

From Self-Defence to Regional Disarmament: Reducing Tensions and Stabilising the South Caucasus

Policy Recommendations

Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus

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Current Events in the South Caucasus

More than a year after Georgia's presidential elections and 6 months after the latest parliamentary elections, relations between Tbilisi and the breakaway regions remain strained. The Sochi 2014 Olympic Games, boycotted by Georgia, are testimony to this, as well as is a relative hardening of the rhetoric with regards to the re-integration of those regions within Georgian territory, as well as the threat of use of the Olympic Games by Russia to make further territorial gains at the expense of Georgia. While there haven't been a resumption of large scale violence in Georgia ever since the 2008 war, the level of harmony between communities has not increased either.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain dependent on Russia for their security, and while South Ossetia readily agrees to be supported by Moscow, the presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia is grounds for disquiet in Sukhum. Currently, Russian troops make themselves scarce in the breakaway region, but puzzling developments continue both in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia. In both cases, a line of separation of increasing solidity has begun to appear in the last several months, with earthworks, razor-wire, monitoring devices, miradors and fences effectively separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia proper. In Abkhazia, the Olympic Games and the alleged threat from Islamist radicals seem to have given Russia a pretext to move back its border some 12 kilometres into the territory of Abkhazia/Georgia. These developments cast a shadow on Abkhazia's claim of effective territorial sovereignty, let alone Georgia's.

Relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan remain tense, and the conflict – as well as the peace process – is frozen. There have been bilateral attempts at resolution, at the initiative of both president Sargsyan and Aliyev in the weeks leading to the 9th Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group. Precious little information has come out from these meetings. Had there been anything of significance, the media would have relayed it, and it is not impossible that the sides may be even farther apart since then. As a matter of fact, on the contact line, very little has moved, and as late as March 26, 2014, an Armenian serviceman had been killed after yet another sniper incident.

To this we cannot fail to add that the crisis in Ukraine has cast a shadow on the proceedings of the 9th RSSC SG. All sides of the conflicts of the South Caucasus have readily grasped the significance of the Crimean referendum, and the decision by Crimean and Russian authorities to effect the re-attachment of that peninsula to Russia proper. There is no doubt that it is in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that the significance of this event is more keenly felt; Armenia, which had sent observers to monitor the Crimean referendum, may be attracted by the idea to legitimize its claim over Nagorno-Karabakh, and the authorities of the Republic there would only be too eager to consent to a Crimean scenario. This leaves few options for Azerbaijan, and the fear now is that the pre-emption of that scenario can only be done through force of arms.

Finally, one cannot exclude Turkey as a vital South Caucasus actor. Although a giant in the region with important interests on the penultimate year before the anniversary of the Armenian genocide, Turkey is facing daunting challenges at home and in its immediate neighbourhood which limits how she can positively influence events in the South Caucasus.

The developments in Ukraine and how the United States, NATO and the EU have responded to Russia's challenge have been of such rapidity that our discussions on the non-use of force in the South Caucasus seemed inapplicable, or even invalid. For the moment, therefore, South Caucasus stability is better entombed in ice than as molten lava in the wake of the Ukrainian events. We feel that when events such as Crimea threaten even the most precarious stability, efforts should be redoubled within the Study Group by facing the facts. In essence, the 9th RSSC SG was a calming exercise and an effort at regional reassurance.

Individual Self-Defence and the State: Establishing Trust towards an Effective Social Contract

This portion of the workshop was greatly helped by the expert involvement of our keynote speakers. The intention of this panel was to unpack the notion that regional groupings should lay down their weapons and returning the responsibility of the populations to the State. In particular, it was clearly demonstrated that increases in defence spending had a direct impact on the level of social and economic development of a country, and that, as a matter of human security, a better balance meant a better social contract.



It was not suggested that the region should undertake a massive de-armament program, merely that a better balance should be achieved. Since this would mean in immediate terms that countries, would need to reduce their share of defence spending (something Georgia has already done), the realization of that balance could be an op-

portunity for a mutual demonstration of good will. From the Georgian side, the notion of a "social contract" extending to all parts of its territory remains hampered not only by the continuing dispute with breakaway regions, but also by the inability of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to perform its work there.



