interviews, Moscow, June 2017.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017.

territory.[65] Russia has reportedly used old Soviet military maps, trying to restore a former administrative border which is also more easily defended.[66]

Beyond the unresolved conflicts of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, there are also some potential ethnic conflicts in Georgia with connections to its neighbours, both to the south and to the north. In Ajaria (see Map 3.1), Georgia's south-west border area facing Turkey, for instance, a conflict in 2016 around the building of a mosque led to tensions between Christians and Muslim Georgians. This led some Georgians to accuse Turkey of using the Muslim Ajarians to advance Turkish interests in the country.[67] There is also a risk of Russia using the Armenian minority in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region (see Map 3.1), east of Ajaria and bordering both Turkey and Armenia, and the Azeri minority in southern Georgia, which form majorities in certain districts, to stoke tensions. The 1980s saw skirmishes but not armed clashes in these areas. However, today there is a shared understanding on the Georgian side with Armenia and Azerbaijan, respectively, about the potential problem if such situations escalate. Yerevan cannot afford to let its relations with Tbilisi sour due to this issue.[68] Baku seldom raises the question of ethnic Azeris in neighbouring states.[69]

During the second Chechen War, the Kists, a Chechen ethnic sub-group in the Pankisi Gorge in eastern Georgia south of the border with Chechnya, allowed Chechen fighters to use their area as a safe haven. The Russian government denounced Georgia for giving refuge to Russia's enemies. In the early 2000s, Russia carried out several bombing raids on the gorge, targeting Chechen combatants, and put political pressure on Georgia to deny Chechen fighters sanctuary. In 2002, after the terror attacks in the US of 11 September 2001, the Georgians invited the US to train Georgian troops in a support role for an anti-criminal operation in the Pankisi Gorge.[70] Although the immediate tensions around the Pankisi Gorge came to an end with the gradual stabilization of the situation in Chechnya (see section 3.1 above) a large section of the Chechen Jihadi fighters

[65] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017; see also Civil Georgia (2017) "Tbilisi Says Russian Troops Seize Farmlands Adjacent to South Ossetia", *Civil Georgia*, 5 July, http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=30238 (accessed 21 November 2017); and Higgins, Andrew (2016) "In Russia's 'Frozen Zone,' a creeping border with Georgia", *The New York Times*, 23 October, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/24/world/europe/in-russias-frozen-zone-a-creeping-border-with-georgia.html (accessed 22 November 2017).

[66] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017.

[67] Menabde, Giorgi (2016) "Restoration of Aziz Mosque in Adjara Reignites Debate over Ottoman Legacy in Georgia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 13, Issue 26, The Jamestown Foundation https://jamestown.org/program/restoration-of-aziz-mosque-in-adjara-reignites-debate-over-ottoman-legacy-in-georgia/ (accessed 20 November 2017).

[68] Interview, Yerevan, September 2017.

[69] Interview, Baku, September 2017.

[70] de Waal, Thomas (2010) *The Caucasus: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 190.

who have travelled to Syria and Iraq are in fact Kists from the Pankisi Gorge. They may eventually cause problems for the Georgian authorities when they return.[71]

Our assessment is that both Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia's Russia-supported separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia hold a potential for further escalation that may require Russian military reinforcements. Three factors stand out for Nagorno-Karabakh. First, it seems to be the most volatile part in a volatile region. Our interlocutors unanimously named this as the conflict currently most likely to erupt.[72] Second, Russia does not have any forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. The parties are unwilling to see a Russian preventive deployment for fear of not being able to get rid of it. True, the Russian military base in Armenia (see chapter 4, section 4.2 below) may deploy forces to Nagorno-Karabakh. The brigade-size force may not be sufficient and redeploying it from its current area of operation would leave Armenia more exposed to possible incursions from Turkey. Third, both sides maintain strong positions of principle. Armenia emphasizes self-determination, Azerbaijan territorial integrity. Both seem unlikely to abandon those principles, for domestic political reasons if nothing else.

There are also several potential causes of escalation concerning the separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia which Russia supports. One is that Tbilisi may decide to act militarily against the regions. Another could be internal dynamics in the two regions, although Russia's current dominance of them makes this unlikely. Yet another cause could be renewed Russo-Georgian hostilities. Finally, Russian demands to be allowed to move major forces across Georgia to support Armenia in a potential conflict with Azerbaijan, as outlined above, are also a possible cause of escalation.

3.3 Conclusions

In the North Caucasus, Moscow's heavy-handed policies in recent years appear to have been fairly successful in curbing the threat from Islamists. The level of killings and violence has gone down substantially. It is not, however, clear what will happen when fighters in Syria and Iraq return home to the North Caucasus in greater numbers. The basic grievances behind the violence in the North Caucasus such as religious intolerance, rampant corruption as well as social and economic problems remain.

Further, the Chechenization policy presents dangers to Moscow. The Russian state has subcontracted its policies to an increasingly independent Chechnya. This has created a situation where Moscow's influence in the North Caucasus rests on the

[71] Maza, Christina (2014) "Georgia's Pankisi Gorge Home to Many of the Chechen Fighters in Syria", *The Balkanist*, 22 July, http://balkanist.net/georgia-is-home-to-many-of-the-chechen-fighters-in-syria/ (accessed 5 October 2017).
[72] Interviews in Moscow, June 2017 and Yerevan and Baku, September 2017.

unstable foundation of Putin's private deal with Ramzan Kadyrov. Both in Chechnya and in Dagestan, society is rapidly orienting itself away from Russia. However, the disastrous effects of the two Chechen wars make separatism from Russia an unattractive option for the North Caucasus republics. Some of the other disputes in the North Caucasus could also turn out to be serious problems for Moscow. Historical injustices such as the deportation of whole peoples during Soviet times give some of today's conflicts, for instance concerning property, an ethnic dimension.

In the South Caucasus, Russia is the key external actor and mediator in all peace processes of the unresolved conflicts. Yet at the same time its military presence and political involvement in Georgia's separatist territories also makes it a party to these conflicts. The risk of renewed war is highest in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The parties cling to two incompatible principles, Armenia the principle of self-determination and Azerbaijan the principle of territorial integrity. This makes a pragmatic solution more difficult. The parties' trust in Russia and the international system is low. From the Russian perspective, this deadlock prevents external powers from gaining influence in this troubled region, and secures for Russia a position of effective dominance.

This chapter has identified three areas with a conflict escalation potential that may require military reinforcements beyond the current posture of Russia's Armed Forces and paramilitary forces in the region: Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia with its Russia-backed separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

4 Russia's Southern war theatre: assets and obstacles

Against the background of the Russian perceptions and policies outlined in the previous chapters, what military assets does Russia have to deal with security challenges in the Caucasus region? The aim of this chapter is to outline the forces, primarily military forces under the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD), that are available for operations in the Caucasus and how the region's particular geography may affect how they are deployed. This then forms a basis for the report's final discussion about how Russia could use its military assets if any of the region's potential conflicts should escalate.

For Russia, the Caucasus since 1991 has been both a volatile part of its territory and a volatile neighbourhood. There have been armed conflicts[73] such as the two Chechen wars, the separatist wars in Georgia's regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the still ongoing conflict of over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. None of these wars were existential in the sense that the Russian state's survival was at stake, but they offered both problems and opportunities for Russia's political and military leadership that required the deployment of military forces.

Beyond the former Soviet republics of the South Caucasus, two regional powers, the NATO member Turkey and the Islamic Republic of Iran, are currently Russia's partners, but also potential rivals in the wider Middle East. It is easy to imagine that Russian military planners need to factor in a range of potential uses of armed force, from handling a local peacekeeping operation to military confrontation with external regional powers in the Caucasus or as a part of a wider confrontation with NATO, something that might actually be existential for the Russian Federation. Each of these requires forces of different size and scope.

According to Russian military terminology, military power pertains to a state's physical and moral resources that can be used to build and use armed forces. A key intrinsic part of military power is fighting power, which relates to the armed forces in terms of quantity and quality of personnel and equipment and the quality of command and control.[74] Generating fighting power means training, developing and sustaining forces in peacetime. Using fighting power is to deploy these forces

[73] See chapter 2, section 2.2 for details about the distinction between the Russian notions of military conflict and armed conflict.

[74] For more about a Joint Inter-Service Combat Operation (JISCO), see Norberg, Johan and Westerlund, Fredrik "Russia's Armed Forces in 2016" in Persson, (ed.) (2016), pp. 23-27.

on war-fighting operations. Russia's five military districts (MDs)[75] develop and sustain forces on Russian territory in peacetime. In wartime, Russian forces deploy on operations in a war theatre, territories that, irrespective of national borders, could include most parts of a continent with surrounding seas and the air and space above.[76] On such operations, Russian forces are likely to be under the command of one of the country's five Joint Strategic Commands (JSCs) of the MD closest to the area of operations.

The Russian view on mobilizing other resources for defence is holistic. The state's military organization (*voennaia organizatsiia gosudarstva*) includes assets of all ministries and agencies and some state companies that can be mobilized for defence, such as the state-owned company Russian Railways. The main military component is of course the Armed Forces under the MoD, but there are also some ten other ministries which have their own armed units and formations with more than 500,000 servicemen. Two of the paramilitary forces are of particular relevance for the Caucasus region. First, the up to 340,000-strong Rosgvardiia (National Guard) whose Interior Troops have tasks related primarily to domestic order, a key Russian concern in the North Caucasus, but also to territorial defence in times of war. Second, Russia has a 160,000-strong Border Guard Service under the FSB (here called the FSB Border Troops), which play an important role, especially in the South Caucasus, in Armenia and as a part of the Russian military presence in Georgia's Moscow-backed separatist regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[77] Russia thus has a fairly flexible range of tools for the use of armed force in the wider Caucasus region.

The focus here is on Russia's potential to handle large-scale interstate wars requiring a Joint Inter-Service Combat Operation (JISCO)[78] with large conventional forces. The assumption here is that such a potential also provides the ability to handle other contingencies of a smaller scale. Stand-off warfare assets as well as nuclear weapons are omitted, as is Russia's war against Ukraine through arming, training, organizing and commanding local militias in the Donbas.[79]

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[75] Nominally, Russia has four MDs – the Eastern, Central, Southern and Western. The Northern Fleet is, like the four other MDs, assigned a territory on the Russian MoD's map of the MDs and probably functions like an MD for all practical purposes.

[76] According to the Russian MoD's definition, a war theatre covers [large] parts of a continent with surrounding seas and the air and cosmic space above. For more details see http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=14091@morfDictionary (accessed 19 October 2017).

[77] IISS (2017) "Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia" in *The Military Balance 2017*, Abingdon, Routledge for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, IISS, p. 223.

[78] See note 72.

[79] On the militias in Donbas, see Sutyagin, Igor and Bronk, Justin (2017) "Russia's New Ground Forces – Capabilities, Limitations and Implications for International Security", Whitehall Paper, London: RUSI, pp. 110-115.

More specifically this analysis of Russia's ability to act militarily is based on selected parts of the current nominal organization of the Armed Forces, the Interior Troops of the Rosgvardiia and the FSB Border Troops. To be more precise about actually available, rather than just nominal, assets, such an assessment should also include the nominally available formations' and units' combat readiness in terms of manning levels and serviceability of equipment. Systematic and reliable information about these is hard to find and is probably closely guarded by the Russian forces in question. Available data have to suffice as a substitute. The Russian MoD claims 90 per cent or more manning levels across the Armed Forces.[80] The forces in the Southern MD are hardly excluded from that and in our assessment their actual manning levels reflect the general figure. That means that all units are practically fully manned. Without clear indicators of combat readiness, the observation that since 2013 the Russian General Staff has systematically carried out surprise inspections across the Armed Forces to improve combat readiness[81] probably means that their readiness is, if not high, then at least adequate. Therefore, this analysis counts the nominal force organization as fully manned and combat ready, although that may not be the case in reality.

The first section of this chapter outlines Russia's Armed Forces in the Southern war theatre in terms of selected key formations and units initially available for combat operations in the Caucasus plus reinforcements and exercises. The second section outlines the Russian military exercise Kavkaz-2016 and some implications for the wider Caucasus region. The third section contains some reflections on geographic features of the region that are likely to affect military operations. The fourth and final section offers overall conclusions on key aspects affecting the Russian Armed Forces in the Caucasus region.

4.1 Russia's Armed Forces in the Southern war theatre[82]

By most measurements, Russia's Armed Forces rank among the largest in the world. It also has the task of protecting by far the largest country on earth. As the heritage force to the Soviet Armed Forces, its assets range from nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missiles to sizeable conventional forces. Today's Russian Armed Forces have a peacetime establishment of nominally around 1 million servicemen and consist of three services (*vid vooruzhennykh sil*): the Ground

[80] Norberg and Westerlund in Persson (ed.) (2016) pp. 48–50.
[81] Norberg, Johan (2015) *Training to Fight – Russian Military Exercises 2011–2014*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R--4128--SE.
[82] Section 4.1 is based on Westerlund and Norberg in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 27–66 and 78-79; Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), pp. 104-122; IISS (2017), pp. 183-236; and the websites voiskovayachast.ru (October 2017) and milkavkaz.com (January 2018). The contents on the two websites is regularly updated.

Forces, the Navy and the Aerospace Forces, as well as two independent arms of service (*rod voisk*), the Airborne Forces and the Strategic Missile Forces.

Each MD has formations and units from each service and independent arm of service as a basis for launching a JISCO with ground, sea and air forces in potential war theatres, with the possible exception of the Arctic. In addition to forces with peacetime locations in a potential war theatre, Russia's Armed Forces also exercise to send reinforcements across the vast country, usually by train for ground forces or, to a lesser extent, by air. Russia's available forces in a war theatre consist of forces permanently based there plus reinforcements that can be deployed from other parts of Russia.

Russia's Southern MD in its current form was created in 2010, based on the then existing North Caucasus MD. That in turn had its root in two former Soviet MDs: the front-line Transcaucasian MD comprising roughly the territories of today's Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the (Soviet) North Caucasus MD, a supporting MD covering the most of the isthmus between the Black and Caspian seas belonging to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. In the early 1990s, Soviet forces either became the bases for the fledgling armed forces of the three South Caucasus newly independent republics or were withdrawn from the Transcaucasian MD across the Greater Caucasus range. In 1991, the North Caucasus MD thus became Russia's front-line MD in the Caucasus.[83] In 2010, it was renamed the Southern MD.

