30th Workshop of the PfP Consortium Study Group
"Regional Stability in the South Caucasus"

"Today and Tomorrow: Prospects for Peace and Pitfalls of Emerging Technologies"

– Programme and Workshop Outline –

23 - 26 October 2025

Reichenau/Rax, Austria

Purpose

In 2012, the Austrian Ministry of Defence, through its National Defence Academy and the Directorate General for Security Policy, resumed the scientific work begun in 2001 (but interrupted in 2005) by the PfP Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes on the South Caucasus. The "Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG)" has emerged as the premiere Track 2 diplomacy platform where intractable conflicts are discussed with discretion, in a serene and academic atmosphere, but within reach of political ears. **Deliberations are conducted strictly according to Chatham House rule**, and this has contributed to a steady stream of successes, seeing recommendations from several workshops being considered if not applied by South Caucasus actors.

For example, in 2015, the George C. Marshall Center held a high-level in-camera meeting for South Caucasus deputy ministers of defence, based on policy recommendations produced by the RSSC SG in November 2013. Armenia and Azerbaijan have enacted a crisis hotline, and an exchange of journalists based on recommendations made in past years. There is evidence that public communication techniques suggested in 2015 and 2017 by the RSSC SG are being put in practice in Armenia. The RSSC SG has also leveraged the assistance of outside partners to accomplish a policy recommendation made in November 2017 as Handbook project entitled "Understanding the Contemporary Information Landscape" which has been launched in November 2022. This effort enables multinational collaboration towards a common goal. The RSSC SG is following up on that success with the production of a second handbook: "Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks" aiming to roll it out by the end of 2025.

Past workshops held since 2012 in Reichenau/Rax, and in Tbilisi (twice), Istanbul (twice), Kyiv, Chisinau (twice), Varna, Minsk, Berlin, Rome, and Naples have demonstrated that the RSSC SG has established a broad academic basis and the cohesion necessary to undertake more ambitious cooperative projects. Thanks to this cohesion, and our participants' direct and indirect access to decision-making circles in their respective power centres, the RSSC SG continues to produce policy recommendations that are both constructive and practical.

The recent events in the South Caucasus, including the Abu Dhabi bilateral summit, and the Washington summit Joint Declaration, have been significant steps towards peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan while having shed light once again on the topic of connectivity previously discussed by the RSSC SG. Reactions from both Iran and Russia have shown that powerful regional neighbours might be warry of any peace solutions in the South Caucasus if they were perceived as made at their expense. Hence, geopolitical shifts might be back in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the 30th workshop of the RSSC will need to discuss these latest developments and their potential implications for regional peace, security, and cooperation. At the last workshop in Istanbul, Türkiye, on 10-13 April 2025, the RSSC SG explored how emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence (AI), could better serve peace and conflict resolution in the South Caucasus. Building up on its outcomes we should aim to discuss this time in more depth how conflict resolution and emerging technologies could go hand in hand in the future and have the South Caucasus countries take full advantage of them. At the Istanbul workshop we have also agreed that regional cooperation on emerging technologies, including in security sector reform and governance, peacebuilding, cyber security, and countering dis-/mis- information should be nurtured by the regional countries and supported by international donors. In addition, we noted that the very core of a nations self-image, its memories and narratives, are increasingly threatened by emerging technologies such as AI-based reasoning tools being increasingly used in academic contexts, as replacements for search engines and even in support of people actively working to resolve conflicts.

To explore those topics, the co-chairs are convening a RSSC SG workshop on **"Today and Tomorrow: Prospects for Peace and Pitfalls of Emerging Technologies"**, to be held 23 to 26 October 2025 in Reichenau/Rax, Austria.

Partners

- Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
- Directorate General for Defence Policy, Austrian Ministry of Defence, Vienna
- Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes (PfP Consortium), Garmisch-Partenkirchen
- The European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Topic Outline

In past workshops we had discussed the increasing volatility of the South Caucasus region stemming from Russia's focus on the war in Ukraine, Iran's setbacks in the war with Israel, and Türkiye's deeper engagement in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq).

