

NATO's Policy in South Caucasus and future perspectives

The North-Atlantic Alliance remains a uniquely capable organization which proved it had an ability to rapidly adapt to the new realities and to face the newly emerged threats and challenges, such as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, energy security issues, cyber threats and etc. In over 60 years of its existence NATO has undergone several transformations and adopting the new strategic concept until 2020. NATO clearly underlines that in this global world of today one single organization, no matter how efficient and capable, will not manage to address the multifaceted challenges alone, therefore, the new concept acknowledges and underlines importance of its partnerships with international organizations, institutions and states around the globe.

Among the NATO partner countries some are interested in becoming full members of NATO and others are attracted in maintaining some kind of practical and bilateral cooperation with the North-Atlantic Alliance rather than its membership.

This difference between the partners is best reflected in the South Caucasus region, due to differences between the states in pursuing their foreign policy priorities. On the one hand it's Georgia, with the clear NATO membership aspirations and on the other hand Azerbaijan and Armenia, seeking merely bilateral, practical cooperation with NATO, which in its term, defines NATO's policy towards these states.

After the dissolution of Soviet Union, South Caucasian countries have experienced numerous challenges, starting with civil wars and regional conflicts that resulted in hundreds of thousands of IDPs and refugees, continued by the economic crisis, poverty, corruption, demography problems and etc. Despite certain cultural homogeneity throughout the history, the three countries differ significantly, both internally as well as in term of heir geo-political orientations, with each of them taking a distinct path since the fall of USSR and regaining their independences.

Being geographically located on the most essential crossroad linking the West and East, North and South of the Eurasia, the South Caucasus has always drawn the attention of superpowers and while aspiring to strengthen their military political influence, they attached significant importance to taking control over this particular crossroad.

The South Caucasus has in recent years surged to the geopolitical center stage as a result of three processes: first, the recession of Russian power after 1990, which gave the region's states a historic chance to pursue a Western orientation; second, the discovery since the mid-1990s of the real potential of Caspian oil and gas, which provides with the unique transit corridors from Caspian energy supplies to the Euro-Atlantic area; and, third, the operational requirements of antiterrorism coalitions after 9/11 and offering direct access for allied forces to NATO-led operations. Furthermore, the unpredictable situations in Iran and Syria also increase the geopolitical importance of the Caucasus for NATO, especially taking into account the common border shared by Armenia, Iran and Azerbaijan, with the controversial bilateral relationship between two latter countries and as well as active Israeli military partnership with Azerbaijan.

Since 2001 terrorists attacks, NATO's activities in this region have significantly grown, and today with the allied military presence in Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Middle East, the South Caucasus has acquired a crucial role in connecting NATO territory and military operations in Afghanistan as well as staging areas in Central Asia, with Azerbaijan and Georgia providing logistical corridor to operational theaters of the mission.

From the beginning of the NATO's relations with the South Caucasus countries, there were a number of challenges that was to some extent hindering the cooperation. Namely,

- Russia's continued perception that all Alliance's activities and more importantly NATO approaching Russia's borders are directed against Russia's state interests. South Caucasus was always perceived by Russia as of strategic importance for its own security and fell within the sphere of its exclusive interest; no surprise, that Russia has been and is persistently opposing any power or country, that tries to "enter" the region and thereby diminish Russia's influence (Russia's former president Medvedev has even named the region as "zone of privileged interest¹").
- Different views or rather disagreement within the NATO itself regarding Alliance's involvement in *out-of-area fields* with some member states being

¹ <http://www.myallsearch.com/Web/Medvedev+five+principles+guiding+russian+policy+2008.html>

more cautious and resisting when it comes to Alliance's engagement in conflicting areas outside the Euro-Atlantic area.

