Section 1: Introduction

Today is 01 December 2019 and you are a member of 18th Airborne Corps Joint Planning Group (JPG) working in support of the United States European Command’s (USEUCOM) J5/8 Directorate (Strategy, Policy, and Assessment) staff. As a combined COCOM/JTF planning team you will conduct a review of the major political/military events in countries that comprise the Caucasus/ Caspian Sea region.
**Key Political / Military Events in Theater**

USEUCOM supports continuing U.S. governmental and commercial involvement in the Caucasus and Caspian Sea region. Two interests are the primary drivers of the U.S.’ continuing focus on the region. First is the energy resources, oil and gas, which contribute to the stability of the world energy markets. The second is to ensure, as much as possible, social, political, and economic progress and stability in the region in order to mitigate Russian influence and minimize conditions for development of Islamic extremism. The U.S. supports the involvement of European countries and organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Union (EU), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the South Caucasus region.

The U.S. has pursued initiatives to link oil and natural gas exports from the east side of the Caspian Sea – in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – across the Caspian Sea to the Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and other existing oil and gas pipelines. These initiatives support minimizing Russian and Iranian influence by bypassing Russian and Iranian transit routes.

In order to address the issue of stability in the region, the U.S. maintains programs of refugee assistance and public works in Azerbaijan and Georgia. The main beneficiary in Azerbaijan is the system of camps sprinkled throughout the country for refugees and displaced persons from the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Food and medical treatment, support for primary schools in the camps, and a continuing promise of someday leaving the camps helps to reduce internal dissension among the Azerbaijani people. The U.S. increased security cooperation and economic development activities in Azerbaijan and Georgia beginning in 2017.

A disproportionate share of the economic benefits from the BTC pipeline and other oil and gas pipelines has benefitted the northern part of Azerbaijan more than the population in the south. Southern Azerbaijani families formed the South Azeri Peoples Party (SAPP) in 2015 in an effort to increase their political and economic representation. The South Azeri People’s Army (SAPA – the military wing of the SAPP) emerged in 2016 when SAPP’s efforts produced only minimal improvements for the southern Azeris. In 2017, SAPA units trained in northern Iran began conducting armed activities in the Kura River valley in the vicinity of Azerbaijan’s oil infrastructure. With the government of Azerbaijan continuing to suppress SAPP, SAPA in July 2018 began attacking Azerbaijani security forces. SAPA’s increasing activities led the Government of Azerbaijan to request additional assistance from the U.S. In response, in late 2018 the U.S. dispatched Army Special Forces to conduct limited foreign internal defense (FID) operations with the Azerbaijani armed forces. One Special Forces Operational Detachment – B (SFOD-B) deployed and established its headquarters in Baku, Turkey, also in response to a request from the Government of Azerbaijan, deployed an F-16 fighter squadron. U.S. national intelligence assets alerted USEUCOM to the increased movement of SAPA insurgents into the southern border areas of Azerbaijan. By the end of 2018, SAPA units were increasingly active in the northwest Iran-Azerbaijan border region, using the area for training, refitting and staging for cross-border raids into Azerbaijan.

In 2017, U.S., Russian, Chinese, and EU diplomatic and economic efforts finally convinced Iran to suspend its uranium enrichment efforts and agree to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring. Simultaneously, ethnic Azeri Turks, Bakhtiaris and Lurs agitated for increased autonomy, and the Iranian government began to lose control over the northwestern and southwest portions of Iran. Ethnic Azeris in northern Iran staged continuing protests in open manifestation of dissatisfaction with rule from Tehran. As Iran slowly lost control over its northwest (predominantly ethnic Azeri) region, the SAPA increased its activity, continuing to use northwest Iran as a safehaven for training, refitting and staging for raids into Azerbaijan.

In June 2018, Iran’s northwestern provinces declared autonomy from Tehran and, in February 2019 declared full independence as “Ahurastan.” The former Iranian armed forces’ Western Area Command became the new Ahurastanian Army. The Ahurastanian authorities began supporting the SAPA
more overtly than had the Iranian government. The Ahurastanians also were more vigorous in their challenge to Azerbaijan’s claims to a portion of the Caspian Sea, and in July 2019 their naval vessels confronted western, Azeri and Turkish oil exploration ships in the Caspian. In October 2019 the extent of Ahurastanian support for the SAPA became evident when Ahurastanian Army units began providing sporadic cross-border support to SAPA insurgents.