Map 4.1 shows Russia's Southern MD, which borders Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea in the east. From the Caspian, its southern border stretches along Russia's national border with Azerbaijan and Georgia to the Black Sea. To the south-west, it stretches along Russia's Black Sea Coast and the Sea of Azov, to the west along the border to Ukraine and, finally, to the north it borders Russia's Western and Central MDs. The Russian MoD map of the Southern MD,[84] unsurprisingly, includes Crimea, which Russia illegally annexed in 2014. Russian forces there are here listed as forces abroad, although they are under Southern MD command.

Russia's Armed Forces in the Caucasus belong to the Southern MD and in operations are likely to be under the command of its JSC. In wartime, other forces such as the Interior Troops and Border Troops are likely to be subordinated to the Armed Forces.[85] These are the military forces initially available for operations in Russia's potential Southern war theatre, which covers Russia's North Caucasus and three other volatile regions: the South Caucasus (including the Caspian Sea),

[83] MoD, "Iuzhny Voenny Okrug [Istoria]", https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/history.htm; and http://encyclopedia.mil.ru/encyclopedia/dictionary/details.htm?id=9799@morfDictionary (both accessed 16 November 2017).
[84] See map on www.mil.ru (accessed 30 January 2018).
[85] MoD, "Iuzhny Voenny Okrug [Istoria]", https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/history.htm (accessed 16 November 2017).

the Middle East and the Black Sea region, including Ukraine where Russia has conducted military operations since 2014 in Donbas and in Crimea.

This section has three parts. The first outlines the forces and key functions in a Russian JISCO. The second describes Russia's initially available assets for a JISCO in the Caucasus region and the third sketches possible generic reinforcements from other parts of Russia.

4.1.1 JISCO functions

Using a military force and actually deploying it requires a military operation. In a 2016 assessment of Russia's Armed Forces, FOI outlined five key functions in a JISCO, outlined in Table 4.1.[86]

Table 4.1 Key functions in a Russian JISCO

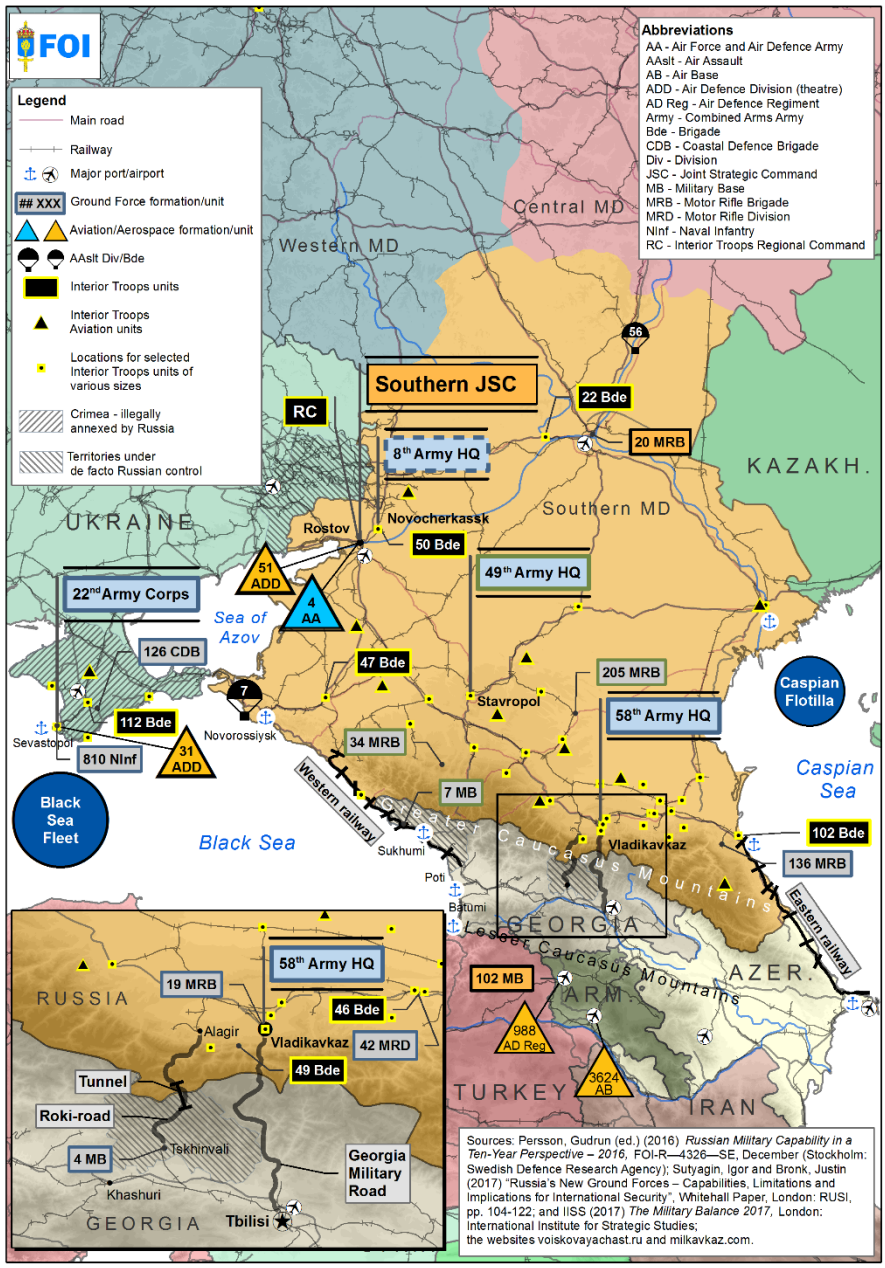
Function	Purpose	Type units (examples)
Command, Control & Communications Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (C4ISR)[87]	Support an operation's commander and coordinate with Aerospace Forces, Navy and combined-arms in the Ground Forces	Headquarters and staff, C3 Support Brigades, Special Forces, Reconnaissance
Manoeuvre	Take and hold terrain; deny terrain to adversary	Motor-Rifle, Tank
Fire support	Support and protect ground manoeuvre	Artillery, Air Defence, Anti-tank
Mobility	Support forces to get to a war theatre and move within it	Engineers Railway Troops
Sustainability	Support forces' combat after they use up intrinsic equipment and supplies	Logistics Brigades

Map 4.1 shows selected initially available Russian military formations, manoeuvre units and Interior Troops in the North Caucasus as well as bases abroad in the South Caucasus and in Crimea with the selected supporting forces units under each formation on Map 4.1 outlined in Table 4.2. Here, we assume that Russia, as a continental power, will probably have ground forces in a key role in a JISCO near its borders, which is why we focus on ground forces. The supporting units have colours according to their functions in a JISCO. Reorganization of the Southern MD force structure is almost constant and the sources vary significantly over time. The force structure outlined here is as of 2016–2017 and a rough estimate.

[86] See also Norberg and Westerlund in Persson, (ed.) (2016), pp. 23-27.

[87] We have added assets for the situational awareness function to command, control and communications (C3). That means that reconnaissance and Special Forces brigades have been added to the assessment.

Map 4.1 Selected initially available Russian military formations and units in the Caucasus region 2016-2017



Map: Per Wikström

4.1.2 Initially available forces

This section accounts for the various forces initially at Russia's disposal for an operation in the Southern war theatre, i.e. before any reinforcements arrive from other parts of Russia. The key service is the Ground Forces, and there is a separate subsection below covering their bases abroad since they are a key part of Russia's force posture in the Caucasus. The ensuing descriptions of the Aerospace Forces, Navy and selected other forces and reinforcements also include units based abroad.

Ground Forces

Map 4.1 outlines the Southern MD's two existing Ground Forces formations, the 58th Combined-Arms Army (CAA) with a motor-rifle division (MRD) and two motor-rifle brigades (MRBs), and the 49th CAA with three MRBs, as the cores of manoeuvre functions for potential JISCOs. Both these CAAs have support brigades for command and control, fire support and sustainability. One air assault division and an air assault brigade are also based in the Southern MD. The airborne units are in peacetime subordinated to the Airborne Forces command in Moscow, but are here seen as part of Russia's initially available forces in the region.

Two existing formations, the 49th and the 58th CAA, have each a logistics brigade and an engineer regiment, besides the manoeuvre brigades' intrinsic engineer and logistics battalions. Sizeable fire support assets (two artillery and one air defence brigade) and mobility assets (two Railway Troops brigades and one Engineering brigade) rest with the JSC. The JSC has a logistics base, probably tailored for the region, but lacks mobile sustainability support units such as logistics brigades. Russian-gauge railways facilitate transport of ground force formations on former Soviet territory, e.g. in Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, but not beyond.

A third formation, the 8th Combined-Arms Army, was being formed in 2017. Its 150th MRD probably consisted of units formerly under the 58th CAA. It may possibly also include the 20th MRB, previously a unit subordinated to the JSC.[88] The 8th CAA probably has more manoeuvre units and units for supporting functions, but our sources do not reveal them and they are not listed in table 4.2. Ukrainian press describe the 8th Army as an operational-level formation for operations in Ukraine.[89] Russia denies any involvement of its Armed Forces in Donbas. Irrespective of its precise organization, adding the 8th CAA and its HQ to the Southern MD increases Russia's ability to command offensive large-scale ground operations in the Caucasus region with reinforcing units.

[88] Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), pp. 106–107.
[89] Tsensor.net, "Putin nazval komandovanie rossiiskoi armii, kotoraia voiuet na Donbasse - zhurnalist", 10 July 2017, https://censor.net.ua/news/447220/putin_naznachil_komandovanie_rossiyiskoyi_armii_kotoraya_voyuet_na_donbasse_jurnalist (accessed 14 November 2017).

Table 4.2 Initially available Ground Forces [90]

	Southern JSC	58th CAA	49th CAA	*8th CAA*[a)]	22nd AC
C4ISR	JSC HQ	HQ (staff)	HQ (staff)	HQ (staff)	HQ w staff
	175 & 176 C3	34 C3	66 C3		
	10, 22 & 346 SF 19 EW [b)]	100 Recce			
Manoeuvre		42 MRD	205 MRB	*150 MRD*	810 NInf
		19 MRB	34 MRB	*20 MRB*	126 MRB [c)]
		136 MRB			*47 Div* [d)]
		4 Mil Base	7 Mil Base		
Fire spt	439 Arty	12 SSM	1 SSM		1096 SAM*
	77 Theatre SAM	291 Arty	227 Arty		8 Arty*
	28 CBR	67 SAM	90 SAM		4 CBR*
		40 CBR	39 CBR		
Mobility	11 Eng	31 Eng*	32 Eng*		
	37 Railway Trps				
	39 Railway Trps				
Sustainab.	3791 Log Base	78 Log	99 Log		133 Log
Other Forces	6 x Interior Trps[e)]				1 x Interior Trps
	Border Trps [f)]				

Brigade size units unless noted otherwise; * = regiment; (a) Being formed 2017–2018; (b) MRDs, MRBs, Military bases and independent recce battalions often have an EW-company each (not listed here); (c) Nominally 126th Coastal Defence Brigade, but resemble a MRB; (d) Territorial Defence Division, exact size and organization unknown, reservists-based; (e) the exact nature of the wartime subordination; and (f) Organization of the forces in the Southern Border District unclear; Units in *italics* are being formed and thus not fully combat capable. Ordinal numbers before units, unless preceded by "x" (times). A list of unit abbreviations can be found at the start of the report.

[90] Westerlund and Norberg in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 78-79; Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), p. 104-122; IISS (2017), pp. 220-221; voiskovayachast.ru (October 2017); and milkavkaz.com (January 2018).

In sum, Map 4.1 and Table 4.2 show that the Southern MD has at its disposal two CAAs and all five JISCO functions stipulated here on the territory of Russia proper, together with a third CAA which, as of mid-2017, is being formed and with no reports of units for supporting functions.

Forces abroad

In Crimea, Russia has established a joint inter-service force group under Black Sea Fleet command. The 22nd Army Corps, established in February 2017,[91] is the basis for commanding ground forces. As seen in Table 4.2, its manoeuvre units include the 810th Naval Infantry and the 126th Coastal Defence Brigade, a de facto MRB. The corps' fire support units include the 8th Artillery Regiment, the 1096th Air Defence Regiment and the 4th Chemical, Biological and Radiological (CBR) Regiment, and its 133rd Logistics Brigade gives the comparatively small ground formation the same nominal support level as the larger Southern MD formations, the 49th and 58th CAAs. Interestingly, in 2016 the Russian press reported that the so-called 47th Territorial Defence Division had been established. It was to be manned primarily by reservists,[92] a clear indication of a reintroduction of mobilization-based units, previously disbanded during the restructuring of the Russian Armed Forces in 2009–2010. *The Military Balance 2017* notes that there are some 490 main battle tanks and armoured vehicles in the force group,[93] which is quite sizeable if there are two manoeuvre brigades[94] of some 100 such vehicles each. Finally, the peninsula's force group includes most of the Black Sea Fleet, two air regiments and two anti-ship missile brigades (see Aerospace Forces and Navy below).

The Southern MD is also responsible for three brigade-size military bases (MBs)[95] in Abkhazia (the 7th MB), South Ossetia (the 4th MB) and Armenia (the 102nd MB).[96] *The Military Balance 2017* notes that the 102nd MB has a brigade-size unit, but with altogether 234 main battle tanks and armoured infantry fighting vehicles,[97] which actually would suffice for two MRBs, assuming some 100 such

[91] Ria Defence, "V Krymu sformirovan 22-i armeiskii korpus Chernomorskogo Flota", https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20170210/1487713296.html (accessed 19 October 2017).
[92] Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), p. 106; and Ramm, Aleksei (2016) "V Krymu sozdali diviziu dlia borby s diversantami", *Izvestiia*, 15 September, https://iz.ru/news/632465 (accessed 16 November 2017).
[93] IISS (2017), p. 224.
[94] IISS (2017), p. 224, claims there are three manoeuvre brigades.
[95] In Russian terminology, a military base means a unit up to division size abroad.
[96] MoD, "Iuzhny Voenny Okrug [Istoria]", https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/history.htm (accessed 16 November 2017).
[97] IISS (2017), p. 224.

vehicles in each. Russia's military presence in Armenia also includes a squadron of MiG-29 fighters and three air defence batteries, two with S-300Vs (SA-12s) and one with 2K12 Kubs (SA-6s). According to *The Military Balance 2017* the two Russian military bases in Georgia also have equipment holdings that seem to exceed the requirements for their nominal brigade size, 160 main battle tanks and armoured vehicles each. The unofficial website voiskovaiachast.ru puts the number even higher, some 210 vehicles per base,[98] enough for up to two brigades.

