

*The fragile nature  
of security:  
the strategies of regional  
countries and unresolved  
conflicts*

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**Abstract**

*The fragile nature of security in the South Caucasus involves several parameters. This article begins with a general overview of the shift from defense to security following the end of the Cold War before addressing some of the specific geographic considerations of the region. Particular attention is given to changes in priorities from the Western perspective temporarily and geographically. The article then focuses on the specifics of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's policies towards the region, highlighting the lack of a common policy in both institutions as well as the differences among the three countries in several of their policies.*

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Before looking at the specifics of the questions at hand as they relate to the South Caucasus region, certain general comments are in order as background to an examination of what applies to the region and the unresolved conflicts. The temporal and geographical contexts of our discussion are important, and some preliminary thoughts are necessary.

The very nature of security has been evolving since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While defense was the single most important issue during and shortly after the Cold War, security has become increasingly important, although its precise definition is not always clear. While defense dealt with high intensity conflicts, from nuclear mutually assured destruction to an armed conflict between the Warsaw Pact and NATO countries, security today includes everything from basic human security such as water, food, and shelter to protection from environmental degradation, terrorism, organized crime, illegal immigration, economic instabilities as well as cyber interference. “Securitization” has become a buzzword<sup>1</sup>, as a host of new topics have entered the equation, in addition to the interstate warfare, ongoing since the 1990’s.

1 See Buzan, B., Waever, O., and de Wile, J. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 1998) and subsequent writing by the Copenhagen School on “Securitization”.

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*Globalization and the permeability of state borders have changed the nature of threats and risks. There is growing concern about non-traditional threats in both substance and origin*

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At the same time as security has been given priority over or inclusive of defense, the subjects of security have also changed. Whereas under the traditional Westphalian state system, defense involved simply defense of the state, it has come to encompass actors beyond the state, i.e. the notion of global security, as well as actors below the state level, from societies, communities, all the way down to individuals.<sup>2</sup> While before the end of the Cold War we were looking at conflicts between states and defense systems, issues such as water, shelter and environment have transcended the state definition to include individuals as well as communities.

For example, the “responsibility to protect” represents an important conceptual change, entailing responsibility to go inside state borders to protect individuals and communities when a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens and those living within its borders.<sup>3</sup>

2 See Andrew Mack and the Human Security Report Project at Simon Fraser University in Canada.

3 See Daniel Warner and Gilles Giacca, “Responsibility to Protect,” *Post-Conflict Peacebuilding: A Lexicon*. Edited by Vincent Chetail, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp. 291-306.

Globalization and the permeability of state borders have changed the nature of threats and risks. There is growing concern about non-traditional threats in both substance and origin.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the shift from defense to security came after the Cold War. Amid the euphoria following the end of that era, and supposedly “The End of History,”<sup>5</sup> much was written about the acceptance of a liberal/democratic order based on a free market economy. The answer to Immanuel Kant’s examination of how to achieve perpetual peace seemed to be on the verge of realization. Given the apparent triumph of this system, the democratic peace theory<sup>6</sup> would be able to flourish, minimizing large-scale state conflicts. According to the post-1989 popular vision, there would be some states or areas where conflicts would remain, mostly internal conflicts, but it was merely a question of time before universal acceptance of the new system would lead to the establishment of perpetual peace. In this context, the Arab Spring might be interpreted as the beginning of this process, however messy the process will be. The fall of the Soviet Union had enormous implications for

the shift from defense to security, and from the state to the sub-state level. For if the liberal order had prevailed, then conflicts between states would no longer be of primary concern.<sup>7</sup> The shift from defense to security was accompanied by the shift from interstate violence to intrastate violence, and the localization of violence.

Specially, in the South Caucasus, it is important to note a comment by Paul Fritch,<sup>8</sup> given at a recent conference in Geneva: “The stubborn intractability of protracted conflicts (sometimes frozen, sometimes not) distract us from the fact that war in the OSCE region, while still far too common, has become a localized phenomenon, with casualties measured in dozens rather than millions. As we argue over missile defence, we too often lose sight of the fact that thermonuclear war has become a distant nightmare.”<sup>9</sup> So that even if some forms of interstate violence existed, they were well below the level of world wars and well below the nuclear threat so predominant during the post-World War II era.