We have also previously discussed Georgia's ongoing geopolitical shifts away from its European and Euro-Atlantic priorities. In short, Georgia is going through a chronic, deep-rooted, and highly consequential political crisis which seems to be shifting its foreign and security policy away from the West and closer to Türkiye, Azerbaijan, China, and, indirectly, to Russia. The Georgian Dream government has sought to expand its economic options through increased trade and investment ties with Türkiye, in addition to a newly established strategic partnership with China since 2023. At the end of May 2024, a decision was made to hand over the construction and management of the Anaklia deep-sea Port to a Chinese-Singaporean consortium, despite the long-standing US opposition to it. That new deep-sea port will reportedly be constructed based on Chinese cargo needs and it might become a critical node in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (B.R.I.).

On August 8, 2025, President Donald Trump hosted Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the White House, where the three leaders issued a joint declaration outlining the outcomes of their trilateral summit. According to the declaration, the leaders witnessed the initialling of a draft peace agreement by the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, aimed at ending decades of conflict between the two countries. They also endorsed a joint appeal to terminate the OSCE Minsk Group and its associated mechanisms. Additionally, the joint declaration committed Armenia, the United States and "mutually determined third parties" to develop a transit corridor across southern Armenia to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its Nakhichevan exclave. This route was rebranded as the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). The United States was granted 99-year exclusive development rights over the route. The sides also affirmed mutual recognition of sovereignty, renounced future territorial claims, and explicitly rejected "any attempt at revenge". Additionally, Armenia and Azerbaijan committed to a formal border delimitation process and pledged to prohibit the deployment of "third-party forces" along their shared frontier. That would preclude Russian presence on their common border, but it might also threaten the future of the European Union Mission in Armenia (EUMA).

The Washington deal came on the hill of a positive trend in Armenia-Azerbaijan relations in 2025, which had been reinforced by the July 10 meeting of the Armenian Prime Minister Pashinyan and the Azerbaijani President Aliyev in Abu Dhabi (UAE). That had been the first bilateral summit in

recent decades without the mediation of a major power, which experts from both sides deemed as both a historical and a significant step forward in the peace process.

Recent progress towards signing the peace agreement came up against the backdrop of Azerbaijan's deteriorating relations with Russia since December 2024, following the crash of an Azerbaijani Airlines plane by Russian air defences, and violent raids, last June, by Russian police against ethnic Azerbaijanis in Yekaterinburg, which would have prompted Baku to seek greater autonomy in its foreign policy. On the other hand, Armenia's relations with Russia have also weakened (culminating with Prime-minister N. Pashinyan freezing his country's participation in the Russia-led CSTO since February 2024) while relations with Türkiye have improved. On June 20, 2025, Armenian Prime-minister N. Pashinyan met Turkish president R.T. Erdogan in Istanbul. Although those apparent geopolitical shifts are still to be potentially turned into tectonic moves of the regional balance of power in the South Caucasus region, experts believe that Türkiye may now be the only regional actor capable of restraining Azerbaijan, while Russia's influence has waned with its Ukraine war, and Iran is distracted by its latest security crises with Israel and the United States.

Within that wider regional context, this workshop will aim:
- To explore recent geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus region, and how they might impact on regional connectivity and cooperation,
- To discuss the role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in shaping ontological security in the South Caucasus (and beyond),
- To brainstorm on possible building blocks for new cyber-domain strategies for peacebuilding and regional cooperation in the South Caucasus.

PANEL 1: New Geopolitical Trends in the South Caucasus: From the Washington Deal to Regional Connectivity Realignment?

The year 2025 has witnessed a cascade of diplomatic and strategic transformations that reshaped the geopolitical and security landscape of the South Caucasus. The Armenia-Azerbaijan summit in Washington D.C. facilitated the initialling of a draft peace agreement and introduced the "Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity – TRIPP". Simultaneously, Azerbaijan's tensions with Russia and growing economic ties with the United States and Europe have strained its long-standing partnership with Russia, prompting Moscow to curtail joint military exercises and to reassess energy-pipeline negotiations. In Armenia, domestic pressures – fuelled by public fatigue over prolonged conflict, a surge in civic activism, and a nascent opposition coalition – have pushed the government toward internal reforms and a more assertive foreign-policy posture. Georgia, meanwhile, has grappled with a series of domestic challenges over the past months, including contested municipal elections, renewed protests over judicial independence, and heightened tensions along its borders with Russia, all of which complicate its role as logistical hub in the South Caucasus region. This panel will explore the prospects of regional geopolitical change in the wake of the Washington Armenia-Azerbaijan deal, and its potential impact on regional connectivity competition between the U.S., Türkiye, and the E.U., on the one hand, and Russia, China, and Iran, on the other hand.

