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**“Caucasus Stability and
Cooperation Platform”: What is at
Stake for Regional Cooperation?**

Eleni Fotiou



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Abstract

Since the start of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's second term in office (July 2007 to date), which coincided with an upgrading of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Senior Advisor Ahmet Davutoglu's role, Turkey's foreign policy has begun to pursue a regional "soft power" role. The Georgian-Russian war of August 2008 served as a catalyst for Turkey's immediate quest for security in pro-active terms; in the context of the "zero-problems with neighbours" policy ("komşular arası sıfır problem") and "rhythmic diplomacy" ("ritmik diplomasi"), the Turkish leadership proposed the establishment of a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform". In this paper, the author attempts to assess the potential of this initiative by looking at the motives and the leverage of Turkish foreign policy, and by analysing the real position, the perceptions and intentions of the various regional and external stakeholders, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Russia, the United States and the European Union. Essentially, the author seeks to present the limitations of the initiative and the opportunities that emerge through alternative frameworks for regional cooperation.

Keywords

Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations, Turkish foreign policy, regional "soft power", "zero problems with neighbours" policy.

“Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform”: What is at Stake for Regional Cooperation?

Eleni Fotiou*

The idea for a “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform”¹

The initiative for a “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” (CSCP) was made public on 13 August 2008 by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Moscow. However, the Turkish proposal is not at all new. It is mainly a revamped version of an older idea proposed by Turkish President Suleyman Demirel on 16 January 2000 for the establishment of a “Stability Pact for the Caucasus” under the aegis of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The aftermath of the Chechnya war and the fear of spill over to the Southern Caucasus served as the impetus for the original Pact.² The leaders of the Caucasian states had also supported common initiatives,³ but past efforts did not succeed,

** Eleni Fotiou is
Research Fellow
at the
International
Centre for Black
Sea Studies*

¹ It should be noted that the process of identifying the position of the involved states-stakeholders was extremely difficult, because there is a lack of official documents and concrete declarations. Press releases and interviews with experts and officials were used as an additional tool; however, they often contained contradictory and vague statements, due to limited information and knowledge and/or secrecy.

² The then proposed “Stability Pact” was modelled after the Balladur Stability Pact (1994-95) and the “Stability Pact for the Balkans” (1999). It mainly served the purpose of bringing the Caucasus closer to Europe after the end of the Cold War, exactly as the other two initiatives aimed to do for the post-Soviet Eastern Europe and the Balkans respectively, see Sergiu Celac, Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci, *A Stability Pact for the Caucasus*, CEPS Working Document 145 (Brussels: CEPS, 2000).

³ President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia had also proposed a peaceful Caucasus initiative under the umbrella of the BSEC and the enhancement of the BSEC’s political role in the BSEC-EU Cooperation Platform (17/11/1999); President Heydar Aliyev of Azerbaijan had favoured the establishment of a Security and Cooperation Pact for South Caucasus in 1999, whereas the Armenian President

basically because they either excluded significant actors, such as Russia, or their timing did not favour the re-examination of foreign policy priorities and threats, as well as the resolution of the numerous protracted conflicts in the region. Conflicts and various pending political issues interfered with all regional cooperation schemes, whereas the Organisation for Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), despite its inclusiveness and concrete projects, did not manage to serve as a platform for political dialogue. The region has lacked a sense of ownership,⁴ effective regional leadership, common threats, and resources.⁵

After the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008 and the change of status quo, it has been widely understood that the power vacuum and the protracted conflicts put stability at risk. In parallel, economic and energy interdependence and existing cooperation in bilateral or trilateral schemes, made the quest for crisis management even more urgent: Turkey's aspiration to become an energy hub largely depends on Russian gas imports and on sustainable Azeri-Georgian-Turkish cooperation for the transportation of energy resources from Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea to Turkey and then to Europe. Tourism, investments and trade relations are another parameter; Turkish direct investments in Georgia and Russia,⁶ the number of Russian tourists in Turkey,⁷ and the level of trade between Georgia and Turkey⁸ and between Russia and Turkey⁹ show that Turkey cannot afford to lose any of its partners in the region.

Robert Kocharian had supported a similar idea with involvement of all relevant actors (29/3/2000).

⁴ Atila Eralp, "Pan-European Security: Enhancing Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms" (background paper presented at the EUISS Annual Conference "Partnerships for effective multilateralism - Managing global crises", Paris, 30-31 October 2008), 5.

⁵ George Khelashvili, "Towards a strategic respite in the Black Sea Area", in *Transformations in the Black Sea Region*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, no. 42 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, December 2008).

⁶ In excess of half a billion dollars, see M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia and Turkey tango in the Black Sea", *Asia Times Online*, 12 September 2008.

⁷ Some 1.7 million in 2004; see "An historic Turkish-Russian exchange", *Turkey Now*, January 2005, <http://www.turkey-now.org/default.aspx?pgID=111>.

⁸ Annual trade between Georgia and Turkey reaches \$1 billion, see Bhadrakumar, "Russia and Turkey tango in the Black Sea".

⁹ Overall trade between Turkey and Russia is at an all-time high, rising from \$10 billion in 2004, to an estimated \$15 billion in 2006, see Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, "Russia and Turkey in the Caucasus: Moving Together to Preserve the Status Quo?" *Russie.Nei. Visions*, no. 8 (Paris: IFRI, January 2006).