Concurrent to the secession of Iran’s northwestern provinces was the split of the southwestern provinces from Iran. These provinces declared themselves the independent Republic of Luristan in February 2019. In contrast to Ahurastan, Luristan has neither laid claims to resources or lands outside their own territory, nor declared or provided support to separatist or terrorist movements elsewhere.

Outside Azerbaijan and Georgia, the Free Karabakh Movement (FKM), a group composed of Azerbaijani refugees forced from Nagorno-Karabakh during the conflict with Armenia, increased attacks against Armenian targets in the Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2017. In November 2019, an element of the FKM attacked the nuclear power plant at Metsamor, Armenia causing radiation leaks that were detected in neighboring countries. The Armenian government condemned the attack and accused Azerbaijan of backing the FKM and its attack.

The Georgian regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia continue to exist as de facto independent states. They are recognized by only Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru. Russia continues to maintain several thousand troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The presence of organized crime remains strong in Abkhazia. As of 2019, Russia continues to pursue a less belligerent foreign policy in the region, while increasingly focusing on its own domestic and economic issues. The ambitions of the Russian region of Tatarstan for independence from Moscow are creating challenges for Russia. Russia has agreed to U.S.-led operations in the Caucasus region should they be necessary to maintain stability, but under two conditions: de facto recognition of the legitimacy of the presence of Russian forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and the transit of some proportion of Azerbaijani oil and gas through Russian pipelines to western markets.

**Section 2: Country Background Notes**

Extracts of notional U.S. State Department background notes for the nations in the region are attached. Following the extracts from the notional background notes is an assessment of the unrecognized “Republic of Ahurastan.”

**NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: ARMENIA**

**DOMESTIC ISSUES**

Armenia’s primary domestic concern is the search for a reliable source of energy to sustain its manufacturing. Industry employs over 50 percent of the work force. Armenia’s secondary concern is water pollution. Drawing on significant Russian investment, Armenia began construction on a new nuclear power plant in early 2018, and the new plant should come on line in 2021.

In November 2019, a Free Karabakh Movement (FKM) unit, led by Zahid Dadashov, attacked the existing nuclear power plant at Metsamor, 20 kilometers south of Yerevan. Armenian officials denied the power plant was damaged. However, downwind fallout from the reactor has grown. Armenia’s neighbor Turkey requested technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Energy to deal with the problem. Armenia has resisted U.S. efforts to assist because they fear the U.S. will pressure them to shut down the plant and possibly to suspend work on the second one.
GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Former Defense and Prime Minister Serzh Sarkisian (a native of the Nagorno-Karabakh region), who first won the 2008 presidential election, was elected to a second five-year term in 2013 and a third five year term in 2018.

The observance of human rights in Armenia is uneven and has been marked by serious shortcomings. Police misconduct goes largely unreported, while observers note that defendants are often beaten to extract confessions and are denied visits from relatives and lawyers. Public demonstrations usually take place without government interference, although one rally in June 2018 by opposition parties to protest the legislation to allow President Sarkisian to seek re-election to a third term, was broken up by paramilitary troops. Post-election opposition protests in 2018 were met by a forceful government response that resulted in some deaths, many injuries, and the detention of opposition political activists.

Most of Armenia's ethnic Azeris remain refugees, largely in Azerbaijan. Armenia's treatment of the remaining national minorities is generally good. The government does not restrict internal or international travel. Although freedom of the press and speech are guaranteed, the government maintains its monopoly over television and radio broadcasting.

DEFENSE AND MILITARY ISSUES

Russia has maintained its modernization of Armenian weapons and munitions. Russia and Armenia maintain strong defense relations, both bilaterally and multilaterally through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Nagorno-Karabakh

The cease-fire with Azerbaijan remains in effect. There is still no settlement to the disagreement over Nagorno-Karabakh, which remains a significant foreign relations issue for Armenia. The Minsk Group of the OSCE (under the co-chairmanship of the U.S., Russia and France) has continued its efforts and hosted numerous meetings between Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. The population of this autonomous province has remained at over 95 percent Armenian, the result of the displacement of approximately 750,000 refugees to Azerbaijan resulting from the original conflict twenty-five years ago.