Possible questions for the presentations and subsequent discussion might include:
- How would the outcomes/deliverables of the Washington summit impact on the prospects of peace and regional connectivity in the South Caucasus?
- What are U.S. President Trump's administration plans for implementing TRIPP? How could they be squared with Azerbaijan's quest for a "Zangezur Corridor" and Armenia's vital interest to preserve sovereignty over its territory?

- How should the Georgian government balance its European and Euro-Atlantic commitments with its recent geopolitical shift away from the West? What might be the impact on Georgia's continued role in regional connectivity?
- What would be the role of Türkiye in implementing the Washington summit's statements, on the one hand, and on incentivizing geopolitical balance and regional connectivity in Georgia?
- What would be Russia's and Iran's prospective policies on TRIPP? Could they accommodate them with existing regional connectivity plans (in particular the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC))?

PANEL 2: AI-Mediated Ontological Security: National Identities and Sustainable Peace in the South-Caucasus

In today's volatile security landscape, the struggle for peace is as much about protecting a nation's self-image as it is about drawing borders. The concept of ontological security is the deep-seated need of states to maintain a stable identity. When peace is perceived as a threat to that identity, parties could cling to conflict as a source of legitimacy. At the same time, breakthroughs in artificial intelligence – especially with generative-AI becoming a replacement for classical search engines – offer new ways to both strengthen and undermine ontological security. AI tools could help to overcome ontological (in)securities, e.g. by surfacing hidden interests or building shared factual baselines. Hence, this panel could develop approaches how AI can be deliberately leveraged to mitigate ontological insecurity, while also confronting possible ethical, legal, and strategic pitfalls that arise when cutting-edge technology meets deeply rooted national narratives. Therefore, firstly, the relationship between AI and ontological security should be further determined as a baseline for discussions. Secondly, this panel explores how ontological security affects the conflicts in the South Caucasus overall.

Possible questions for the presentations and subsequent discussion might include:
- How does ontological security affect the resolution of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict and what measures could be taken to mitigate negative effects from this?
- How could Georgia's current geopolitical shifting away be analysed through the lens of ontological security?
- How can outside actors (like Russia, Türkiye, Iran, but also USA) leverage ontological insecurities for their agenda, especially using and/or controlling AI tools?
- What positive effects could AI have on ontological security of states? How could AI be leveraged to create a peaceful and ontological secure South Caucasus?
- What design principles should guide the implementation of AI, e.g. in education or in peace processes. Which governance frameworks are needed to ensure AI models used in negotiations fairly represent the perspectives of all conflicting parties?

PANEL 3: Cyber-Domain Strategies for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus: Counter-Disinformation, Collaborative Security, and Inclusive Governance

The South Caucasus is increasingly exposed to cyber threats that exacerbate longstanding ethnic and geopolitical frictions – state-sponsored intrusions, ransomware attacks on critical infrastructure, and coordinated disinformation campaigns that erode public trust. At the same time, the region's emerging cyber-governance frameworks, multilateral security arrangements, and civil-society networks provide a foundation for turning these vulnerabilities into avenues for peacebuilding. This panel will explore how robust cyber norms, joint incident-response mechanisms, transparent data-sharing protocols, and inclusive policy making can curb malicious

online activity, strengthen collective resilience, and create accountable digital spaces where all stakeholders – governments, NGOs, academia, and the private sector – share responsibility for securing the cyber domain and fostering lasting regional stability.

