
Moving Beyond Mirages

THOMAS DE WAAL DISCUSSES A NEW PARADIGM
FOR FOREIGN INTERVENTION IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

FLETCHER FORUM: *The weight of history in the Caucasus is immense; indeed, you argue it is even heavier than in the Balkans. To what would you attribute that?*

THOMAS DE WAAL: Well, the strange thing about studying the Caucasus is that the Balkans becomes a positive example and actually relatively straightforward in comparison. We're looking at the same diversity and history of conflict as in the Balkans, and then that squared. Clearly there is a long history of conflict and of foreign intervention here, but one of the themes of my book is that history changes.

To take one example, up until the early twentieth century, the great historical enemy for the Georgians was the Turks, while the Russians were perceived as a Christian ally against Muslim invaders. In the past twenty years, that's been totally turned around, and the national Georgian ideology is now very much about being liberated from Russia, while Turkey has become an ally. So, there's been historical amnesia there. Azeris and Armenians have actually collaborated in the past. For example, in the nineteenth century, Azeri Shiites were fighting with the Russian army

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alongside Armenians against the Sunni Turks, and now the Azeris and the Turks think of themselves as brethren. So, I think history can be a bit of a double-edged sword in this region. Perception differs from reality and you can select certain episodes to prove different things.

Another big historical theme is that there are many foreign interventions in this region, but they always fail, in my view—or else the end result is a long way from the initial goal. Many foreign powers have marched

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..... through, leaving their mark and great destruction behind, but somehow the locals have always survived. This is the great contrast between this region (the South Caucasus) and Iran and Turkey across the border. In Turkey, the minorities have pretty much either been assimilated or killed—or survived but suffered great discrimination. In Iran, strong central control prevents the Azeris of Iran from even teaching their language in schools. Compare that to independent Azerbaijan over the border and how Azerbaijan maintained nearly full autonomy even under Russian rule.

So, foreign interventions fail; foreign conquerors, or would-be conquerors, always have to collaborate with the locals and end up ruling by consent. People see the Caucasus as a “Great Chessboard” on which the Great Powers push the small peoples around like pawns, but that is the wrong image.

FORUM: *On that note, in The Caucasus you discuss the “three mirages” that misinform outsiders’ thinking about the South Caucasus. Can you talk a bit more about foreign misperceptions of the conflict and how they may contribute to its continuation?*

DE WAAL: Well, clearly something has gone terribly wrong in this region in the last twenty years. You compare its development—or lack of development—to that of the Baltic States and other former Soviet states, or even to Russia, and you see the massive economic consequence of conflict and mass emigration. There are obviously a number of factors, including the destructive power of nationalism and misplaced national historical narratives, which have driven people against each other. That is the bottom-up reason, but clearly not the only driver of conflict. The main driver of conflict is this deep sense of structural insecurity, in which people come to believe that attack is the best form of defense.

But outsiders also play a role and this is where I get into my idea of mirages and misperceptions. Too many outsiders have perceived this region through a First World War paradigm of picking friends and allies, treating the region as a chessboard in which they're playing against the Russians and holding a Great Power, winner-takes-all attitude. In other corners of the world, it's possible to work with the Russians; though they can be difficult and unpredictable, it's still possible to identify points of common interest. But, particularly in the United States, there still seems to be an idea that the Caucasus is a game with only one winner—a new Great Game, a new Cold War. I think this attitude has been extremely destructive for the locals.

To take one obvious example, Georgians and Ossetians in Soviet times were very close. There was a lot of intermarriage, they traded with one another, and they were both basically Orthodox Christian, but they were driven apart at the end of the Soviet era by this wave of Georgian nationalism that overwhelmed Georgia. That made the Ossetians look to Russia as their protector against Georgian assimilation, and then the Georgians looked to Western countries as their patrons against the incursions of Russia in South Ossetia. And instead of treating this as a local dispute that would have been quite solvable on the ground if everybody worked together, outsiders made it worse by framing the dispute in bigger geopolitical terms and by loading it with issues such as NATO enlargement. The end result was that in 2008, a local conflict between Georgians and Ossetians blew up into this huge, dramatic, new episode of the Cold War—a clash between Washington and Moscow.