Renewed efforts beginning in 2015 (similar to efforts that began in 2009, but lost momentum shortly thereafter) by the Armenian and Turkish leaders to normalize relations between their countries initially have acquired some momentum. But these efforts, like the earlier attempt, stalled by the end of 2018 because the Turkish leadership still proved unable to potentially jettison its close relationship with Azerbaijan, whose government vehemently opposed a rapprochement between Ankara and Yerevan absent a favorable (to Baku) resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh situation.

NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: AZERBAIJAN

U.S.-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

Since 2017, various U.S. Army reserve engineer units have engaged in stability and economic improvement-related building efforts to upgrade the Azerbaijani infrastructure. The rail system from Georgia to Baku has been upgraded and maintained. The road and water distribution networks along the
Kura River valley have been over-hauled and several regional airfields paved and enlarged to assist humanitarian relief efforts and the economic development of the region.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS

Prime Minister Artur Rasizadze won a very narrow victory and succeeded Ilham Aliev as president in 2018 when Aliev left office after serving three terms. Aliyev’s continuing failure to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and increasing unrest in southern Azerbaijan by the southern Azeris precluded his retention of the presidency for another term. Rasizadze has embarked on a moderate course of democratic reform. He is determined to bring honest parliamentary government to Azerbaijan, but the continuing inequity in economic development and benefits between northern Azerbaijan and southern Azerbaijan hinders increasing the involvement of opposition groups like SAPP in the political process. Turkey was first in line to welcome Rasizadze as the new president. Having been a secular parliamentary democracy but with increasing moderate Islamic influence during the past twenty years, Turkey’s leaders empathize with the government in Baku and like to have a friendly neighbor in the region.

Ibrahim Gurbanov, a fundamentalist Islamic scholar from the University of Baku, has risen to prominence, backed by the South Azeri People’s Party (SAPP). Gurbanov enjoys strong backing from Ahurastan and has challenged the legitimacy of Rasizadze’s election win. The resultant political situation remains unstable.

DOMESTIC ISSUES

The significant income to the government’s coffers from Azerbaijan’s increasing oil and gas production has had a profound effect on Azerbaijan’s society. Residents of the northern portion of Azerbaijan, who have benefited the most, have remained more secular (a trend that was already underway at the start of the new millennium). Conversely the southern portion of Azerbaijan, which has reaped fewer economic benefits from the increase in oil wealth, has become increasingly susceptible to more extreme Shiite Islamist agitation.

FOREIGN RELATIONS

Azerbaijan’s primary foreign affairs issue remains the territorial dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K). The OSCE Minsk Group has continued its efforts to broker an agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. Since 2004, both the European Union and Turkey have also tried to intercede with the two countries in support of the Minsk Group’s efforts. Of the Azeris displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh, approximately 750,000 remain in Azerbaijan and 250,000 in Ahurastan. To alleviate conditions in the refugee camps, the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has repeatedly responded with food, shelter and medical support.

The Free Karabakh Movement (FKM) originated in several of the refugee camps as a means for self-protection against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenian activity and for conducting reprisal raids into Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia proper. The FKM has interfered with Azerbaijani police efforts to maintain order in the region and is a growing problem. In late 2019, a FKM unit attacked the nuclear power plant at Metsamor, Armenia, 20 kilometers south of Yerevan.

In the south, extended Azerbaijani families straddle the Azerbaijan-Iran (Ahurastan) border. These families tend to be more religious - and Islamist - than the Azeris in the north. In 2015, the South Azeri Peoples Party (SAPP) formed to represent the people of this region. It was unable to affect change, however, and consequently gave birth in 2016 to the South Azeri People’s Army (SAPA), a fundamentalist insurgent group whose ultimate goal is to overthrow the secular government in Baku. In 2017 the
SAPA, trained and equipped by the fundamentalist regime in Iran, began attacking Azerbaijani army units sent to maintain order in the area. Beginning in 2018, when it split from Iran, and continuing since it declared full independence, Ahurastan has supported the SAPA, albeit more overtly than Iran had. In late 2019, Ahurastan provided cross-border support of the SAPA. Sporadic small clashes have occurred between the Azerbaijani and Ahurastanian armed forces. Ahurastan also supports 250,000 Azerbaijani refugees that were displaced during the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The delineation of the Caspian Sea among the five littoral states remains a source of tension. More than 15 rounds of negotiations have failed to reach an agreement acceptable to all parties. Azerbaijan, Ahurastan, and Iran claim the Araz-Alov-Sharg oil field in the Caspian Sea. In 2019 Ahurastan confronted British Petroleum survey and supply ships and Exxon/Mobil survey ships in the Caspian Sea with naval patrol boats. Tensions continue in the region over oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea and pipeline transit routes and now involve Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan as well.

**NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: GEORGIA**

**POLITICAL CONDITIONS**

The government of Georgia, more than ten years after the war with Russia, still has not regained sovereign control of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions, which have maintained de facto independence. Only Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru recognize the independence of the two regions. Russian forces remain deployed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, foiling all Georgian efforts to reassert sovereignty. The Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRM), which feature regular meetings between the Georgians, South Ossetians and Abkhazians under the auspices of the OSCE, EU and UN, continue to operate and preserve a modicum of stability among the parties in Georgia. The Georgian government, while a constructive participant in the IPRM, is concerned that their continuation will institutionalize the de facto separation of the two regions from Tbilisi’s control.

**FOREIGN RELATIONS**

The Georgian government continues to pursue its goal of integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially NATO. The unresolved conflict situations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia negatively affect Georgia’s efforts. While the U.S. and other European countries sympathize and support Georgia, Russia continues to apply diplomatic pressure and use its military presence to prevent the achievement of Georgia’s goal.

Although Russia maintains significant forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Moscow has chosen to maintain an uneasy status quo and its forces have not forayed into Georgia proper. It is likely that tacit and explicit understandings reached between Moscow and the U.S./NATO, as well as competing security priorities inside Russia have been the cause for this “noninterference.” Russia has, however agreed to let the U.S and NATO conduct military operations in Georgia and the region to maintain stability and insure the security and flow of energy as long as the status quo is maintained with respect to South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

**U.S.-GEORGIA RELATIONS**

Since 2017, various U.S. Army engineer units, as part of USEUCOM’s security cooperation efforts, have been engaged in upgrading the Georgian infrastructure. The rail system from Batumi through Poti to Tbilisi – and onward to Baku, Azerbaijan - has been upgraded and maintained.
**NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: IRAN**

**POLITICAL CONDITIONS**

By early 2017, Iran’s government was beginning to lose control over the western portion of the country. A separatist trend had been developing for a year or so as the ethnic Azeris in the north and Lurs in the south began agitating for greater autonomy from Tehran. In 2018, a semi-autonomous republic broke away and ultimately declared full independence in early 2019. The Azeri Turks in the provinces of Ardebil, East Azerbaijan, Gilan, Ghazvin, Hamadan, Kordestan, West Azerbaijan and Zanjan formed the “Republic of Ahurastan.” Lacking the political and military clout to bring “Ahurastan” under control, the Iranian government still has limited ties to this “republic,” primarily in the economic and petroleum industry areas. Nonetheless, Tehran has not resigned itself to the loss of these provinces. Concurrently, Iran’s southwest provinces populated by the Bakhtiaris and Lurs also remain outside Tehran’s control and formed the autonomous “Republic of Luristan.”

**DEFENSE AND MILITARY ISSUES**

The key western concern about Iran’s military - over the development of a nuclear capability - was favorably resolved in 2017. The issue of Iran’s uranium enrichment program and its military application, which had been a major source of tension and concern for 10-15 years, came to a head. The U.S. decision to participate in talks with the European Union, Russia, China and Iran was a critical factor in coaxing Tehran into accepting an agreement in late 2017 to suspend uranium enrichment and place its complete nuclear program under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring in accordance with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The agreement included a package of incentives that provided economic benefits and a reliable source of fuel for light water reactors for power generation. Tehran’s increasing preoccupation with its restive northern provinces was widely viewed as a contributing factor to the decision to agree to the nuclear accord. The U.S. and other western governments are satisfied that, as of 2018, the Iranians have abandoned their pursuit of nuclear weapons.

