

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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

“After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security”

24th RSSC SG Workshop
03 – 06 November 2022
Reichenau/Rax, Austria

PfP Consortium of Defense
Academies and Security
Studies Institutes



Executive Summary of Recommendations

The Regional Stability in the South Caucasus Study Group (RSSC SG) met 03–06 November 2022 in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, discussed and subsequently agreed on a number of policy recommendations, such as:

1. To urge for greater input/involvement from the European Union in the Armenian-Azerbaijan peace process. This involvement should focus on trust building and the necessity of regional cooperation. In particular, business-to-business contacts through “EU for Dialogue” projects should be established.
2. To lengthen the duration of EU’s civilian monitoring mission on the line of contact, and possibly to roll it into the Frontex scheme.
3. Regional civil society and NGOs via the EU’s support should implement specialized programs designed to stimulate mutual trust: monitoring social media for heinous content; developing a free trade zone, and a broader range of economic incentives to support the peace process; building collective psycho-social resilience.
4. To set up an Armenian-Azerbaijani annual literary contest for regional scholars and writers. The objective would be to collect success stories or fictional accounts of good-neighbourly relations as well as peaceful coexistence from Armenia and Azerbaijan.
5. Official statements should limit vitriolic/provocative rhetoric or positions.

Introduction

The 24th workshop, which took place from 3rd to 6th November 2022, provided the occasion to examine the implications for the countries of the South Caucasus triggered by Russia’s aggression against Ukraine.

The conflagration of which Ukraine has become victim has been brewing for several years, and the current tragedy is a function of geopolitical tensions opposing Russia and the West. Sadly, Ukraine has been the terrain over which this dispute is being settled, but we cannot overlook the possible implications of this conflict on the remaining tensions in the South Caucasus. Against the background of an uneasy cease-fire on the new line of contact between Armenian and Azeri forces in Karabakh, maintained by Russian peacekeeping troops, a number of questions arise, while the parties to this decades-long conflict seek to ink a final peace deal. First, can the weakness of Russian forces embolden Azerbaijan in seeking greater concessions from Armenia, threatening the current cease-fire?

Second, more generally, what will Armenia’s options be when it realizes that it cannot count on Russia for support? Third, might not Georgia be tempted to re-establish its sovereignty over the breakaway regions in the same manner? What are the implications for Georgia’s NATO aspirations while it welcomes thousands of Russian draft- and sanctions-dodgers? Fourth, what to make of Iran’s growing economic and security role in the South Caucasus from the point of view of the European prospects of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and of their engulfment with the Middle Eastern turmoil?

The intention of this workshop was again to stimulate thinking over the fast-evolving security and strategic environment in order to advocate for regional integration and the abandonment of hegemonic “guarantees” as best option for regional security.



What follows is a brief description of the debates that took place, capped by policy recommendations. The co-chairs thank all the participants – whose recommendations these are – and the organizers for making this workshop possible.

Panel 1: Georgian Security, Breakaway Territories, and NATO

This panel was opened by a message by Dr. Alan Whitehorn urging everyone in the region to keep their minds and hearts opened for long-term and peaceful solutions to the conflicts of the South Caucasus. Later, the RSSC SG participants welcomed keynote speaker Ambassador of Canada to France and special envoy to the European Union, H.E. Stéphane Dion, who outlined Canada's programs to support fragile democracies in the region in general, and in particular Armenia. He also mentioned the eventual opening of a permanent Canadian legation in Yerevan.

Much of the presentations that followed underlined the absolute necessity for Georgia to adhere to NATO, and for NATO to open negotiations for accession. Evidently, certain conditions outlined in the Membership Action Plan on which Georgia's eventual NATO membership hinges, have not been met yet. However, the continuing aggression by Russia over Ukraine has triggered a hardening of the Alliance and provided the opportunity to further expand, most famously to Finland and Sweden.

Georgian participants could rightly wonder why the admission of two new members can proceed over an urgent strategic need, while Georgia's admission, which proceeds from the same need, continues to be delayed. The solution proposed has been to extend partial (territorial) membership to Georgia, to account for the obligation of mutual defence for the areas which Tbilisi controls. In other words, it is the same logic that operated in the 1950s, when a truncated (West-)Germany was welcomed into NATO. This idea – recently proposed by think tanks in Washington – is therefore not new. As the Russian menace continues to threaten regional stability, the consolidation of Western democracies' influence in the South Caucasus merits a second look.

