

Deconflicting Protracted Conflicts in the South Caucasus: The Role of the EU and NATO

Policy Recommendations¹

Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

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PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and
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Current Events in the South Caucasus

The current situation in the region has not improved since the wars of the early 1990s came to a stalemate over Nagorny-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan, with the two countries engaged in an arms race at least since 2006. There is evidence that the increased defence spending on the Armenian side has the consequence of denying the government the tools to address critical social issues in terms of health and nutrition. At the same time, Azerbaijan, which has rebuilt its armed forces thanks to revenues generated from its natural resources, could be in for a shock when the oil and gas reserves start dwindling in 2014. There is virtually no contact at all between the two countries besides meeting of their presidents under Russian auspices or in the framework of different conflict workshops that have however taken place years ago.

In Georgia, the relationship between the central powers in Tbilisi and the breakaway entities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has changed dramatically since the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 with the following recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia. Previous contacts with the breakaway entities have stalled or are to-day functioning differently in a decreased manner in comparison to what they used to be.

The 2008 war and its outcome meant for NATO and its members a visible contradiction to its Kosovo policy, for Russia an additional complicated surrounding taking into



consideration her own policies towards the Northern Caucasus. Channels of communications between Moscow and Tbilisi have been opened in the wake of the French mediation following the 2008 war and take place to-day in the framework of the Geneva talks. The recent election of Mr. Ivanishvili as Prime Minister of Georgia seems to have provided the grounds for maintaining the goal of western integration in parallel with improved relations with Russia.

The war of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the collapse of the Soviet Union has produced thousands of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), in countries where traditional attachment to the soil runs very deep. This suggests that easy solutions of “exchanges of territories” or even compensations for abandoning an ancestral home and moving away may not yield much in terms of sustainability. This partly explains why insistence of parties on return of IDPs is so crucial. IDP return would forestall further territorial disintegration in case secessions are voted on by referendum, if it is perceived that IDPs have run counter to a national destiny separate from central authorities (e.g. the population of Abkhazia was composed of only 18% Abkhaz (others predominantly Georgians) at the outbreak of the war.

Summary of Recommendations

The 6th RSSC workshop was opened by Ambassador Philippe Lefort, the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia. Ambassador Lefort stated due to challenges as energy security, terrorism, organized crime, the EU and NATO enlargement as well as due to the Georgian-Russian conflict, the South Caucasus has come more into focus of the European Union. Unfortunately, the nature of the conflicts in the region makes final and lasting solutions seem unrealistic. Approaches for conflict resolution would need to establish networks on a high level, expand views, change perceptions, search for alternative solutions and, above all, find ways to compromise. Currently, a pragmatic readjustment of politics in a regional context can be observed: besides the EU, NATO and the US, Russia returns economically and militarily to the region. Additionally, China’s power is increasing, so is the influence of some Arab countries including Iran. The EU will continue to support the countries of the South Caucasus economically, administratively as well as politically

Honouring Promises, Managing Expectations

The relationship between the South Caucasus and the EU and NATO, seen from the region, has been marked by “broken promises”. This should be characterised rather by an asymmetry between expectations from the region, capability (or will) by the EU and NATO, and the belief that security guarantees that these institutions could provide for the region would in fact be provided.

Today governments in the region realize that there are limits to the EU’s and NATO’s level of regional engagement. NATO, in particular, was thought as “hesitant” and “indecisive.” In fact, the dominant institutional actor in the

region is the EU, while NATO has not expressed deep-seated interest in the region, save for secure access to energy resources

EU and NATO approaches to the region are also interlinked with their relationship towards Russia. In fact, the EU-Russia dyad is an essential component of any future resolution of protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus. NATO, for its part, is torn between commitments it may seem to make towards a region composed of non-members, and obedience to the will of the various NATO member States which decide on its strategic direction. In consequence, the Alliance members decide the Alliance’s priorities.



One of the lessons of the Georgia-Russia war of 2008 is that perceptions of security provisions and the actual delivery may differ widely. For example, the 2008 NATO Summit declaration in Bucharest stated unequivocally that “Georgia would one day be a member of NATO”. This has the effect of an official promise by the organization. But this promise is mitigated by the other statement that “decision on enlargement is made by NATO members only, and not by third parties.”

This statement can be aimed at Russia, but it is also aimed at any candidate member, from any part, and reiterates that it is not NATO as an organization that makes such decisions, but as an Alliance (its member countries). Failure to heed this nuance reveals the depth of misperception between regional and outer regional (EU, NATO) approaches. In consequence, a possible policy recommendation could be framed in these terms:

1. **Manage expectations rather than letting rhetoric build an alternative reality.** EU and NATO counterparts to the region should reiterate that the level of engagement of their institutions is predicated upon the political agreement within their respective structures. This process should start with the sine

qua non condition of engagement, which is shared by both the EU and NATO, and, one believes, by Russia as well, namely: no war.

2. **Avoid rhetorical entrapment by instituting mild conditionality.** EU and NATO, having clarified their positions with regard to the region and in consultation with Russia, could leverage their respective engagement initiatives (Eastern Partnership, IMAP, IPAP, etc.) to strengthen the commitment of the non-use of force in developing solutions to regional security challenges – if these instruments however are of interest for the parties (special case Azerbaijan).
3. **Clarify terminology.** One of the Soviet Union's legacies to the post-Soviet republics is a penchant for ambiguity. Too much is read between the lines, and not enough trust is put in the value of what is actually expressed. Frankness has its value, and EU and NATO officials should not fear for their institutions' credibility by speaking plainly, even in public formats. Trust must be built on achieving what is promised based on what is achievable by all, not on what is desirable by some. This could be the basis for a renewed program of engagement by the EU and NATO, but also of particular frameworks of youth interaction based on education exchanges aimed at clarifying recent history, building understanding of international actors' interests and international law's limits.