Our second preliminary comment deals with the concept of place. Although the liberal order was

4 See for example, Mustafa Aydin (ed.) *Non-Traditional Security Threats and Regional Cooperation in the Southern Caucasus*. (Amsterdam: IOS PressBV, 2011).

5 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

6 Fred Chernoff, “The Study of Democratic Peace and Progress in International Relations,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2004, 1079-1760.; Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

7 Indeed, Andrew Mack has argued in the *Human Security Report* that violence has decreased with more deaths coming from intrastate violence than interstate warfare.

8 Director, Office of the OSCE Secretary General

9 Pul Fritch, “A more coherent OSCE response to addressing transnational threats,” forthcoming in DCAF publication and presented at Oct. 14-15 conference in Geneva.

supposed to be universal, there were regional considerations which modified the general theory. Specifically, as suggested above, following the end of the Cold War, the South Caucasus was a region of considerable interest for the West—the United States and NATO in particular—for its location on Russia’s southern border, its proximity to Iran, its oil reserves, and pipeline position. What was the relationship between Russia and its newly independent neighbors or the so-called near abroad? To what extent was the eastward expansion of NATO and the European Union possible? Both of these questions were burning issues in the post-1989 period, as the liberal order sought to spread beyond Western Europe and traditional defense issues became entwined with security issues.<sup>10</sup>

The extent to which liberal democracy would spread eastward and the possible mechanisms for this expansion became a priority. During the post-1989 euphoria, the United States, European Union and NATO gave significant focus to the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and even Central Asia. Accession to major institutions, the development of civil society, and the rule of law as the foundations of a liberal order became paramount objectives for western aid programs. Indeed, the European

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*The recent economic problems of the EU have further diminished interest in “Old Europe” from the American perspective.*

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Union granted membership to eight former Soviet republics and satellites in 2004. For a number of reasons, including the desire to establish a buffer zone on Russia’s southern border, the South Caucasus became a focal point for Western interest.

But times have changed, and so have priorities. In his recent speech on the future defense posture of the United States, President Obama was quite clear about national priorities.<sup>11</sup> Not only was the defense budget to be reduced, but the geographic concentration of American forces was to be changed from Europe to Asia, Iran and the Middle East. Troops were to be withdrawn from Germany; ships and soldiers were to be placed in Australia and the Pacific Rim. This was the American perspective, with Europe in general and certainly Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus no longer a priority. America’s eyes have turned elsewhere: Indeed, the Arab Spring and the growth of China have taken the South Caucasus and indeed most of Europe off the radar screen. The recent economic problems of the EU have further diminished interest

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<sup>10</sup> Notice here the tensions between NATO’s concept of collective defense and President Medvedev’s concept of a European Security Treaty through the Corfu Process.

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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller and Thom Shanker, “Obama Puts His Stamp on Strategy for a Leaner Military”, *New York Times*, January 5, 2012.

in “Old Europe” from the American perspective.

What caused this change? It is clear that the global, liberal order has not developed as far as was prophesied at the end of the Cold War. The End of History has not materialized. Even Francis Fukuyama admitted, “The process is harder and longer than I felt back then. I appreciate to a greater degree that democracy is built around institutions that are quite difficult to put into place, especially the rule of law”.<sup>12</sup> It is also clear that the economic difficulties of the Western powers are forcing them to make choices about the positioning of resources. Attempts were made to integrate Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus into Western Europe, institutionally, politically and economically, but this has had limited success thus far. The process appears more complicated than anticipated.

Finally, in terms of place, it is important to note that the very notion of the South Caucasus as a potential regional partner appears to be a very western construction, much like Edward Said’s brilliant description of the Middle East as one region in *Orientalism*.<sup>13</sup> Western foreign ministries found it expedient to place Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in one basket, disregarding the different national histories, languages and

politics. All of a sudden, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was easier to refer to the South Caucasus, rather than acknowledge the specific characteristics of each country. The West wanted them to be homogeneous, and encouraged a cooperation that denied political realities, in the same way they have done and continue to do across the Middle East and North Africa, especially in relation to the Arab Spring aftermath. The idea of regional cooperation among the countries of the South Caucasus was as inviting as the democratic peace theory and the end of history.

Following these comments on the problematic of time and place, we will focus on two major Western institutions and their roles in the South Caucasus to further illustrate the fragile nature of security and the difficulties western institutions have had in their own right to achieve coherence in their policies. While there are many exogenous forces at work in the region, including Russia, Turkey, the United States and Iran, our focus on these two institutions seeks to further illustrate the difficulties the West has had in coming to terms with the newly independent countries of the region, and its failure to provide security or solutions for the frozen conflicts.

