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RESEARCH ARTICLE
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Russia's Policy Towards Georgia, 1991-2001

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INTRODUCTION

Georgia is located on the western side of Caucasus and in Russia's southern flank by the shores of the black sea. It covers an area of 69,700 sq km. with a population of 54,00,84 comprising through autonomous regions, Abkhazia south Ossetia and Ajaria. Though Georgia declared its independence on 9 April 1991, it effectively emerged as an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union right in the midst of elite and ethnic conflicts. The dawn of competitive election in Georgia led to the domination of the nationalist in the new supreme Soviet of Georgia which in own elected a Georgian chauvinists to the post of the Chairman of the elected body. Later on, a referendum was held in Georgia, which 93% voted in favour of separation from the Soviet Union, and its Supreme Soviet appointed Zviad Gamasakhurdia as the president of Georgia.

Georgia appeared having one of the most enthusiastic independent movements with anti-Russian sentiment after the Baltic States in the Soviet Union. The new Supreme Soviet dominated by nationalists fevour adopted new laws such as prohibiting. The conscription of Georgians in the soviet army. In fact, Georgia proceeded to form its own nation guard a year before the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Tbilisi demanded the withdrawal of the Russian forces stationed in Georgia from its territory. After the collapse of the USSR, the independent Georgia refused to join the commonwealth of independent states (CIS), and continued its insistence on its independence and keeping distance from Russia (Jonathan, 1992).

Russian Policy towards Georgia:

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union and emergence of Georgia, Russia's policy towards this new independent republic can be primarily explained in the framework of its policy towards the near abroad countries.

As mentioned before, the Russian policy towards its near abroad countries, prominently, the southern flank, has gone through two phase in the first phase Moscow adopted a relative moderate policy toward them based on compromise and negotiation because of its western oriented foreign policy. Second phase in Russian near abroad policy emerged by mid 1993 when the reintegrate tendencies became dominated in Russia's policy towards near abroad countries. In fact, Russia realized the importance of the newly independent states in terms of economy, strategic location and security. Therefore, there was a shift in Russian policy from neglecting abroad countries to active engagement with them in order to persuade or force them to accommodate with Russia's interests (Wright, 1995).

In other words, the gap between nationalists-conservative forces approach on near abroad and that of westerners represented by Yeltsin and Kozyrev get narrowed if not disappeared. Thus, Kremlin began to pursue its strategic interests in near abroad, regardless of niceties of independence. The structural weakness of the new republics compounded with the presence of the Russian minorities and ethnic conflict in some of the republics provided a good ground to Moscow to follow its strategic goals there. Georgia is a good example of how Russia succeeded to alter its behaviour through policy

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of stick and carrot (Otyrva, 1994).

However, it seems that the protection of Russians living in near abroad, which is partly responsible for Moscow's interventionist policy in the former territory of the Soviet Union is not of primary importance in shaping Russia's policy towards Georgia. The Russian population that was 371,608 in 1979 decline by 8.9%, to 338,645 according to 1989 census, mostly because of out migration. No doubt, the eruption of civil war and ethnic conflict had further increased the out-migration of already declining number of Russians.

Russia with its huge landmass is quite a land-locked country. For centuries, on of the aims of Russian expansion and conquest of new land was to reach the warm waters of the south, an aim which was realized during Tzarist period mostly as a consequence of Russo–Ottoman wars. The October revolution that caused the disintegration of the Russian empire did not change the geo-political reality, a fact, which persuaded the Bolshevik to revive, by and large, the shattered empire.

However with the collapse of Soviet Union and emergence of the new Sovereign republics, once again Moscow's sea out lets sharply shrinked particularly in republics adjacent to the Black sea, namely Ukraine, and Georgia. In fact, not only access to the Black sea, the legacy of Tzarist Russia but also preserving a dominant position are strategic goals of Russia; which is crucial to Russia's economy and military interests regardless of political, ideological orientation of the Kremlin leaders. It is against this background that one can assess the Russia activities in Crimea, and Abkhazia respectively in Ukraine, and Georgia (Georgi, 1995).

Georgian defiant government under Gamaskhurdia with its ultra-nationalist orientation was not ready to accommodate Russia's vital interest in Georgia. His authoritarian rule led not only to the rise of ethnic nationalism, but also conflict among Georgian elites, a situation which culminated in armed clashes between them and consequently the overthrow of Gamaskhurdia. It was alleged that opposition groups were supplied arms and ammunition by Russian military forces in Georgia. With the appointment of Shevardnadze as head of the provisional government in Tbilisi, it was thought that he would be accommodative towards Russians, a perception which did not come true, though he tried to amend the tense reduction between Georgia and Russia.