- Different or rather contradicting security visions among South Caucasian states. All the three South Caucasian states have different national security strategies:
 - - Armenia, on the one hand having rather "poor" relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, and on the other hand linking its security to Russia, its main ally and guarantor of its security.
 - - Azerbaijan, with its conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia, tensed relations with Iran and more or less normal relations with Russia, has directed its efforts towards strengthening relations with West and Turkey.
 - - Georgia, having strong Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and on the other hand conflict with Russia.

NATO's decision to be more engaged in the South Caucasian region was defined by number of factors:

First - it's the key security challenges- terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and regional conflicts, which can only be addressed through concerted international cooperation. In this regard, all the three South Caucasian states-Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are facing almost the same problems as the NATO does and thus they also have a crucial role to play to counter those challenges.

Second, it is NATO's growing interest towards the energy security issue. Bearing in mind the well-known energy bargains it is clear that there is a direct link between the security of NATO member states and the interruption of their energy supply². As mentioned above, the region is located on key oil and gas transit routes, which makes the South Caucasus extremely important place to be.

Thirdly, South Caucasus, being in proximity to the NATO borders, the Alliance directly links the security in South Caucasus to the security in the entire Euro-Atlantic area. Therefore,

² Energy security: NATO's Limited, Complementary Role, Andrew Monaghan, May 2008

the Alliance tries to play a significant role to enhance security and stability in region because of the delicacy and fragility of the security situation. Therefore, NATO is best interested in the stability in the South Caucasus region, with the reform-capable states, sharing democratic values with the Alliance that are the best guarantors of security, stability and prosperity.

At the same time NATO relations with South Caucasus both, the extent and depth of cooperation with Georgia is of different order, than with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

NATO and Armenia

Armenia, being the main strategic ally of Russia in the South Caucasus, and the only Caucasian member state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has no concrete plans to seek full membership and has the least engaged relations among the South Caucasian states with NATO. Nevertheless, since 9/11 terrorist attacks, Armenia has considerably changed its foreign policy priority and while in recent years Armenia was relying exclusively on Russia to protect its interests, today Yerevan is trying to diversify its foreign and security policy. To this end, Armenia tries to implement a multi-vector model, with the sense that Armenia maintains its strategic partnership with Russia, while the country strengthens its relations with other powers such as the US or France.

However, NATO's assistance is particularly important for Armenia in terms of reforms in the sphere defence sector reform, military education and training. Whereby, Armenia wants to make the most of this pragmatic cooperation. It also contributes to international missions, including NATO-led operations; since 2004 till present, Armenia has been contributing troops to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) and since 2009 to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.³ This co-operation also helps Armenia to achieve partial interoperability with NATO forces.

It should be also mentioned Russia's special relationships with Armenia marked by Russia's military presence in this country, namely the existence of Gyumri Military Base. Gyumri base is the only legal Russian military facility in the South Caucasus and it is gaining even the larger significance because of unpredictable situations in Iran and Syria.

³ http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_48893.htm

NATO and Azerbaija

After regaining its independence in 1991, Azerbaijan started to actively cooperate with Turkey, US and European and Euro-Atlantic structures. At the same time it doesn't immediately seek membership, however while Azerbaijan seeks active cooperation with NATO, it counter-balances its relations with Russia. From 1994 on, Azerbaijan has been an actively engaged in the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) through participating in several international peacekeeping missions, including KFOR and ISAF.

The situation around Nagorno-Karabakh to a great extent determines Azerbaijan's foreign policy. While Azerbaijan seeks more inclusive engagement of Alliance over the Nagorno-Karabakh issue, NATO's participation in peacekeeping processes is limited, due to Russia's reluctance.

At the same time, Azerbaijan, with its rich energy resources, is of significant importance for NATO and its member states energy security. To this end, the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceiyan (BTC) oil pipeline⁴ and South Caucasus gas pipeline⁵ has given Azerbaijan more relative power as the pipeline constitutes an energy corridor alternative to the northern (Russian) one.