### **EU Security Policy in the South Caucasus**

A recent Working Paper from the German Institute for International and Security Affairs highlights

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, Interview, *Newsweek Magazine*, September 19, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York : Pantheon Books, 1978).

many of the above comments while focusing on the particularities of the EU position. The author, Ondrej Ditrych, laments the lack of attention to the region, which he describes as “of strategic interest due to its geographical location and EU’s current energy concerns, where as a result of unstable security equilibrium a risk of conflict remains high”.<sup>14</sup> Attempting to argue for the “reinvigoration” of the Eastern Partnership but realizing that concepts such as principle-not-geography have not worked, he is left to push for renewed attention based on traditional threats and energy security, rather than promoting democracy and highlighting common values

But for whom is he arguing? While we have already noted that the South Caucasus includes three separate countries with different histories, languages and politics, Ditrych argues for a singular European Union position. Just as Said faulted “the West” for its monolithic view of the Arab world, without disaggregating the various elements at play within the West, Ditrych tries to fathom a common European security and foreign policy position where it is just not possible. The European Union has had enormous difficulty in negotiating the euro zone crisis; Lady Ashton has very slowly started

to try to create a unified European external relations institution. Thus just as one resist definitions that deny the heterogeneity of the South Caucasus, so also should we be careful about referring to a coherent European Union policy. It is one thing for Ditrych to say that “The Europeanization of these regions is a key pre-condition for the peaceful settlements on EU’s terms,” but the real problem is the normative statement that “a strategic framework for EU’s policy towards the region should be established.”<sup>15</sup>

What are the major concerns of the EU? There are several, according to the author, and they are of different types, not easily categorized or prioritized. In no particular order: 1) Energy and pipelines - it is important to note that during the Georgian-Russian conflict of August 2008 there was no damage done to the pipeline in northern Georgia and South Ossetia. 2) The residue of the Georgian-Russian conflict has little potential for re-ignition, but then again it was not easy to predict the first conflict’s outbreak. 3) The frozen conflict over Nagorno Karabakh and its potential to explode if left unresolved. 4) Iran and its continuing hostilities with the United States over its nuclear

<sup>14</sup> Ondrej Ditrych, “EU Security Policy in the South Caucasus,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Working Paper FG 2, No. 5, 2011, p. 3.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Note a similar comment by Paul Fritch, Director of the Office of the Secretary General of the OSCE concerning transnational threats (TNT) when he says, “...there has not been a serious effort by participating States to identify comprehensive priorities for TNT-related work...TNT-related activities at the field operations level in particular tend to be driven more by the preferences and priorities of the host country than by the Organization-wide strategic goals... Paul Fritch, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

program. Any overt attack on Iran by the United States and/or Israel is bound to have implications for the entire South Caucasus region. 5) The continuing militarization by Russia of its southern border as well as troops in Armenia and the disputed territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. 6) The general role of Turkey in the region and the continuing inability, in spite of a determined Swiss effort, to resolve the historical dispute between Turkey and Armenia.

But what are the interests of the EU and the West regarding these issues? While much was made of the “reset policy” between Russia and the United States, with even a symbolic reset button offered by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Foreign Minister Lavrov in Geneva, the recent icy reception of the newly appointed U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul in Moscow<sup>16</sup> leaves little doubt that there is relatively little interest in either Moscow or Washington to seriously address these issues. Elections are coming up in the United States, Russia and France. No major changes in foreign policy will be forthcoming in the near future with domestic economic issues, unemployment and recession being the primary focus in each country.

Indeed, the EU’s stated ambition of bringing peace to the region has become lost in a web of isolated

initiatives, described by Ditrych as a “many-headed hydra with multiple actors,”<sup>17</sup> none of them conclusive. Although the EUSR South Caucasus, established in 2003, has had some influence in ceasefires, incident prevention, and response mechanisms for Georgia and Russia, it has not been able to realize EU neighborhood policies in a concrete manner. Rounds and rounds of negotiations have taken place in Geneva between Russia and Georgia with no flare-ups, but no substantial progress either. A number of norms, regimes and practices have been put into place, but the overall ambition of extending European values and administrative practices has had difficulty in gaining traction either in individual countries or in the region as a whole. The recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains a sticking point.