Turkish foreign policy and pursued objectives

Turkey has traditionally pursued relations with the Caucasus and Central Asian states. This strategic approach was basically adopted during Turgut Özal's presidency (1989-93). During Özal's term in office, as well as throughout the 1990s, these foreign policy objectives remained at the discourse level, hostage to the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh and the troubled relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as to the Cold War balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union. After Özal's death in 1993, there was not much strategic thinking about the Caucasus.¹⁰

In more recent times, especially since the start of the second Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's term in office (July 2007 to date), and due to the current challenges in its immediate neighbourhood, Turkey seems to be pursuing the role of an energy hub between the East and the West and a regional "soft power" in the Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the Muslim world.¹¹ This activity can be understood as an alternative foreign policy option to the European Union (EU), or rather as a communication tool towards the West, as a result of the Europeanisation/globalisation processes. A gradual understanding has emerged that contemporary challenges cannot be met by a country on its own; these demand the adoption of a more sophisticated win-win approach and regional cooperation.¹² As President Abdullah Gül put it: "There are a lot of frozen conflicts, but it would be wrong to attempt to keep them in the freezer forever".¹³

The proposal for a CSCP at such a critical juncture serves Turkey's foreign policy priorities for a more pro-active policy in the Caucasus in the context of its "zero-problems with the neighbours" and the "maximum

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Apart from the initiative for a "Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform" and its warming relations with Armenia and Russia, indications of such an aspiration are its mediation efforts between Syria and Israel, Afghanistan and Pakistan, US and Iran, its role in Sudan, and its co-chairmanship of the "Alliance of Civilisations".

¹² On Turkey's regional soft power role and its disillusionment from the West, see inter alia Richard Giragosyan, "Redefining Turkey's Strategic Orientation", *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (Winter 2007); Hasan Ali Karasar, "Saakashvili Pulled the Trigger: Turkey between Russia and Georgia", *SETA Policy Brief*, no. 20 (Ankara: SETA Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, 2008).

¹³ Aris Ghazinyan, "Shifting Neighborhood: What are Turkey's intentions as new movement stirs in Caucasus?" *ArmeniaNow*, 20 February 2009.

cooperation” approach. It is in line with Professor (and now Foreign Minister) Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “rhythmic diplomacy” and “Strategic Depth”¹⁴ as part of a transformation towards a more “independent and assertive” foreign policy formation. This is the result of the country’s rising self-confidence and the emphasis on its multidimensional and “multi-geographical” role.¹⁵ The recognition of Turkey as an important player in the region, which could balance Russia’s role in the Caucasus, would eventually strengthen its international position. It would not only offer an alternative choice (to the West), but also - paradoxically - bring the country closer to the EU and the United States. With this move, the AKP demonstrates its intention to implement a regional strategy not only towards the Middle East and the Muslim world, as is often claimed by the secular opposition, but also towards the Caucasus. This would answer the demands of several lobbies and advocacy groups in Turkey, such as the Turkish Georgians, the Ahiska Turks and Caucasian Diaspora, as well as of a segment of Turkish nationalists - i.e., a foreign policy which enjoys wide consensus.¹⁶

At the same time, it is an excellent tactical move to overcome tensions between Georgia and Russia, which is an issue of “enormous importance”, as former Turkish Foreign Minister, Ali Babacan asserted. During the August war, Turkey adopted a policy of equidistance towards all the parties of the conflict, in order to avoid complications with the pipelines and alienation of its partners - Georgia, the United States and especially Russia: “One of the sides is our closest ally, the United States. The other side is Russia, with which we have an important trade volume. We would act according to what Turkey’s national interests require”.¹⁷

The initiative aimed at accommodating Russia’s “privileged interests” and reconfirming the good state of Russian-Turkish relations, whose great

¹⁴ The foreign policy approach brings Turkey’s Ottoman imperial past to the fore. For an extensive account on the AKP’s foreign policy, see Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik derinlik: Türkiye'nin uluslararası konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position)*, (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001).

¹⁵ “Turkey [...] is a Middle Eastern, a Balkan, a Caucasian, a Central Asian, a Caspian, a Mediterranean, a Gulf and a Black Sea country” (“Türkiye, [...] hem bir Ortadoğu, hem Balkanlar, hem Kafkaslar, hem Orta Asya, hem Hazar, hem Akdeniz, hem Körfez, hem de Karadeniz ülkesidir”), Transcript of a CNN-Turk Programme with Prof. Ahmet Davutoglu, 2 January 2008.

¹⁶ Karasar, “Saakashvili Pulled the Trigger: Turkey between Russia and Georgia”.

¹⁷ Bülent Alirıza, “Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus”, *CSIS Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 9 September 2008).

importance is largely due to Turkey's economic dependence on Russia.¹⁸ Foreign trade, FDIs in Russia, tourism and energy dependence through the Blue Stream gas pipeline required not only a "delicate repair of the damage", but also an upgrading of relations outside the framework of the Armenia-Iran-Russia axis. President Gül's characterisation of Russia and Turkey as "neighbouring states" during his visit to Russia is indicative of Turkey's willingness to warm its relations with Russia and cooperate in the Caucasus.¹⁹

Whilst the Russian and Turkish foreign policy agendas concerning the Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Middle East partially overlap in a number of issues, they also contradict each other: in the Caucasus, both Russia and Turkey emphasise the preservation of stability, however they compete for regional hegemony. Turkey encroached on Russia's position by playing on the Turkic/Muslim Republics, whereas Russia dislikes Turkey's efforts to prevail in the region. In addition, both countries wish to distance the United States from the use of the Black Sea for a potential strike against Iran or for military operations against Iraq. They do not want the Black Sea to become a NATO preserve; even though Turkey is a NATO member state, Russia and Turkey are on the same side in relation to the issue of the Straits and the Montreux Convention; nevertheless, Russian and Turkish interests seem to collide over Europe's energy supply. Russia and Turkey agree on the need to combat terrorism with reference to the Chechnyan and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) secessionist groups, but their positions differ in the cases of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.²⁰

Apart from the importance of Turkey's relations with Russia, the CSCP offered Turkey an opportunity to restore stability in the area and confirm the importance of Georgian-Turkish relations. Georgia is the only direct

¹⁸ Igor Torbakov, *The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, November 2008).