Two observations can be made regarding the Russian ground forces structure in the Caucasus region, including the military bases abroad. First, in the event of a large-scale war, for example as a part of a confrontation with NATO, the force posture gives Russia several lines of defence. The Russian forces in Armenia, the 102nd MB, the 988th AD regiment, the 3624th Airbase and FSB Border Troops, constitute a first line. The bases in the Georgian regions under de facto Russian control, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, plus FSB Border Troops constitute a second. The third line are the forces on Russian territory in the Southern MD, and the fourth the reinforcements that can be brought in from the rest of Russia.

Second, the excess of main battle tanks and armoured vehicles compared to the stated size of the units noted above in Crimea and in Russia's three military bases south of the Greater Caucasus range may be pre-stored equipment for units that are to be manned with personnel from other parts of Russia. This is a pragmatic way to be able to augment forces quickly from the equivalent of one army corps to almost two, albeit with relatively weak support functions, south of the Greater Caucasus range with soldiers that are easier to transport than whole units and their equipment. In a similar vein, Russia has equipment for several MRBs in stores in both the Central and Eastern MDs.[99]

Aerospace Forces[100]

The key air formation is the 4th Air Force and Air Defence Army, indicated as 4 AA on Map 4.1. Table 4.3 outlines the assets in terms of squadrons, aircraft and helicopters. Aerospace Forces fire support includes eight fighter/multi-role squadrons, seven fighter-bomber squadrons, six attack helicopter squadrons and two air defence divisions. Air units can operate from some 20 airfields plus, possibly, from some of the Interior Troops air fields in the North Caucasus. These

[98] See http://vojskovayachast.ru/yuzhnyj-voennyj-okrug/ as of 26 October 2017.
[99] Westerlund and Norberg in Persson, (ed.) (2016), p. 73.
[100] In Russia, the Air Force (Voenno-Vozdushnye Sily) includes the Air Defence Forces (Voiska Protivovozdushnoi Oborony) for theatre-level air defence. In 2015, a presidential decree merged the Air Force and the Space Defence Forces (Voiska Vozdushno-Kosmichskoi Oborony) into one service, the Aerospace Forces (Vozdushno-Kosmicheskie Sily). Air assets from the Interior Troops and Border Troops have not been included.

initially available resources would provide significant air support to a JISCO, in terms of both fire support and operational and tactical air mobility.

Table 4.3 Initially available Aerospace Forces units and aircraft[101]

4th Air Force and Air Defence Army		
Type of a/c or helicopter	Sqn	#
Fighter/Multirole	8	80
Fighter-bomber	7	75
Attack	5	54
Helicopter (attack)	6	60
Transport (medium)	1	10
Transport (heavy)	2	18
Helicopter (transport)	6	60
51 Theatre AD Div		

Aerospace Forces units based abroad, the 3624th Airbase and the 988th Air Defence Regiment in Armenia and the units in Crimea, enable Russia to operate outside its own territory. The Aerospace Forces' assets in Crimea are the inter-service force group's air component and include the 31st Composite Air Division, which consists of the 37th Composite Air Regiment, the 38th Fighter Regiment and the 39th Helicopter Regiment, and the 31st Theatre Air Defence Division with two regiments, one with S-300PM (SA-10/12) and one with S-400 (SA-21) surface-to-air missiles.[102] These units are probably primarily aimed at reinforcing Russia's military presence in the peninsula.

In a large-scale conflict, the small assets in Armenia may play a role initially but risk being overrun quickly. In such a conflict the inter-service force group in Crimea would provide a base to project air and sea power across the Black Sea Region. The key Aerospace Forces' assets would, however, be units based in Russia that would have the advantage that they can relatively quickly operate beyond Russian borders without being too restrained by difficult terrain such as the Greater Caucasus mountain range.

Naval forces

Table 4.4 outlines selected units in the Southern MD's two Navy formations, the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla. For operations in coastal areas around the Black Sea, the Black Sea Fleet can support manoeuvres by landing Naval Infantry and provide fire support with air defence from one cruiser and three

[101] Westerlund and Norberg in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 78-79; Sutyagin and Bronk (2017), pp. 104-122; and IISS (2017), 220-221; and voiskovayachast.ru (October 2017).
[102] Khodarenok, Mikhail (2017) "'Triumf' v Krymu", *Gazeta.ru*, 17 July, https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2016/07/15/9692405.shtml (accessed 20 October 2017).

frigates. The Caspian Flotilla can support manoeuvres with a battalion-size Naval Infantry landing and limited air defence along the Caspian Sea coast. Two corvettes and four submarines from the Black Sea Fleet as well as one frigate and three corvettes in the Caspian Flotilla can provide land-attack cruise missile (LACM) fire support in the entire theatre. The inter-service force group's naval components include the 11th and 15th anti-ship missile brigades as well as the Black Sea Fleet. In addition to the Black Sea Fleet's ability to support a JISCO, it has also a key role in projecting Russian military power across the Black Sea and its littoral states. The Caspian Sea is in a sense a bastion for Russian ships with stand-off weapons such as Kalibr cruise missiles. It is very hard for any adversary to affect these platforms.

Table 4.4 Initially available Naval Forces[103]

Black Sea Fleet		**Caspian Flotilla**
Naval Forces	*Naval Aviation*	
Black Sea Fleet HQ	318 Comp Reg (Tp, ASW)	Caspian Flotilla HQ
30 Surface Ships Div	43 Ftr/Bmb Reg	73 Sea Prot Bde
4 Sub Bde	*Aerospace Forces*	106 Sea Prot Bde
41 Missile Boat Bde	37 Comp Reg	727 & 414 NInf Bn
197 Landing Ships Bde	38 Fighter Reg	
68 Sea Prot Bde	31 Theatre AD Div (Crimea)	
184 Sea Prot Bde	*Coastal Defence Forces* *	
205 Spt Ships Group	11 AShM Bde	
	15 AShM Bde	

* Ground Forces units are listed under in table 4.2 under the 22nd Army Corps.

Other forces

Some ten Russian ministries have their own armed formations and units.[104] The Russian MoD website notes that the Interior Troops, the FSB Border Troops, the Emergency Control Ministry (MChS) forces and forces from other ministries and agencies on the Southern MD territory are subordinated to the MD's commanding officer.[105] Many of them participate regularly in the Armed Forces' annual strategic exercises. [106] The focus here is on the Interior Troops from Rosgvardiia

[103] Norberg and Westerlund in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 35-37; IISS (2017); and voiskovayachast.ru (October 2017).
[104] Galeotti, Mark (2013) "Russian Security and Paramilitary Forces since 1991", Oxford/New York: Osprey Publishing; and IISS (2017), p. 223.
[105] MoD, "Iuzhny Voenny Okrug [Istoria]", https://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/history.htm (accessed 16 November 2017).
[106] See also Norberg, (2015), p. 12.

(hereafter called Interior Troops) since they are the biggest in size and on the FSB Border Troops which play a key role in the South Caucasus.

The Interior Troops are subordinated to the Southern JSC for wartime operations, which facilitates combining forces from the MoD with other forces. As seen on Map 4.1, the Interior Troops have a regional command in Rostov, seven operational brigades[107] and aviation units across primarily the south part of the Southern MD. According to the unofficial website www.milkavkaz.com, the Interior Troops units in the Southern MD are mainly infantry, sometimes with armoured personnel carriers or armoured infantry fighting vehicles, with battalion- or company-level units for artillery/air defence, communications, engineers, repairs and logistics as well as CBR protection, i.e. encompassing the five JISCO functions needed for operations. Thus, in addition to formations and units of the Armed Forces, the Southern JSC also has a sizeable lighter tool at its disposal that can support a JISCO in time of war with territorial defence or as occupying forces.

The key mission of the FSB Border Troops is to protect Russia's land and sea borders, for example at border crossings and with mobile patrols. They also have mobile detachments of up to company-size units.[108] For the North Caucasus, the command of the Southern Border District is in Rostov-na-Donu.[109] In the South Caucasus, Russian Border Troops have operated in both Georgia's separatist regions since 2009, in South Ossetia, also including along the region's border with Georgia,[110] and on Abkhazia's side of the Enguri River that separates Abkhazia from Georgia.[111] Russian Border Troops have also served along Armenia's borders with Iran and Turkey since 1992.[112] It has not been possible within the framework of this study to establish the exact organization of Russia's forces in the Caucasus region. Their contribution to Russia's war-fighting capabilities is minor, but they

[107] *Brigada operativnogo naznacheniia* literally means operational purpose brigade.
[108] Galeotti (2013), pp. 42-43.
[109] Rostov-na-Donu.ru, http://rostow-na-donu.ru/organizacii/pogranichnoe~upravlenie~fsb~uyfo.html.
[110] "Tibilov vstretilsia s novym nachalnikom Pogranupravleniia RF v Iuzhnoi Ossetii", Sputnik News Agency, 27 March 2017, http://sputnik-ossetia.ru/South_Ossetia/20170327/3904790.html (accessed 19 January 2018).
[111] Russian Foreign Ministry, "Soglashenie mezhdu Rossiiskoi Federatsiei i Respublikoi Abkhazia o sovmestnykh usiliiakh v okhrane gosudarstvennoi granitsy respubliki Abkhazia", http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/international_contracts/2_contract/-/storage-viewer/bilateral/page-117/45275 (accessed 19 January 2018); and "Rossiiskie pogranichniki v Abkhazii otmetili professionalnyi prazdnik", Sputnik Abkhazia News Agency, 27 May 2017, http://sputnik-abkhazia.ru/Abkhazia/20170527/1021132776/rossijskie-pogranichniki-v-abxazii-otmetili-professionalnyj-prazdnik.html (accessed 19 January 2018).
[112] "Vakhnin: pogranichnikov Rossii i Armenii sviazyvaet tesnoe sotrudnichestvo", Armenia Sputnik News Agency, 26 April 2017, https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/armenia/20170426/7135346/vahnin-pogranichnikov-rossii-i-armenii-svyazyvaet-tesnoe-sotrudnichestvo.html (accessed 19 January 2018).

can play other roles in volatile areas, such as the borderization process in South Ossetia noted in chapter 3, section 3.2.

4.1.3 Reinforcements

The assumption here is that Russia initiates an offensive operation to ensure an element of surprise to make it easier to take and retain the initiative. Russia would thus control the time for planning, preparing and launching the operation and give itself adequate time. Therefore the time aspect of an operation is not discussed further.

Major exercises since 2011 indicate that a realistically deployable force may be built around up to three or four ground force formations, combined-arms armies, with brigades for supporting functions, with Aerospace Forces support consisting of 11 fighter squadrons, six fighter-bomber squadrons, five attack squadrons and three theatre Air Defence (AD) divisions as well as support from Navy units in the war theatre.[113] That is probably the maximum reinforcement Russia would deploy to a war theatre, such as the Caucasus. The reinforcement principle was illustrated in the Armed Forces' annual strategic exercise Kavkaz-2016 (Caucasus-2016).

4.2 Actually doing it: the Kavkaz 2016 exercise

Just possessing the military assets for a JISCO does not automatically mean having an operationally capable fighting force. What forces do on exercises indicates what they can actually do in terms of planning, preparing, launching and carrying out war-fighting operations. The annual training cycle of the Russian Armed Forces culminates with a large-scale strategic-level exercise that pertains to a JISCO on war-theatre level.[114] Russia's military districts take turns to host the exercise, which enables the Armed Forces to train in the unique conditions of different potential war theatres. In 2016, the Kavkaz-2016 exercise took place on 5–10 September in the Southern MD and on the Black and Caspian seas. Reinforcements from the Central and Western MDs deployed by air, road, river and rail transport.[115] The Armed Forces Combat Support Service's preparations included

[113] Westerlund and Norberg in Persson (ed.) (2016), pp. 67-96.
[114] See also Norberg (2015), p. 61.
[115] MoD, "Na iuge Rossii startovalo strategicheskoe komandno-shtabnoe uchenie 'Kavkaz-2016'"; MoD, "Bolee 120 tys. chelovek po vsei Rossii zadeistvovany v SKShU "Kavkaz-2016'", 9 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12095266@egNews (accessed 10 October 2017); and MoD, "Nachalnik Generalnogo shtaba VS RF rasskazal zhurnalistam o predvaritelnykh itogakh SKShU 'Kavkaz-2016'", 14 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096033@egNews (accessed 10 May 2017).

12 separate exercises for comprehensive supplies for forces starting three weeks in advance.[116] The actual exercise was preceded by a series of combat-readiness inspections which enabled participating forces to practise their transition processes from peace to war. This illustrates how the Russian Armed Forces may prepare to launch and conduct a war-theatre-level operation in the Caucasus.

The overall exercise design reflected two inter-service force groups. Ground forces in two-sided brigade-level tactical exercises, one in Crimea and one in Rostov Oblast, were supported by air force units, theatre air-defence units, artillery and rocket forces and the Navy.[117] According to the MoD 120,000 men took part at various stages,[118] including from other ministries and agencies.

Regarding command and control, the General Staff wanted to test commanders' and staffs' ability to plan, prepare and execute combat operations. The exercise enabled those being trained to practise command and control, practical mobilization readiness measures, territorial defence, extensive use of Aerospace and Navy Forces and tactical exercises with a "practical designation of the nominal adversary's actions".[119] The MoD also called up 6,000 contracted reservists[120] to augment existing units as in preceding years. More importantly, in Kavkaz-2016, reservists not only augmented existing units but also formed four separate territorial defence units, attached to the Southern and Central MDs and the Northern Fleet.[121] Reservists were also called up during comprehensive combat readiness inspections before Kavkaz-2016 for refresher training lasting a month.[122] The deployment of reservists from Murmansk and Novosibirsk to the Southern Military District[123] indicates that reserve units may be as mobile as other units.