The "social contract" also has ramifications at the inter-State level as well. It was clearly argued that countries in the region, not to mention breakaway regions, had to find security in alliance with larger powers. In terms of what NATO can offer to the region, it was stressed that a mutual transformation had occurred during the years of the Afghan operation between NATO and its partners. The rapidly evolving strategic situation regarding Ukraine hampers NATO's ability to enlarge on the premises of the Bucharest Summit of 2008, which means that a renewed partnership needs to be defined. One would expect, in particular, that a new mission be determined for the Partnership for Peace, one that would positively secure the relationship between NATO and its partners.

Security in the Break-away Regions: How much of a Monopoly on the Use of Force?

The presentations made by representatives of the breakaway regions were unequivocal; for them, Russia remains the prime security guarantor, and the presence of Russian troops either regulars or as a peacekeeping force, is welcomed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As discussed above, the saving grace of what the Georgians call "Russian occupation" is that the human security of Abkhaz and South Ossetian populations which Russian troops provide allows the breakaway regions to avoid the costly diversion of financial resources which so hampers social and economic development particularly in Armenia. It also remains that independence and sovereignty, as concepts of international relations, are nullified by the presence of Russian troops in the breakaway regions. Not only for Georgia alone, but for the regions themselves as well.

It is perhaps for this reason that Nagorno-Karabakh experts continue to argue that the development of an effec-

tive self-defence force should not be imposed from outside, but should be created from within. This way, the balance that was alluded to in Panel 1 can be achieved with a greater degree of control while making the claim of sovereignty and independence real.

One of the more original contributions to this panel came during the interactive discussion. For demilitarization (a term encompassing arms control, disarmament, as well as a functioning “social contract”) to happen from the bottom up, three conditions had to be obtained; first, a working group at expert/technical level had to be convened in a de-politicised atmosphere. Second, the public needed to be prepared for the eventuality of demilitarization (this was termed “psychological” demilitarization, and three, military procurement, force structures and defence expenditure had to be transparent and accountable.

Security Competition among the South Caucasus States: Racing towards Disaster?

This panel gave way to a long discussion on the notion of intentionality. A practical demonstration was given of how a country can decrease its defence spending while also adapting to new regional conditions (especially after the August 2008 war). Apparently, a decrease in defence spending must be accompanied by concrete political steps to offer the possibility of a reduction of tensions, not to mention the guarantee that force will no longer be used to resolve disputes. This is what Georgia has done since the presidential-parliamentary election cycle that took place in 2012 and 2013.

There was wide evidence from the presentation – influenced by the events in Ukraine – that the wider region was suddenly ill at ease, that large powers were affecting the status quo, and that there was a risk that actors internal to the region could take advantage of the unrest to seek a military decision.

The new security environment created by the Ukraine crisis has not helped matters between Armenia and Azerbaijan, or on the Line of Contact (LOC) in Nagorno-Karabakh. There the sniper war continues on a front where 20000 soldiers are present. It was argued that a new format for talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan should be developed, without disengagement from the Minsk Group process. In fact, a bolder approach on the part of the Minsk Co-chairs was heartily recommended.

To stave off disaster in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it was argued that de-militarization of some or all of the seven Azerbaijani districts now under Armenian control should take place under the auspices of the Minsk Group, and provide the de-escalation needed to undertake more meaningful peace talks.

The South Caucasus as Nexus of Large Powers’ Security Dilemma

This panel offered a “realpolitik” point of view of the security competition between large powers beyond the region. It offered a backdrop to the idea that the world was being perceived – once again – as a world divided by different competing civilizations. By definition, this suggests that the countries of the South Caucasus find themselves at the fault line, and that a “choice” must be made. Here again, Russia’s recent involvement in Ukraine provided food for thought as to whether Azerbaijan could one day hope to strike a deal on Nagorno-Karabakh owing to Armenia’s choice of engaging with the Eurasian Union.

Furthermore, it was argued that NATO membership would be the only way to avoid nations being “torn” by that choice, or other strategic and resource rich nations be “grabbed” by Russia. On the other hand, a powerful argument was made that this was not only a contest of nations or civilizations, but of personalities, and that these clashes had played out to the detriment of stability not only in the South Caucasus, but in other regions as well.



There was widespread agreement that insofar as large powers were concerned, arms control, disarmament and demilitarization methods based on the Conventional Forces in Europe protocols were null and void. The CFE had been signed before the collapse of the USSR, and therefore, the geopolitical changes that the collapse had created already hobbled the CFE regime. Rather, it was argued that the Vienna Documents were a more promising avenue to generate confidence between competing powers. In fact, the very principle of verification, especially in the form of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) which came forward in the wake of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, has shown a dramatic increase in the level of security in Georgia, especially along the de facto border between the breakaway regions and Georgia proper over the last five years.

