
Addressing the security challenges in the South Caucasus The case for a comprehensive, multilateral and inclusive approach

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BACKGROUND

The South Caucasus in a European and global security context

Events in the Middle East and North Africa risk the EU taking its eye off the ball as regards its eastern neighbourhood, particularly the South Caucasus region. The short but bloody Georgia-Russia War of August 2008 was an example of how badly things in the region can flare up, and how they can impact on the rest of Europe. However, in spite of this Europe continues to have an overly complacent approach to security in the region, apparently deeming the fragile *status quo* sustainable.

Any kind of regional destabilisation may have a serious impact on the wider security of the EU, making this complacent approach short-sighted and risky. Rather Europe needs to move swiftly to address some of the root causes of the region's problems which include protracted conflicts, poor governance, organised crime and trafficking, and economic under-development,

enabling the three South Caucasus countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) to further integrate into European political and economic processes. This will require bold action, a more nuanced strategy to managing relations with Russia, and a multilateral, comprehensive approach to addressing security and other issues.

The importance of the South Caucasus in both a European and global security context has been repeatedly discussed since the end of the Cold War. In the period when Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were part of the Soviet Union the region was seen as the underbelly of the Soviet super power, the sometimes forgotten frontier between the Communist world and NATO. Turkey's army of over half a million, propped up by NATO's nuclear and conventional arsenal, were matched in kind on the Soviet side by the large and prestigious Trans-Caucasian Military Command of the USSR Armed Forces.

STATE OF PLAY

The certainties of the Cold War, chilling as they were, no longer exist. Twenty years on the region is still searching for a security framework that will satisfy all three countries, as well as their larger neighbours. While all three states seek greater security, their vision of security concerns and perceptions of threats vastly differ. In addition to the intra-regional security challenges, the problems of the countries of the region are compounded by an unpredictable array of relations with the regional and great powers that have interests there.

Three separatist regions emerged from the ashes of the USSR: Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia and Nagorno-Karabakh from Azerbaijan. South Ossetia and Abkhazia have been recognised by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru, whilst Nagorno-Karabakh remains unrecognised. All three remain largely untouchable behind walls of barbed wire and trenches: Abkhazia and South Ossetia supported by Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh backed by Armenia. The ambiguous status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh constitutes a long-term danger to the security of the region and to the

international system. Because of their proximity, this threat is particularly serious for the EU.

Russia's attempts to keep the region within its orbit has only had limited success. Russia has not been able to secure the three countries as military allies. Only Armenia can be said to fall in this category. Nor has it been able to turn the Commonwealth of Independent States into an effective regional body. Indeed Georgia is no longer a member of this organisation. However Russia has neutralised perceived threats to it from the region. It has contributed to conditions that slowed down Georgian efforts to join NATO. In the process it has fought a brief war with Georgia with implications for both sides, perhaps not as yet fully appreciated.

For the first decade after the emergence of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as independent states, splendid inactivity was the strategy of choice of the EU. In the second decade, shaken into action by Georgia's dramatic Rose Revolution in 2003, and the increasing geostrategic importance of the region in the aftermath of 9/11 but also for Europe's energy security, there has been considerably more engagement. Nevertheless the overall impression remains that Europe has not quite made up its mind as to the extent it wants to embrace the region. As for the countries themselves, while Georgia sees integration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions as its only option, Armenia and Azerbaijan have a more ambivalent approach.

Over the last decade Europe has used a number of instruments in its dealings with the South Caucasus. Through the European Neighbourhood Policy and later the Eastern Partnership it sought to stimulate the process of reform whilst providing modest assistance, while through the offices of an EU Special Representative it sought to portray an interest in the wider issues of peace building. The main objective pursued was stability, with the EU at one time toying with the idea of a Stability Pact along the lines of that in the Balkans. However, as has been witnessed in North Africa, stability that is not built on a democratic foundation can quickly disappear. Unfortunately, in the South Caucasus stability has become another word for inertia and the EU is in danger of being seen as an obstacle to reform and democracy, rather than an ally of change.

In July 2010 the EU began negotiating Association Agreements with all three countries, which necessitates political and economic reforms. However, it is apparent that only by addressing the region's security deficit will the South Caucasus be able to develop economically and politically into stable and peaceful societies.