As in preceding years, Kavkaz-2016 involved the state's military organization,[124] i.e. agencies, ministries and selected companies relevant for national defence. In

[116] MoD, "Bolee 120 tys. chelovek po vsei …".
[117] MoD, "V khode SKShU 'Kavkaz-2016' otrabotany vse vidy boevykh deistvii po otrazheniiu voennoi agressii", 9 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12095244@egNews (accessed 10 May 2017); and MoD, "Bolee 120 tys. chelovek po vsei … ".
[118] MoD, "'Kavkaz-2016' – ekzamen na voinskoe masterstvo", 16 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12096233@egNews (accessed 10 May 2017).
[119] MoD, "Na iuge Rossii startovalo strategicheskoe komandno-shtabnoe uchenie … ".
[120] MoD, "Nachalnik Generalnogo shtaba VS RF rasskazal zhurnalistam … ".
[121] MoD, "V meropriatiiakh SKShU 'Kavkaz-2016' v IuVO prinimaiut uchastie chetyre podrazdelniia terrotorialnoi oborony, ukomplektovannie rezervistami", 6 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12094815@egNews (accessed 10 May 2017).
[122] MoD, "V Novosibirskoi oblasti sformirovan pervy motostrelkovy batalion rezervistov", 27 August 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12094193@egNews (accessed 29 April 2017).
[123] MoD, "Nachalnik Generalnogo shtaba VS RF rasskazal zhurnalistam …".
[124] See also Norberg (2015), p. 12.

Kavkaz-2016, participants included the Bank of Russia, the Ministry for Industry and Trade, the Rostov Oblast administration, defence industry companies, Russian Railways and the federal agencies for sea, river, railway and road transport and for state reserves.[125] Armed units from the MVD, FSB and MChS also took part,[126] illustrating how ministries with armed units contribute to an Armed Forces operation. To conclude, Kavkaz-2016 illustrates that the Southern MD and its Joint Strategic Command, as indeed all Russia's MDs, have exercised to actually *do* what they are supposed to be able to carry out in a large-scale war.

4.3 Geography and infrastructure affecting military operations

4.3.1 Key features: lowland and plateaus, two mountain ranges, many rivers

The central aspect of geography here is how it affects Russia's ability to move forces for a JISCO southwards from Russia. As distinguishable on Map 1.1, the key geographic feature affecting the mobility of a ground forces-centric JISCO are the two Caucasus mountain ranges and the lowland between them, all going in a north-west to south-east direction across the Caucasus isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas. The main range, the Greater Caucasus, forms a natural border dividing the region into the Russian territories of the North Caucasus and the three independent South Caucasus states Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The western half of the Greater Caucasus range sees its northern slopes rising from the south Russian plains while its southern slopes are steep. The terrain is generally rugged and often covered with thick forest.[127] South of the Greater Caucasus range, less mountainous lowlands and plateaus separate it from the Lesser Caucasus range which stretches across south-western Georgia to the south-east through Armenia and western Azerbaijan. The Lesser Caucasus range has more roads than the Greater Caucasus range and is thus probably easier to cross.

For a JISCO, ground forces' mobility is further impeded by the numerous rivers across the South Caucasus.[128] Mountain ranges and many rivers impede forces' mobility. This underlines the importance of controlling infrastructure or having units that help overcome obstacles.

[125] MoD, "Ministr Oborony Rossii provel soveshchanie s predstaviteliami organov ispolnitelnoi vlasti po povedeniiu itogov SKShU 'Kavkaz-2016'", 12 September 2016, http://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12099446@egNews (accessed 10 May 2017).
[126] MoD, "Nachalnik Generalnogo shtaba VS RF rasskazal zhurnalistam …".
[127] Based on "Caucasian Geography", https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe-/caucasus.htm, 2013 (accessed 19 October 2017).
[128] See map at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kura_(Caspian_Sea)#/media/File:Kurabasinmap.png.

4.3.2 Infrastructure

There are four north–south passages across the Greater Caucasus range with its many glaciers, especially in winter when snow blocks most mountain passes. This makes certain infrastructure crucial. Roads, bridges, tunnels, railways, sea- and airports are key for launching and conducting a Russian JISCO in the region with additional assets from Russia.

Ground transport – roads, tunnels, bridges and railways

The Caucasus mountain barrier prevents swift movement of major ground forces. Thus, control of the four key north–south routes (see the enlarged roads and railways[129] on Map 4.1) is vital for a Russian JISCO south of the mountains. Russia has partially achieved this. The Western railway and the highway along the Black Sea coast are under Russian control to the eastern border of Abkhazia, which makes it easier to move forces south of the Greater Caucasus range. At its narrowest point, south of Alagir, passage across the Greater Caucasus range from north to south is via the Roki Tunnel which connects North Ossetia in Russia with the de facto Russia-controlled Georgian region South Ossetia[130] (see the enlarged section of Map 4.1). Control of the whole Roki Tunnel was a favourable outcome for Russia in the 2008 war with Georgia. The Russian operation, often described as a tactical failure, ensured durable access to a key north-south route across the Greater Caucasus mountain range, a clear operational-level advantage for potential offensive Russian operations in the South Caucasus.

A little further east, south of Vladikavkaz, lies the so-called Georgia Military Road, which leads directly to Georgia's capital Tbilisi. Georgia controls that road on its territory in peacetime, but it passes close to South Ossetia where Russia permanently has a brigade-size unit, the 4th Military Base. The Roki Tunnel and the Georgia Military Road are unlikely to be enough for the transport of large ground forces formations, especially in winter. They are important simply because there are no alternatives.

Furthest to the east, Russia's control over the coastal highway and Eastern railway along the Caspian Sea coast ends at Russia's border with Azerbaijan, which is north of the Greater Caucasus range (see map 4.1). The multitude of rivers underlines the importance of controlling existing bridges or having engineer units able to build temporary bridges. According to an unofficial website, the Southern MD has altogether four pontoon battalions.[131] The Greater Caucasus range hinders

[129] The terms Western and Eastern railways are not Russian, but used in this report only to distinguish the two north-south railways routes across the Greater Caucasus range.
[130] Democracy and Freedom Watch (2014), "Roki Tunnel reopened", 10 November, http://dfwatch.net/roki-tunnel-reopened-24909-32118 (accessed 16 October 2017).
[131] Vojskovayachast.ru "Yuzhnyj voennyj okrug", http://vojskovayachast.ru/yuzhnyj-voennyj-okrug/ (accessed 16 November 2017).

swift north–south movements of major ground forces by road or rail. This increases the importance of air and sea transport.

Air and sea transport – air- and seaports

As seen on Map 4.1, there are only five major civilian airports in the South Caucasus likely to be suitable for wartime air transport on a larger scale. The Russian Armed Forces already have the 3624th Airbase near Yerevan and would probably have little problem getting access to other nearby airports. Access to airports in Georgia and Azerbaijan, neither of which is Russia's ally, would arguably be more difficult. There are two other limitations to wartime air transport. First, heavy ground forces equipment is cumbersome to move by air. Second, military transport aircraft are vulnerable in flight and any airlift thus requires air superiority to protect them.

As for wartime sea transport,[132] Russia's key challenge is that it does not control any of the key ports south of the Greater Caucasus range. Ensuring control of these ports could at worst entail a seaborne and, possibly, an airborne landing operation to seize the ports, usually a difficult endeavour. Sea transport across the Black Sea from Crimea or Novorossiysk to the Georgian ports in Poti and Batumi would land Russian forces south of the Greater Caucasus range, but the two Georgian ports can only receive ships up to around 150 metres long,[133] which limits the amount of equipment and number of troops. On the Caspian Sea side, there is probably a similar problem. The key port south of the Greater Caucasus range is Baku, which has ferry and other terminals, making it ideal for unloading large amounts of ground forces equipment. The port is, however, controlled by Azerbaijan.

There are three conclusions about geography, one concerning offensive and one defensive Russian JISCOs in the Caucasus, and one concerning Russia's bases abroad in the region. First, for offensive operations southwards, the Greater Caucasus range is a barrier that effectively divides the region into the North and the South Caucasus. It is arguably almost impossible to move forces for a theatre-level JISCO across that barrier. North of the range is Russian territory. Russia controls all crucial infrastructure and can use it flexibly for military purposes. South of the range, other countries control key infrastructure for military operations, except the port in Sukhumi, the railway along the coast in Abkhazia (Western railway on Map 4.1), the Roki Tunnel connecting North and South Ossetia and the airport for the 3624th Airbase in Armenia. This may explain why the Russian Armed Forces have stored additional equipment in their military bases

[132] The availability of transport ships has not been assessed here, but simply assumed to be sufficient.

[133] Ports.com, "Ports in Georgia", http://ports.com/browse/asia/georgia/ (accessed 16 November 2017). As noted in chapter 5, section 5.3, Georgia is upgrading the port in Poti to be able to host NATO ships. An upgraded port is likely to benefit other sea transports such as civilian sea vessels and possibly Russian military in the event of war.

in Georgia and Armenia. Stored equipment makes it possible to double the Russian forces south of the Greater Caucasus range from three motor-rifle brigades to almost five or six, i.e. from the equivalent of one to two army corps, albeit somewhat reduced.

Second, for defensive operations to protect Russia from a major ground operation from the south, almost all problems for a Russian operation would be the same for an adversary. The two Caucasus mountain ranges serve as geographical buffers. Russian seaports and airports in the region are more readily available in the North Caucasus than in the South Caucasus, but they are heavily defended. It would probably be very hard for an adversary to make a major ground incursion into Russia's North Caucasus from the South. Third, Russia's bases south of the mountains serve as a first line in the defence of Russia. They are also to some extent pre-deployments for offensive operations southwards, but such operations may require significant reinforcements across the barrier.

4.4 Conclusions

Geography clearly affects Russia's Armed Forces in the Caucasus in terms of the possibility of deploying forces outside Russia. The Greater Caucasus range impedes any offensive Russian operations southwards. Transport challenges probably explain why Russia has pre-stored additional equipment south of the Greater Caucasus range – to enable its forces to almost double in size by deploying additional personnel. Such an augmentation potentially makes it easier to switch from a defensive to an offensive JISCO. The Russian inter-service force groups in illegally occupied Crimea are isolated by the Black Sea and by Ukraine to the north. Season matters too. Winter snow makes any mountain obstacle worse.

For a JISCO, it is very much a question of north–south movement across the Greater Caucasus range. North of the range, Russian forces have complete freedom of action in terms of using key infrastructure for mobility such as roads and railways. South of the range, in a region with challenging terrain, Russia has limited access to such infrastructure. This may explain Russian efforts to take control over key infrastructure and improve it when possible, such as the Roki Tunnel. In that perspective, after its 2008 war against Georgia Russia established a brigade-size military base in South Ossetia. The ensuing control of a north–south route across the Greater Caucasus range reinforced Russia's foothold in the South Caucasus.

Why does Russia have such a high force density in and near the Caucasus region? The initially available forces ensure an ability to handle most contingencies except a large-scale regional war without reinforcements. The four-tier defence – bases in Armenia, bases in Georgia, the Southern MD and reinforcements from the rest of Russia – in combination with the Greater Caucasus barrier seem like overkill for defence of Russian territory on the operational level. Even if an external actor

musters a huge ground force through the South Caucasus, the Greater Caucasus range facilitates defence with relatively few forces. A major ground incursion from the south is probably almost impossible. The strategic depth to Russia's heartland is more than 1,000 kilometres. Handling instability in the North Caucasus requires qualified police forces and Interior Troops, but hardly the firepower of several Southern MD formations.

So, the explanation for Russia's current force posture in the Caucasus can probably be found at the strategic level. The force posture ensures a potential to dominate the region in terms of subduing smaller neighbours and – more importantly – hindering external actors' influence. For landlocked Russia domination of the South Caucasus is also a matter of influence in and access to the Black Sea region and beyond that to the Middle East, the Mediterranean Sea and the high seas.

5 Russian pressure: consequences for South Caucasus security

The three South Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are, while ethnically and linguistically distinct, interlinked through their geographic proximity, shared history, and current relations. They are also surrounded by three considerably more powerful states: Russia, Turkey and Iran. These three have significant impact on the security dynamics within and between the smaller South Caucasus countries. Russia is the most dominant outside actor against which the other relationships of the three South Caucasus states have to be balanced.

Russia is highly unlikely to accept that post-Soviet states are both de jure and de facto fully independent. An idea of "diminished sovereignty" permeates Russian policy towards them.[134] Since independence, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have pursued three different geostrategic paths. Armenia is highly dependent on Russia. Azerbaijan is relatively independent from Russia. Georgia's orientation westwards has earned it Russia's enmity.[135] All three South Caucasus countries have attempted to cultivate political and economic relations with a spectrum of states and actors in order to facilitate and safeguard independent policymaking. But they have had varying degrees of success.

Russia views the South Caucasus as its sphere of interest, and as an integral part of Russia's southern buffer zone.[136] This makes the region an arena for Russian competition with the West, and to some extent with the other two regional powers. The Russian Military Doctrine of 2014 outlines the most serious military risks and threats facing Russia. Issues of particular relevance to developments in the South Caucasus are: NATO enlargement in areas bordering Russia; the placement of NATO infrastructure in areas bordering Russia; and the establishment of regimes in states bordering Russia whose policies threaten Russian interests.[137] Russia's

[134] Blank, Stephen (2013) "Russian defence policy in the Caucasus", *Caucasus Survey*, 1:1, p. 8, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/23761199.2013.11417284?needAccess=true (accessed 22 November 2017).
[135] Kamrava, Mehran (ed.) (2017) *The Great Game in West Asia*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 20.
[136] Toucas, Boris (2017), "Russia's Design in The Black Sea: Extending the Buffer Zone", CSIS Commentary, 27 June, Center for Strategic and International Studies, https://www.csis.org/-analysis/russias-design-black-sea-extending-buffer-zone (accessed 22 November 2017).
[137] Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation (2014), para 12; see also Gorenburg, Dmitri (2016), "Russia's strategic calculus: threat perceptions and military doctrine", *PONARS Eurasia Policy* Memo no. 448, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-strategic-calculus-threat-perceptions-and-military-doctrine (both accessed 30 January 2018).

strategies to counter these threats have had serious consequences for the South Caucasus states.

