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Regional Security and Cooperation: Armenia and the Caucasus

Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, Ruben Shugarian

Wednesday, September 25, 2002

3:30 pm – 5:00 pm

Ruben Shugarian, Deputy Foreign Minister of Armenia, gave a talk to a group of business, U.S. government representatives, and diplomats from regional and European embassies at CSIS on September 25, 2002. Minister Shugarian focused his comments on the history and geopolitics of the South Caucasus, and asserted that the term “South Caucasus” is just a geographic name for an area once known as the “Trans-Caucasus.” The states of the South Caucasus are hampered by the lack of a regional identity and a lack of common security priorities. Until the states in the region begin to cooperate with each other and relevant non-state actors in the region (primarily ethnic groups), the “miracle development” that was anticipated for the South Caucasus will continue to be elusive. Minister Shugarian mentioned the Baltics as a possible model of regional cooperation for the South Caucasus.

Minister Shugarian then made brief comments on each of the three countries of the South Caucasus. Georgia, he remarked, is torn between East and West: it wants to be a part of the European security structure, but is still burdened by its legacy as a former Soviet republic. Minister Shugarian noted that Georgia’s dual nature is reflected in its security arrangements. Georgia is considering leaving the CIS in favor of NATO, but has not yet been accepted into NATO. He also said that Armenia “ties its future to Georgia,” that Georgian security is an important component of Armenian security, and that Armenia will remain an ally of Georgia, no matter what security arrangement Georgia chooses.

Turning to Azerbaijan, Minister Shugarian noted that they are also balancing between the old and new security systems, due to President Heidar Aliyev’s multi-faceted policy. Aliyev has found middle ground between the interests of the great powers in the region, primarily Russia and Turkey, and has managed to establish good relations with Iran. This balancing has been difficult, especially considering Azerbaijan’s identity pushes it in several different directions: It has strong ethnic ties with both Turkey and Iran, but also wants to be in the Euro-Atlantic security structures. In this sense, the last two years have been years of clarification for Azerbaijan.

Minister Shugarian also gave a brief overview of Armenia’s security structure. Armenia’s security has four dimensions: a regional Collective Security Treaty; the Partnership for Peace Program (PfP); relations with the United States; and relations with Russia. Although Armenia has remained in the old security system with its focus on the states of the former Soviet Union, it is trying to incorporate new western-centered elements into its security system. Minister Shugarian noted that the Russian base in Armenia is meant to fill the security vacuum created by unresolved problems with Turkey and bellicose statements by former Turkish President Turgut Ozal. In the early 1990’s Russia filled Armenia’s security vacuum, which has led to a strong Russian factor in Armenia’s security consciousness. This strong Russian component is tempered, however, by Armenia’s relations with the United States. Furthermore, Armenia is



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able to have strong relations with Europe and the West with the help of its significant diaspora.

The two major themes brought up by the audience in the question and answer session following Minister Shugarian's statements were Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Debate focused on the role of Nagorno Karabakh in Azerbaijani-Armenian relations and how and if settlement can be reached. Turkey's relations with Armenia were also discussed within the framework of Nagorno Karabakh, as Turkey has much closer ties to Azerbaijan, and the contentious issue of Turkish recognition of what has been termed the Armenian genocide.

Summarized by Daniel Steingart