¹⁹ Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey realised the need to implement a "multi-dimensional foreign policy" towards Russia. The first substantial agreement signed by Russia and Turkey recognising their "Eurasian identity" was the "Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia" on 16 November 2001, which established a high-level Joint Working Group and a Caucasus Task Force which consist of officials from both Ministries for Foreign Affairs. On 6 December 2004, a "Joint Declaration on the Intensification of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership" was signed between the two Presidents, which was enhanced with a "New Joint Declaration for Further Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership" signed on 13 February 2009 during President Gül's visit to Moscow (12-15 February 2009).

²⁰ Fiona Hill and Omer Taspinar, "Turkey and Russia: Axis of the excluded", *Survival* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 81-92.

corridor to Azerbaijan, the Caspian energy resources and the Turkic Republics in Central Asia. More significantly, Georgia is Turkey's key energy partner: the viability of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) pipelines, the Nabucco project, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway, which will connect China with Europe, are crucial for Turkey's increasing domestic energy needs, as well as for its aspirations to become an energy transit state indispensable for Europe's need for energy diversification.²¹ Georgia is also an important trade partner, with a bilateral trade increase of almost 230 % over the last five years. As Professor Mitat Çelikpala asserts, "Georgia's instability and civil war is more of a threat to Turkey than a Georgia without territorial integrity".²²

In the aftermath of the Georgian-Russian war, Turkey found itself in the epicentre of instability and in front of a number of dilemmas and security challenges derived from Russia's resurgence, Iraq, Iran and the Caucasus. It seems that the timing for a rapprochement with Armenia was right. The Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, which had begun long before the August crisis, as well as Turkey's need to warm relations with Russia, were promoted both by the security establishment and the economic elite. It is widely maintained in Turkey that the country's security establishment and Foreign Ministry have been strategically oriented towards the East and the Caucasus and are willing to improve Russian-Turkish and Armenian-Turkish relations.²³ General Tuncer Kılınç for example, an influential figure and the former Head of the National Security Council, believes that "Turkey should work on an alliance in the East alternative to the EU" implying enhanced cooperation with Russia, China and Iran.²⁴

A policy reversal and an eventual opening of the borders would not only add credibility to the proposal and to Turkey as an honest-broker, but also further enhance Turkey's role as an energy hub. A closed-door policy to date has not brought about any concrete results in the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and has imperilled relations with Russia and the West.²⁵ The CSCP

²¹ Giragosyan, "Armenia and the New Turkish Proposal", <http://www.noravank.am/en/?page=analitics&nid=1332>

²² Mitat Çelikpala, "Kafkaya'daki Son Gelişmeler, Küresel Hâkimiyet Mücadelesi ve Türkiye", *ASAM Stratejik Analiz* 9, no. 101 (Ankara: ASAM, September 2008), <http://www.asam.org.tr/temp/temp1141.pdf>.

²³ Torbakov, *The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations*.

²⁴ Ihsan Dağı, "A Pro-Russian Turkish General?" *Journal of Turkish Weekly* 31 (May 2007).

²⁵ International Crisis Group, "Turkey and Armenia: Opening minds, opening borders", *Europe Report*, no. 199, 14 April 2009, 1-33.

would include the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement process, which would not only benefit Turkey economically - by lowering the transit costs for trade with Central Asia - but it would also have positive repercussions in terms of security, through the economic development of the Kurdish-populated areas in the east and the expected decrease of Kurdish extremism.²⁶ An opening of borders would render Turkey's regional leverage more credible. In addition, in an attempt not to destroy the positive climate in Armenian-Turkish relations, an eventual opening would probably forestall the Resolution recognising the Armenian Genocide in the US Congress;²⁷ especially in light of the fear of alienation of the Jewish lobby in the United States due to the incident at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 29 January 2009.²⁸

It is assumed that the proposal for a CSCP had been discussed in the Foreign Ministry long before the August crisis, but the political mandate was given by President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan.²⁹ It is true that after the start of accession negotiations with the EU, the government's role in regional affairs and foreign policy-making has been enhanced,³⁰ but given the fluidity and transition of Turkey's decision-making processes, it is premature to jump to quick conclusions on foreign policy decision-making agents.

Regardless of the proposal's origins, more importantly the initiative seems to serve a number of Turkey's foreign policy objectives, which appear to be sufficiently compatible with the rest of the stakeholders' priorities in order not to reject it at this early stage. As a "blind shot"³¹ or intelligent move with potential, prestige-seeking or result-oriented initiative, it has certainly complemented efforts to raise Turkey's regional prestige and to substantiate Turkey's pro-active foreign policy not only in the Caucasus, but as part of an overall approach for a "soft power" regional leadership.