⁴ *The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan*

Georgia is the central link in the South-Caucasian corridor, so Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline had to go through this territory. There was another option to use an Armenian territory, but because of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict Georgia became the host of this project. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline is a 1,768 kilometers (1,099 mi) long crude oil pipeline from the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli oil field in the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. It connects Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan; Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia; and Ceyhan, a port on the south-eastern Mediterranean coast of Turkey. It is the second longest oil pipeline in the former Soviet Union after the Druzhba pipeline. The first oil that was pumped from the Baku end of the pipeline on 10 May 2005 reached Ceyhan on 28 May 2006. The August war between Russia and Georgia has shown the importance of stability in the region. As one of the world's oil arteries was threatened during the conflict, it was apparent for NATO and US that the peace in the black sea and south Caucasus region was essential for energy security in Europe. The length of this pipeline is 692 km and it is capable of carrying up to 7 billion cubic meters of gas. At the border between Georgia and Turkey, the pipeline link into other new pipelines to provide gas into Turkey and the European Union.

⁵ *South Caucasus Pipeline*

South Caucasus Pipeline (also known as: Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum Pipeline) is a natural gas pipeline. The Pipeline has been designed to transport gas from the Shah Deniz field in the Azerbaijan sector of the Caspian Sea, through Georgia and on to the Georgia-Turkey border. It runs parallel to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The construction process commenced in 2004 and was completed by the end of 2006.

NATO and Georgia

Immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it became apparent that Russia, the heir of the Soviet Union, desperately tried to maintain its control over Georgia with its strategic geopolitical location; it used distorted political/economic internal situation in the country after *gaining independence*. Its main leverage became stirring up ethnic tensions. Since then Russia has been actively supporting the separatist movements in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region through, but not limited to the militarization, illegal passportization and etc. At the same time, from the very outset Georgia had clearly outspoken European and Euro-Atlantic foreign policy vector, which has been significantly strengthened after Rose Revolution and the comprehensive democratic reforms, Georgia embarked on since 2003, transformed the country from a "failed state" into a functioning democracy and a success story in the region and beyond. This, along with, NATO Allies Bucharest decision stating that "Georgia will become a member of NATO" led to culmination of already deteriorated Georgia-Russia relations- 2008 August war.

If, prior to the war Russia at least tried to position itself as a nonpartisan mediator in Georgian conflicts, after Georgia's apparent success on its Euro-Atlantic integration path, Russia significantly hardened its stance and openly declared full scale support to de facto separatist regimes. August war was direct response to Georgia's successful reforms and advance to NATO. This openly was declared by Russian president Medvedev, when he stated that in case of hesitation in August 2008 "*geopolitical arrangement would be different now and number of countries in respect of which attempts were made to artificially drag them into the North Atlantic Alliance, would have probably been in NATO by now*". Russia occupied Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region and unilaterally recognized "independence" of these territories. Today, Russia is continuing military build-up in the occupied territories. The European Monitoring Mission (EUMM), the only international organization on the ground since Russia's veto on OSCE and UN is prevented by Russia to enter the occupied regions, which significantly hinders the peaceful resolution of conflict.

Against all odds, Russia failed firstly, to derail Georgia from its Euro-Atlantic aspiration and secondly, to exercise its veto power on the NATO decision regarding Georgia's prospect to

NATO membership. Since then, NATO has been clear over its support towards Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, as well as its continuous support towards Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations through, but not limited to reiteration of the Bucharest summit decision; and the establishment of NATO integration instruments, namely NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) and Annual National Programme (ANP), aimed to supervise the process set in hand in Bucharest, NATO-Georgia relations have become even more intense and dynamic.

At the same time Georgia, from the very outset has been an active participant and contributor and not limited to the NATO-led operations and has become an important security provider to the Euro-Atlantic security.

Conclusion

South Caucasus regained its geopolitical significance after disintegration of the USSR. Despite Russia's inherent reluctance to allow other powers to its "Back Yard" and maintain its exclusive influence in this very diverse region, during the last two decades with the single power balance, the South Caucasian region today intersects Transatlantic and regional powers.

