

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus (RSSC SG)

“The Way Forward in the South Caucasus: What Role for Pragmatic Multilateralism?”

3rd Extraordinary Virtual Roundtable RSSC SG Workshop
7 June 2021

PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



INTRODUCTION

On 7 June 2021, the Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) of the PfP Consortium convened a third Virtual Roundtable (VRT3) to evaluate the role of “pragmatic multilateralism” in the South Caucasus, assess the impact of Georgia’s recurrent political crises on its Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and to take stock of Russian peacekeeping efforts in Nagorno-Karabakh after six months of uneasy peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Nowhere has multilateralism been more severely criticized than in the South Caucasus; to many the OSCE Minsk Group has been barely useful in bringing the conflicting parties together over the last 25 years, when it concerns the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Others see in the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), championed by Russia, an attempt to re-establish a Soviet Union 2.0. The EU’s Eastern Partnership program is considered by some an empty promise, when not a manifestation of the EU’s toothless foreign policy. Yet, as one of the participants pointed out, multilateralism is the cornerstone of the South Caucasus countries’ foreign policy because it augments national power in discreet ways. What form multilateralism should take is the question many in the region have on their minds, and the co-chairs attempted to answer this crucial question.

Meeting virtually does not help the mission of the RSSC SG, which is to act as a Track 2 diplomacy tool. Furthermore, precious little time is available online to discuss issues in depth. Regardless, the co-chairs are reasonably satisfied with the outcome of the workshop, and particularly with the production of actionable policy recommendations.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE DISCUSSION

- “The South Caucasus states have no choice but to work with each other to establish long-lasting peace in the region. Consequently, the most important questions include what forms of multilateralism should regional governments pursue, in what forums should they pursue them, and what objectives is their multilateralism intended to achieve? The cornerstone of their foreign policy will be to achieve a new regional security order that is more equitable and people-centered, and to create conditions for sustainable development. This demands that the three South Caucasus countries have to strengthen multilateralism”. (Dr Elkhan Nuriyev, Humboldt Senior Fellow, Baku, Azerbaijan)
- The outcome envisaged in the January 2021 Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia statement consisted of creating a backbone for future regional economic integration including Turkey and Iran. Whether such plans can withstand growing nationalist and geopolitical headwinds in the South Caucasus region remains to be seen.
- Across the Armenia-Azerbaijan borders, ethnic, cultural, historical legacies clash. Renewed dialogue on creating incentives to restore trade, set up joint business and infrastructure projects could help build trust, and alleviate divisions.
- The May 2021 border crisis was the product of Azerbaijan’s intent to cement its post-war gains, while Armenia was struggling to buy some time in the run-up to the June 2021 legislative elections.



With the mutual consent of Baku and Yerevan, Russia has largely supplanted the OSCE role in conflict management and resolution. However, Russia has not reneged its support of the OSCE Minsk Group, which is maintained as a fallback in case its current peace-keeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh would, in time, face headwinds from Azerbaijan, and Turkey, while ensuring a modicum of international legitimacy.

- Having played a “game changer” role in the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, it is high time for Turkey to step up its contribution to a just and lasting Armenia-Azerbaijan peace. Investing in South Caucasus stability would underpin Ankara’s regional strategy to expand its influence in Turkic Central Asia.
- Current geopolitical regional dynamics are pulling Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan farther away from Europe, the US, and deeper into the Middle Eastern geopolitical cauldron, where the Russia-Turkey-Iran triangle is gaining steam. However, Turkish ambitions could affect the balance in the region.
- From a geopolitical angle, the Iranian foreign minister’s recent tour of the South Caucasus, Russia and Turkey aimed to display an expanding regional role at a time of relative isolation in the Middle East.
- “In designing a multilateral framework, it would be unrealistic to expect the South Caucasus states to surrender any significant degree of national sovereignty or to compromise on fundamental security interests. [...] Accordingly, there will be a need to mitigate tensions and try to establish security-building and peace-making in a situation of no or limited trust between actors. Building upon the principles of informality, dialogue, and consensus embedded in structures such as the EU’s Eastern Partnership, Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Belt and Road Initiative could prove instructive in this regard.” (Dr Elkhon Nuriyev, Humboldt Senior Fellow, Baku, Azerbaijan)

- Both Armenia and Azerbaijan desperately need wider multilateral commitment from neighbouring, regional and external actors to support their efforts at winning the peace, normalize bilateral relations, build mutual trust, and advance towards a comprehensive Armenian-Azerbaijani reconciliation within Karabakh and more widely within the South Caucasus region and beyond. Regional stability and the secure and prosperous future of the whole region also hangs by it.