In 2017, the Azeri population in the northwestern provinces of Iran began covert support of religious fundamentalist factions in Azerbaijan (the SAPP and later the SAPA) with the intent of installing a less westernized regime in Baku. Iranian officials in Tehran were aware of this support, but officially disavowed any Iranian involvement. This support increased significantly in 2018 when Ahurastan broke away from Iran.

Iran has a considerable ballistic missile capability. In addition to Scud-C and Nodong 1 missiles purchased from North Korea, Iran fielded its own ballistic missile, the Shahab-3. The Shahab-3 has a range of 1,300km and can carry a 700kg warhead. It is not yet clear whether any WMD warheads have been produced for the Shahab-3. When Ahurastan broke away, the ethnic Azeris who formed the bulk of the forces in Iran’s Western Area Command became the foundation of the Ahurastanian military forces. Besides significant ground assets, this force also includes the ballistic missile units and a suspected chemical weapons production facility.

**FOREIGN RELATIONS**

Iran has continued its efforts to gain greater influence in the Caspian Basin and continues to claim a 20 percent share of Caspian oil and gas reserves. Iran denounced the ongoing building of oil and gas pipelines in Azerbaijan to transport the flow of Caspian oil to the international market and has been working on its own pipeline to bolster influence over the Caspian region.

Iran has pressured Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman concerning their security relationships with the U.S. Although these states have asked the U.S. to reduce its presence, they have not yet
buckled to Iranian pressure to sever all ties. These states remain highly concerned about the threat that a powerful Shiite Iran poses to their security, in part given their large indigenous Shiite populations. Kuwait remains the bulwark U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf area.

**NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: TURKEY**

**GOVERNMENT AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS**

Unlike many of its neighbors, Turkey has continued to enjoy a stable political environment.

**FOREIGN RELATIONS**

Turkey’s relationship with Armenia has developed in fits and starts; but it remains hostage to the Armenia-Azerbaijan dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Turkey’s strongest relations in the region are with Azerbaijan and the security of the energy resources which transit Turkey and the resulting economic benefits remain a paramount interest. Full normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations appears unlikely until Armenia and Azerbaijan reach agreement over Nagorno-Karabakh. Turkey insists on overflight rights to assist Azerbaijan in its Caspian Sea disagreements with Iran and Turkmenistan. Absent a lifting by Ankara of Turkey’s economic blockade of Armenia, Armenia has steadfastly refused to grant these rights and has denied Turkey the use of land routes to provide ground support. Turkish overflights to assist Azerbaijan have had to travel over the Black Sea and then across Georgia to Azerbaijan airspace.

The effects of the attack against the Metsamor nuclear power plant in Armenia by the FKM in 2019 constitute another point of contention between Ankara and Yerevan. Turkey measured 30 to 40 curies per square kilometer of cesium in the Igdir Province from the damaged Armenian Metsamor nuclear power plant. Turkey requested technical assistance from the U.S. Department of Energy to deal with the potentially disastrous effects of the Metsamor situation on its territory and population.

Turkey’s relationship with Azerbaijan has deepened because of the threats that Iran (now Ahurastan) and Turkmenistan have posed to Azerbaijan. Turkey views both as threats to the flows of oil and gas through pipelines that transit Turkish territory, and thereby to its future economic growth. In 2018, Turkey first deployed a squadron of F-16s in support of Azerbaijan, and since then has rotated squadrons through Baku as a permanent presence.

Additionally Turkey has made it clear that any Ahurastanian move into the Nakhichivan region of Azerbaijan would provoke an immediate Turkish response. However, any Turkish response would probably come via Azerbaijani territory as Turks do not want to provoke a fight with Ahurastanian Kurds along their border. The Turks want to avoid triggering further unrest from their domestic Kurdish problems. Fighting from Turkey’s eastern border would almost certainly involve conflict with some of the ethnic Kurds in Ahurastan.

**NOTIONAL BACKGROUND NOTES: RUSSIA**

**FOREIGN RELATIONS**

Russia continues its efforts to be the dominant economic and military power in the Caucasus region.

Early in 2017, the Russian government began to pursue a less belligerent approach in foreign relations and shifted focus inward to address the persistent structural problems confronting the Russian economy and society. The government also shifted internally to tackle the ever-more-ambitious separatist actions of the leadership of the region of Tatarstan, which has enjoyed broad autonomy during the past ten
years. The resource-rich region, located in the central portion of European Russia at the confluence of the Volga and Kama rivers, had been agitating for independence from Russia in response to Moscow’s recognition of the independence of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia regions of Georgia. The prospect of Tatarstan independence has given a boost to the aspirations of neighboring regions to split from the Russian Federation.