Possible questions for the presentations and subsequent discussion might include:

- How can multilateral cyber norms be effectively developed and implemented in the South Caucasus to mitigate state-sponsored cyber intrusions and foster mutual trust among historically adversarial actors?
- What are the best practices for establishing joint incident-response mechanisms in the region that involve governments, private sector, and civil society, and how can they overcome political and technical challenges?
- In what ways can coordinated efforts to counter disinformation campaigns be designed to enhance public trust without compromising freedom of expression and inclusive governance?
- What role should civil society and academic institutions play in shaping cyber-governance frameworks in the South Caucasus, and how can their inclusion improve accountability and the legitimacy of peacebuilding initiatives?

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSIONS

The interactive discussions are the main moderated platform that allows the group of experts to develop actionable policy recommendations by the RSSC SG. We invite all participants to take advantage of this opportunity to make constructive proposals on each of the topics discussed. As always, these policy recommendations are disseminated throughout the PfP Consortium network, covering some 60 countries, and 800 policy and academic institutions. **Like the rest of the workshop, they are held under Chatham House rule.**

Programme

Thursday, 23 October 2025

till 18.30   Arrival of the participants

19.00   **Words of Welcome**

Andreas F. WANNEMACHER, Directorate General for Defence Policy, Austrian Ministry of Defence, Vienna

Official Dinner

Friday, 24 October 2025

07.00 – 09.00   Breakfast

09.00 – 09.20   **Introduction to the Study Group "Regional Stability in the South Caucasus" and Administrative Remarks**

Benedikt HENSELLEK, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna
Olaf GARLICH, PfP Consortium Secretariat, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

09.20 – 09.45   **Keynote Address**

Lieutenant General Erich CSITKOVITS,
Commandant, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

09.45 – 11.15   **PANEL 1: New Geopolitical Trends in the South Caucasus: From the Washington Deal to Regional Connectivity Realignment?**

Chair: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Shalva DZEBISASHVILI, University of Georgia, Tbilisi
Vasif HUSEYNOV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku
Boris KUZNETSOV, Centre for International and Regional Policy, St. Petersburg
Yeghia TASHJIAN, American University in Beirut

11.15 – 11.45   Coffee Break

11.45 – 13.00   **PANEL 2: AI-Mediated Ontological Security: National Identities and Sustainable Peace in the South-Caucasus**

Chair: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

Anna NADIBAIDZE, University of South Denmark, Odense
Gulkhanim MAMMADOVA, Topchubashov Center, Baku
Levon HOVSEPYAN, National Academy of Sciences, Yerevan
Nikolas NEUBAUER, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

13.00 – 14.15   Lunch

14.15 – 15.45   **PANEL 3: Cyber-Domain Strategies for Peacebuilding in the South Caucasus: Counter-Disinformation, Collaborative Security, and Inclusive Governance**

      Chair: Frederic LABARRE, Royal Military College, Kingston

      Andro GOTSIRIDZE, Ministry of Defence of Georgia, Tbilisi
      Vusal GULIYEV, Center of Analysis of International Relations, Baku
      Armine ARZUMANYAN, American University of Armenia, Yerevan
      Dawn LUI, Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (DCAF)

15.45 – 16.15   Coffee Break

16.15 – 17.30   **Interactive Discussion, Part 1:**

      Breakout Group Geopolitics & Connectivity:
      "Today and Tomorrow:
      New Prospects for Peace and Prosperity in the South Caucasus?"
      Moderation: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

      Breakout Group Cyber & AI:
      "Today and Tomorrow: Cyber-Domain Strategies for Peacebuilding?"
      Moderation: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

19.00   Dinner

Saturday, 25 October 2025

07.00 – 08.30 Breakfast

08.30 – 09.30 **Interactive Discussion, Part 2:**

Breakout Group Geopolitics & Connectivity
Moderation: George NICULESCU, European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels

Breakout Group Cyber & AI
Moderation: Elena MANDALENAKIS, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

09.30 – 10.00 Coffee Break

10.00 – 11.30 **Policy Recommendations Formulation**

Moderation: Christoph BILBAN, Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna

11.30 – 11.45 **Official Closing Remarks**

11.45 – 12.30 Lunch

12.30 **Departure to the Side Programme**

Sunday, 26 October 2025

Individual Departures