Russia uses involvement in the region's conflicts as a means to ensure continued influence, and to counteract policies that threaten Russian interests. Russia is closely intertwined with both parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. It has close bilateral relation with Azerbaijan, but is formally allied with Armenia, and provides weapons to both sides. Russia has also recognized Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's "independence" from Georgia, and provides such extensive military aid that Georgia perceives both areas to be under de facto Russian occupation.[138]

The Russo-Georgian war in 2008 was a turning point after which the South Caucasus countries began to question "the utility of a Western orientation."[139] It is likely that Russia's ongoing war in eastern Ukraine and the illegal annexation of Crimea further strengthened that impression. The EU and the US currently play rather peripheral roles in the region. For example, in contrast to other conflict resolution processes in the post-Soviet space, the EU has no seat at the table in the OSCE Minsk Group for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.[140] Although the South Caucasus was not considered a foreign policy priority during the Obama administrations, experts in all three states note that the Trump administration is even less interested.[141] Russia's strategies to protect its interests seem to work.

The lack of interest on the part of the United States and to some extent the EU has created room for Turkey and Iran to promote their agendas. The Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) states that Turkey aims to strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the South Caucasus countries, supports their efforts to integrate with Euro-Atlantic structures and wants to enhance regional cooperation in order to promote political and economic stability.[142] These policies are in part based in Turkey's wish to become a hub for energy transit.[143] The region is also important for historical and cultural reasons. Turkey strives to maintain deep relations with other Turkic countries. In the South Caucasus Turkey is therefore particularly close to Azerbaijan. Parts of the South Caucasus were once under the

[138] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017.
[139] Cornell, Svante E. (2017) "The Raucous Caucasus", *The American Interest*, Vol. 12, No. 6, https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/05/02/the-raucous-caucasus/ (accessed 22 November 2017).
[140] Interviews, Yerevan, September 2017.
[141] Interviews, Yerevan, Tbilisi and Baku, September 2017.
[142] MFA Turkey (no date) "Turkey's relations with Southern Caucasus Countries", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-southern-caucasus.en.mfa (accessed 2 November 2017).
[143] Winrow, Gareth M. (2017) "Turkey's energy policy in the Middle East and South Caucasus" in Kamrava, (ed.) (2017), p. 84.

control of the Ottoman Empire, and today the region serves as a link to Central Asia and the Turkic nations there.

Iran's policy towards the South Caucasus is pragmatic and based in considerations of the economy and security.[144] It is also determined by a wish to balance against the other two powers with influence over the region, Russia and Turkey.[145] For Iran it is a priority for the region to develop in a peaceful direction, as any instability could cause spillover effects on Iran. Like Turkey, Iran seeks to develop and connect to the region's network of energy and transport infrastructure, and views the region as a gateway to larger markets. As for historical ties, Iran lost its South Caucasus territories to Russia in the early 1800s, and that effectively ended hundreds of years of Persian influence north of the Aras River.[146] Today's Iranian state is of a very different character in that it is an Islamic Republic. Its religious character has exacerbated the mutual feelings of estrangement between Iran and its more secular northern neighbours. However, over the past few years, signs have pointed towards increased intermingling between Iranians and South Caucasians. Since 2016 Iran has had visa-free agreements with Georgia and Armenia, and tourism has grown greatly.[147] Iran has long been constrained in its ability to further its economic interests in the South Caucasus. With Iran's 2016 nuclear agreement with the UN and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which lifted sanctions on Iran, Tehran has begun to play a more active role in the South Caucasus.

5.1 Armenia

Russia has created the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as instruments for deepening cooperation with some of the former Soviet republics, but probably also to block them from becoming members of NATO or the EU. Armenia is the only one of the three South Caucasus states to have joined the CSTO and EAEU, which effectively prohibits any significant security cooperation with the EU or NATO above the level of military training, exercises and cooperation about peace operations.[148]

[144] Monshipouri, Mahmood (2017) "Pipeline Politics in Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus" in Kamrava, (ed.) (2017), p. 60.
[145] Ibid., p. 68.
[146] Forsyth, James (2013) *The Caucasus: A History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 271. The river is also known by its Greek name, Araxes.
[147] Weiss, Andrea and Zabanova, Yana (2017) "The South Caucasus and Iran in the Post-Sanctions Era", *SWP Comments* C24, July, Berlin: German Institute for International Security Affairs, p. 4.
[148] In 2016, Armenia had personnel serving with NATO missions in Afghanistan (65) and Kosovo (35). IISS (2017), p 200.

This will probably remain the case as long as the conflicts in Georgia's separatist regions and in Nagorno-Karabakh persist. Yerevan's choices are limited.

There is no other partner besides Russia willing to ensure Armenia's security. Armenia's refusal in 2013 to sign the EU association agreement and its joining the EAEU instead is a case in point. Although the EAEU is an economic union, not a security alliance, the rationale behind this choice is national security and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.[149] Russia would probably perceive a closer relationship between Armenia and the EU as a threat to its interests. Armenia, being militarily and economically weaker than Azerbaijan, needs Russia's help to maintain the status quo, which the EU cannot offer. However, the EU and Armenia signed a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in November 2017.[150] The signing of CEPA indicates that Russia can accept EU-Armenian relations up to a certain point.

Armenia has yet to see any significant positive effects from EAEU accession.[151] With the economy being so closely tied to Russia's Armenia is very vulnerable to the way in which Russia manages economic fluctuations. It is also very difficult for Armenia to make any significant deals that go against Russian interests. Following the nuclear agreement and the removal of sanctions, Iran has attempted to improve economic ties with its neighbours. However, in the Armenian case Russia is an impediment to such cooperation. For example, Iran has expressed a wish to deepen economic relations particularly in the fields of energy and transit,[152] where one goal is to create a connection from the Persian Gulf to the Black Sea via Armenian and Georgian territory linking in to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). But the Armenian energy and transit sectors are dominated by Russian companies and such deals would probably require Russian approval. According to Armenian experts, Russia is unwilling to invite competition in these areas.[153] As a consequence, Iran is instead developing another route, via Azerbaijan.[154] At

[149] Ter-Matevosyan, Vahram et al. (2017) "Armenia in the Eurasian Economic Union: reasons for joining and its consequences", *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 58:3, p. 345.

[150] EU External Action Service (2017), "New agreement signed between the European Union and Armenia set to bring tangible benefits to citizens", 24 November, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/36141/new-agreement-signed-between-european-union-and-armenia-set-bring-tangible-benefits-citizens_en (accessed 31 January 2018)

[151] Ibid., p. 352.

[152] MFA of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2017) "President in a meeting with his Armenian counterpart: Iran seeking to deepen ties with neighbouring countries, including Armenia", 6 August, http://www.mfa.gov.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=3&pageid=1997&newsview=469235 (accessed 22 November 2017).

[153] Interviews, Yerevan, September 2017.

[154] van Leijen, Majorie (2017) "Missing Link International North-South Transport Corridor almost Complete", Railfreight.com, 24 October, https://www.railfreight.com/corridors/2017/10/24/-missing-link-international-north-south-transport-corridor-almost-complete/ (accessed 22 November 2017); and Weiss and Zabanova (2017), p. 11.

present, Iran's relations with Armenia thus remain "more symbolic than substantive".[155] Attempting another avenue to improve economic cooperation with Iran, Armenia has initiated discussions on a free trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU.[156]

Where Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned, Iran is a less influential actor than Turkey and Russia. However, escalation of the conflict could have negative spillover effects for Iran in terms of deteriorating border security and refugee flows.[157] Iran has offered to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan on several occasions, and President Rouhani often reiterates that he does not believe in a military solution. Tehran is deeply entrenched in both Syria and Iraq, where Iran, Turkey and Russia have begun to cooperate, albeit tenuously. Hence for the time being Nagorno-Karabakh is probably not at the top of Iran's agenda, and neither is upsetting its partners in Syria over this comparatively less pressing issue.

Armenia's stance on Nagorno-Karabakh hinders any prospect of its improving relations with Turkey. Turkey supports Azerbaijan's claim to Nagorno-Karabakh, and holds that Turkey's relations with Armenia cannot be mended until Armenia-Azerbaijan relations are.[158] In theory, gaining entry to the enormous Turkish market[159] could offer an opportunity to improve Armenia's poor economy and thereby reduce its reliance on Russia. But, in the absence of any signs of a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, this remains very unrealistic. Armenia's persistent efforts to get international recognition for the 1915 genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman empire, and Turkish insistence that it should not be called a genocide, is another issue complicating the relationship.

[155] Kamrava (ed.) (2017), p. 11.

[156] Armenpress.am (2017) "Armenia-Iran relations are exemplary and unique – President Sargsyan's interview to Iranian Shargh Daily", *Armenpress*, 1 August, https://armenpress.am/eng/news/900452/armenia-iran-relations-are-exemplary-and-unique-%E2%80%93-president-sargsyan%E2%80%99s-interview-to-iranian-shargh.html (access 22 November 2017).

[157] Melvin, Neil and Klimenko, Ekaterina (2016) "Shifting conflict and security dynamics in the Caucasus: The role of regional powers", *SIPRI commentary*, 1 June, https://www.sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/shifting-conflict-and-security-dynamics-caucasus-role-regional-powers (accessed 22 November 2017).

[158] MFA Republic of Turkey (no date) "Relations between Turkey and Armenia", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-armenia.en.mfa (accessed 22 November 2017).

[159] Turkey has a population of 80 million and the 17th largest GDP in the world. For population see the CIA *World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tu.html, and for GDP ranking see the World Bank, http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf (accessed 22 November 2017).

5.2 Azerbaijan

According to Azerbaijani experts, Azerbaijan tries to maintain its sovereignty by conducting a balanced foreign policy. This has essentially meant the cultivation of economic and political ties with a diverse spectrum of actors, in a diverse spectrum of formats. Although less entangled than Armenia, Azerbaijan is still quite dependent on Russia, including for arms deliveries.[160] Azerbaijan has a strong bilateral relationship with Russia, but has not joined the CSTO or the EAEU. Because of Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan and Armenia cannot be members of the same organizations. However, Azerbaijan also cannot join the EU or NATO, for two reasons. First, it would mean a direct challenge to Russia in what Moscow perceives as a sphere of interest, which may evoke a military response. Second, neither NATO nor the EU is at present likely to accept today's Azerbaijan as a member state. Azerbaijan however cooperates with both organizations, and participates in NATO missions.[161] The EU is Azerbaijan's most important trade partner.[162]

Azerbaijan became a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 2011. Because one of the terms for membership is that one cannot be part of a military bloc while also a member of the NAM, Azerbaijan's choice could be interpreted as a signal that its orientation is neither with Russia nor with the West. It could also be interpreted as a face-saving solution to the problem of not having the option to join a military bloc.[163]

The bilateral relationship with Turkey is very important to Azerbaijan, and functions as a counterweight to Russian influence in the region. The relationship even has its own slogan, "one nation, two states", which implies a very close bond.[164] The closed Turkish-Armenian border is one of the two most important tools that Azerbaijan has at its disposal to pressure Armenia.[165] The other is the Azeri defence budget which is reportedly larger than Armenia's entire state

[160] See chapter 3, section 3.2.
[161] MFA of the Republic of Azerbaijan (2016) "Overview of Azerbaijan–NATO partnership", http://www.mfa.gov.az/en/content/560. In 2016, Azerbaijan had personnel serving with the NATO missions in Afghanistan (94), IISS (2017), p 202.
[162] EU External Action (2017) "EU-Azerbaijan relations, *EEAS*, 1 November, https://eeas.europa.eu-/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/4013/EU-Azerbaijan%20relations (accessed 22 November 2017).
[163] Azernews (2011) "Azerbaijan joins non-aligned group", *Azernews*, 26 May, https://www.azernews.az/nation/33126.html (accessed 22 November 2017).
[164] Aliyev, Ilham (2017) "'One nation, two states' principle covers all spheres of Azerbaijan-Turkey relations", *Trend news agency*, 13 January, https://en.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/2708793.html (accessed 22 November 2017).
[165] Interviews, Baku, September 2017.

budget.[166] Bilateral military cooperation with Turkey is extensive and also serves as a bridge for Azerbaijan to NATO.[167] Azerbaijan and Turkey have together initiated several trilateral cooperation formats with other regional countries. Since 2011 trilateral foreign-minister talks have been held annually with Iran to discuss regional developments and to boost regional security.[168]

After Iran, Azerbaijan-Turkey trilaterals with Turkmenistan as well as with Georgia have followed, and planning is also under way for one with Russia. The Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia format has been quite successful in that it has evolved from talks to actual defence cooperation. Nevertheless, cooperation is centred on energy security, as this is something all three states need. Azerbaijan is an energy exporter, Turkey an importer and Georgian territory is vital for energy transit from the Caspian to Europe.[169]

Relations between Iran and Azerbaijan have at times been contentious. Iran is especially concerned by Azerbaijan's security cooperation with Israel. Azerbaijan is the only country in the South Caucasus that shares a religious connection with Iran. However, because Azerbaijan's form of government is secular, the regime there has at times perceived this connection as threatening.[170] Likewise Azerbaijan's stressing of Azeri nationalism is perceived as a threat by Iran, whose Azeri minority is larger than the population of Azerbaijan itself.[171] However, under the Rouhani administration relations have become more constructive, focusing on joint economic interests and security. For example, the two countries are connecting their railway systems in an effort to build the North–South transport corridor that will stretch from India to the Baltic.[172] Contacts at the defence minister levels have also become more frequent, and Iran reiterates that it would

[166] Gurbanov, Ilgar (2017) "Revitalizing the Military Dimension of the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Tripartite Partnership", *CACI Analyst*, 24 July, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13459-revitalizing-the-military-dimension-of-the-azerbaijan-georgia-turkey-tripartite-partnership.html (accessed 22 November 2017).

[167] Ibid.

[168] Nazarli, Amina (2017) "Azerbaijani, Iranian, Turkish FMs to meet in Baku", *Azernews*, 19 September, https://www.azernews.az/nation/119157.html (accessed 22 November 2017).