²⁶ Richard Giragosyan, "Redefining Turkey's Strategic Orientation", 7.

²⁷ The Armenian Genocide Resolution (H. Res. 106) was introduced on 30 January 2007 and it was submitted to the House of the Representatives during the 110th United States Congress.

²⁸ Amberin Zaman, "Crisis in the South Caucasus: Turkey's Big Moment?" *On Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: GMF, 25 August 2008).

²⁹ Interview with expert, Athens, April 2009.

³⁰ Cengiz Aktar, "Turkey's Obsession with Mediation", *Middle East Times*, 11 February 2009.

³¹ Yasemin Congar, "Caucasus Plan Void without Yerevan", *Turkish Daily News*, 18 August 2008.

The position of the stakeholders

The greatest difficulty for the implementation of such a platform is its synthesis. There is no possible way for more than three states to cooperate under the current circumstances. Maximum cooperation can be achieved only among Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, whereas all the other states can operate only in pairs, with cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey, Georgia and Russia being quite problematic. Armenia and Russia could support the inclusion of three more state formations: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh,³² a claim that would nullify any chance for the initiative's success, given that Azerbaijan and Georgia would withdraw; whereas Iran, an influential regional player is excluded. Good relations between Russia and Turkey is a positive element, taking into consideration that the two countries have a stake in the stability and peace in the South Caucasus, however it is clear Russia that enjoys maximum leverage in the region. The role of external stakeholders, such as the United States and the EU cannot be ignored, taking into account the US energy stakes in the Caspian Sea,³³ as well as the EU membership aspirations of the Caucasian states and their willingness to maintain bilateral relations with the EU, rather than cooperate with each other.

Armenia: in need of a way out of the deadlock

The Georgian-Russian war signalled the need for Armenia to resolve its disputes with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The lifting of isolation has become a pressing issue for the country's development, democratic consolidation and integration in the region. An opening of borders with Turkey would strengthen FDIs and trade capacity, and would also upgrade Armenia's role by providing it with an additional transport route from Central Asia to Turkey and then to Europe.³⁴

Armenia seems to understand that the CSCP initiative cannot be implemented without putting conflict resolution and the peaceful

³² Ghazinyan, "Shifting Neighbourhood: What are Turkey's intentions as new movement stirs in Caucasus?"

³³ For an extensive account, see Soli Ozel, Suhnaz Yilmaz and Abdullah Akyüz, *Rebuilding a partnership: Turkish-American relations for a new era, a Turkish perspective* (Istanbul: Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association [TUSIAD], April 2009).

³⁴ International Crisis Group, "Turkey and Armenia: Opening minds, opening borders", 1-33.

settlement of disputes at the top of the agenda.³⁵ Any cooperative effort depends on the opening of the Armenian-Turkish borders and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on top of the launching of the CSCP.

The Armenian-Turkish rapprochement began at the public level in September 2008 with the first ever visit by a Turkish President to Yerevan.³⁶ From the very first stages, Turkey had to ensure Azerbaijan's consent, because the lifting of the isolation of Armenia is linked to Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Armenian Genocide issue. These issues encounter Azerbaijan's resistance and opposition in Turkey by the nationalist segments of Turkish society, and stumble upon the role of the Armenian Diaspora, which puts the issue of recognition of the Armenian Genocide in the context of the Turkish-US relations.³⁷ It is not far-fetched to argue that Armenian-Turkish rapprochement and the debate related to the opening of the borders prior to the President's Obama visit to Turkey in April 2009 has also served as a tool to postpone the US Congress Resolution on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide.

Armenia holds a positive stance towards the CSCP as an independent platform at expert level complementary to the OSCE Minsk Group for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The issues of good-neighbourly relations and peaceful resolution of disputes are at the top of its agenda; while low politics, such as energy and economic cooperation, could facilitate communication between Armenia and Turkey.³⁸

However, given the agreement between Armenia and Iran for the construction of a railway, which is referred to by the Turkish media as "Armenia's Plan B", Armenia has doubts about the success of the CSCP initiative without Iran's participation. Armenia does not consider undermining the Armenia-Iran-Russia axis, or decreasing the importance of Armenian-Turkish relations by letting Turkey place them in the framework of Russian-Turkish relations.

³⁵ Interview with Armenian official, Athens, April 2009.

³⁶ After the "soccer diplomacy" that gave both publics the first signs of rapprochement, on 29 January 2009 the Turkish and Armenian Prime Ministers met in Davos and by the beginning of February talks between the Foreign Ministers with the active involvement of the Presidents started.

³⁷ Ozel, Yilmaz and Akyüz, *Rebuilding a partnership: Turkish-American relations for a new era, a Turkish perspective*.

³⁸ Interview with Armenian official, Athens, April 2009.

Azerbaijan: seeking to preserve its negotiating cards

For Azerbaijan, every regional cooperation initiative is conditional to prior liberation of the Azeri territory and the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue according to the relevant UN Resolutions,³⁹ which call for withdrawal of the Armenian troops, the restitution of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and the return of the refugees.⁴⁰ According to Azerbaijan, Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) and the opening of channels of communication between the parties to the conflict are subject to prior signing of peaceful agreements and settlement of the conflict, given that specific projects for cooperation already exist either under the umbrella of the BSEC or in the framework of existing pipelines, such as the BTC and BTE or the BTK railway project. It is indicative that the Azeri President, Ilham Aliyev, stated that "before finding a way to solve the Karabakh issue, if Turkey cuts a deal with Armenia, we could cut off the natural gas flow to Turkey"⁴¹; Aliyev also refused to participate in the Second Forum of the Alliance of Civilisations held in Istanbul on 6-7 April 2009.