In consequence, the two countries succeeded to conclude a cease-fire in South Ossetia, but soon with the eruption of armed conflict in Abkhazia, reduction of the two governments exacerbated, when Tbilisi accused Russia of assisting Abkhaz separatists.

It is noteworthy that there were some evidence in South Ossetia, regarding Russia's military forces and its peacekeeping mission siding with Ossetes in order to put pressure of Georgia. But it is more likely that the conservative forces and nationalists in Moscow and within the militant were behind the events, acting independently from the government of Moscow. It may be suggested that the fact that Moscow did not utilize the conflict to extract concessions from Tbilisi as it did with regard to the Abkhaz conflict supports the said argument (Lynch, 1998). Therefore, this behaviour can be identified with the first phase of Russia's policy towards the near abroad that was mostly based on the western school of thought, supporting a moderate policy towards the new independent state.

However, the event in Abkhazia went in different way indicating the Russia's assertion to follow its own national interests in the near abroad. The old policy of divide and rule was used by Russian in a systematic manner to bring states which had refused to join the CIS like Georgia, back to the fold. In fact, Georgia represents the most evident case of Russia's involvement in near abroad countries as its sphere of influence. Moscow applied political, military and economic pressure to force Tbilisi to abide by Russia's strategic interests in its territory.

Russia's role as a guarantor of peace and stability has been endorsed by others, particularly Americans. This has enhanced Russia's political leadership as an arbiter to the conflict in nears abroad, a position on which the parties of the conflicts depend. So far as Georgia is concerned this was manifested in Russia's – attempts to intervene and mediate between Georgians and Abkhazians, a job that could hardly be neutral.

Although, there is a no absolute evidence to assets that Russia on leashed the attack against Georgia, there are some clear signal suggesting Russia's role in supplying arms, and training and sometimes directly assisting Abkhazia in there conflicts with Georgia. It appeared that the Russian militant forces plated an essential role in the conflicts. The presence of the Russian troops was one of the most important disagreements between Georgia and Russia. From the beginning, Tbilisi demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from its territory and Moscow was reluctant to give up its bases in Georgia, citing the special strategic interests of Russia in Georgia's

Black sea coast including Abkhazia and Ajaria which dictate the Russian presence in black sea bases in Georgia (The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, 1993).

Georgia attempt to woo western support through its western oriented policy proved in vain. When it signed a friendship treaty with Ukrain in April 1993, Russia considered it as a threat. As such, it did not promote Georgia's position before Russia. After the fall of Sukhumi to the hand of Abkhaz fighter Shevardnadze appealed to U.N. Secretary General and to the leader of the US Treaty, Spain, Japan, Canada, Great Britain, France and other countries. Though without any concrete result (The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press, 1993). This appeared to be a Swan Song of independent Georgia before yielding to Russian demands. In facts, with the resurgence of Zviadists in western Georgia, the country was on the brink of dismemberment. In the absence of any option outside the CIS, it appeared that there was only one option before Tbilisi, namely to turn towards Russia. Hence, Georgian government agreed to join the CIS, which it had earlier resisted.

However, it should be noted that, Russian used not only military pressure, but they also utilized that economic levers at their disposal against Tbilisi government. It should be emphasized that the structure of the soviet economy was interconnected through central planning and regional specialization among the union republics Therefore; the new independent states are heavily depended on each other's particularly on Russian Federation. Russia is source of raw material and energy as well as a market for the low quality products of the near abroad countries. This economic power provides Moscow a good lover to put pressure on the near abroad countries, unwilling to join the CIS, like Georgia.

The rise of economic conflict and evil war in Georgia compounded with rail and road blockades which led to rupture of Georgia form other parts of the former Soviet Union, especially Russia's brought about catastrophe to the Georgian economy (Sunny, 1980). The situation was exacerbated as a consequence of Russian retaliatory measures against Georgia for not joining the CIS. This was including the termination of delivers of goods from Russia and erecting barriers to the Georgians exports.

So, the disappointment of Shevardnadze with the west, compounded with increasing economic hardship and Russian heavy handed deal with Georgia, forced Tbilisi to yield to the Moscow's demands. Hence forth, Georgia not only acceded to the CIS, but also signed a treaty on bilateral military relation with Russia. Soon after, Russia's troops came to the assistance of Georgian forces in regulating the Zviadists insurgency in Western Georgia, and protecting the major rail links.