[169] Gurbanov (2017).

[170] Interviews, Baku, September 2017.

[171] There is no consensus about the size of Iran's Azeri minority, but it is probably more than 15 million. Azerbaijan's population was an estimated 10 million in 2017. CIA (2018) *World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aj.html; and *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Azerbaijani-people (both accessed 24 January 2018).

[172] Railway Pro (2017) "Azerbaijan agreed to fund Iran's Rasht-Astara rail section", Railway Pro, 27 September, http://www.railwaypro.com/wp/azerbaijan-agreed-fund-irans-rasht-astara-rail-section/ (accessed 22 November 2017).

like to cooperate on military issues with Azerbaijan.[173] President Aliyev has mentioned that Azerbaijan has bought weapons from Iran. Details as to what kind of weapons are lacking, but the fact that any such transaction has taken place indicates that the relationship between the two states is becoming closer. Supposedly, Iranian weapons were used in the April 2016 war. [174]

Azerbaijan and Iran have also been meeting in a trilateral format with Russia, where the aim is to boost economic cooperation and regional security. A particularly important issue is the legal status of the Caspian Sea, as the three countries disagree on how it should be resolved. However, the first trilateral summit, which was held in 2016, was interpreted by some media outlets as indicating that a solution to the Caspian question was close at hand. The follow-up trilateral held in Tehran in November 2017 did not produce any known results in this regard, but there appear to be plans for a meeting between all the concerned parties in 2018, where the convention on the legal status of the Caspian is to be signed.[175] If the parties can agree, resolving the Caspian issue would facilitate joint economic projects, such as connecting the north–south transport corridor with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.[176] For Azerbaijan such a development would be especially welcome as Baku would be a natural point of connection for the two transport corridors.

5.3 Georgia

Georgia considers Russia to be the number one threat to its security, which is perhaps not surprising since the two countries are engaged in a conflict. As noted in chapter 2, section 2.2, Russian strategic documents consider colour revolutions and membership of NATO and the EU as threats and dangers to Russia. From a Russian perspective, such developments have materialized more in post-independence Georgia than in Azerbaijan and Armenia. The Georgian Rose Revolution in 2003 meant a discarding of Soviet-era politicians in favour of a government that was strongly oriented towards the West. Georgia has since

[173] Shirinov, Rashid (2017) "Iran's defence minister calls for peaceful settlement of Karabakh conflict", *Azernews*, 16 April, https://www.azernews.az/karabakh/111577.html (accessed 22 November 2017).
[174] Shiriyev, Zaur (2017) "Iran and Azerbaijan Boosting Military Ties", *Eurasiannet.org*, 1 November, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85806 (accessed 22 November 2017).
[175] Shirinov, Rashid (2017) "Summit of Caspian states may take place in early 2018", *Azernews*, 31 October, https://www.azernews.az/nation/121383.html (accessed 22 November 2017).
[176] Mamedova, Nina and Mammadov, Farhad (2017) "The Caspian Triangle: Predictability of Neighbours is the Key", *Valdai Club*, 2 November, http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/predictability-of-neighbours/ (accessed 22 November 2017).

pursued membership in both NATO and the EU.[177] The Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 decided that, provided it was willing to reform, Georgia would become a NATO member.[178] The Georgia–Russia war took place in August of the same year (see Appendix 1). While Russia has used Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence struggles to pressure Georgia into accommodating Russian interests since the 1990s, the 2008 war showed that Russia was willing to go a step further.

Georgia's sovereignty has also become diminished in another very tangible way, as Russian FSB Border Troops control the borders of both separatist regions. Russia continuously reminds Georgia of this fact by the borderization process mentioned above (chapter 3, section 3.2). Consequently, Georgia's ability to integrate with the West is impaired, not only because NATO members and the EU countries might be reluctant to engage in conflict with Russia over Georgia, but also because the Georgians are reluctant to risk further losses of territory. In November 2017 it was announced that the South Ossetian armed forces are to be incorporated into the Russian military command structure. The Georgian MFA denounced the move as a continuation of Russia's annexation policy.[179]

In 2014 Georgia's status vis-à-vis NATO was elevated to an Enhanced Opportunities Partnership (EOP), which is as close as Georgia can get to membership without formally joining. There are two reasons why it has not formally joined. First, actual Georgian NATO membership would probably elicit a harsh Russian response. Second, considerable defence reform is still needed in Georgia. Cooperation is therefore focused on strengthening Georgia's military institutions.[180] Georgia is also negotiating to participate in NATO's Black Sea initiatives, and is rebuilding its Black Sea port in Poti to accommodate NATO ships.[181] Georgian experts interpret Russia's actions in Ukraine and Crimea as not just being aimed at Ukraine, but also as intended to establish an anti-access area denial capability that spans over the South Caucasus.[182]

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[177] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (2012) National Security Concept of Georgia (2012), http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/NationalSecurityConcept.aspx (accessed 22 November 2017).

[178] NATO (2017) "Relations with Georgia", nato.int, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_38988.htm?selectedLocale=en (accessed 22 November 2017).

[179] Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia (2017) 28 November, http://mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-ministris-shefasebit,-samkhret-ose.aspx?CatID=5&lang=en-US. Armed units of the separatist regions in Georgia probably have little importance for the capabilities of Russia's Armed Forces in the Caucasus and are not included in our assessment.

[180] Lins de Albuquerque, Adriana and Hedenskog, Jakob (2016) *Georgia: A Defence Sector Reform Assessment*, FOI-R--4306--SE, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, October.

[181] Abrahamyan, Eduard (2017) "Georgia after Montenegro's NATO accession", *Eurasianet.org*, 11 July, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/84336 (accessed 22 November 2017).

[182] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017.

Georgia–EU relations are based on an Association Agreement from 2014, but full EU membership for Georgia is probably unlikely in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, since 2017 Georgians have been able to travel to Schengen countries without a visa. The EU is Georgia's main trade partner, followed by Canada, Turkey and Russia.[183] As part of the Association Agreement between Georgia and the EU, which came into force in 2016, a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) was created. Georgia is thereby hoping to increase agricultural exports to the EU, but in order to be able to compete in the European market further reforms in food security are needed. Such reforms are coming along at a slow pace, in part because the Georgian producers are small-scale and have a hard time funding modernization of their facilities. This is likely to clash with the Georgian population's expectations that the agreement will bring quick economic results, and could further increase disappointment with the EU. Possibly with this in mind, those geographic areas adjacent to Russia, which have traditionally exported agricultural products over the border, have been targeted in Russian soft power campaigns seeking to convince Georgians that trade with Russia is easier and more beneficial.[184]

Russia has additional means to pressure Georgia. The Georgian Orthodox Church is very influential in Georgian society, and shares much of its world view with the Russian Orthodox Church. According to Georgian interlocutors the close relationship between the two churches is at times used as a tool for spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda.[185] Another important lever that Russia has over Georgia is the fact that remittances make up a significant part of the Georgian economy. Many Georgians work in Russia. In 2016 the total of remittances in the Georgian economy amounted to 1.15 billion US dollars, and of that amount 394.5 million USD originated from Russia.[186]

Georgia's relationship with Turkey is very important, in terms of both trade and security. A joint infrastructural project, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway, opened in October 2017 and could bring important economic development for Georgia as it increases connectivity within the region, and links Central Asia with the EU.[187]

[183] European Commission (2017) "Georgia", http://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/georgia/ (accessed 22 November 2017).
[184] Baranec, Tomáš (2015) "Trade, economy and pro-Russian opinion in Georgia", *The CACI Analyst*, 2 October, http://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13281-trade-economy-and-pro-russian-opinion-in-georgia.html (accessed 22 November 2017).
[185] Interviews, Tbilisi, September 2017.
[186] Tabula.ge, "Remittances to Georgia in 2016 Total $1.15 Billion", http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/116532-remittances-to-georgia-in-2016-total-115-billion (accessed 24 January 2018).
[187] RFE/RL (2017) "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railway Line Officially Launched", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 31 October, https://www.rferl.org/a/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-line-officially-launched-azerbaijan-georgia-turkey/28824764.html (accessed 22 November 2017).

Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey share the BTC oil pipeline, which stretches from Baku via Tbilisi to the Turkish port Ceyhan. Running in parallel there is also the South Caucasus Pipeline for natural gas. These two pipelines have boosted Georgia's economy and reduced Russian control over Caspian energy flows.[188]

Turkey does not recognize the "independence" of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, and "supports Georgia's efforts for integration with Euro-Atlantic organizations".[189] Both countries agree that Russia's expanding control over the Black Sea is a problem. However, the war in Syria has driven a wedge between Turkey and the West. Turkey has recalibrated its Syria strategy and is now cooperating with Russia and Iran. In September 2017 Turkey made public that it will purchase S-400 surface-to-air missiles from Russia, which are not compatible with NATO systems. Due to the increasingly authoritarian characteristics of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's rule, Turkish EU membership appears further away than ever. Thus under the current circumstances Turkey is moving in a different trajectory from Georgia. It remains to be seen if the alignment with Russia will last, and if it will affect the Turkey–Georgia relationship.

Finally, the Iran–Georgia relationship is comparatively insignificant, but post-nuclear-sanctions Iran is pushing for increased trade between the two countries. When the Georgian prime minister visited Tehran in April 2017, an important topic of discussion was the development of the North–South transport corridor, and creating a connection between the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf.[190] As a consequence of the visa-free regime, tourism from Iran to Georgia is going up, and Iranian bureaus providing advice on how to buy property in Georgia are currently visible in many parts of Tbilisi. [191] Iran does not recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent from Georgia. But, considering Georgia's Western-friendly orientation and Iran's increasingly warm relations with Russia, it is currently unlikely that Iran would get involved in Georgian affairs beyond the economic sphere.

5.4 Conclusions

All three of the South Caucasus states have had their sovereignty constrained by Russia, via Russia's involvement in the regional conflicts, and demonstrably Russia has so far been successful in keeping the three countries from joining

[188] Monshipouri (2017), p. 58.
[189] MFA of the Republic of Turkey (no date) "Political relations between Turkey and Georgia", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-georgia.en.mfa (accessed 22 November 2017).
[190] Mehr News Agency (2017) "Iran, Georgia share common stances on regional issues", *Mehr News Agency*, 22 April, https://en.mehrnews.com/news/124944/Iran-Georgia-share-common-stances-on-regional-issues (accessed 22 November 2017).
[191] As observed by the authors in September 2017.

NATO or the EU. Armenia has basically exchanged its sovereignty for Russian security support. Armenia is the only South Caucasus member of CSTO and the EAEU, and Russian influence over its economy is such that much-needed economic diversification is impossible if Russian economic interests are threatened. Azerbaijan is probably the most sovereign out of the three states, but is still highly considerate of Russian interests as it conducts its foreign relations. Azerbaijan's non-alignment policy is forged out of necessity rather than free choice. Georgia has to live with Russian occupation, and the knowledge that Russian troops could cut Georgia in half seriously constricts Georgia's freedom. Neither NATO nor EU membership is likely as long as Russia de facto controls parts of Georgia.

Both Iran and Turkey currently appear to accept Russian dominion over the South Caucasus. Iran has an impetus to improve its economic relations with all of the South Caucasus states, but is for the time being unlikely to be able or willing to influence the situation in the region through any other means. Turkey has mended its relationship with Russia and made a strategic turnaround in Syria in an attempt to see if cooperation with Russia and Iran will yield better results. As long as the Middle East is embroiled in wars where both Iranian and Turkish vital interests are at stake, the South Caucasus is likely to be given lower priority. Thus, Russia's clear preference for maintaining the status quo in the South Caucasus is probably going to have Iranian and Turkish support, at least tacitly. While interlocutors in the region continuously underline that the risk of Nagorno-Karabakh exploding is imminent, the unwillingness of all three of the regional powers to see this happen may put a damper on things, at least until the more pressing conflicts in Syria and Iraq are settled. In the meantime, the regional powers will certainly continue to work on increasing their economic dividends from the region.

6 Conclusions and discussion

This chapter summarizes our observations about Russia's approach to armed conflict in the Caucasus region before discussing Russian considerations about the use of military force in four cases of escalating conflicts in the region.

The Caucasus continues to be a conflict-ridden part of Russia's neighbourhood. The biggest risk of war is a renewed and expanded war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The growing convergence of interests of the regional external powers, Russia, Turkey and Iran, on Syria and the Middle East, as manifested in the so-called Astana process, a series of talks between the parties to the war in Syria, affects the Caucasus as well. For all three, the Middle East is more important in the short run, which means that they are all interested in keeping the Caucasus as stable and predictable as possible.

Of the three external regional powers, only Russia has military bases in the Caucasus region and is the only one seemingly ready to act militarily. Ankara and Tehran also have their own interests in the region but do not seem ready to use military force to uphold them especially if this risks opposing Moscow. Western powers are losing interest in the region and that currently seems unlikely to change. The Trump administration's agenda is increasingly US-focused. The EU has to deal with other problems such as the UK leaving the union and a migration crisis. After Russia's aggression against Ukraine since 2014, the West seems even more reluctant to irritate Russia in the Caucasus.

Russia currently appears satisfied with the status quo in the South Caucasus. Unresolved conflicts are therefore unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. Unresolved conflicts suit Russia's objectives. Military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia provide Russia with both a key lever against Georgia and a structural advantage for potential Russian military operations in the region. Moreover, Russia's support for Georgia's separatist regions makes the country unattractive for membership in NATO and the EU. In Nagorno-Karabakh, the most volatile conflict area, Moscow has its weakest grip on events in terms of the ability to influence events on the ground, but nevertheless manages to keep Yerevan and Baku in Russia's security orbit.

The Russian military posture in the Caucasus – the Armed Forces and the Interior Troops in the North and the three military bases and the FSB Border Troops in the South – is over-dimensioned given the current conflict situation. Russia's military posture in the Caucasus actually pertains to a potential large-scale conflict in the Southern war theatre, including the wider Middle East, rather than just local conflicts in the region.

In the Caucasus, Russia's Armed Forces currently have a strategic advantage over regional competitors. Russia can probably launch a JISCO south of the Greater Caucasus mountain range more quickly than other regional powers. One indication

of that is its preparations for overcoming that range as a geographical obstacle by pre-positioning of equipment in its military bases in Georgia and Armenia, allowing Russia to almost double its force size by adding more easily transportable manpower. Another example is the direct control over key transport routes such along the Black Sea coast to the Enguri River and the Roki Tunnel.

