

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

“Supporting New Conflict Management Platforms in the South Caucasus”

22nd RSSC SG Workshop
4 - 7 November 2021, Reichenau/Rax, Austria

PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) resumed its normal activities on 4 to 7 November 2021 in Reichenau/Rax, Austria to discuss new conflict management platforms in the context of the first anniversary of the ceasefire in the aftermath of the 44-Day war. Initially, the workshop had aimed at discussing a host of different initiatives with a particular focus on the Georgian Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative (PNI). But much discussion inevitably focused on its potential geopolitical competition with the “3+3” format, as well as on whether or not either of them should replace the OSCE Minsk Group.

A PNI should not only be a flexible framework, but also a sum of interchangeable parts aiming to attract external support behind a common vision on peace and stability through regional integration. The platform’s purpose would be to integrate the whole of the South Caucasus – with a view to identifying common risks to the region, and finding multilateral solutions, within a changing regional geopolitical context.

A number of associated policy recommendations were discussed and agreed upon, such as:

1. A PNI, or a PNI-like platform, should be the fruit of a bottom-up initiative to ensure that there is local ownership of the effort by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, first and foremost.
2. As a regional cooperation platform, it should focus on issues of common interest, such as environmental sustainability, transport, energy, water resources, and human security needs.
3. It was suggested that the PNI, or a PNI-like structure, could have a parliamentary component.
4. The PNI should remain a platform designed to achieve small steps, acting in low profile, to produce technical solutions. Solutions must not only be pragmatic, but practical.
5. A separate proposal was made to set up a distinct sub-platform to discuss economic issues. The RSSC SG has chosen to take up this challenge at its next (23rd) workshop in Spring 2022 as a panel (or breakout group) in the agenda.
6. It was also independently suggested to host a symbolic kick-off event, free from outside mediation – ostensibly hosted by Georgia – where the three South Caucasus states would meet to shape a path to “growing regional interdependence”.
7. Other proposals mentioned a “Marshall Plan” solution where the international community would commit to investing in infrastructure, transport, and energy regional projects, and that imminent action was required to improve the human security of those people who were the most affected by the 44-Day war.

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) resumed its normal activities on 4 to 7 November 2021 with the 22nd workshop in Reichenau/Rax, Austria. A small group of participants from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Canada, France, Georgia, Romania, Russia, Turkey,

Ukraine and the United States gathered to discuss new conflict management platforms in the context of the first anniversary of the ceasefire in the aftermath of the 44-Day war.

The 10th November 2020 Trilateral Statement by Armenia-Azerbaijan-Russia on Nagorno-Karabakh has established a fragile peace in the South Caucasus.



Many questions remain as to how to move forward constructively. It therefore seemed appropriate to search for new ways to build new conflict management platforms in the South Caucasus, since earlier instruments, like the OSCE Minsk Group, had been lamentably side-lined. This 22nd workshop was also the occasion to celebrate the role of Georgia in the search for a pan-regional identity, what is arguably among the more difficult goals for the RSSC SG to achieve. In particular, the RSSC SG was keen to provide advice in support of Georgia's "Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative" (PNI). We hope that the RSSC SG's modest contribution will help Georgian – and by extension South Caucasus – diplomats to bring this initiative to life.

PANEL 1: Georgia at the Forefront of the Peaceful Neighbourhood Initiative

The first panel wasted no time in deepening the meaning of the PNI, and provided many ideas to give substance and possible relevance to this initiative. Georgia's mediation following last year's war had been a success on which the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs could build on, but there has initially been little substance behind and, apparently, limited political interest for the instrumentalization of the PNI. Consultations with other partners, among which the U.S. and the EU seemed to suggest that Georgia could be transformed into an agent for peace in the South Caucasus. However, as stronghold for Western values in the South Caucasus, Georgia was also keen to neutralize the "3+3" format of cooperation (see 21st RSSC SG workshop policy recommendations). Of particular importance was the need to limit the Russian regional influence that would be facilitated by this cooperation format. Prior to launching the debate over the PNI, Tbilisi's approach was "wait and see", while a broader agenda for Black Sea security was being developed by the West.