Russia has supplied Armenia and, to a lesser extent, Azerbaijan with modern military equipment, especially sophisticated air defense systems. Russian naval forces of the Caspian Squadron have maintained an increased presence in the Caspian Sea. Russia’s state-owned arms trading agency Rosoboronexport announced in 2017 an agreement to sell weapons to Turkmenistan in exchange for natural gas. Turkmenistan is also seeking advanced Russian military hardware, including coast guard border patrol craft.

Since October 2017 Russia has enforced a naval blockade of all maritime traffic – less that of Kazakhstan - north of 42 degrees north latitude in the Caspian Sea, while rapidly expanding oil exploration there. Russia and Kazakhstan continue to assert their claims over the territorial sea area. Iran has repeatedly raised concerns about Russia’s naval power in negotiations over Caspian Sea dividing lines, calling for demilitarization of the Caspian Sea so it could continue to be a source of “peace and friendship.”

Russia continues to provide Georgia and Armenia natural gas, although less and less so at prices below market value, and to increase its influence and control of natural gas distribution in the region through construction of new and expansion of existing gas pipelines. Georgia’s and Armenia’s continued dependence on Russian natural gas supplies, however, leave both countries vulnerable to Russian pressure on economic, political and security issues.

Russia continues to recognize the South Ossetia and Abkhazian regions of Georgia as independent states. Several thousand Russian military and border security forces remain in these regions in contravention to the cease-fire arrangements concluded in 2008. These forces, however, have not intervened in Georgia proper.

The political situation in Azerbaijan presents Russia with a dilemma: it does not want a western-oriented democratic / economic success story on its doorstep, but neither does it want its southern neighbor to be unstable and provide fertile ground for the growth of fundamentalist Islam. While Moscow remains leery of U.S. and Euro-Atlantic (read: NATO) inroads into the Caucasus – and Azerbaijan in particular – it is unlikely to vociferously oppose efforts to counter Ahurastanian subversion or overt incursions into Azerbaijan. In the event the U.S. feels the need to intervene, Russia will insist that the action take place only under the sanction of a UN Security Council resolution. In fact, by 2019, Russia signaled its willingness to allow U.S.-led coalition operations in the South Caucasus in response to Ahurastanian aggression if the U.S. and NATO agree to the following quid pro quos:

- Continued acceptance of the presence of Russian forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with the understanding that any movement of the forces from these regions into Georgia proper would entail “serious consequences;”
- Support for a mutually-agreed upon amount of oil and gas from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to transit through Russian-controlled pipelines.

**AHURASTAN ASSESSMENT**

The “Republic of Ahurastan” remains – in December 2019 – unrecognized by the overwhelming majority of the international community. There is a debate within the Intelligence Community and the Department of State as to when – or if - Iran will try to regain control of its provinces that now constitute
Ahurastan. For the short term, the consensus among intelligence analysts is that Iran is not in a position – either militarily or politically – to seek to bring Ahurastan to heel.

Ahurastan has begun to pursue limited strategic partnerships with the People’s Republic of China in order to challenge the current OPEC oil supply regime and build a coalition to compete as an equal in the international system. Some intelligence analysts believe that the Ahurastanian leadership now feels secure in taking direct action against Azerbaijan. The perceived lack of action by the EU or NATO to confront potential threats in the Caspian Sea region has raised the Ahurastanian leadership’s confidence that there is little risk of the West – including the U.S. – interfering in Ahurastan’s attempt at “petroleum blackmail,” i.e. threats or actions against the Azerbaijani oil and gas production and transit infrastructure.

The U.S., however, has put the Ahurastanian authorities on notice that, in the event of an attack against Azerbaijan, the U.S. and coalition partners will conduct all necessary actions to restore Azerbaijan’s sovereignty and regional stability. Ahurastan, nonetheless, believes that the U.S. will not be able to form and maintain a coalition to counter its actions and will not act unilaterally. The “Government of Ahurastan” assesses that the U.S. has neither the will nor the staying power to assist Azerbaijan to combat threats to its internal order and oppose a conventional invasion by Ahurastan.