Relying on International Law and Recognition as Ways towards Stability

Discussions on objective conflict resolution mechanisms have yielded that international law and the practice of state recognition had not offset the threat of instability. The international doctrine of *uti possidetis*, which means that one uses what they possess, and vice-versa, has evolved after the Balkan Wars of the 1990s to an ulterior meaning involving the control by an ethnic group over a specific territory can often yield to secession (external self-determination). Evidence has also been presented to show that although certain political secessions can on the surface be successful; the ensuing cascade of secessionist grievances created by newly-former minorities (in the new independent state) will perpetuate instability, and pose problems for other powers by the precedent thereby created. A seemingly evident policy recommendation imposes itself;

1. **Insist on mutual consent of the parties, regardless of the decision.** If the internationalization (i.e. the involvement of large and legitimate international

bodies, like the UN, the International Court of Justice, the OSCE or the EU) of the South Caucasus conflicts is to meet with a happy end, the involvement of international law and the practice of state recognition, if needed, should be directly linked upon the mutuality of the decision by the parties in conflict.

While this seems evident, large regional powers, namely Russia and Turkey, will more easily accept an entity's decision to separate if that decision is somehow made with the consent of the (former) central authority (i.e. Baku, Tbilisi or Yerevan). It has even been suggested that "joint sovereignty" is a worthy subject to explore.

2. **"Commissions on Difficult Issues".** Because reliance on international law may not yield the stability hoped for, it may be necessary for the parties to engage in constructive bilateral talks on their own initiative. These initiatives should be formally rewarded by the EU and NATO, and/or by great powers. The example provided by the Russia-Polish Commission is worth following, and the beginning of such contacts may be in the works between Tbilisi and Moscow, which we all applaud.



Emphasizing Soft Security Measures

Participants insisted on the fact that the conflicts in the region were protracted because of the absence of contact between parties. This is a characteristic of the Armeno-Azerbaijani conflict mostly. The desire for stability and a constructive resolution of the conflict has to come from within.

This reality has helped shape the discussion as to what can be achieved, and towards which audience initiatives should

be aimed. In particular, there was no consistent agreement that (mostly for Armenia and Azerbaijan), appealing to the political regimes in the region as opposed to the civil society would lead towards a relaxation of tensions. The following recommendations have been brought out:



1. **A Two-Track Approach Focusing on the Elite and Civil Society in Parallel.** The political sphere in the region is also hostage to frozen conflicts. Though some political actors may depend on the continuation of conflict as a backdrop to their political power, it follows that only a change in public opinion about the conflicts can lead the political elite to adopt a more conciliatory tone.

This is why the “Track 1” method of official diplomacy should be maintained by keeping the Minsk Group channels open, or strengthened by renewed engagement of other actors (EU; NATO?). At the same time, efforts should be made to offer the respective public/civil society within the region access to alternative points of view on the conflicts without necessarily exposing the EU, NATO or any other actor to the charge of intervening unduly in internal affairs, which the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 prohibits.

2. **Develop Incentives for the Political Sphere.** Creativity should be applied in finding ways to reward political elites for adopting less confrontational policies or agreeing to confidence-building measures to resolve their conflict. For the purpose of these policy recommendations, the definition of political elites should include the elites of the unrecognized regions, their IDPs as well as the different lobbying factions..
3. **Focus on Soft-Security Measures.** Programmes should be developed to offer the South Caucasus civil

society with options for economic and commercial cooperation, scientific cooperation, and trust-building through regional intercultural cooperation. These measures can take the form of educational exchange, women, youth, journalists’ cooperation etc., and also involve intra-national (Armenian-to-Armenian, Azerbaijani-to-Azerbaijani and Georgian-to-Georgian) contacts aimed at redefining the conflicts that affect their respective country.

Overview of the Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus (RSSC)

After a hiatus of several years, the Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus was re-launched by the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Institutes and the Austrian Ministry of Defence and Sports, in conjunction with the Austrian Ministry of European and International Affairs. Building on previous iterations of the RSSC Study Group, it held its 6th workshop at Reichenau, Austria, on November 8 - 11, 2012. The format is based on the successful Study Group Regional Stability in South East Europe, and its thematic concept aims at gradually bringing parties from the region to discuss and form policy recommendations on security issues and conflict resolution ideas starting from a high-level strategic outlook towards resolving particular issues of tension.

Way Ahead for the Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

The RSSC Study Group will reconvene periodically with the aim of enlarging and elaborating on some of the recommendations put forward by the participants. It will seek to bring participants together and leverage existing EU and NATO tools to engage in projects taking place in the wake of Study Group workshops, as envisioned by the stakeholders of the PfP Consortium. The next workshop meeting will take place in March 2013 in Tbilisi, Georgia and will address practical issues of confidence-building using the EU and NATO’s soft security initiatives.

¹These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 6th RSSC workshop on “Deconflicting Protracted Conflicts in the South Caucasus: The Role of the EU and NATO” convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” from 9 – 11 November 2012 in Reichenau, Austria. They were prepared by Frederic Labarre, RSSC Co-Chair, valuable support came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Judith Ivancsits from the Austrian National Defence Academy.