

Just What Is “GUUAM” Anyway?

By Robert M. Cutler

The GUAM formation (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova) had its origin in the 1996 round of talks implementing the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe. The four countries found they had a common opposition to the stationing of Russian weapons on their territory. GUAM became GUUAM when Uzbekistan joined in April 1999.

According to recent reports, the GUUAM countries intend, in spring 2001, to institutionalize their cooperation by forming a permanent international organization. This organization will have its own secretariat (probably in Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine) and a small number of ancillary bodies but will have principally a coordinative function with no supranational authority. In response to this prospect, three schools of thought regarding GUUAM have begun to appear in Western, principally U.S., commentary and analysis.

The first school of thought includes those whose policy views incline toward collaboration with Russia and Iran. This approach opposes the construction of the planned oil pipeline from Baku, Azerbaijan, through Georgia, to Ceyhan, Turkey, in the eastern Mediterranean. The result of such a policy would mainly be to yield over the South Caucasus countries—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—to a Russian sphere of influence, with some Iranian influence in Azerbaijan and Armenia. Paradoxically then, this school of thought, which begins by touting the idea of cooperation with “great powers,” ends by renouncing a strategic new region, shunning prestige and influence, and abandoning access to free-market energy, with nothing to show in return.

This first school of thought would abandon President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia and his country to the Russian security ministries that have never forgiven him for what they see

as his role, as Gorbachev’s foreign minister, in promoting the disintegration of the USSR. (The irony here is that Shevardnadze had nothing to do with that transformation. The USSR was destroyed first by the incompetent and unsuccessful military putsch in August 1991 and second by the three-way conspiracy to establish the Commonwealth of Independent States involving presidents Yeltsin of Russia, Shushkevich of Belarus, and Kravchuk of Ukraine in December 1991.)

This school of thought is skeptical about GUUAM and raises the specter of Russia taking umbrage and seeking to crush these countries’ autonomy. It therefore counsels caution in supporting the organization, without clarifying exactly why that caution is justified. This attitude is also popular among certain European elites who are accustomed to arranging European affairs through great-power ententes, including the British elite who would profit economically from the failure of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Indeed, some Washington proponents of this viewpoint have career ties with the most important British think tanks.

A second school of thought mainly supports GUUAM because its members are judged to be pro-Western in orientation. In this view, a strengthened GUUAM would and should reduce the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to a Russocentric rump. This school of thought cites Russia’s use of CIS structures to coerce the non-Russian former Soviet republics or newly independent states (NIS). It emphasizes the hostility of the Moscow security ministries not only to Georgia but to most NIS leaders who show any autonomy from Russia. It catalogues the Russian hostility to the GUUAM region, including the support by Russian security organs for separatist militancy in Abkhazia, the breakaway part of Georgia,

where a civil war persists in stalemate to this day.

The second school of thought thus emphasizes differences between Moscow's definition of "terrorism" and that of the West. It views the projected CIS antiterrorist center as nothing more than an extraterritorial branch of the KGB successor organizations, seeking to increase Moscow's coercion of the NIS. Finally, this school of thought applauds GUUAM's intention to move toward setting up a free trade zone (FTZ), and it asserts that this represents the irretrievable downfall of the CIS's own FTZ initiative.

The third school of thought assesses GUUAM on its own merits rather than in relation to Russian policy, American policy, or great-power designs. It notes that the GUUAM members autonomously established their cooperation as a result of their common threat perceptions at the late 1996 Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) talks. Ironically, Russia seems recently to have confirmed their insight by sponsoring, in the pro-Russian breakaway fraction of Moldova called Transdnistria (the part of the country east of the Dnistr River on the border with Ukraine), in late 2000, a meeting of the self-styled "foreign ministers" of Transdnistria, two breakaway regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, which both share a border with Russia itself), and the breakaway Karabakh enclave inside Azerbaijan.

This third school of thought is more nuanced than either of the other two.

It points out, for instance, that the security interests of the GUUAM countries vary. Georgia and Azerbaijan are more interested in pipeline protection, Uzbekistan in protection from Islamic fundamentalist incursions, Moldova in controlling the Transdnistria region, and Ukraine in stabilizing its own foreign policy, which is delicately balanced between an economic pull toward Russia and political aspirations toward Europe. (Regarding Ukraine, see FPIF, "U.S. Policy Must Be Sensitive to Ukraine's Balancing Act," at <http://www.fpif.org/commentary/0101ukraine.html>)

This school of thought avoids the pitfalls of the other two by noting that U.S. policy should avoid becoming a zero-sum game with Russia. The GUUAM countries have in general adopted a Western-oriented foreign policy strategy, and a GUUAM-U.S. dialogue has recently been initiated at the foreign minister level, with discussions planned for once every six months. The third school of thought points out the danger of fostering expectations in the GUUAM countries for increased Western support—support that might not materialize, especially if the GUUAM countries encounter a strong reaction against this from Russia itself. Actually GUAM (omitting for the moment Uzbekistan in Central Asia) has the potential to emerge as a rightful miniregion of its own. At present, however, many observers consider it split between the two South Caucasus countries (Georgia and Azerbaijan)

and two countries in the new Eastern Europe (Moldova and Ukraine).

The GUUAM-U.S. dialogue at least guarantees that energy transport questions will figure importantly in the proto-organization's future activities, although what coordination GUUAM will be able to provide (that is not already provided elsewhere) is dubious. If there are any real effects on energy transport from the activities of the GUUAM group (other efforts are under way in larger, principally European, forums), then these will come through practical measures implemented in specific sectors. It is likely that any such success will require greater emphasis on interparliamentary cooperation than is present at the moment. Indeed, the establishment of a free trade zone would require harmonization of national systems of trade legislation.

In an effort to solidify their new formation, the GUUAM countries intend to establish regular multilateral parliamentary consultations among themselves. In order to better understand GUUAM's future intentions and directions, may be useful for members of the U.S. Congress to be present at some of these sessions as silent observers.

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