This document is designed to present those policy recommendations for review by the RSSC SG VRT3 participants. What follows are the policy recommendations that were provided for review prior to 11 June 2021, at close-of-business in Central Europe. They have been condensed whenever possible in an attempt to reconcile opposing points of views, but otherwise, they have not been changed in content. They can be separated into two types; general and particular recommendations. In the latter case, we have identified two opportunities which we believe the PfP Consortium can bring its network to bear.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Concerning Nagorno-Karabakh; move forward based on the new reality on the ground. This would suggest building upon this reality and not on prior negotiations that may have occurred under previous multilateral arrangements or platforms.
2. Concerning the situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan; there needs to be a moratorium on weapons acquisition by both sides. This moratorium would be better enforced if third parties refrained from selling weapons to Armenia and/or Azerbaijan.
3. In conjunction with point 2 above, political-military confidence building measures should be fostered preferably through the existing principles of informality, dialogue and consensus offered by the EU’s Eastern Partnership, NATO’s Partnership for Peace, the Eurasian Economic Union, or any other existing regional multilateral formats.

4. Interested international actors should invest in developing local expertise and capabilities in areas which are conducive to multilateral regional cooperation: environment, ecology, communication and transportation, water resources management, disaster relief, energy security, food security, health and medical security, cyber security, information security, etc.

PARTICULAR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Support inter-diaspora dialogue (Armenia and Azerbaijan). This suggestion was made by one of the participants, and another participant agreed through suggesting to remain committed to Track 1.5¹ (if not Track 2) diplomacy, leveraging the knowledge of regional experts and policy makers from the region. In particular, Track 2 diplomacy efforts should involve youth more fully.

2. In 2008, NATO set up the Defence Education Enhancement Program (DEEP). One participant suggested that the Armenia and Azerbaijan DEEPs be brought together at least in virtual fashion to explore topics of conflict resolution and conflict de-escalation. This would give NATO a stake in the reconciliation process, and would be easy to implement, from existing programs.

3. A concrete measure to ease tensions could be the establishment of an incident prevention and response mechanism (IPRM) in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh). The IPRM could provide an opportunity to discuss issues such as the identification of potential risks, the follow-up of incidents, and the exchange of information, as well as problems affecting the communities on a daily basis. The non-Caucasus representatives of the OSCE Minsk Group's Co-Chairs – the US and France – and the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia should act as facilitators of the IPRM. Such a mechanism might ensure appropriate security and stability conditions that might enable restarting negotiations on conflict settlement.

4. “In tandem with a formal track 1 process, support could come via informal or semi-formal track 1.5 or 2 processes until a more coherent formal track is established. Such processes have already operated involving regional stakeholders, bringing a mix of academics and policymakers to the table in often confidential settings. However, a challenge remains in that such low-key initiatives struggle to find the necessary space and support. Investing more resources in such initiatives and connecting them better to government-led processes would be important in this regard.” (Dr Elkhan Nuriyev, Humboldt Senior Fellow, Baku, Azerbaijan).

These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the Extraordinary Virtual Roundtable on “The Way Forward in the South Caucasus: What Role for Pragmatic Multilateralism”, convened by the PfP Consortium Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group on 7th of June 2021. They were prepared by Frederic Labarre (Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston) and by George Vlad Niculescu (European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants and the ensuing roundtable discussions. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Benedikt Hensellek and Mirjam Habisreutinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).

Participants in this roundtable were, in alphabetical order of the Latin alphabet; Laurence Broers, Michael Cecire, Benedikt Hensellek, Leonid Karabeshkin, Frederic Labarre, Mariam Maisuradze, Tatoul Manasserian, Nilufer Narli, George Vlad Niculescu, Elkhan Nuriyev, Benyamin Poghosyan, Fuad Shahbazov, and Alan Whitehorn.

The co-chairs are grateful for the input of all participants, and particularly of Dr. Elkhan Nuriyev, Dr. Alan Whitehorn, Dr. Nilufer Narli and Mr. Tatoul Manasserian in helping to shape and refine these recommendations.

The co-chairs very much welcome the virtual participation to this roundtable of: MP (R.Az.) Razi Nurullayev, and Dr. Oktay Tannisever, who have been long standing contributors to the RSSC SG.

¹The term track 1.5 diplomacy is used by experts to define a situation where official and non-official actors cooperate in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

South Caucasus Games

*Whether it be children playing or
state officials and military planners charting scenarios,
there are only three major types of games:
The most common is a zero-sum game.
It is a competitive see-saw like interaction.
When I go up, you go down.
I win when you lose
or vice versa.
But competition can get out of hand.
It can create rivalry that fuels animosity,
which, in turn, can trigger a conflict spiral.
When nations go to war,
each country and countless families pay a deadly price,
albeit not all equally.
Wars are minus-sum games.
In contrast, teaching and sharing book knowledge
are examples of a cooperative plus-sum game
where we all benefit.
It is the core basis for the advancement of global development.
Azerbaijan and Armenia currently view each other through the lens of a zero-sum game.
Each side wants to win at the expense of the other.
But in so doing,
they have created a far more dangerous minus-sum game.
Increased animosity, along with death and destruction of war, are the result.
A technological arms race of advanced weaponry has been unleashed
that hurtles towards mutual assured destruction.
What needs to be done
is to find new forms of mutual aid and cooperation.
And in so doing,
foster shared benefits and greater well-being.
Each generation must decide
what kind of game it intends to play.
Their future depends on it.*

by Alan Whitehorn