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**Briefing on: "The Role of NATO in the Wider Black Sea"**

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The dynamics of NATO's role in the South Caucasus has been considered against the backdrop of the Wider Black Sea since both geopolitical and policy reasons make the South Caucasus a too narrow geopolitical scope for the analysis of NATO's policies. In fact, in contrast to the situation before the Russo-Georgian war in 2008, the South Caucasus is currently very rarely referred as such in NATO's statements, except for the cases where the Alliance is expressing concerns over the settlement of the "frozen conflicts".

Although there is no specific NATO regional policy or strategy, the geopolitical focus on the Wider Black Sea (adding Bulgaria, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, and Ukraine to the South Caucasian trio) is offering a more nuanced outlook to the regional role of NATO. Since the Istanbul summit in 2004, NATO has repeatedly recognized the strategic importance of the Black Sea region for Euro-Atlantic security, and it has displayed a rather vague mandate to contribute to regional cooperation therein. However, NATO has been playing a role in the WBS region restrained by both policy and geopolitical factors to "soft security cooperation" and to bilateral dialogue and practical cooperation with individual countries.

This has eventually resulted into restrained regional influence which was shaped by: the growing regional influence of Turkey and Russia; the US decreasing interest for and engagement with the region driven by its global priorities; the interest of European key players -in particular France and Germany- to keep NATO's regional profile relatively low; the failure of medium and smaller WBS countries to boost NATO's engagement with the region, in spite of certain efforts having been made by some of them, at different stages.

### **NATO's Restrained Influence on Regional Security in the Wider Black Sea**

To assess NATO's influence on the regional security dynamics in the WBS with a focus on the South Caucasus one might look at two levels of analysis: the policy level, and the geopolitical level.

Overall, the conclusion is that, since the 2004 Istanbul summit when the Black Sea first appeared on the radar screens of NATO policy, Alliance's interest and engagement with the WBS has been restrained in the area of "soft security" cooperation. This trend is likely to continue unless major geopolitical changes related to the neighboring regions (i.e. the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe) would require a comprehensive review of NATO's commitments and engagement with the WBS more broadly, and with the South Caucasus in particular.

At the policy level, one may be looking at public documents of NATO, including political declarations at various levels, policy statements, and strategic documents since 2004 to date.

For example, the Euro-Atlantic Partnership-Refocusing and Renewal, adopted in 2004, was stating as geographic priority of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership "the special focus on engaging with Partners in the strategically important regions of Caucasus and Central Asia" with a view "to enhance stability across the Euro-Atlantic area by encouraging and supporting reform". As a consequence, a Special Representative of the Secretary General for Caucasus and Central Asia, and



Liaison Officers for Caucasus and Central Asia, respectively, were appointed and deployed in the two regions. This priority was defined at a time when the second wave of enlargement bringing NATO membership on the Western coasts of the Black Sea had been recently completed, the Rose Revolution in Georgia had created high expectations on the democratization of the countries around the Black Sea, and NATO's military engagement in Afghanistan had created logistic requirements for NATO deployed troops which were prevailing over the geopolitical concerns of the Russian Federation.

In contrast, the document on "Active Engagement in Cooperative Security: A More Efficient and Flexible Partnership Policy" (adopted by NATO foreign ministers in April 2011) is placing under the same umbrella all of NATO's partnerships, i.e. the Euro-Atlantic Partnership, the Mediterranean Dialogue, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative, as well as partnerships with other international organizations, and with partners across the globe, while allegedly preserving their specificity.

Promoting regional security and cooperation is one of the strategic objectives included in this policy document. However, it has been more vaguely defined than in 2004 by scrapping the geographical priorities which had been linked to the Caucasus and Central Asia since the Istanbul summit. This might look like a setback for those who were aiming at strengthening NATO's contribution to regional security and cooperation. However, this change was probably motivated, on the one hand, by a much wider range of regional priorities stemming from all NATO's partnerships, and, on the other hand, by having had realized that setting out geographical priorities had proved sometimes counter-productive against enhancing support for NATO-led operations and missions and promoting democratic values and reforms. For example, one might had been wondering why would NATO give priority to partnership activities in Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan, countries who repeatedly breached democratic values and didn't pursue any kind of reforms, over Sweden, Switzerland or Finland, who are widely recognized as democratic countries and as active contributors to NATO operations and partnership work. In the foreseeable future, the flexible formats "28+n" will be offering the only viable partnership mechanism that would enable NATO's involvement in regional consultations, and, potentially, cooperation. However, these formats would only be thematic- or event- driven, although specific geographical themes shouldn't be hard to figure out.