Azerbaijan does not favour rapprochement between Armenia and Turkey taking into consideration that an eventual opening of the borders would strengthen Armenia's position and negotiating capacity over Nagorno-Karabakh. The warming of Russian-Turkish relations implies the degradation of Azerbaijan's mediating role; and Russian and Turkish co-leadership in the region could possibly undermine the US-Azerbaijan bond. However, Azerbaijan is unwilling to gang up with the US against Russia. Azerbaijan also has EU membership aspirations;⁴² as such it favours an EU role in the region. As a small-sized country with strong energy and economic potential, it prefers the involvement of regional and international organisations or big external powers.

³⁹ The relevant UN Security Council Resolutions passed during the Nagorno-Karabakh war are: S/RES/822 (1993), S/RES/853 (1993), S/RES/874 (1993) and S/RES/884 (1993).

⁴⁰ Interview with Azeri official, Athens, April 2009.

⁴¹ Emrullah Uslu, "Ankara-Yerevan Rapprochement Strains Turkey's Relations With Azerbaijan", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 68, 9 April 2009.

⁴² Interview with Azeri official, Athens, April 2009.

Georgia: in an attempt to regain its territorial integrity

Georgia's top foreign policy priority is its relations with the EU and future membership,⁴³ thus it favours regional cooperation mainly in the context of EU or other international structures such as OSCE. The CSCP is welcomed by Georgia, as President Saakashvili declared, as a complementary platform to existing EU structures that should not "create any mechanism that would exclude the EU or other big players in the region". It seems that if the initiative had been launched under the aegis of the EU - in the framework of the Eastern Partnership or the Black Sea Synergy - Georgia would have been more actively engaged, given that like all aspiring EU member states, it aims at strengthening its bilateral ties with the Union.

Moreover, Georgia would support any initiative that would reduce the tensions in the region, but in the case of the CSCP, it follows a "wait and see policy".⁴⁴ Among the issues in the Platform's agenda, conflict resolution should be included.⁴⁵ Driven by the threats to its territorial integrity and its willingness to return to the status quo ante the August war, Georgia has strained relations with Russia and opposes any proposal for the inclusion of new state entities in the Platform, since this would be detrimental for the fate of the initiative.⁴⁶

Russia's predominance in the Caucasus, as well as the "spheres of influence" game between Russia and Turkey are seen negatively. However, Georgia would not want to jeopardise its military partnership and economic cooperation with Turkey.⁴⁷

Russia: defining the rules of the game

Russia's foreign policy especially after the August war revealed its *Realpolitik* tenets and its zero-sum approach towards the US role in the

⁴³ Interview with Georgian official, Athens, April 2009.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ In 2006, Georgia received \$1,8million in military aid from Turkey and Turkey assists Georgia in the field of military training, see Gareth Jenkins, "Turkey caught in a dilemma over South Ossetia", *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5, no. 153, 11 August 2008.

Caucasus.⁴⁸ Russia's aim is mainly to counterbalance the US and NATO influence and position in the region and the EU's expansion to the Caucasus. By proposing a legally binding European Security Treaty that would replace the politically binding 1990 Charter of Paris for a New Europe and the 1999 Charter for European Security, Russia is probably trying to undermine NATO's role and establish a European order in which Russia would play a decisive role.⁴⁹ Seen as a matter of "spheres of influence", initiatives that bring the South Caucasus close to Euro-Atlantic integration are consistently challenged, whereas independent and indigenous schemes which exclude external actors are highly appreciated.

In this context, Russia is supportive of the Turkish initiative, because it excludes the US from the scheme, thereby reducing American influence and restoring local ownership in the region, where Russia is the "indisputable leader". However, as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, the CSCP is visualised as "something like ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)", a loose forum of dialogue, which implies that the Russians would not seem willing to put too much effort in this initiative.⁵⁰

Whether of tactical character or not, it is worth noting that Russia's support to the CSCP reveals another side of Russian diplomacy. Russia's priority in the region is to limit the conflict potential and increase stability. Despite the fact that Russia dislikes encroachments into its spheres of influence, it recognised the commonality of interests with Turkey and welcomed the initiative by adopting a pragmatic approach and accepting political dynamism on behalf of Turkey in the Caucasus. Russia and Turkey are partners not only in energy, trade and tourism, but also in the military and defence industry,⁵¹ and today Russia perceives Turkey as a potential ally to contain US influence in the Caucasus and the Black Sea.⁵² This perception is fed by Turkey's independent foreign policy formation, confirmed during the American operation of Iraq, as well as during the Georgian-Russian war.

⁴⁸ For an extensive account on Russia's foreign policy and EU-Russia relations, see Nadia Alexandrova-Arbatova, *Regional Cooperation in the Black Sea Area in the Context of EU-Russia Relations*, Xenophon Paper, no. 5 (Athens: ICBSS, 2008).

⁴⁹ Jean-Christophe Peuch, "OSCE discusses European security", *EurasiaNet*, 4 December 2008.

⁵⁰ Bhadrakumar, "Russia and Turkey tango in the Black Sea".

⁵¹ For an extensive account on Russian-Turkish relations, see Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Turkey's Political Relations with Russian Federation", http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-political-relations-with-russian-federation.en.mfa.