It was also argued that the EU should take a more proactive and cooperative approach in seeking a viable solution to the conflicts in the South Caucasus, preferably in strategic cooperation with Russia and Turkey.

Summary of Recommendations

1. New conflict management mechanisms.

New conflict management mechanisms should be designed or implemented and existing mechanisms should be reinforced. This recommendation goes for all panels, that is, at various levels of analysis.

- It appears that NATO is already moving ahead with a redefinition of the mission of the Partnership for Peace which will bring qualitative security changes for its partners. While this would work well within the NATO framework, this does not address the security dilemma on the ground in Georgia and between Armenia and Azerbaijan.
- A Working Group at the technical expert level should be established by the Minsk Group to develop practical disarmament and demilitarization measures regarding forces (formal and irregular), equipment and training that could be applied in a verifiable manner within relevant territories.
- For Georgia, the EUMM should be strengthened to better cover the territory as well as to meet its evolving mission.

2. Concrete steps towards demilitarization.

It is clear that the tense situation in the South Caucasus, especially between Armenia and Azerbaijan, has to do with mutual mistrust. In this classic security dilemma, concrete steps towards demilitarization should be undertaken at the earliest opportunity by breaking the conflict into minor sub-issues. Hard security issues – sniper withdrawal, and mutual mine clearance – could be supported and sustained through spontaneous on-site verification, perhaps in the framework of the Vienna Documents (see recommendation 4), or an enhancement of the EUMM (in the case of Georgia) or a strengthened role for the Minsk Group (see recommendation 3).

3. Bolder approach by key conflict resolution agents.

This would mean not only a more proactive attitude, but the integration of new functions. For example, recommendation 1 suggests the creation of a non-political working group to discuss issues at the technical level, and present options to the Minsk Co-chairs and negotiating parties. This Working Group could also act as a “bridge” between the elite and civil society, especially to “psychologically prepare” the latter for permanent resolution. A greater EU role has also been advocated. Since the OSCE is the principal conflict resolution agency for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, an enhanced EU role would have to go through the strengthening of the EUMM, as well

as the Eastern Partnership. In the latter case, the Eastern Partnership advantages would act as incentive for conflict resolution. It has furthermore been argued that these incentives should not be seen in exclusivity, and that Russian and Turkish preferences should also be taken into consideration.

4. New arms controls agreements

New arms controls agreements must take into account the qualitative change of modern weaponry, as well as the change in the strategic environment. The CFE Treaty cannot be salvaged. The recent enlargement of NATO, the current crisis in Ukraine, as well as the tensions in the North and South Caucasus make a return to prior levels of force structure limitations on Russia’s southern flank difficult to sustain. Furthermore, the erection of anti-ballistic missile batteries in Central and Eastern Europe, the development of fifth-generation fighters on the Russian side, as well as the permanence of tactical nuclear weapons have to be taken in consideration in any new arms control regime. More to the point, it is felt that a “new cooperative security deal” should be developed between NATO/EU powers, and Russia and its allies to secure the South Caucasus.

5. Involve the population

The United Nations should be invited (by the Minsk co-chairs) to consider outreach activities to relevant populations on the possible scope and application (including verification) of practical disarmament and demilitarization in the region. The UN has considerable expertise in this area and so might respond positively to a request for assistance which again would probably have to come from the Minsk co-chairs. This reflects the central importance of affected populations being aware of possible disarmament/demilitarization options so as to understand their purpose, scope and possible impact; particularly if there are to be weapons restrictions on individuals, then the community needs at a minimum to understand what they involve and why they are necessary; good outreach activities may also lead to better overall measure.

These Policy Recommendations reflect the findings of the 9th RSSC Workshop on “From Self-Defence to Regional Disarmament: Reducing Tensions and Stabilising the South Caucasus”, convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group in Regional Stability in the South Caucasus from 20-22 March 2014 in Istanbul, Turkey. They have been compiled by Frederic Labarre, RSSC co-chair, with input by David Matsaberidze, Peggy Mason and Marcel de Haas. Valuable support came from Ernst M. Felberbauer and Edith Stifter from the Austrian National Defence Academy.