Clearly, something went badly wrong. I believe the outsiders deserve more of the blame for this fiasco than the locals. They had more of a capacity

to put the brakes on a slide toward conflict than the locals, who were acting within a very insecure environment of regional instability and were inclined to use attack as the best form of defense.

FORUM: *Given Russia's interest in stabilizing the North Caucasus, and perhaps the impossibility of doing that without regional support, do you see Russia moving to improve its relations in the South Caucasus?*

DE WAAL: Yes, this is another historical theme I investigate in the book.

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There's a strong contrast between the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus, which has to do with geography and the fact that on the far [south] side of the mountains, Russia has always had a much smaller military capacity. Also, local elites are stronger in the south, whereas on the north side of the mountains, the smaller ethnic groups are less developed and Russia has geography on its side; without the obstruction of the mountains, the Russians can deploy much more hard power and military force.

What does this mean for the future? Well, I think it means that Russia is actually now facing its biggest problem in the North Caucasus, a region that has been described as the "inner abroad." It's on a very different trajectory from the rest of Russia demographically, with a lot of young men, high unemployment, and growing perceptions of difference between the Islamic peoples and Slavic Russians. And Russia really has few instruments at its disposal to properly rule this region. The North Caucasus is basically either governing itself or ungovernable, and maybe the only thing that is preventing greater instability there is a sort of inertia or a conflict-fatigue, but it is certainly very difficult for the Russian government to handle. I don't think they fully appreciate it nor have the proper instruments to do so.

And therefore, when it comes to the South Caucasus, the important point is that Russia made this very bold move in August 2008 when it recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But I think in the long term this has stirred up a new set of problems for Russia. People in North Ossetia, Ingushetia, and Chechnya look across the border and see that the Russian government has recognized these two small bits of Georgia as independent, and they think, "What about us?" It stirs up discontent. But the deadlock and lockdown over South Ossetia and Abkhazia makes it worse and, in a few years time, Russia will be looking to be more flexible so as to win Western and Georgian cooperation for stabilizing the North Caucasus—certainly not to give these regions back to Georgia, but to make some kind of deal which allows Georgians and the Europeans a say in the future of the two places.

FORUM: *Although Kosovo is clearly a different situation, what kind of spill-over or precedent do you see for Nagorno-Karabakh in the wake of the ICJ opinion this summer?*

DE WAAL: Well, not just for Karabakh, but in terms of Abkhazia and South Ossetia too. As I see it, the big mistake in Western policy on Kosovo was not just to pursue this tactic of encouraging Kosovo's independence, which had its pluses and minuses in and of itself, but then also to deny that this had any repercussions. They said that Kosovo and the Caucasus were

two separate cases and were very different, and that therefore they were not going to talk about them in the same breath. Well, that was the intention, but events, not words, set precedents.

Clearly, Kosovo was perceived by Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Karabakh Armenians as precedent because this secessionist territory had been granted independence without consent of the metropolitan state. Other secessionist movements around the world—in Eritrea, East Timor, and Montenegro—won independence with the consent of the former metropolitan state, but this wasn't the case with Kosovo. It clearly looked like a green light to the Abkhazians and South Ossetians and Karabakh Armenians.

Now, clearly there are big differences between the cases but if you were the leader of Abkhazia and you were thinking about doing some deal with the Georgians, after the Kosovo case a lot of your local constituents would say, "Hey, wait a minute, they got independence; why would we settle for anything less? We want independence." So, it creates an internal pressure in these regions and reinforces the perception that history is on their side—that if they just wait, dig in, and lock down, eventually the international community is going to have to cut some kind of deal with them.

FORUM: *Do you see any kind of dialogue emerging from this intransigence, and do you think the media could play a constructive role in bridging communication gaps in the region?*

DE WAAL: It's very depressing, really, with these conflicts. You see that people are so very much stuck in their black-and-white positions of "I win, you lose," that the symbolism of having won or having suffered is still incredibly important. So, there's precious little common ground there. And in general the media plays quite a negative role, reinforcing the old stereotypes and conflict propaganda.