If the PNI were formally to take shape, it could do so under an original scenario where regional cleavages are not an impediment to the European integration of Georgia, or regional cooperation with other powers. One way to activate the PNI, or a PNI-like platform, would be to tie it to transportation, communication, and energy infrastructure connectivity projects. Actually, this theme came back repeatedly during the RSSC SG's deliberations over the weekend, and could give strong substance to the PNI.

Others saw that a "light" PNI could complement the already proposed "3+3" format. The aim would be to convene belligerents on some particular issues without cross-linkages. Such opinions suggested adopting mechanisms that would lessen the weight of the "3+3" concept, and avoid further undermining the role and the relevance of the OSCE Minsk Group. As such, the PNI could complement the Geneva International Discussions on Georgia as well by providing a way to include Abkhazia and South Ossetia in status-neutral discussions.

The Georgian mediation efforts were successful so far, because they were kept low profile. The important point for a successful PNI is to let the actors work on small, achievable, reconciliation steps. The aim could be, in this case, the transformation of relations, not necessarily the settlement of particular divisive issues. The Georgian mediator should therefore not try to impose solutions on the parties. The status quo may not be ideal, but there is no way to alter it for the moment. Better to make the most of the current situation by emphasizing topics of common interest – like responses to transnational challenges conducive to multilateral cooperation – and setting controversial hard security issues aside for later discussion.

During the Q&A one participant thought that Azerbaijan will not participate in any regional platform where the territorial integrity of all members was not recognized. He further thought that Russia should be also somehow involved in the PNI, if it was desired for Moscow not to have reasons to place sticks into its wheels. He reiterated the policy recommendation agreed after the Rome meeting to combine the "3+3" and the PNI formats into a broader "3+5" framework (see #3 from Chapter "Interactive Discussion/Policy Recommendations" of the 21st RSSC SG workshop). In response, another participant concluded that the PNI should start from the core three South Caucasus states, while the "+ n" regional powers should be subsequently added, as appropriate.

PANEL 2: Moving Ahead from Post-War to Peace

This panel highlighted the gaps in the ceasefire "deal" of November 2020, stressing, among other things, the lack of coordination measures between Russian peacekeeping and Azeri forces on the ground, making it difficult to prevent ceasefire breaches, and exposing the whole peacekeeping effort to the spoiling effects of miscreants.

The OSCE Minsk Group strongly discouraged – not to say prohibited – the use of Minsk Group Co-chairs states' militaries as part of a peacekeeping solution in the South Caucasus. Therefore, the presence of Russian peacekeepers goes against that principle. This suggests that the role of the Minsk Group as legitimate conflict management platform has somewhat eroded, but it could be retrieved, provided there was political will on all sides to do so. While this may confirm the geopolitical expulsion of Western powers from large parts of the South Caucasus, it does not solve the human security emergencies in the region.

The recommendation is to focus on people(s), not territory in the short term. Practically speaking, a specific task force (civilian or military) should be appended to the existing peacekeeping mission to expedite demining, as well as ensuring the neutrality of the ongoing peacekeeping effort. Over the longer term, the mutual political will should be devoted to creating a stronger cultural, educational, scientific, business, and civil-society Track 2 diplomatic space.



Others suggested that to get there, there is a need for an un-mediated meeting of the minds, especially between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The aim would be mutual recognition of territorial integrity. While the preference for un-mediated talks is expressed, there can be no neglect of the influence of large powers like Russia, Turkey and Iran over the region. The way forward towards effective peace includes communication and trade “corridors” that would be mutually beneficial. And if trust is to be built, talks about status must be replaced with international guarantees for the political and civil rights of Armenians from Karabakh. Actors likely to support beneficial business linkages should be also included, like the EU. Foreign investment should also focus on health care, education, universities, disaster relief, environment and ecology, cyber and misinformation security, and infrastructure.