A focus was given on the shifting balance of power in the South Caucasus following Russian entanglement in Ukraine. The weakening of Russian regional attention increasingly draws Iran into the region while threatening the fragile Russia-Turkey balance of power established with the ceasefire agreement of the latest Karabakh war. This might have a destabilizing effect on the region, as Turkey-Iran relations would be more competitive not only in Syria, but also in Iraq, and more recently over the issue of the "Zangezur Corridor". It was discussed

whether the West was prepared to share its "sphere of interest" in the South Caucasus with Russia, Turkey and Iran, rather than compete for "spheres of influence" with them.

Panel 2: Nagorno-Karabakh as Once and Future Powder Keg?

This panel discussed the current state of the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process and how it has been affected by the ongoing war in Ukraine. Concern was expressed with this conflict becoming entangled with the Russia-West confrontation, and with the ensuing consequences of Russian long-term engagement in Ukraine. Azerbaijan's insistence that Armenia allowed the opening of the "Zangezur corridor" through Armenian sovereign territory has raised concerns in Teheran over Turkey's alleged plans for regional hegemony. Less Russian and more US and EU presence in the South Caucasus were also hardly liked by Iran who felt its Northern neighbourhood had been increasingly encroached by perceived hostile powers. In the currently tense regional context, Armenia should continue peace negotiations as the main way to avoiding a new war with Azerbaijan. However, concluding a peace agreement by January 2023, as hoped for by some Western capitals, was little likely given the continued uncertainty over the status of Armenians from Karabakh.

The biggest success so far of EU's diplomatic mediation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict consists of their mutual recognition of territorial integrity under the auspices of the European Political Community summit in Prague. In that context, greater EU presence in the South Caucasus seems welcome in spite of an internal debate over the "Western alienation of Azerbaijan". Furthermore, the increasing regional role of Iran in response to a perceived weakening role of Russia was noted, which in turn might lead to stronger Russia-Azerbaijan relations as natural allies against Iran's deeper involvement in the region.

Another topic was how Iran and India perceived current developments in the South Caucasus, and how they were playing in support of Armenia's security policy. Including Armenia into the North-South transport corridor for geopolitical reasons in spite Azerbaijan having a much better infrastructure on offer could serve as an example. Looking at the results of a survey of Iranian experts' views on Iran's role in its neighbourhoods, including in the South Caucasus region, there was dominant dissatisfaction with current Iranian policy and vigorous recommendations for its substantive review. On the other hand, India was both providing economic incentives, by inviting Baku and Yerevan to participate in regional transport projects, and arming Yerevan to resist further against Azerbaijani pressures. By doing so, New Delhi would be seeking to preserve its geo-

economic interests and limit its geopolitical losses against the Ankara-Baku-Islamabad axis.

Participants argued in favour of the EU and US being more actively involved in the peaceful settlement of conflicts in the South Caucasus region, and of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict in particular. Increasing the geopolitical and financial involvement of the West in the region would lead to a significant reduction in the role and influence of Russia. As an example, the creation of a special OSCE Observation Mission was proposed, which could lead to the replacement of Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh. Moreover, in the longer term, the Eastern Partnership could prepare Armenia and Azerbaijan for signing Association Agreements with the EU. A stable and integrated South Caucasus could make a serious contribution to establishing a more functional European security system and would also bring greater stability in the adjacent areas.

Panel 3: The Outer Limits: Ukrainian, Moldovan and Russian Security

This panel was meant to complement the views from the South Caucasian states with broader perspectives on the current security challenges facing Ukraine, Moldova, and the Russian Federation. Clearly, Ukraine and Moldova are directly threatened and largely affected by the Russian war against Ukraine. The focus has been given here on strategic communication of (in)security in Ukraine, and on state institutions' and public perceptions of security threats in Moldova. Additionally, two scenarios facing the global distribution of power were outlined: a bipolar (US-China) world, where Russia would become a junior partner of China; a multi-polar international system where US, and China would still be the most prominent global players, but great powers like Russia, India, Brazil would also play major multi-regional, if not fully global roles. In case the latter scenario was the likelier one, Russia should build its new global role upon multilateral organizations, such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, to replace its broken relations with the West, and re-balance its partnership with China on an equal footing.