Clearly the picture is more complex. These people are not idiots. They realize that Armenians and Azeris and Georgians and Abkhaz are not that different and were not fated to be enemies; there is nothing that genetically predisposes them to hate one another. You meet ordinary people and, after talking to them for a while,

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you begin to get a different narrative as they remember their friends from the Soviet times, or they find out they've actually traded with someone from the other side and still want to. So, there are different narratives, but they are not being expressed in the public sphere.

When it comes to media, there are some journalists who collaborate, and there is also this phenomenon of social networking sites, which some individuals are using to circumvent official media. And this is an interesting and positive phenomenon, but it is certainly only just one ray of light in general darkness.

FORUM: *Do you see any other rays of light? What's next for the region?*

DE WAAL: Well, it's not a very positive picture. I suppose the best that can be said is that we've avoided a major re-run of the war in Abkhazia and Karabakh, though there was a re-run of the war in South Ossetia. I think there is possibly sufficient international interest in the region to try to have a better early-warning system about these conflicts, particularly with the Karabakh conflict. But I think the paradigm shift has to come through external actors; I don't see there being enough internal capacity by those who want change in the region to affect it.

I see two external agents of change. One is Turkey. I think if normalization between Turkey and Armenia can get back on track—which may happen in 2011—Turkey could be a good trading partner for all three countries and could be a stabilizing force and a useful regional actor.

The other potential agent for change could be the European Union. The European Union, as we know, is still very much distracted by its own internal policy debates and institution-building, and is still a very cautious, consensus-based actor with 27 countries. So, it is constrained by all sorts of factors. But even a more modest ramping-up of European Union interest would be very positive, I think, particularly in terms of visa facilitation and trade. And of course this is also a two-way street; elites in the three countries of the region would have to decide that they want to liberalize sufficiently to get the benefits that European Union trade liberalization can give them, which would mean opening up their economies and losing some political control.

FORUM: *But do you think Azerbaijan actually has an interest in European Union membership?*

DE WAAL: I think not. I think Azerbaijan is still very much focused on wanting to be the next Kazakhstan, by which I mean a country that is basically prosperous and balances a lot of regional powers—be it Russia,

Iran, Europe, or the West—but does not hitch itself to any of those particular powers. This allows the elite to get on with what it wants, which is enriching itself.

Armenia, also, is fairly lukewarm [on the European Union] and has a strong alliance with Russia. I think it is interested in contacts in Europe but that is a more long-term perspective.

Georgia, obviously, is the most progressive of the three, but even Georgia has a definite split between those who have chosen the European Union and those who have chosen a more “Singaporean” model of economic development. The latter want Georgia to be a kind of island unto itself, with low taxes and investment from all around the world, but not to be linked to what they regard as the bureaucratic requirements of the European Union. I think that is a mistake. I think the European Union is Georgia’s closest and biggest market, and I think that if Georgia would submit itself to the restrictions of European Union trade standards, it would actually benefit a lot.

FORUM: *Is there anything else you’d like to add?*

DE WAAL: I suppose the issue that I would like to raise again is Russia. I think Russia is clearly a very difficult neighbor, with a long colonial interest in the region, but I think it’s a mistake to see Russia as being a hegemon that wants to dominate this region. I think Russia has moved into a post-imperialist phase, in which it does not want to dominate this region and actually does not have the capacity to do so. Clearly, there are constituencies in Russia, such as the military, who still
 have an interest in this. And, of course, Russia is still in charge of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, I think that in looking at the broader region—
 Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan—Russia is slowly adjusting to the new reality, where it realizes that it is one actor among many in the Caucasus.

Therefore, framing policy to keep Russia out of the region is a waste of time and is counterproductive. I think
 it should be possible to look at ways of working with Russia in the region. And that applies also to Turkey and Iran. Basically, it’s a matter of accepting that there should be some kind of Great Power truce in the Caucasus in which everyone’s interest is acceptable as long as it is benign. ■

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