⁵² Torbakov, *The Georgia Crisis and Russia-Turkey Relations*.

Russia supports the Armenian-Turkish rapprochement because of the absence of the US and the EU in the process, Georgia's potential isolation and the establishment of an alternative energy route to Armenia from Turkey. Nonetheless, if the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh were resolved and Armenia played the role of an alternative transit country of Caspian resources to Europe, Turkey's role would indirectly harm Russian interests.⁵³

The United States: a change of conduct

Turkey's geostrategic importance for the United States can hardly be disputed. The US's energy stakes in the Caucasus and the Middle East, as well as the quest for combating religious fundamentalism and restoring peace in the region have promoted Turkey as a role model and regional leader.⁵⁴ Its significance is further appreciated because Turkey is the only NATO ally bordering the Caucasus and because the US needs to access the Black Sea through the Dardanelles and Bosphorus Straits.

However, Turkey's placement in the West both during the US operations in Iraq, and more recently, during the Georgian-Russian war - at least at the rhetorical level - was questioned. President Obama's visit to Turkey restored its reputation as one of the US's closest allies; the fact that Turkish foreign policy nowadays focuses on reinforcing Turkey's position in the East and Turkey's role as a bridge between the Orient and the West makes Turkey an even more attractive partner for the US. The debate as to Turkey's Western orientation taking place in the media and in EU circles is usually generated by the EU or policy-makers from its member states and by Turkish secular intellectuals who oppose the AKP's policies, who mainly refer to the delay in democratic reforms as a prerequisite for the absorption of European values. Yet, Turkey is one of the US's favourite allies not because of its Western liberal political culture, but essentially because it is "the most Western country of the Orient and the most Oriental country of the West".⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ For an extensive account on US stakes in the Black Sea, see Ian O. Lesser, *Global Trends, Regional Consequences: Wider Strategic Influences on the Black Sea*, Xenophon Paper, no. 4 (Athens: ICBSS, 2007).

⁵⁵ "We have said for centuries that we were the bridge between the West and the Orient, but we attached more importance to the West" (speech delivered by Egemen Bağış at the Izmir Atatürk Industrial Zone, 23 March 2009).

It is claimed that the US was “surprised” by the CSCP initiative, because Ankara bypassed Washington by not seeking a transatlantic consensus;⁵⁶ however, some question the lack of prior notification to the US and remember that the idea was also presented during the NATO anniversary summit in Washington in 1999.⁵⁷ The US maintains very good relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia, and is influenced by the Armenian lobby. Still, US long-term interests in Turkey cannot be easily put at stake: Turkey is a NATO ally in Afghanistan, necessary for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, important because of its mediation services between Syria and Israel, Pakistan and Afghanistan, Iran and the US, and crucial for counterbalancing Russia’s resurgence and involvement in the Caucasus.

The European Union: in a struggle for stability with hands tied

The Georgian-Russian war highlighted once again the importance of stability and security in the EU’s new immediate neighbourhood. The launching of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004, that has been complemented by the Black Sea Synergy in 2008 and strengthened by the Eastern Partnership in 2009, is in many regards a clear indication of the importance that the EU attaches in supporting regional cooperation and development in this troubled region.⁵⁸ Indeed, reading the various Presidency Conclusions, the recent EC Communications and the “Joint Declaration of the Eastern Partnership” in 2009, it becomes quite clear that the EU’s key priorities in the region are basically the energy security conundrum, the promotion of bilateral, multilateral and regional cooperation through the establishment of good neighbourly relations and the creation of the conditions that would allow for the resolution of the protracted conflicts.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Alirıza, “Turkey and the Crisis in the Caucasus”.

⁵⁷ Mehman Aliyev, “From the Balkan Pact to the Caucasus Stability Pact”, *Zerkalo Azerbaijan*, 27 September 2008.

⁵⁸ For an extensive account on the Black Sea Synergy and the Eastern Partnership, see Yannis Tsantoulis, “Black Sea Synergy and Eastern Partnership: Different Centres of Gravity, Complementarity or Confusing Signals?” *ICBSS Policy Brief*, no. 12 (Athens: ICBSS, February 2009).

⁵⁹ For more information on the EU’s official position, see: Council of the European Union, *Joint Declaration of the Prague Eastern Partnership Summit*, Prague, 7 May 2009; European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, Eastern Partnership*, COM(2008) 823 final, Brussels, 3 December 2008; Council of the European Union, *Brussels European Council 15/16 October 2008, Presidency Conclusions*, 14368/08, Brussels, 16

In this context, the EU has every reason to welcome the Turkish initiative for a CSCP and the concrete steps taken towards the normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations, as stated by Commissioner Olli Rehn at the Bosphorous Conference in October 2008.⁶⁰ In addition, an eventual opening of the Turkish-Armenian border would serve as a catalyst for the de-escalation of conflicts and the demilitarisation of the region, as well as for the region's economic development. It would also create an alternative transport route, and could be used as a communication tool in favour of Turkey's membership in the EU, given that the argument of Turkey's dynamism in Europe's wider neighbourhood as a substitute to the implementation of criteria required for full membership in the EU does not seem to be effective.

Challenges and opportunities

The Caucasus is tormented by protracted conflicts and there is a lack of effective security mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution.⁶¹ The Georgian-Russian war revealed the colliding interests of the region's stakeholders - whether local or external - and demonstrated the urgency of the security situation in terms of energy sustainability. The demand for new foreign policy prioritisation on behalf of the local players and for a regional focus on behalf of the international community has created the need for a new understanding of the challenges and for constructive thinking as to the ways to establish security platforms.