Interactive discussions focused on Georgia as a major beneficiary of East-West connectivity. The official strategic goal of the Georgian government is to expand this connectivity and establish Georgia as a hub between East and West. Economically and commercially speaking, Georgia, thanks to its numerous free trade agreements, is "non-aligned". This non-alignment is supported by the fact that Georgia is close to the needs of other countries in the region. All compete for trade corridors and all need to modernize infrastructure. The logical conclusion would be to make the region as a whole

more competitive. This competitiveness could be generated by the evidence that a commercial hub like Tbilisi could help connect suppliers in the Caspian and beyond to the West, by-passing Russian infrastructure (especially in oil and gas).

On the other hand, a general precondition would be for regional actors to honour existing conventions faithfully, arrive at non-use-of-force agreements between all countries, open borders and guarantee respect for human rights. The promotion of contrary ideological notions must be stopped. Rather, it is the region itself which should develop its own strategic objectives with due consideration of hegemonic interests. In order to do this, actors should concentrate on commonalities, and address them frankly. When there are competitive advantages, these should be leveraged to the advantage of the whole region.



New Handbook Project

The Editorial Workshop on launching a new handbook project on "Building Resilience against Human Security Threats and Risks" hashed out the foundations of the new project. Participants agreed that: the project should take a bottom-up approach aiming at developing a better future rather than imposing an external regional vision; it will be developed as an educational project, but its potential regional impact in support of building a new security architecture based on the EU's historical experience is equally important; the content should be de-politicized and reflecting specialist experts' research. Like the first RSSC SG handbook project (www.bundesheer.at/publikation-1139) its scope and contributors' list should not be limited to a specific region, but it should be geographically as inclusive as possible. The focus on strategizing building resilience against human security risks and threats was highly recommended. After the workshop, a summary of conclusions and an outline of the table of contents have been circulated to confirmed and potential contributors.

Policy Recommendations

The following policy recommendations emerged from our interactive discussions pertaining to the current tense geopolitical and strategic context:

1. All participants agreed that a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan was vital for the region's future development and status. They urged decision makers to come to an agreement quickly.

The Armenian-Azerbaijan peace process should welcome greater input/involvement from the European Union. This involvement should focus on trust building and the necessity of regional cooperation. In particular, business-to-business contacts were urged through "EU for Dialogue" projects.

2. Military incursions across the common border were deemed as the most serious and proximate threat to the current Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire. Therefore, it was proposed to lengthen the duration of EU's civilian monitoring mission on the line of contact, and possibly to roll it into the Frontex scheme. EU monitors would increase transparency and deter against a resumption of hostilities, complementing the work of Russian peacekeepers.

3. Specialized programs designed to stimulate mutual trust should be implemented mainly by the regional civil society and NGOs, via the EU's support. Among the initiatives that were discussed, a few attracted our attention:

- Projects to monitor social media for heinous content (bots, fake accounts, graphic content);
- Develop a free trade zone, and implement a broader range of economic incentives to support the peace process;
- Stimulate the involvement of NGOs and civil society in building collective psycho-social resilience.

4. Set up an Armenian-Azerbaijani annual literary contest for regional scholars and writers. The objective would be to collect success stories or fictional accounts of good-neighborly relations as well as peaceful coexistence from Armenia and Azerbaijan. These are then to be honored at an annual prize ceremony where the first, the second and the third prize are to be awarded each for Armenian and Azerbaijani writers.

5. Official statements should limit vitriolic/provocative rhetoric or positions.

Georgia is currently being put under pressure by the influx of Russian draft- and sanctions-dodgers. Since late September 2022, thousands of Russian nationals have been pouring in, and establishing companies to open trade with the outside world.

This means that Georgia is being put in a position where she might be unwittingly or indirectly helping Russia's war effort. Nevertheless, the presence of many anti-war Russians is also an opportunity to deploy soft power. It therefore became urgent to distinguish between those Russians who oppose the war from those who profit from it. This becomes especially important in the context of Georgia's continuing ambitions to join NATO and the EU (notwithstanding the delicate geostrategic position it occupies next to Russia). Thus it is recommended that:

6. The possibility and risks associated with a partial enlargement of NATO to include the areas of its territory which Georgia more directly controls, and how to deal with the most recent wave of Russian immigrants in Georgia be investigated more fully during the next RSSC SG workshop.



These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 24th RSSC workshop on "After 24 February 2022: Imagining South Caucasus Security", convened by the PfP Consortium Study Group "Regional Stability in the South Caucasus" in Reichenau/Rax, Austria, 03–06 November 2022. 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 page-setting came from Sara Milena Schachinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).