It remains to be seen whether the foregoing can be achieved with the great return of Iran on the South Caucasus “chessboard”. Although Iran is apparently less threatening now than it was two months prior this workshop, the military drills held on the border with Azerbaijan are a signal that regional stability must not develop without certain key interests being kept in mind by the South Caucasus states. It would therefore be propitious to revise the Trilateral Agreement of November 2020 in light of these developments. Clarification, precision and follow through are needed. At present, the situation in the Lachin corridor and other districts must be regularized and ceasefire breaches must be prevented. While the situation of prisoners of war (POWs) has been largely implemented, that of internally-displaced persons has not. The understanding of what a “peacekeeping mission” entails seems approximative for the Russian military; while there are officially 1960 troops deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh, there are several others deployed by other Russian ministries.

In the Q&A discussion, a proposal emerged for those cases where border disputes have led to unclear border demarcation thereby endangering the food security of local inhabitants living on both sides of the border. The respective states should be encouraged to negotiate and sign bilateral agreements that would regulate and guarantee for safe cross-border livestock grazing and harvesting. Local governments would be instrumental for the successful implementation of these agreements as they have first-hand knowledge of the local communities’ needs

PANEL 3: Providing for Conflict Management and Resolution

The first speaker addressed the topic from the perspective of a White Paper on Armenia’s foreign and security policy¹. Within that context, she explained the pros’ and cons’ of the “3+3” regional cooperation format while highlighting that this should not be the only platform for dialogue between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. In addition, other platforms of multilateral diplomacy, including the OSCE Minsk Group, should resume their work on conflict mediation,

with a clear and precise mandate approved by the parties. Such regional platforms should not obstruct the parties’ ability to establish direct contacts, and to foster channels for backdoor discussions. Meanwhile, she admitted that Yerevan needs to better understand the goals and objectives which drive the current foreign and security policies of Baku and Ankara, while striving to seek more convergence with its other neighbors (i.e. Georgia and Iran). From this perspective, she wondered why the organizers would not invite Iranian participants to future RSSC SG workshops. Her conclusion was that regional cooperation initiatives (like “3+3” and PNI) should eventually aim at mitigating the geopolitical fragmentation of the South Caucasus.

The next speaker basically echoed most of the themes of the previous one. He pointed out that Armenia is not against any regional cooperation platform, but it sees certain potential risks with each of them, and Yerevan would obviously like to avoid them to materialize. He made a plea for the need for openness and transparency of each regional platform, and for avoiding by all means linking those platforms to great powers’ competition and the ensuing geopolitical fragmentation of the region.

Next speaker offered the Arctic Council as an example of a successful regional cooperation platform. She enumerated a number of similar features which would make comparable the two case studies, while highlighting several advantages the Arctic Council model would offer to meaningful regional cooperation in the South Caucasus. Eventually, she proposed to overcome regional political, security and military divergences by focusing regional cooperation platforms on human security, developing joint economic projects, and on addressing environmental challenges. While the comparison of the South Caucasus regional platforms with the Arctic Council was not welcome by everyone around the table, the conclusions offered were mainly in line with the main thrust of the workshop’s discussion.

Last speaker expressed cautious optimism about the progress achieved so far in the Armenian-Azerbaijani peace process. He thought that now it is a good time to discuss the implementation of various infrastructure connectivity projects, as well as other soft security, economic development and human security issues. He has also offered challenges posed by climate change as a possible future topic to be explored in one of the next RSSC SG workshops. In addition, he argued strongly in favour of ensuring the regional ownership of any regional cooperation initiatives, while stressing that it would have been better if the PNI was proposed jointly by the three South Caucasian states.

INTERACTIVE DISCUSSIONS/POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Initially, the 22nd workshop of the RSSC SG had aimed at discussing a host of different initiatives with a particular focus on the Georgian PNI ideas. But much discussion inevitably focused on its potential geopolitical competition with the “3+3” format (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia + Russia, Turkey,

¹ R. Aydabirian, J. Libaridian, T. Papazian - “A White Paper: the Karabakh War of 2020 and Armenia’s Future Foreign and Security Policies”, July 2021.

Iran), as well as on whether or not either of them should replace the OSCE Minsk Group.