On a positive note, however, the entry of Russia to the WTO after an 18 year struggle<sup>18</sup> was a very favorable step in terms of the overall security picture of the region. Georgia had firmly opposed Russia’s membership since it became a member in 2000. Swiss creativity concerning border and customs questions reduced tensions.

The Working Paper specifically mentions the role of the EU in Azerbaijan. The role of the EU and its possibilities for influence in the

<sup>16</sup> See Daniel Warner, “New American Ambassador’s Unfriendly Welcome in Moscow,” *www.nashagazeta.ch* January 20, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Ditrych, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> See Daniel Warner, “Russia to Join the World Trade Organization,” *www.nashagazeta.ch*, November 21, 2011

Karabakh peace process are small but not insignificant. The author rightly suggests that Azerbaijan and the EU have obvious common interests in energy that should not be separated from a stronger role for the EU in the peace process. Indeed, according to the author, regional cooperation should be an essential part of the Eastern Partnership, but one, as mentioned, that should avoid the difficulties of structural problems while emphasizing practical functionalities. Discussion of European-South Caucasus cooperation runs the risk of getting lost in the difficulty of defining both actors, and hence precluding concrete results.

The lack of coherence on the part of sides, the European Union and the South Caucasus, has consistently frustrated significant cooperation. As we have suggested, the European Union has failed to unify its members in important common policies, as demonstrated by the current euro zone crisis. The conceptualization problem in both regional configurations is part of the idealism of the liberal order, and very much reflects Benedict Anderson's description of imagined communities<sup>19</sup> with all of the pitfalls of being divorced from realities.

### **NATO and the South Caucasus**

If the situation between the European Union and the South Caucasus

<sup>19</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1983.

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reflects two imagined communities, the situation between NATO and the three countries also merits further analysis, to disaggregate a regional approach as well as to highlight the difficulty of delineation between defense and security. Similar to the EU, NATO also expanded in the post-Cold War euphoria of 2003. In November 2004, NATO's Secretary General made its first ever visit to the three countries of the South Caucasus. The position of Special Representative to the South Caucasus and Central Asia was created.

Specifically, cooperation between NATO and the three countries has included the drafting of military doctrine, cooperation in military education, peacekeeping missions as well as the modernization of communication and control systems. Cooperation has been pursued at different levels. The Partnership for Peace (PfP) has become the central focus for NATO cooperation with the three countries.<sup>20</sup> Individually, however, Armenia is a member

<sup>20</sup> For a further elaboration of this point, see Martin Malek, "NATO and the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia on Different Tracks," *The Quarterly Journal*, Summer Supplement, 2008, p. 38.



of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Georgia's conflict with Russia has excluded membership for fear of the eventual use of Article 5 to defend Georgia against Russia, and the President of Azerbaijan has clearly stated that his country is not ready for NATO membership.

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*NATO Secretary General's Special Representative to the South Caucasus and Central Asia said; "Each of the three countries of the South Caucasus is very different."*

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NATO has no agreed strategy among the allies. Implicitly, NATO engages with the three countries with an à la carte menu that depends upon the ambitions of the individual countries. Georgia is obviously the most ambitious, with Armenia and Azerbaijan having Individual Partnership Action Plans that focus on defense reform, defense education and interoperability in peacekeeping. And just as NATO itself has no overall strategy for the region, it perceives the three countries separately. Indeed, as NATO Secretary General's Special Representative to the South Caucasus and Central Asia said; "Each of the three countries of the South Caucasus is very different."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> James Appathurai, quoted in *MilAZ.info*. 22-10-2011.

As for the frozen conflicts, NATO clearly stated in the Lisbon communiqué that the countries are urged to make more efforts toward settlement, at the same time as declaring strong support for the work of the Minsk Group, the 5+2 for Moldova, and the Geneva Talks for Russia and Georgia. In other words, there has been no active NATO involvement in the resolution of the frozen conflicts.<sup>22</sup> The Lisbon Summit Declaration said:

With our vision of a Euro-Atlantic area at peace, the persistence of protracted regional conflicts in South Caucasus and the Republic of Moldova continues to be a matter of great concern for the Alliance. We urge all parties to engage constructively and with reinforced political will in peaceful conflict resolution, and to respect the current negotiation formats. We call on them all to avoid steps that undermine regional security and stability. We remain committed in our support of the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova, and will also continue to support efforts towards a peaceful settlement of these regional conflicts, taking into account these principles.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the cooperation has involved activities under the NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme (SPS), which would