It is unavoidable that the Nagorno-Karabakh question ought to be part of the agenda of such an initiative complementary to the OSCE Minsk Group,

October 2008; Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on Georgia*, 2889th External Relations Council meeting, Brussels, 15 and 16 September 2008; European Commission, *Communication on the Report on the first year of implementation of the Black Sea Synergy*, COM(2008) 391 final, Brussels, 19 June 2008; European Commission, Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament, *Black Sea Synergy: A New Regional Cooperation Initiative*, COM(2007) 160 final, Brussels, 11 April 2007.

⁶⁰ "Turkey has the potential to play a vital role in advancing regional cooperation in the Caucasus, and I was glad to see the Turkish government proposing initiatives [...]", Olli Rehn, "Turkey and the EU: a win-win game" (keynote speech of Commissioner for Enlargement Olli Rehn to open the Bosphorus Conference, CER/British Council/TESEV, Istanbul, 10 October 2008), http://www.cer.org.uk/articles/speech_rehn_bosphorus_10oct2008.html.

⁶¹ Bruno Coppieters, "A Regional Security System for the Caucasus", in *The Future of the Caucasus after the Second Chechen War*, ed. Michael Emerson and Nathalie Tocci, CEPS Working Document, no. 148 (Brussels: CEPS, July 2000).

because this issue hampers cooperation among three out of the five stakeholders (namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey). The normalisation of Armenian-Turkish relations prior to the resolution of the conflict can be understood as a requirement for increasing the chances of the implementation of the CSCP. Hence, it would be easier for Turkey to facilitate negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and contribute to the resolution of the dispute.⁶²

The economic and energy stakes of such a development seem to be higher than the cost of the resolution of the conflict in a crucial energy environment, where the politicisation of the pipeline routes interferes with the investment processes. The Caucasus and the Black Sea are at the epicentre of the energy game, through which the most important energy corridors connecting the Caspian resources with the European markets pass and challenge Russia's energy primacy.

The Caucasus used to be a conflict zone between Russia and the US during the Cold War and it has continued to be an area of dispute even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the course of the struggle by Russia and the US for control over the world's energy resources.⁶³ The August war reminded the West that Russia is the main power centre in Eurasia and that it has stakes in its Near Abroad. As such Russia assumes the right to take part in the formation of the rules of the game, especially considering Kosovo's independence. The war also challenged the EU's role in the region and rendered the delineation of the remits of each actor in the EU-Russia-US triangle more complicated.

The Caucasian states spend large amounts for their military budget, and lack a culture of cooperation, democratic institutions, and common objectives; thus trade, investments, economic interdependence and social development in general, are at relatively low levels. Another impediment of any conflict resolution effort is domestic opposition: during negotiations, compromises are necessary, which usually bear the possibility of political cost. The opening of the Armenian-Turkish border, the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the state of Georgian-

⁶² Atila Eralp, "Pan-European Security: Enhancing Conflict Prevention and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms" (background paper presented at the EUISS Annual Conference "Partnerships for effective multilateralism-Managing global crises", Paris, 30-31 October 2008), 5.

⁶³ Zbigniew Brzezinski has characterised Eurasia as a "grand chessboard", Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997).

Russian relations would probably meet high resistance on behalf of the nationalist segments of the region's societies.

However, is the CSCP a suitable framework for the resolution of disputes and the development of regional cooperation? In other words, is the timing right and is Turkey the right messenger?

From a geostrategic and economic perspective, Turkey is of incontestable importance to the region, the EU and the US. Turkey provides the EU with an alternative energy corridor, thereby enhancing diversification, and it is a US ally in a position to serve as a supply route for the American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as to counterbalance Iran's nuclear ambitions and the rising power of Russia.⁶⁴ Long-lasting economic ties with the West and military cooperation with Israel, and the fact that Turkey, as a predominantly Sunni-Muslim country, is the most suitable mediator between Israel and Syria or Hamas cannot easily be challenged. Arguably, in the aftermath of the Georgian-Russian war and by maintaining an equidistance policy, Turkey managed to ameliorate its image in the Caucasus and reminded all regional stakeholders that all conflict-resolution and peace-building efforts cannot take place without Turkey's participation.

However, Turkey's image as a "peacemaker" and an honest broker suffered severe damage due to Erdogan's stance at the World Economic Forum. Additionally, Turkey has to resolve a number of pending issues, such as the state's relations with the Kurds of Turkey and northern Iraq, the reopening of borders with Armenia, the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement, the eventual recognition of the Republic of Cyprus, and the Aegean dispute with Greece. In the Caucasus, Georgia and Russia are both Turkey's strategic - economic and energy - partners, but they are not willing to cooperate with each other. An agreement on a CSCP is not easy to reach due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Azerbaijan's agitation against any potential rapprochement between Turkey and Armenia and/or Russia. On top of all this, Turkey's domestic problems and the global economic crisis that precipitated an additional IMF deal further worsen Turkey's image in the West.

Stakeholders in the Caucasus do not necessarily share similar views over the future of the region and even if they did, they certainly would have different motives. Russia is the most powerful stakeholder; thus the region has become a terrain where the rivals of the Cold War meet again in order

⁶⁴ For an extensive account on Turkey's regional leadership aspirations see also Amberin Zaman, "Turkey after Davos: Risks, Opportunities, and an Unpredictable Prime Minister", *On Turkey* (Washington, D.C.: GMF, 13 February 2009).

to “struggle for global hegemony”.⁶⁵ At the regional level, the game is mainly in the hands of Russia, whereas Turkey strives for an enhancement of its role.