A PNI structure could theoretically accommodate a secretariat, but the importance is to provide mechanisms to discuss particular topics among South Caucasus representatives primarily. A PNI is not only a flexible framework, but it should be also a sum of interchangeable parts aiming to attract external support behind a common vision on peace and stability through regional integration. The platform's purpose would be to integrate the whole of the South Caucasus – with a view to identifying common risks to the region, and finding multilateral solutions, within a changing regional geopolitical context.

1. A PNI, or a PNI-like platform, should be the fruit of a bottom-up initiative to ensure that there is local ownership of the effort by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, first and foremost.
2. As a regional cooperation platform, it should focus on issues of common interest, such as environmental sustainability, transport, energy, water resources, and human security needs. A list of possible areas of cooperation that could be taken into account was agreed at the 3rd Extraordinary RSSC SG Virtual Roundtable, of 7 June 2021 (General Recommendations, item #4).
3. Several sub-platforms would help the PNI address discrete issues directly among stakeholders, such as demographic issues, brain-drain, fighting organized crime, tackling human rights issues, etc.
4. It was suggested that the PNI, or a PNI-like structure, could have a parliamentary component (meaning that members of the respective parliaments in the South Caucasus could also meet occasionally, ostensibly under the auspices of a parliamentary friendship group within the PNI). This would of course bring greater legitimacy to the PNI, but it would also raise its profile.
5. An “official” PNI would therefore attract a lot of attention. If that may be so, the profile of the platform should be kept as low as possible to relieve negotiators from public pressure or unwanted media attention, which could spoil discussions. The PNI should remain a platform designed to achieve small steps, acting in low profile, to produce technical solutions.
6. In support of recommendation 5, above, solutions must not only be pragmatic, but practical. Focus on cross-border activities, education, cultural exchanges, health and welfare for the respective populations.
7. A separate proposal was made to set up a distinct sub-

platform to discuss economic issues. The RSSC SG has chosen to take up this challenge at its next (23rd) workshop in Spring 2022 as a panel (or breakout group) in the agenda. This panel/breakout group could symbolically represent a model for an eventual sub-platform of an “official” PNI.

8. It was also independently suggested to host a symbolic kick-off event, free from outside mediation – ostensibly hosted by Georgia – where the three South Caucasus states would meet to shape a path to “growing regional interdependence”, the end point being better guarantees for human security across the region, and an effective strategic persona to interact with larger powers or other economic regions.
9. A third proposal mentioned a “Marshall Plan” solution where the international community would commit to investing in the peace of the South Caucasus, by way of infrastructural, transport, and energy investment.
10. Another proposal envisaged that imminent action is required to improve the human security of those people who were the most affected by the 44-Day war. Upon invitation from regional states, relevant international organizations, being neutral, should offer their capabilities and field expertise to engage local experts into human security projects. Such engagements could amount to a peace-building measure. (Details in the paper presented by Dr. Elena Mandalenakis²)

While these recommendations give pride of place to the South Caucasus states themselves, we should not forget that the region is a geopolitical crossroads of great interest to Russia, Turkey, Iran, US, EU and even China. Despite this reality, the RSSC SG seemed to find broad consensus over the fact that a “3+2” PNI format (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, EU and US) was premature in the current context. Negotiation and cooperation platforms should be born from the actors which have a primary interest in stabilizing their region. This said, there is room to believe that a PNI, or such an initiative could also welcome external sponsors/contributors to extend regional stability into the geopolitical fabric of the relations between Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 22nd RSSC workshop on “Supporting New Conflict Management Platforms in the South Caucasus”, convened by the PnP Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, 4 – 7 November 2021. They were prepared by Frederic Labarre (Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston) and by Dr. George Vlad Niculescu (European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and layouting came from Mirjam Habisreutinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna). The co-chairs are grateful for the input of all participants, including the comments received from Armine Arzumanyan, Dr. Elena Mandalenakis, Taline Papazian, and Professor Alan Whitehorn.

² E. Mandalenakis - “Possible Steps Towards Armenian-Azerbaijani Peaceful Coexistence”.