The current mechanisms in place to deal with the protracted conflicts, as well as the whole issue of

security and development in the region, are a mixed bag of different processes that have emerged as quick responses to crisis, and there are no functioning intergovernmental mechanisms or institutions that help build regional stability. On Nagorno-Karabakh the OSCE Minsk Group Process, formally initiated in 1994, is currently co-chaired by Russia, the US and France, whilst the Geneva process, co-chaired by the EU, the OSCE and the UN has since 2008 dealt with the aftermath of the Georgia-Russia war. The latter process has in practice replaced the UN and OSCE led missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which were torpedoed by the Russians.

Over the last three years both the Minsk Process and the Geneva Process have played the role of glorified cease-fire management frameworks rather than peace processes that could lead to meaningful and durable peace. This is an unsatisfactory situation that needs to change.

Russia and the protracted conflicts

Western analysis very often defines Russia as "the elephant in the room" when dealing with the South Caucasus. Russia, however, is very much a party with direct interests in the region, a fact that needs to be recognised and managed without at any point accepting Russian hegemony on its smaller neighbours in the region.

Russia remains wary of any Western involvement in the Caucasus region. It sees it as part of a process of encirclement, with the West pursuing a policy of fragmentation of the region, trying to draw the CIS countries away from Russia, and even as the first step to the breaking up of Russia through support for insurgents in the North Caucasus. Russia's policy has been to keep the three south Caucasus republics on edge, mainly through its leverage on the unresolved conflicts. It does not, however, want instability in the region. Perversely its war with Georgia in 2008 – a war that it helped provoke but not necessarily start – was conducted also with that objective. Russia knows that this approach is a gamble.

To succeed, any arrangement in the South Caucasus needs to have Russian agreement. Securing this should be Europe's first objective, and this needs to be done as part of a package that will ensure that Russia does not emerge out of the process worse off than it is now, that the emerging order will not be harmful to Russian security or political interests, and that Russia will see the advantages of a new, more secure order in the region from which it could also benefit economically and which will have a positive effect on its own arrangements in the North Caucasus. This is a tall order but not unachievable.

PROSPECTS

The South Caucasus needs European support that is not a short-term game but rather a long-term commitment. In its engagement with the region over the next decade Europe needs a bold approach with a transparent and clearly stated end game. The ultimate aim should be to negotiate, agree and sign a comprehensive South Caucasus Security and Co-operation Treaty that would unblock the current *impasse* in the negotiations on the unresolved conflicts, not through a piecemeal approach, but rather by placing the various problems in a common context and providing solutions to which all interested parties could become stakeholders. This is not the case in current structures, with many important voices remaining unheard or ignored.

Achieving a new order through a South Caucasus Security and Co-operation Treaty, and ensuring the buy-in of the three South Caucasus states, Russia and other interested parties is a process that is likely to take several years.

An open ended South Caucasus Security and Co-operation conference (SOCSECC), organised in an OSCE format could provide the space in which to bring in all the interested parties, discuss all the relevant issues, and come to agreements that are mutually reinforcing and have the support of all stakeholders.

Such an idea has been muted for a number of years. It was proposed in the report of the Caucasus-Caspian Commission chaired by the then Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitri Rupel in December 2007. In June 2010 it was also suggested in the European Parliament's resolution on an EU strategy towards the South Caucasus which stated that the Parliament "recommends the setting up of a Conference on Security and co-operation in the South Caucasus, embracing the countries concerned and the relevant regional and global actors, with a view to developing a Stability Pact for the South Caucasus" (European parliament resolution P7_TA (2010) 0193 adopted on 20 May 2010, article 40). That resolution also called for a much greater EU role in the region.

Various elements of such an idea have also been pursued through diplomatic means, for example through the Turkish initiative for a "Caucasus Security and Co-operation Platform". Unfortunately, there has not yet been sufficient political will or a sufficiently unified approach to take this idea forward. Furthermore, such initiatives have frequently excluded a number of partners, with proposals either being drawn up in the interests of one or other of the states, or with the intention of promoting the proactive foreign policy of the state

initiating it. For example the Turkish initiative totally excluded the EU.

There were also hopes that such a discussion would become an offshoot of the Corfu Process embarked on in June 2009 within the OSCE framework to look at the whole issue of European security. Progress, however, has been very slow with no tangible results being reported at the December OSCE Astana Summit.

A future SOCSECC can, however, still be organised in an OSCE format and context with additional provisos that will take into consideration all the security concerns of all the actors in the region. The OSCE is the most inclusive Security organisation on the European continent. Despite its shortcomings all European states are represented on it equally, and the organisation's working modalities have by and large withstood the test of time.