So what are possible Russian considerations for the use of military force in the event of escalating conflicts in the Caucasus? What could Russia's Armed Forces, the Interior Troops and the FSB Border troops do if any of the Caucasus' current conflicts escalate and require reinforcements to the current force posture? The discussion below is neither predictive nor scenario-based. It simply uses the escalation potential in the region's frozen conflicts that this study has uncovered as a background to discuss factors affecting possible Russian military actions. The discussion will not cover possible Russian military responses to the status quo, i.e. without escalating conflicts, since they are assumed to remain as they are.

Three of the four cases[192] below are based on the Russian notion of armed conflict, i.e. an armed confrontation on a limited scale between states or within a state, and its occurrence in the Caucasus since 1991. First, tensions in Chechnya, or for that matter any North Caucasus republic, could escalate into a domestic armed conflict in Russia. Second, the simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan could reignite to lead to a full-scale war, for example, caused by tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh, i.e. an international armed conflict between two states in the South Caucasus, of which one, Armenia, is a Russian ally. Third, a war between Russia and a South Caucasus state,[193] e.g. Georgia, as in 2008, would also be an international armed conflict, but asymmetric – a large-scale war for Georgia, but only a local war for Russia. The fourth case is a large-scale military conflict between major states or coalitions of states, as mentioned in Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine. Such a war has obviously not happened in the Caucasus since 1991. The assumption here is nevertheless that Russian military plans for the Caucasus also include preparing for large-scale wars.

[192] These cases pertain to the Caucasus only. Russia's campaign in Syria and its military occupation and ensuing illegal annexation of Crimea and war in Donbas are not part of this analysis, despite being related to the Southern MD. Russia's aggression in Ukraine reveals two cases of alternative Russian-organized non-military force: first, training, equipping and commanding large-scale militias such as the forces of the so-called Peoples' Republics in Donetsk and Luhansk and, second, the use of private military companies such as Wagner, which Ukrainian sources claim operate in the Donbas. See chapter 2, section 2.3 for more about definitions.

[193] We have not described or analysed the armed forces of the South Caucasus states or any other power that may get involved in the region or war-gamed potential outcomes in a conflict with Russia. The South Caucasus states may have a certain home-turf advantage, but are all significantly smaller than Russia's by all measurements. In a war with external regional powers or coalitions that would not necessarily be the case.

6.1 Chechnya – domestic armed conflict

Large-scale violence could erupt, for example, because of renewed demands for secession from the Russian Federation or internal Chechen power struggles or organized crime leading to a coup against the Kadyrov regime. Another possible cause is the current leadership's ambitions outside the Chechen Republic, in Dagestan and Ingushetia. Both these could challenge the delicate but controversial relationship between Chechnya and Moscow which is to a great degree based on the current leaders' personal relations.[194] The Russian Armed Forces had the lead in handling the first Chechen war in an operation with weak coordination with other forces and political control. In the Second Chechen War there was better coordination with other forces and stronger political control over the operation. Today, Russian, and Chechen, Interior Troops are likely to be the key force for handling any large-scale violence with the support of the Armed Forces units stationed in Chechnya.

There are plenty of Russian ground forces units in Chechnya: the 42nd Motor-Rifle Division with three motor-rifle regiments plus support units as well as one brigade, two regiments and several independent battalions, including various combat support functions, from the Interior Troops.[195] If not adequate, Moscow has good opportunities to reinforce them. There are plenty of forces in the surrounding Southern MD. The republic is north of the Greater Caucasus range which means the Caucasus' key geographic obstacle will not impede Russian reinforcements. There are four railways and several major roads leading into the northern, more populated, half of Chechnya. The southern, less populated, half of the republic will probably be more difficult to control, especially the forest-clad mountains which facilitate guerrilla-style warfare. On balance, Russia is in a good position to reinforce its forces in Chechnya if need be.

6.2 Nagorno-Karabakh – interstate armed conflict between two South Caucasus states

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the most volatile of the entire Caucasus region. Escalation between Armenia and Azerbaijan can happen if either side becomes confident that it can win a new war. Many interlocutors believed that Azerbaijan probably sees more advantages in a new war than Armenia, which appears content

[194] Interviews Moscow, June 2017.

[195] Milkavkaz.com, "Natsionalnaia Gvardia Rossiiskoi Federatsii", http://milkavkaz.com/index.php/voorujonnie-cili-racii/ross-gvardia and "Iuzhny voenny okrug (IuVO)", http://milkavkaz.com/index.php/voorujonnie-cili-racii/vo-cv/u-vo (both accessed 19 December 2017).

with the status quo. Other causes can be plain misunderstandings between Armenia and Azerbaijan or internal political developments in either country pushing them to renewed conflict escalating into a major war between the two. Russia lacks forces in Nagorno-Karabakh. A Russian military intervention there would probably require sizeable reinforcements, from either south or north of the Greater Caucasus range.

South of the Greater Caucasus range Russia's military assets include the three military bases. Russia can probably deploy personnel to man additional units based on pre-deployed equipment in the bases, but they would face the same problems no matter how strong they are. Only forces from the 102nd Military Base in Armenia can be moved to Nagorno-Karabakh without crossing either Georgian or Azerbaijani territory. That may, however, be at the expense of a possible core task of that base, namely to help guard Armenia against Turkey. Forces from Russia's other two bases, the 4th and the 7th Military Bases in Georgia, could be redeployed to Nagorno-Karabakh, but with two potential problems.

First, Georgia may delay and obstruct Russian military transports across its territory. Second, redeployment from the bases would come at the expense of two possible missions: to keep Georgia de facto divided or, more importantly for military operations, to ensure that two transport corridors are open across the Greater Caucasus range: the Georgia Military Road and the Abkhazia route along the Black Sea coast. The Georgia Military Road across the mountain passes has limited use for moving larger forces. Snow may block it in winter. The Abkhazia route is more reliable. It includes the Western railway, the key operational-strategic means of transport for Russian ground forces, and a highway open in all seasons, which facilitates moving larger forces.

In addition to the above-mentioned two transport corridors, a third potential corridor lies along the Caspian Sea coastline, the Eastern railway and a highway. The problem for Russia may in this case start at the Russo-Azeri border. Baku would hardly support a Russian intervention that might benefit Armenia, Azerbaijan's adversary in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Among the other Russian services, the Aerospace Forces unit in Armenia is probably the key asset for air defence support for a Russian ground operation in Nagorno-Karabakh. In addition, proximity to Russia probably makes additional air support from the Southern MD's 4th Air Force and Air Defence Army feasible. The Russian Navy can probably provide support with land-attack cruise missiles and with sea transport of additional forces from Russia, but to get to Nagorno-Karabakh they would face the same problems as land transports along the Black and Caspian seas – the consent of Georgia and Azerbaijan to cross their territories.

In sum, Russia can probably act relatively effectively within weeks with a brigade-size unit from the 102nd Military Base plus Aerospace Forces support from 3624th Air Base and the 988th Air Defence regiment. Any substantial reinforcements,

either from Russia's two bases in Georgia or from Russia proper, would face geographical and political hurdles that could delay deployments for months. Russia would also have to consider possible Turkish military support to Azerbaijan.

6.3 Georgia – interstate armed conflict between Russia and a South Caucasus state

Tensions between Georgia and its two Russia-supported separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, could escalate into a confrontation that Russia's two military bases are unable to handle. As noted in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh above, Georgia is essential for Russia's ability to reinforce its ally Armenia. Russian forces have been present in various forms in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since the early 1990s. In a war with Georgia, Russia is likely to strive to deploy a JISCO to be able to combat Georgian forces from land, air and sea.

There are several key advantages to Russia using its ground forces in Georgia compared to Nagorno-Karabakh. The first is having the equivalent of two motor-rifle brigades in place, which makes it easier to act immediately. Second, having excess equipment pre-deployed facilitates swift reinforcements by just moving personnel, thus avoiding the cumbersome transport of equipment across the Greater Caucasus range under the pressure of an ongoing operation. The third is land access. Russia has a land border to Georgia which makes it easier to bring up any reinforcements close to an operation. Fourth, by the region's standards, Russia has good transport facilities for an operation in Georgia. As noted above, Russia's 7th Military Base controls the key north–south transport corridor across the Greater Caucasus range – Abkhazia. The 4th Military Base controls the small road across the mountains through the Roki Tunnel and probably would be well able to cut off the nearby Georgia Military Road, currently on Georgian territory. In all, by adding personnel, Russia can possibly augment its two motor-rifle brigades in Georgia with another brigade plus additional units for supporting functions, thus creating the equivalent of an army corps as the ground forces core of a JISCO, possibly within weeks.

As for other services, proximity makes it easier for Russia to use its Aerospace Forces from their bases both in the North Caucasus and in Armenia in an operation in Georgia. Georgia's coastline enables the Russian Navy to use its Black Sea Fleet not only for firing cruise missiles, but also, for example, for a sea-borne manoeuvre with units from the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade in Crimea, ship-based air defence, and supply transports. Russia has probably pre-deployed not only ground forces equipment for augmenting forces, but possibly also equipment for command and control of a JISCO in its military bases. This also makes sense as preparation for a major regional war in the Caucasus.

6.4 Military conflict – large scale war between major states or coalitions of states

A potential large-scale war, *krupnomashtabnaia voina* in Russian terminology, between major states or coalitions of states in the Caucasus region, here means that Russian forces would face sizeable modern forces from either a regional power such as Iran or Turkey or a coalition such as NATO. Such a large-scale conflict would probably mean a wider Russian war effort involving not only the Armed Forces but also the Russian state's entire military organization, i.e. ministries, agencies and private companies that play a role in national defence, for example by supporting forces' mobility or sustainability in the field.

In a large-scale war, compared to the three cases of armed conflict outlined above, four factors would be different, three military and one geographical. First, in the event of a military conflict, Russia would not have the same obvious advantage in numbers in relation to an adversary. Iranian, Turkish or NATO forces would probably be bigger than what the South Caucasus states can muster. Russian forces in the Caucasus region may thus face an almost peer adversary. Second, such an adversary is likely to be able to field fairly modern forces on land, at sea and in the air. Russia would thus not enjoy the advantage of being the only actor able to launch a JISCO. Third, such a military conflict could possibly involve Russian forces elsewhere in Russia's western or south-western direction, which would limit Russia's ability to reinforce operations in the Caucasus region. The fourth, geographical, factor is that in a defensive operation Russia could use the Greater Caucasus range as a barrier. The same limitations as Russian forces would face if they needed to move southwards from Russia could significantly limit an adversary's ability to advance into Russian territory from the south.

In a military confrontation with an adversary using sizeable forces on land, at sea and in the air, the Russian disposition of forces for the Caucasus region has three possible tiers. The first tier would be Russia's military bases in Georgia and Armenia, altogether a force of some three motor-rifle brigades. With reinforcements it could possibly act as an army corps-level formation able to handle both offensive and defensive ground operations with Navy and Air Force support. The second tier would be the forces of Russia's Southern MD which could reinforce Russian operations south of the Greater Caucasus range. The limitations on land transport for supporting major Russian reinforcements southwards could partially be addressed by using sea and air transport, so long as there was sufficient access to harbours and airports. The third tier would be reinforcements from Russia's other MDs. Such reinforcement procedures across Russia are a regular part of the Russian Armed Forces" annual strategic exercises. In 2016, that exercise took place in Russia's Southern MD and in its military bases in the Caucasus and was named Kavkaz-2016. It included reinforcements from Russia's Central and Western MDs. Notably, Kavkaz-2016 also included Russian

Aerospace Forces and Navy formations, the 4th Air Force and Air Defence Army, and the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla. The exercise also saw the mobilization of reservists and the involvement of non-military actors in Russia's state military organization, indicating preparations to augment forces and improve their sustainability in the field. Altogether, the exercise tested Russia's capability to fight a large-scale war in and around the Caucasus region. Russia has exercised that capability systematically in different potential war theatres each year since at least 2009. Therefore, Russia has demonstrated the ability to command all its forces in the Southern MD plus reinforcements for a major war-fighting operation in the Southern war theatre.

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Why can Russia dominate security in the Caucasus region as it does today? Put simply, Russia wants it more than external powers, including the West, and is putting more resources into doing so than any of the current regional powers. In that perspective, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are left with few real options. Russia has shown an ability both to formulate a strategy to influence the region and to implement that strategy. This is Moscow's operationalization of a Russian sphere of interest.

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Appendix 1 Background on unresolved South Caucasus conflicts

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

The dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh (see Map 3.2) is the longest-running secessionist conflict in the post-Soviet space. It is also the bloodiest. The region, largely inhabited by ethnic Armenians, was an autonomous region of the Azerbaijan Soviet Republic. Especially from the 1970s the Karabakh-Armenians accused Azerbaijan of discriminatory politics that allegedly aimed at "de-Armenianization" of the region.[196] The Azerbaijani inhabitants of Nagorno-Karabakh in turn criticized the dominance of the local Armenian majority and its efforts to portray the region as unambiguously Armenian. Spurred on by the new openness under Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s, the Karabakh-Armenians pursued their project of leaving Azerbaijan and joining Armenia with greater confidence.[197]

By February 1988, the raising of a petition in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh had escalated into huge demonstrations in Yerevan, and on 20 February the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh officially demanded to be transferred to Armenia. Six days later, resettled Azerbaijanis from Armenia went on the rampage against Armenians in the Azerbaijani coastal city of Sumgait – with Soviet Interior Troops three miles away opting not to interfere. Following the massacre in Sumgait, inter-ethnic violence intensified and militia groups on both sides worked to ethnically cleanse their respective republics, a process that was completed by late 1990.[198]

The war was fought between 1991 and 1994 and is estimated to have cost between 22,000 and 25,000 lives.[199] Two of the largest ethnic atrocities of the conflict were "Operation Ring" in the summer of 1991 and the Khojaly massacre in February 1992, when hundreds of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, respectively, were killed. More than 700,000 Azerbaijanis and 400,000 Armenians had to flee their homes, although figures are disputed.[200] One reason why the numbers of displaced persons

[196] Smolnik and Halbach in Fischer (ed.) (2016), p. 61.
[197] de Waal, Thomas (2003) *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*, New York: New York University Press, p. 16.
[198] Cornell, Svante E. (2017) "The Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict and European Security" in Cornell, Svante E. (ed.) *The International Politics of the Armenian-Azerbaijani Conflict: The Original "Frozen Conflict" & European Security*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 7.
[199] Smolnik and Halbach in Fischer (ed.) (2016), p. 62.
[200] Popjanevski, Johanna (2017) "International Law and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict" in Cornell (ed.), p. 26.

are much higher on the Azerbaijani side is that the Armenians gained control not only over Nagorno-Karabakh but also over seven Azerbaijani districts (five entirely and two partially: see Map 3.2) outside the former Autonomous Oblast. The Armenians have increasingly come to regard them not as a bargaining chip but as "liberated territories" and part of the "Nagorno-Karabakh Republic" proclaimed in 1991.[201] No other country – not even Armenia – has recognized Nagorno-Karabakh – or the Artsakh Republic as it is officially named – as an independent state, and it remains financially, militarily and politically dependent on Armenia.