<sup>22</sup> "NATO does not seek a direct role in the resolution of these (Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions), but supports the efforts of other international organizations..." *NATO Backgrounder*, 11-09-2011, p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Lisbon Summit Declaration para 35, Nov. 20, 2010. The last sentence was not acceptable to the Armenian authorities.

not usually be considered within traditional activities of NATO. Many of these activities, clearly labeled as “approved by NATO nations on the basis of consensus,” reflect security issues such as pesticides, nuclear power and security, the fight against terrorists, water resources, and seismic emergency response. None of these are traditional defense issues.

In addition, in examining the NATO fliers<sup>24</sup> outlining the programs, what is most impressive is how the scientific aspects of the projects are emphasized, with only indirect reference to larger security issues. A recent flier says that “Scientific cooperation enhances communication and understanding and therefore contributes to security and stability. One example of how the SPS Programme contributes to regional cooperation is the Virtual Silk Highway, under which NATO has supported the establishment of international Internet connectivity”.<sup>25</sup> Two other regional projects are noteworthy here: the Caucasus Seismic Emergency Response and the Water Resources Management of Agro-Ecosystems in the South Caucasus. Both of these regional or transnational cooperative activities could be interpreted as non-traditional security threats that conspicuously avoid the question of frozen conflicts or the direct threats of violence, as witnessed between

Georgia and Russia and potentially Armenia and Azerbaijan.

But what about an active NATO policy on the issues of defense? With regard to membership, the Bucharest Summit of 2008 made it very clear that a Georgian membership was far down the road. Georgia’s Individual Partnership Action Plan is certainly not the Membership Action Plan that was originally envisioned by both sides<sup>26</sup>. Nor have there been any breakthroughs on the boundaries of Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, or on the status of Nagorno Karabakh. For that matter, and to return to our previous comments about the security issues in NATO’s fliers, NATO has not been involved in reducing the potential for armed conflict in the region. On the contrary, the possibility of Georgia’s joining NATO was perceived as heightening tensions with Moscow.

Indeed, the great unspoken in the above description of the South Caucasus is the role of exogenous forces. While we have already mentioned the United States and its obvious change in focus, away from Europe toward Asia, Russia continues to view NATO expansion and activities in the South Caucasus as interference, and is obviously trying to reduce its influence. While Russia’s influence militarily is patently obvious in Armenia, it is also present

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24 See *The NATO Science for Peace and Security Programme fliers for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, May 2010

25 SPS Flier June 15, 2011.

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26 See Ahto Lobjakas, “NATO Lacks the Stomach for South Caucasus Fight,” *caucasus analytical digest*, No. 5, April 16, 2009, pp. 2-5.

to an extent in Azerbaijan. NATO has not participated in the unsuccessful attempts to solve the frozen conflicts, leaving the stalled negotiations to the EU, the UN and the OSCE. As Martin Malek correctly points out; “NATO representatives in general, and the Secretary-General in particular, have always deferred to the UN and OSCE when asked in Tbilisi and Baku about a possible role for the Alliance in the efforts to solve the ‘frozen conflicts’ in Azerbaijan, namely the situation in the breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. NATO has therefore not participated in the thus far unsuccessful negotiations over these conflicts...”<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has examined several aspects of the fragile nature of security in the South Caucasus. Temporally, we have highlighted the changing nature of security, with the move away from traditional defense issues between states, and the shift to intrastate violence, while recognizing that interstate violence still exists. Geographically, we have indicated that the liberal euphoria regarding the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union has been replaced by other priorities due to, among other reasons, the failure of instant transformation to democratic/free market systems. Finally, we reviewed the policies of the European

Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization toward the South Caucasus in order to demonstrate the fragmentation in perceptions of the organizations towards the region and within the region itself.

In many ways, these observations can be construed as pessimistic. They make no judgment about the nature of the conflicts nor do they make predictions about how the unresolved conflicts may be resolved. However, by placing certain discussions in their larger contexts, it is hoped that a better contextual understanding will illuminate the present challenges, and eventually serve to advance greater security in the individual countries and across the region.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Malek, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.