A comprehensive approach is better

The disappointment at the failure of the Turkey-Armenia *rapprochement* to move forward with the protocols signed in October 2009 is just one of many examples of good but isolated initiatives that failed because of problems in the wider context to which they were related. In this instance Azerbaijan was able to place sufficient pressure on Ankara, insisting that Turkey make a link between the *rapprochement* process and the solution of Nagorno-Karabakh, which was something Armenia could not accept. The international community has not been able to create the conditions whereby such initiatives become mutually reinforcing. Moving *pari passu* on a number of issues simultaneously may be a complex process, but one which has obvious benefits.

Many countries have attempted to resolve the problems of the Caucasus unilaterally. Russia in particular has on and off sprinted ahead of the pack, for example with Abkhazia in the 1990s and with Karabakh in the last three years. Some were concerned with this. Others were happy to see Russia drink alone from what many believe is a poisoned chalice. A unilateral approach will not work because there are too many interests and heavy baggage of history for Russia in the region, and others have similar problems. The approach most likely to succeed is a multilateral approach in which European institutions such as the EU take the lead. The EU, being in comparison to some other players, "neutral" in the region is well placed to do this. There will be a role for the UN also but this is likely to be at the end of the process,

with the Security Council underpinning and guaranteeing agreements, rather than brokering them.

The process that will succeed will be the one that is flexible enough to ensure that all stakeholders have a voice, although this may, in practical terms, be difficult to achieve and will require a lot of political will.

Convincing all parties to sit around the table will not be an easy task given levels of distrust and historical rivalry. However, it seems there is growing recognition that the region's fragile security situation is deteriorating. This has been reflected in a number of ways including Russia's more pragmatic approach towards conflict resolution, particularly *vis-à-vis* Nagorno-Karabakh. Over the last twelve months there has been a significant increase in ceasefire violations which has led to an increased arms race, with the security vacuum also exacerbating problems related to trafficking and corruption. Furthermore with both the West and Russia in the process of developing new energy transit projects, and the forthcoming 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, there is an urgent need to improve the security environment. Moreover, with the West's relations with Russia presently far more harmonious and positive than for a number of years, it offers a good opportunity for such an initiative.

However, the current reality in the South Caucasus presents a number of dilemmas whenever one talks of convening an international meeting. Three entities have existed *de facto* for most of the last two decades but remain wholly or largely unrecognised. Regardless of the fact that the external patrons are able to exert a lot of influence on their *protégés*, engaging with these *de facto* authorities and including them into a comprehensive process is necessary, especially to avoid having black holes or grey areas that could easily undermine any regional security arrangements. A future SOCSECC should therefore be in a format that would allow the inclusion of the non-recognised entities in the process, without extending to them the full international recognition that they seek, but which other countries reject. It will also be important to ensure the representation of refugees, IDPs, and displaced communities (for example the Nagorno-Karabakh Azerbaijani Community) who in the opinion of many have been too long without a voice.

If a new South Caucasus security framework is to emerge, one that would be able to address shortcomings

of the last two decades including the unresolved conflicts, then this has to have a buy-in from a wide spectrum of the societies of the different stakeholders. This should include a number of countries and international organisations that have interests based on historic relations, as well as civil society and other relevant interested non-state stakeholders from throughout the OSCE space. A creative arrangement will need to be found that would enable all the stakeholders to participate in the discussions and help shape the future of the region. In part this could be done with track two diplomacy, including through the organisation of working groups on specific issues – as has been the case in other processes such as the Cyprus peace talks – the results of which could be fed into the discussions. Again the OSCE experience of interaction with NGOs in the field of the human dimension offers a time tested precedent of good practice which can be applied to any eventual SOCSECC.

Conclusion

For twenty years the south-eastern corner of Europe has been plagued by conflict, its people living in insecurity and failing to benefit from progress, due to closed frontiers and economies on a war footing and where hundreds of thousands of people remain displaced by the conflicts. Efforts to change this situation have yielded few results.

Even as events in the Middle East and North Africa demand increasing time and resources of European nations, further delay in addressing the problems of the South Caucasus may present serious dangers to Europe in the not too distant future. The convening of a South Caucasus Security and Co-operation Conference, with an aspiration to achieve a comprehensive security and cooperation treaty dealing with all the outstanding problems of the region by 2014, should be the ambition around which Europe should rally.



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