The largest-scale fighting was brought under control in 1994 by a Russian-mediated ceasefire, following heavy losses on both sides. But to this day there is no sign of resolution of the conflict. The Minsk Group of the OSCE, originally created in 1992, has led the process to resolve the conflict. In November 2007, at the OSCE ministerial conference in Madrid, the Minsk co-chairs (Russia, the US and France) came up with a set of Basic Principles (the Madrid Principles). The principles seek to satisfy both parties by combining a package deal and a step-by-step approach.[202]

The Basic Principles have been revised over time, but without fundamental changes. They include:

1. the return of the territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani control;
2. an interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh providing guarantees for security and self-governance;
3. a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh;
4. future determination of the final legal status of Nagorno-Karabakh through a legally binding expression of will;
5. the right of all internally displaced persons and refugees to return to their former places of residence; and
6. international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation.[203]

The presidents of both Armenia and Azerbaijan have accepted these principles, but only for further discussion. The two sides are facing off irreconcilably, each citing fundamental principles: the Armenians argue the right of self-determination, the Azerbaijanis the right to territorial integrity. Since the 1994 ceasefire the parties have failed to agree to establish a joint peacekeeping force or to permit the deployment of an international mission. There has therefore been no effective

[201] Cornell (ed.) (2017), p. 9.
[202] Caspersen, Nina (2017) "Moving Beyond Deadlock in the Peace talks" in Cornell (ed), pp. 177-178.
[203] This is the version made public by the co-chairs in 2009: OSCE (2009) "Statement by OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chairs countries", OSCE, 10 July, http://www.osce.org/mg/51152 (accessed 19 December 2017).

monitoring of the ceasefire, which is regularly violated, not only along the so-called Line of Contact (LoC) between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, but also on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The causes of the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia date back long before the secessionist wars of the early 1990s. Tensions over questions of autonomy and status persisted throughout the Soviet period and especially in Abkhazia protest movements calling for greater political and cultural independence from Tbilisi emerged at intervals repeatedly. The Georgian elites in turn rallied against Russian dominance. In conflicts with Tbilisi, Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists sought backing and support from Moscow, which found itself in the convenient position of being able to play all three parties off against each other. During the collapse of the Soviet Union the latent conflicts erupted into bloody wars between a nationalist Georgian government under President Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[204]

In South Ossetia the war lasted from early 1991 to mid-1992 and cost about 1,000 lives. Figures for the numbers of refugees and IDPs range between 40,000 and 100,000 depending on the source: the parties to the conflict quote different figures. The economic damage in already underdeveloped South Ossetia was enormous. Russia acted ambivalently, emphasizing the territorial integrity of Georgia while lending sporadic support to South Ossetian fighters. Under the terms of the ceasefire agreement signed in June 1992 in Dagomys, near Sochi, a Joint Control Commission (JCC) was established with representatives of Georgia, South Ossetia, North Ossetia and Russia. Representatives from the OSCE also took part to prevent further conflict. A Georgian/Ossetian/Russian Joint Peace-Keeping Force (JPKF) was established under Russian command. From the Georgian perspective the composition of both the JCC and the JPKF was disadvantageous, with the North Ossetian and Russian presence giving the South Ossetian separatists the upper hand.[205]

The war for Abkhazia lasted from August 1992 to May 1994. Roughly 10,000 people died, about two-thirds of them civilians. The Abkhazians did not fight alone: they were joined by "Cossack" units, by elements of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey and Syria, and by members of other Caucasian peoples. Here, too, Russia played an ambiguous role, alternately supporting either side. As events progressed, however, Moscow stepped up its support for the Abkhaz separatists, placing the collapsing Georgian state under increasing military pressure. Russian

[204] Fischer "The Conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia …" in Fischer (2016) (ed.), pp. 43-44.
[205] Jones, Stephen (2015) *Georgia: A Political History of Independence*, London: I.B. Tauris, pp. 93-96.

politicians and military officers working closely with the Abkhazian leadership were focused not on independence for Abkhazia but on undermining Georgia and Eduard Shevardnadze, the Georgian president after Gamsakhurdia was deposed in a coup.

The Abkhaz counter-offensive in summer 1993 forced almost the entire Georgian population of Abkhazia to flee, about 250,000 people. The Moscow ceasefire agreement ended the fighting in May 1994. The peacekeeping force stipulated in the agreement was nominally supplied by the CIS but the operation was under Russian command. The unarmed UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was tasked with monitoring the ceasefire. Georgian-Abkhaz peace talks were held in the UN-moderated Geneva process. After 1994 Abkhazia was almost completely isolated. Alongside Georgia's economic blockade, the CIS also imposed an embargo in 1996. Russia supported the embargo in return for Georgia's cooperation in the fight against separatists who had taken refuge in Georgian Pankisi Gorge. In the early 2000s, Moscow gradually relaxed its policy of isolation.[206]

The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 was a watershed for both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It marked the climax of a long period of tension between the conflicting parties themselves, but also in relations between Georgia and Russia and between Russia and Westerns actors such as the US, NATO and the EU. The Tagliavini Report commissioned by the EU and led by the Swiss top diplomat Heidi Tagliavini came to the conclusion in September 2009 that, although the shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7–8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict in Georgia, yet it was only the culminating point of a long period of increasing tensions, provocation and incidents.[207] These include, for instance, the shelling of Georgian administrative buildings and villages by Russian and Ossetian troops, the shooting down of Georgian drones and the repairing of the Abkhaz part of the Western railway (see Map 4.1) by the Russian Railway Troops for military purposes.[208] After the Kavkaz 2008 military exercise held in July across the North Caucasus MD, a small Russian force of 1,500 soldiers, as well as tanks and artillery, remained deployed on the Russian border with South Ossetia.[209]

[206] Fischer (ed.) (2016), pp. 46-47.

[207] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia* (2009), p. 11, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/30_09_09_iiffmgc_report.pdf (accessed 11 December 2017).

[208] Illarionov, Andrei (2008) "The Russian Leadership's Preparation for War, 1999-2008" in Cornell, Svante E. and Starr, Fredrick (eds) *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, pp. 64-72.

[209] Toal, Gerard (2017) *Near Abroad: Putin, the West, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, New York: Oxford University Press, p.157.

In recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states after the war, Russia for the first time openly broke with its commitments to the existing post-Soviet borders. In autumn 2008 Moscow concluded "agreements of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" with both entities; in the following years it granted generous budget assistance and invested in the socio-economic development of the secessionist territories. Moscow deployed regular forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and supported Sukhumi and Tskhinvali in securing their "borders" with Georgia. After Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia and the West were no longer able to agree on the status and mandate of the UN and OSCE missions. With their closing, the non-Russian international presence disappeared from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, while Moscow now established regular military bases in both regions in place of peacekeeping forces. In the Six Point Peace Plan agreed between French President Nicolas Sarkozy, at the time leading the rotating presidency of the EU, and Russian President Dmitriy Medvedev in 12 August 2008, the fifth point – for the Russian forces to withdraw behind their positions before the start of hostilities (7 August 2008) – remains unimplemented to this day. The old formats were succeeded by the Geneva International Discussions, where both conflicts are negotiated jointly. Russia continues to insist on a mediating role alongside the co-chairs, the OSCE, the UN and the EU.[210]

[210] Fischer (ed.) (2016) pp. 48-49.

Appendix 2 Ethnic groups of the North Caucasian Federal District

Federal subject (Capital)	Total pop.	Major Ethnic Groups	Religions
Chechnya (Grozny)	1.2 million	Chechens (95.3%); Russians (1.9%); Kumyks (1%); and others (1.8%)	Islam (95%); Christian Orthodox (Russians)
Dagestan (Makhachkala)	2.9 million	Avars (29.4%); Dargins (17%); Kumyks (14.9%); Lezgins (13.3%); Laks (5.6%); Azeris (4.5%); Tabasarans (4.1%); Russians (3.6%); Chechens (3.2%); Nogais (1.4%); Rutuls (1%); Aghuls (1%); and others (1%)	Almost all the ethnic groups in Dagestan are Muslim. The Russian minority is Christian Orthodox.
Ingushetia (Magas)	412,000	Ingush (94.1%); Chechens (4.6%); Russians (0.8%); and others (0.5%)	Islam (over 97%); Christian Orthodox
Kabardino-Balkaria (Nalchik)	860,000	Kabardians (57.2%); Russians (22.5%); Balkars (12.7%); Ossetians (1.1%); and others (6.5%)	Islam (Kabardians, Balkars); Christian Orthodox (Russians, Ossetians)
Karachai-Cherkessia (Cherkessk)	478,000	Karachais (41%); Russians (31.6%); Cherkess (11.9%); Abazins (7.8%); Nogais (3.3%); and others (4.4%)	Islam (Karachais, Cherkess, Abazins, Nogais); Christian Orthodox (Russians)
North Ossetia-Alania (Vladikavkaz)	713,000	Ossetians (65.1%); Russians (20.8%); Ingush (4%); Armenians (2.3%); Kumyks (2.3%); Georgians (1.3); and others (4.2%)	Christian Orthodox (Ossetians, Russians, Armenians, Georgians); Islam (Ingush, Kumyks)
Stavropol Krai, (Stavropol)	2.7 million	Russians (80.9%); Armenians (5.9%); Dargins (1.8%), Caucasus Greeks (1.2%); Romani (1.1%); Ukrainians (1.1%); and others (8%)	Mostly Christian Orthodox; Islam

Source: Russian Federal State Statistics Service (2011) "Vserossiiskaia perepis naseleniia 2010", http://www.gks.ru/free_doc/new_site/perepis2010/croc/perepis_itogi1612.htm (accessed 30 January 2018).

Note: The North Caucasian Federal District includes six ethnic republics (Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachai-Cherkessia and North Ossetia-Alania) and one territory (Stavropol Krai). However, it does not include Krasnodar Krai or the Republic of Adygea, which historically and geographically usually are regarded as parts of the North Caucasus region.

Appendix 3 List of Interviews

Date	Organization	Place
27 Jun 2017	Embassy of Sweden	Moscow
27 Jun 2017	Caucasus Department, CIS Institute	Moscow
27 Jun 2017	Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST)	Moscow
27 Jun 2017	Independent analyst	Moscow
27 Jun 2017	Central Eurasia Research Center, Institute of Eastern Studies of the Russian Scientific Academy (IVRAN)	Moscow
28 Jun 2017	Institute of Social and Political Studies of the Black Sea-Caspian Sea Region	Moscow
28 Jun 2017	*Krasnaia Zvezda*	Moscow
28 Jun 2017	Centre of Caucasus Studies and Regional Security, Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)	Moscow
29 Jun 2017	*Vedomosti*	Moscow
29 Jun 2017	Russian State University for the Humanities	Moscow
29 Jun 2017	Centre of Caucasus Studies and Regional Security (MGIMO)	Moscow
6 Sep 2017	Embassy of Sweden	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	Yerevan Press Club	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	US Embassy	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	Imagine Centre for Conflict Transformation	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	Yerevan State University	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	EU delegation	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	UK Embassy	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	Political Science Association of Armenia	Yerevan
6 Sep 2017	Caucasus Institute	Yerevan
7 Sep 2017	Caucasus Research Resource Center – Armenia	Yerevan
7 Sep 2017	Ministry of Defence	Yerevan
7 Sep 2017	Armenian Institute on International and Security Affaires	Yerevan
7 Sep 2017	International Center for Human Development (ICHD)	Yerevan
8 Sep 2017	Regional Studies Centre	Yerevan
11 Sep 2017	Embassy of Sweden	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Rondeli Foundation, Georgian Foundation for Security and International Studies (GFSIS)	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Ilia State University	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Georgian Institute for security Studies (GISS)	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Georgian Civil Society Sustainability Initiative	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP)	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	Civil.ge	Tbilisi
11 Sep 2017	International Crisis Group (ICG)	Tbilisi
12 Sep 2017	EU Special Repr for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia	Tbilisi
12 Sep 2017	NATO Liaison Office in Georgia	Tbilisi
12 Sep 2017	Economic Policy and Research Center (EPRC)	Tbilisi
12 Sep 2017	Ministry of Defence	Tbilisi
13 Sep 2017	EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM)	Tbilisi
14 Sep 2017	Caucasus Research Resource Centre – Azerbaijan	Baku
14 Sep 2017	Embassy of Sweden	Baku
14 Sep 2017	Centre for Economic and Social Development (CESD)	Baku
15 Sep 2017	Independent political analyst	Baku
15 Sep 2017	Political Innovation and Technologies Center	Baku
15 Sep 2017	Centre for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan	Baku

This study analyses Russia's approach since 2014 to armed conflicts in the Caucasus region. This region consists of both the North Caucasus, which is a part of the Russian Federation, and the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – three former Soviet republics that gained independence in 1991.

The Caucasus continues to be a conflict-ridden part of Russia's neighbourhood, the biggest risk of war is a renewed and expanded war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. Of the three regional external powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran – only Russia has military bases in the Caucasus region and is the only one seemingly ready to act militarily. Western interest in the region is mainly related to non-security issues.

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