Russia, traditionally being the major player in the region, acknowledges that its exclusive presence in the region is not a reality anymore, nevertheless, it harshly opposes to NATO's presence in the region for two major reasons: firstly, having in mind extremely unpredictable situation in the North Caucasus, with the growing Islamic movements, frequent terrorist attacks and insurgencies, it is desperately resisting to allow any, alternative to Moscow power into the region. Secondly, Russia is desperate to keep its power over the transit of energy resources, which is actually the corner-stone of its geopolitical strategy. Thirdly, in Russia's perception NATO's presence in South Caucasus will significantly damage Russia's position not only in the Caucasus, but in the Central Asia as well, which could finally deplete Moscow from its ambitions to be the center of attraction for former Soviet Union countries. The recent statement of the head of the Russian Joint Staff, General Makarov, advising Finland to give up its NATO aspirations, since "the NATO-Finnish relations constitutes a threat to

Russia”⁶, is again a clear demonstration that NATO’s open door policy in broader term, whether it applies to South Caucasus or other regions, continues to be a point of general divergence.

In this context Georgia’s progress towards NATO on its integration path has critical importance, as so far only Georgia from the South Caucasian states has an openly fixed aspiration to join NATO. If Russia succeeds to slow down Georgia’s integration in NATO, it will be a strong signal to other Caucasian and Central Asian countries, implicating change into the geopolitical climate and shift into the established balance of powers.

At the same time, maintaining the *status quo* in the region is in the interests of Russia. Russia’s role in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Russia’s military presence in the occupied regions of Georgia Abkhazia and Tskhinvali after August war where the levers which underpinned attempts of South Caucasian states to reframe their approaches to these conflicts and find optimal resolutions for them under international intermediation and control. Through keeping the conflicts in the “somnolent” stance Russia maintains its influence in the Caucasus. Furthermore, Russia’s preparation for the military exercise “Kavkaz-2012”⁷ which by its scale exceeds all other military exercises which were held by Russia in the recent years could be used as a means to destabilize already the fragile situation in the region.

Turkey, as one of the principal NATO Allies and at the same time a direct South Caucasus neighboring country has its own interests to strengthen its role and influence in the region. Having different relations with the three South Caucasian states, on the one hand strategic partnership with Georgia and Azerbaijan, and on the other hand tensed relations with Armenia⁸, Turkey nevertheless tries to balance its power and to some extent replace Russia’s influence in the region. Uninterrupted flow of the oil and gas reserves to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum pipelines is in Turkey’s strategic interest, which is in turn is largely linked to the strengthening of stability and security through the peaceful resolution of conflicts.

NATO - Since 9/11 terrorist attacks South Caucasus has attained significant importance for NATO and crucial role to counter common challenges, but not limited to terrorism. At the same time, the rich Caspian energy resource basins and energy transit potential of the South

⁶ <http://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2012/06/05/989307.html>

⁷ Similar military exercises were conducted by Russia in 2008, which was followed by Russia-Georgia war

⁸ Notwithstanding the recent attempt of Armenian-Turkish rapprochement, Turkey will not improve the relationships with Armenia at the expense of Turkey-Azerbaijan strategic partnership.

Caucasus region, as alternative to the Russia control-free route is another dimension of NATO's interest in South Caucasus. On the other hand, with the South Caucasus as an immediate neighbor to the Euro-Atlantic space, the Alliance directly links the security situation in the region to that of the entire Euro-Atlantic area.

Therefore, more presence of NATO in the region, on the one hand through active partnership relations with the regional states and on the other hand, through strong support of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspiration will be the best chance to ensure that South Caucasus countries are less vulnerable to external, as well as internal factors on instability and more committed to the principles of democracy, freedom, human rights and security; and that is of reciprocal benefit, for both, all three Caucasian countries and NATO itself.