In February 1994, Yeltsin and Gorbachev visited Tbilisi and signed a treaty with Shevardnadze in which Russia was committed to assist Georgia in the creation of the republic of Georgia of the armed forces and supplying military equipments. More importantly Russia retained the three military bases in Georgian territory, included the Black sea naval base of poti (Adometi, 1995). In November 1994, the two countries also reached a border patrol agreement aiming to fulfill one of the Russia's strategic goals with regard to the near abroad countries namely protecting the quarter CIS border. Little wonder, that Georgia also joined the collective security system. In fact, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian problem remained unresolved, and the peace that prevails now is department only on the presence of Russian peacekeepers there. Therefore, there is always the possibility of the renewal of conflicts, if Georgia turns assertive against Russian strategic interests in its territory. In this context, Georgia has no option than to boost its ties including security relations with Moscow either within the CIS or on the bilateral basis.

For this reason, Georgia has come closer to the core states of the CIS, even once Shevardnadze supported the idea of European Union proposed by Kazakhstan president.

This drastic shift in Georgia policy seems to have been facilitates policy seems to have been facilitates by the dismissal of its hard line opponents within the ruling Georgian elites (Ibid, 363), even without substituting the Georgian ruling elites as it was the case with Azerbaijan. Thus by the end of 1994, it did appear that some semblances of stability in Russia's relations with Georgia had appeared. However, a clear picture is yet to emerged.

The independence of the three South Caucasian states in 1991 meant a very tangible loss of Moscow's control over the Caucasus. Furthermore, a fourth republic had declared independence in the same period: Under the leadership of former air force General Jokhar Dudayev, Chechnya aspired to membership in the community of independent nations, thereby seceding not only from the Soviet Union, but also from the Russian Federation (Treisman, 1997). In spite of this direct challenge to Russian statehood, Moscow initially focused its energy on reasserting control over the South Caucasus,

while ignoring the Chechens' de-facto independence for almost 3 years. This corresponds exactly to the Russian incorporation of the Caucasus in the 19th century: Russia achieved control of the South Caucasus through peace treaties with Iran in 1813 and 1828, by which date Russian control over the region was indisputable.

This policy began with the protectorate over Georgia with the Treaty of Giorgevsk in 1783, and was completed by the annexation of Georgia in 1801. In the decades that followed, Georgia was a crucial staging point for Russian military operations in the North Caucasus, where the small mountain peoples ferociously fought the Russian onslaught. But the struggle continued in the North Caucasus for 3 more decades, until the Chechen Dagestani rebellions were subdued in 1859, followed by the defeat and expulsion of most Circassia's in 1864. Hence Russia securely controlled Georgia over half a century before it established control over the North Caucasus.

Russia's modern-day began almost immediately after the dissolution of the union, and much like in the 19th century, Russia focused on securing control over the South Caucasus before it attempted to reassert control of Chechnya, in spite of Chechnya being within the Russian Federation's borders. Moscow was involved heavily in the conflict over South Ossetia, threatening military action against Georgia on more than one occasion, and played an important role in all conflicts of the region including providing arms to various fighting factions, often simultaneously to both warring parties. Overtly, a clear Russian policy towards the South Caucasus evolved rapidly, based on three major principles: First, the Caucasian states should be members of the CIS, which Georgia had never joined and Azerbaijan had not ratified; second, the "external" borders (meaning Soviet external borders with Iran and Turkey) of these states were to be guarded by Russian border troops; and third, Russian military bases should be present on the territory of the three states (Mennon, 1999).

In practice, Moscow first succeeded in asserting control over Armenia. This was logical, given Erivan's rapidly developing involvement in warfare on the territory of Azerbaijan. Turkey's increasingly pro-Azerbaijani stance, and its economic embargo enforced on the country, compelled Armenia to accept any support it could receive-and Russia was more than forthcoming. A military agreement was signed in May 1992, whereby Armenia complied with Russia's three demands. After Armenia, Russian policy focused on Georgia. In July 1992, Moscow enforced a cease-fire agreement between Georgia and South Ossetia, which led to South Ossetia's de facto independence and the interposition of Russian troops on the administrative border separating the region from the rest of Georgia. Russia repeatedly had offered Georgia military assistance conditional on its acquiescence to Russia's three demands Shevardnadze nevertheless refused (Pottier, 2001).

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