

Peacekeeping in the Caucasus

By Louis Wesselling

The southern borders of the former Soviet-Union, from Kazakhstan near China to the Balkan in Europe are straddled by ancient warlike peoples of different cultures, languages and religions, fiercely independent, but condemned by geography and history to live together.

The iron communist fist obliged them to keep their animosities under their fur hats, but the withdrawal of the Soviet Empire, which left them grouped together in many artificial nations, allowed all the old internal faultlines between tribes to re-surface. Even the smallest tribes can now fight for freedom and independence. Without Soviet subsidies and security, income per head declined drastically and ordinary business and even agriculture suffered to the advantage of the local mafia. Un-surprisingly the common woman in the street therefore finds the advent of “freedom” and “democracy” a disaster compared to the “bread and security” of the Soviet system.

Now add to this explosive combination international competition for large oil and gas finds and the planning of pipelines for political reasons through disputed territories and you have a recipe for serious war. When I visited the physically beautiful but governmentally dys-functional republic of Georgia in May '03, the place was crawling with predominantly Russian and American spies, who try to turn the local troubles to their advantage. The Chechen terrorist incursions continue. American airfields and bases to project power in the Middle East are being built. May is not only the time for the fields to flower and the mountain snows to melt but for the traditional fighting to resume.

A stabilising and hope-giving factor in this dark picture is the presence since 1999 of a strong OSCE (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) mission, consisting of rather active European, Russian and American military observers under joint international diplomatic control. They control, observe electronically, by helicopter and on foot the high mountain passes from Chechnia to other areas of conflict, such as Dagestan. Operations have now been extended to cover the Osetian undeclared war and will shortly cover the Pankisi valley which is effectively “no-mans-land” at present.

As seen from a high OSCE outpost at Shatili, a mountain pass on the Chechen border, each valley seems to have its own fiercely separate clan, hating those on the other side. The outpost operates a clinic for the local village of less than a hundred people (heavily armed of course). The Norwegian oil firm, Statoil, provides the money for a small school. But even that insignificant village is split in two clans with a blood feud between them.

It appears that, in the absence of a reliable police and Georgian army (which is still being trained by the Americans) only the OSCE is able to fulfill an impartial peace maintaining role in Georgia and beyond. Ordinary people begin to understand that only if peace is maintained can economic investment take off and improve their lot.

At an annual OSCE budget of 24 million Euro's, cheaper than a handful of Apache helicopters, that seems a good investment to me.



The OSCE observation post at Shatili. Second and third from the right, LW and son, together with OSCE officers in front of an old but very fit Russian MIG helicopter (maintained by Germans).

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