Despite the positive developments as to the relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan,⁶⁶ the Turkish initiative for a CSCP to date has not managed to gather the utmost attention and interest of the other stakeholders or to stimulate their active involvement and engagement for the success of the idea. It seems that apart from Turkey - which began to improve its public image and leverage when the idea was first launched - none of the other partners is willing to devote time and energy to make this proposal work. Moreover, to date, given the recent developments after President Obama’s visit to Turkey and the state of negotiations between Armenia and Turkey regarding the opening of the borders, Turkey has developed a pro-active policy in the Caucasus, mainly at the discourse level. This leads us to assume that given the impediments to such an initiative, the Turkish proposal is more one of tactics and prestige, rather than a result-oriented move.

Taking into consideration that a number of international organisations and financial institutions have developed many programmes, projects and mechanisms,⁶⁷ would the CSCP be more effective if it operated under the

⁶⁵ Çelikpala, “Kafkaya’daki Son Gelişmeler, Küresel Hâkimiyet Mücadelesi ve Türkiye”.

⁶⁶ The Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met on the margins of the EU Summit in Prague in May 2009, as well as with the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, the same week; President Aliyev made unusually warm statements; President Medvedev and US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Matthew Bryza seem to consider peace between the two countries “possible”; and the Armenian-Turkish roadmap to normalise bilateral relations has created a positive mood. See Konul Khalilova, “Can thaw unstick frozen conflict?” *BBC Azeri.com*, 6 May 2009.

⁶⁷ Apart from the EU, the BSEC and the OSCE, there is a UN Mission in Georgia; in the framework of NATO’s Partnership for Peace, Georgia and Azerbaijan agreed on Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs), Georgia is candidate for membership in the Alliance and there is a NATO Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its relevant cooperation schemes, such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC), the Common Economic Space, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Inter-parliamentary Assembly and the Election Observation Missions cover the area as well; Georgia and Azerbaijan participate in the GUAM Organisation for Democracy and Economic Development (ODED-GUAM); international financial institutions, such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International, as well as the European Bank for Reconstruction and

umbrella of an existing scheme? It is true that most of the regional cooperation structures have failed to promote political debate and conflict resolution, mainly because they excluded some of the region's stakeholders, and due to lack of political will. The potential partners of the CSCP have welcomed the proposal as an independent initiative; however past practices have demonstrated that when an initiative is based on existing structures and with better coordination of funds, the results are usually better.

The EU could on the one hand, take the lead and include the CSCP in the context of ENP, possibly in the framework of the BSEC-EU Interaction and in coordination with the EU-Russia dialogue. The EU enjoys legitimacy from all the Caucasian states, which aspire for a closer relationship with the Union, and has the know-how and the funds to support specific projects, such as networks of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Think Tanks as CBMs to sustain political and civic dialogue.⁶⁸ The BSEC has to date avoided addressing the sensitive issues troubling the region, but its member states have already agreed on specific norms and institutions, and have worked on specific projects on energy, transport, infrastructure, communications and the environment. Today, with the EU's involvement and funds, we can "build on BSEC rather than duplicate it with a new initiative"⁶⁹ more than in the past in order to serve wider political ends.

Another idea is to put the CSCP under the auspices of the OSCE as a complementary platform to the OSCE Minsk Group and to any other group that may operate for reconstructing peace and security in the area of the Caucasus. The OSCE reserves the position of a Personal Representative of the Chairman-in-Office on the Conflict dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Group, and has offices in Baku and in Yerevan, and a Mission to Georgia. Consequently, it holds more mechanisms that could receive and coordinate all relevant information.

The legal legitimacy, however, is an open question. In light of the Russian proposal on a European Security Treaty, it is fruitful to elaborate on the

Development (IBRD and EBRD), and the European Investment Bank (EIB) allocate funds for financial assistance to the Caucasian states.

⁶⁸ For example, in the framework of the Union for the Mediterranean/Barcelona Process, the EU supports platforms, such as the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission (EuroMeSCo), the Euro-Mediterranean Forum of Institutes of Economic Sciences (FEMISE) and the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures (ALF).

⁶⁹ Celac, Emerson and Tocci, *A Stability Pact for the Caucasus*, 34.

idea of including the CSCP initiative in the agenda of negotiations for a new Treaty, a legally binding international document that was agreed upon under the assumption that "no single state or international organisation may have the exclusive right to maintain peace and stability in the region".⁷⁰ If the states of this turbulent region are sincerely interested in resolving the protracted conflicts, restoring peace and stability, and promoting development in this crucial part of the globe, they can become actively engaged by signing onto an internationally approved document that would have a positive impact and immediate results in the region of the Caucasus. It is only within such a multilateral context that the CSCP could be successfully implemented.

⁷⁰ Peter Cassata, "Medvedev Proposes New 'European Security Treaty'", *Atlantic Update*, 9 October 2008, http://www.acus.org/atlantic_update/medvedev-proposes-new-european-security-treaty.

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International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)

4 Xenophontos Str.

10557 Athens, Greece

Tel: +30 210 324 2321

Fax: +30 210 324 2244

Email: icbss@icbss.org

Website: www.icbss.org

Director General: Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou

Managing editor: Olga Borou

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