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Opinion

Where is Canada in the South Caucasus?

Beyond the immediate compromised situation into which Canada stumbled over arms sales, Canada should also have been able to play a more constructive role in the security dynamics in the region over the last decades.



Christopher Waters

Opinion

In a rare visit to Georgia by a high-level Canadian official in the late 1990s, the Speaker of the Senate attended an official banquet in Tbilisi hosted by Georgian counterpart. The banquet was unusually short by Georgian standards, a country famed for its joyous feasts (or supras) of multiple courses, speeches, and toasts. The Speaker's Georgian host was welcoming, but his remarks were also unusually short. The blunt gist of his speech was: "Where is Canada?" Canada had minimal presence or interest in Georgia—or the other countries of the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan—in the waning days of the

20th century. Although having recognized all three countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, no Canadian embassies were established in the region, high-level diplomatic visits were rare, and economic or cultural outreach was minimal.

More than two decades later, that remains largely, and disappointingly, true. No Canadian diplomats are stationed in the region; the Canadian embassy in Ankara handles Georgia and Azerbaijan and our embassy in Moscow is responsible for Armenia. With deadly consequences, Canada's lack of presence or interest in the region was highlighted in the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan last fall over Nagorno-Karabakh. As has been documented elsewhere—and as I and others have suggested before the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee—Canadian-made sensors sold to Turkey were improperly transferred to Azerbaijan and used in drone attacks which may well have been a game changer in the conflict. Canada, correctly if belatedly given its commitments under the Arms Trade Treaty, suspended, and last month cancelled, the arms export permits to Turkey.

Canada should have been able to rely on its own reading of the regional dynamics in the first place to have understood—in advance—where Canadian arms would likely end up, despite Turkey's end user assurances to the contrary, for authoritarian Turkey and Azerbaijan are close allies and Turkish arms transfers to Azerbaijan had been steadily increasing in the months before the war.

Beyond the immediate compromised situation into which Canada stumbled over arms sales, Canada should also have been able to play a more constructive role in the security dynamics in the region over the last decades,



Canada should have been able to rely on its own reading of the regional dynamics in the first place to have understood—in advance—where Canadian arms would likely end up, despite Turkey's end user assurances to the contrary, writes Christopher Waters. *Photograph courtesy of Pixabay*

including with respect to the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia as well as Nagorno-Karabakh. The region is strategically significant—between Turkey and Russia with Iran and even China as emerging players, energy resources, important trade routes—and there are many good reasons for Canada to be there in terms of its commitments to multilateralism and international peace and security.

Canada also has a significant cultural connection to the region. Although only small numbers of Canadians are of Georgian or Azeri descent, the Armenian diaspora in Canada is historic and significant. Furthermore, the potential for increased trade, although currently quite modest and dropping (less than \$100-million in 2020), is significant—extending far beyond the excellent Georgian wines which can now be found on Canadian shelves. The region has high standards of education and there should be excellent opportunities for academic exchanges and international student recruitment for Canadian universities seeking to diversify the source countries of international students and enrich our campuses. (However, even before the pandemic, efforts to promote academic exchanges were met with interminable visa process-

ing delays and arbitrary denials by Canadian officials.)

In an ideal world, Canada would have proper embassies in all three countries, just as all three South Caucasian countries have embassies in Canada. Although this may not be feasible in the short term, there is no reason why Canada cannot have some form of permanent diplomatic presence in the region (aside from honorary consuls). This could take the form of satellite offices of the Moscow and Ankara embassies, adopting the model used by Canada's embassy to the Baltic countries. (While the Embassy itself is located in Riga, Latvia, there are embassy offices in Tallinn, Estonia, and Vilnius, Lithuania.) Or, perhaps Canada could have one embassy in "neutral" Georgia to be responsible for the region. We are on record, after all, as supporting Georgia's eventual membership in NATO. Simply put, the "where is Canada?" model works for no one.

Christopher Waters is an international law professor at the University of Windsor. He has worked on and in the South Caucasus—namely Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—since 1998. His books include Conflict in the Caucasus and The State of Law in the South Caucasus.

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