At the geopolitical level, there is a wide range of relevant literature which might be considered to identify factors restraining NATO's influence in WBS regional affairs.

For example, the most recent working paper of the European Geopolitical Forum on the "Changing Dynamics of the Wider Black Sea in Regional Security and External Relations" highlighted the continued geopolitical significance of the Black Sea over time. It also reckoned that Turkey was no longer the focal point of the West's geopolitical outlook in the WBS, while a "pragmatic triangle" consisting of Russia, Turkey and Ukraine would be shaping many regional processes. It went on noting that, like very often in the history of the 19th and 20th centuries, external powers are exerting influence through smaller WBS countries.



The implication of the geopolitical trends above is the prospect of a rather modest role for NATO in the WBS. In fact, over the last decade, NATO's role in the WBS has been either directly or indirectly restrained by the major regional players: Turkey and Russia. The United States will very likely spare its "limited containment policy" (in the words of the working paper above) for Turkish Middle Eastern policy, rather than spending the scarce political capital still available in Ankara on shaping Turkish WBS policy, while the US re-set policy vis-a-vis Russia, is pulling NATO in the same direction.

The European Union, driven by two of its key members who, at the same time, are important members of NATO- France and Germany- has no interest in seeing a stronger involvement of NATO in the WBS and in the Caucasus either. EU is actually aiming at, on the one hand, sparing a leading Western role for itself, and, on the other hand, at avoiding to create additional means for Turkey to extract concessions on further EU enlargement, and to upset Russia who might be anxious of a stronger regional role for NATO. In fact, the game plaid by France and Germany during the Bucharest summit discussion on NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine was a strong argument in this vein, as it was the speed of the French president Nicolas Sarkozy, in August 2008, at that time holding the presidency of the EU, to intervene on behalf of the EU in the Georgian-Russian war.

The smaller WBS countries, either members or Partners of NATO, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Moldova and Romania, have had relatively little leverage on the Alliance to broaden the scope of its engagement in the region. Some of them might actually not have been seriously interested in such an evolution.

The current situation is likely to go on unchanged unless a major geopolitical shockwave would strike one of the neighboring regions: the Middle East, Central Asia or Europe. Iran might be the biggest candidate to generating such a shockwave; Afghanistan or the loss of control in one of the major Central Asian former Soviet Republics might be another potential source; eventually, the breakdown of the EU under the burden of the Euro crisis might also trigger a more active WBS role for NATO. However, at this stage, discussing about Central Asian or European scenarios would be just pure speculations.

Perhaps surprisingly for some, the outburst of a new war in the South Caucasus stemming from the "frozen conflicts" is little likely to create the critical mass to trigger a policy change regarding NATO's involvement in the WBS, and in the South Caucasus in particular, at least as long as the relations within the "pragmatic triangle", i.e. Russia -Turkey - Ukraine, would remain stable. The "Little War which Shook the World" (i.e. Georgia-Russia war of 2008), to paraphrase the title of Ron Asmus' best seller, is the most recent evidence in this respect.

However, the EU might have the posture, the motives and the instruments to raise its geopolitical profile in the WBS and in the South-Caucasus, aside Turkey and Russia, provided it would be able to re-shape its current policies governing the Eastern Partnership. To that end, a change of current Franco-German approach to these regions is critical, while the competition for resources with Southern Mediterranean countries would matter a lot.



### **Implications for Armenia**

Armenia, who might be concerned by the rising regional power of Turkey, and by the need to strengthen reliance on Russia for ensuring its national security, might deem a restrained NATO influence in the WBS as bad news. Closer Russian-Turkish political ties might be both reassuring in case the two regional powers would constrain Azerbaijan's military build-up around Nagorno-Karabakh (N-K), and dangerous in case Ankara and Moscow might conclude a deal on the South Caucasus, which would pay lip service to Armenian interests in N-K. The current Western preoccupation with finding solutions to its own problems stemming from the global economic crisis, and the re-focusing of its political attention to the developments in the Mediterranean in the aftermath of the Arab spring might also play against current Armenian policy for maintaining the status quo in N-K.

It is probably the right time for Yerevan to review its national security strategy in line with the changing geopolitical and geostrategic context in the WBS with a focus on adopting more flexible policies on both N-K and its bilateral relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. The connectivity of Armenia to the regional flow of energy resources, and, more broadly, to the trading networks between the Caspian Sea and Europe might also be envisaged in this context. Current Western policy to create political and economic incentives for Azerbaijan to continue pursuing the peaceful settlement of the N-K conflict might also be helpful on the short and medium term, but it could hardly replace an Armenian security policy review over the longer term.

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