BACKGROUND TO THE AHURASTAN SECESSION

The National Liberation Movement of Southern Azerbaijan (NLMSA), headed by Piruz Dilenchy, was one of the main Azeri national movements which formed in northern Iran in 2017. It began to speak out for saving the Turkish Azeri population of South Azerbaijan (now Ahurastan) from the yoke of Persian chauvinism and for putting into practice Azeri national and personal freedoms, and protecting Azeri civil rights according to international laws. The Iranian government accused Turkey of being involved with the NLMSA. In 2018, the movement organized several demonstrations, mainly in Tabriz (now the seat of government of the Ahurastanian authorities), which were violently broken up by the Iranian police. However, the militants found backing in the Iranian armed forces that were stationed in the northwest. Several military leaders abandoned their garrisons and ordered their troops to leave their weapons and march home. Other garrisons were surrounded by Azeri militias and, because the motor pools were separated from the barracks, the military’s heavy weaponry was surrendered to them by default. General Tahir Panahov, the former Commander of the Iranian Western Area Command, assumed control of the military units in Ahurastan. In 2018, the Azeris in the provinces of Ardebil, East Azerbaijan, Gilan, Qazvin, Hamadan, Kordestan, West Azerbaijan and Zanjan formed the autonomous “Republic of Ahurastan” with its capital in Tabriz. They declared full independence in 2019.

Elections took place in “Ahurastan” in the fall of 2018, and Dilenchy’s National Liberation Movement of Southern Azerbaijan (NLMSA) won with a majority (68 per cent) of the vote. The newly empowered parliament elected Dilenchy as the first “president” of Ahurastan. President Dilenchy bribed local political and influential family leaders and he soon gained control of the Special Security Corps, which serves as the major internal security force in Tabriz and in the other large cities in Ahurastan. Dilenchy then cracked down on any political freedom initiatives and suppressed opposing political parties. Through bribery he gained the backing of a majority of the military leadership as well. Those who were not in his immediate inner circle, though, were quickly won over by his promise to unite the greater Azeri people. Any doubtful generals were inspired by his vision to threaten the oil rich region to the north and enticed by the new wealth it would bring those in power. Recently, Dilenchy confirmed his support for the SAPA cause. He has continued covert support to the SAPA and recent information indicates that he is assessing the feasibility of conducting overt military operations in direct support of them.
EXPECTED AHURASTAN ACTIONS

At this time (December 2019), it is uncertain how far Ahurastan is actually willing to go in support of the SAPA insurgency in Azerbaijan. The most dangerous course of action would be for Ahurastan to conduct a conventional cross-border attack in support of its “oppressed ethnic brothers” (SAPA). If this attack could seize the eastern Azerbaijani oilfields in the Kura River basin and the capital, Baku, Ahurastan would control the flow of oil through key pipelines in Azerbaijan and be in a position to control a significant portion of the Caspian Sea reserves. Ahurastan could be expected to reinforce its conventional military opposition to a coalition coming to the aid of Azerbaijan through a variety of asymmetric means, such as:

- Retard and disrupt coalition forces’ entry into theater using insurgent forces.
- Cause politically unacceptable casualties.
- Allow no sanctuary for coalition forces.
- Neutralize technological overmatch.
- Control the tempo of operations by using a complex mix of diplomatic, economic, and asymmetric military deterrent options.
- Obscure the nature of the conflict.
- Conduct dispersed and decentralized operations.

A conventional attack by Ahurastan would likely be preceded by attacks by covert action or special purpose forces against oil and gas storage facilities at Azerbaijani ports, key railroad bridges and tunnels, and airfields. Ahurastanian ground units would be expected to advance into southern Azerbaijan to seize key roads and railroad lines. SAPA insurgents, encouraged and supported by Ahurastan, would likely simultaneously engage in the systematic destruction of transportation infrastructure—bridges, tunnels, rail yards, and rolling stock - from the Georgia-Azerbaijan border to eastern and southern Azerbaijan. Ahurastan would be expected to engage in an active strategic communications campaign, using propaganda to depict U.S. and coalition intervention as part of an imperialist war aimed at continuing to dominate the region and exploit the energy resources for their own selfish purposes.