

NATO and South Caucasus' post-Cold War riddle

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This article provides a brief analysis of NATO's post-Cold War cooperation with the South Caucasus countries, arguing that when it comes to the South Caucasus, NATO has been pursuing a limited role, mainly confined to the goals defined in the Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs) and the involvement of the South Caucasus countries in related activities. According to the author, NATO's strategy in the South Caucasus has its roots not only in the political and security dynamics of the regional states, but also in Russia's substantial role in the region, and the ways in which NATO-Russian relations have been shaped and enacted as a result. At the same time, the crises in the Middle East and the role of Western countries there together with the withdrawal of NATO and the U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, require major revisions of NATO's approaches. The current global security complex calls for the organization to step up its foreign policy efforts. In conclusion, the author emphasizes that as NATO continues to face a range of global challenges it cannot tackle alone, its relations with the states of the South Caucasus should serve as a reminder that its choice of partners in the currently fluid situation may determine the future of the region.



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Among the most vibrant focal points in Eurasia, there are three major factors that contribute to the dynamism of the South Caucasus: local engagement of regional and non-regional actors, complex interconnection of economic and political motivations driving regional policies, and proxy competition of political alliances over dominance in geopolitically catalytic states that are still striving to protect their independence.

Several features – like that of exploiting and transporting the profitable Caspian Sea energy resources – have given the region its global importance and brought strong engagement by external actors including states and major energy companies. It is the combination of internal political dynamics (mostly in the form of multiple ongoing conflicts between the states of the South Caucasus and their immediate neighbors) and the inevitable external dimensions that make the regional situation so potentially turbulent. This is especially true in the light of Russia's annexation of Crimea; Moscow's expansionist policies may have a domino effect in the former Soviet space.

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While the current situation in Crimea is a direct and explicit response to the uncoordinated “triple expansion” of NATO, the European Union, and American/European defense and political economic interests and military infrastructure into the so-called Russian ‘near abroad’, the Kremlin has long sought to build up a new Eurasian geostrategic and political economic alliance in the aftermath of Soviet collapse. In the 1990's Russia, which played a leading role in uniting the seven former Soviet republics under the umbrella of the CSTO, was anxious about NATO's eastward expansion close to its borders and the U.S.' planned deployment of a missile shield in East Europe.

Although the CSTO has from its inception stressed that its primary function is to manage “new threats and challenges” in the sphere of “soft security,” such as drug trafficking and illegal cross-border migration, with the transition to joint air defense, three integrated army formations, horizontally integrated military systems, and collective peacekeeping forces, the CSTO's integration is also heading in the direction of a traditional military bloc. This has to an extent affected the image the organization originally sought to

project, drawing comparisons with the OSCE and the EU rather than NATO.

The seven-member regional security bloc included Russia, Belarus, Armenia and the four former Soviet Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The CSTO pursued the idea of joint efforts in combating drug trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime, with its member states pledging to provide immediate military assistance to each other in the event of an attack.

At this stage, NATO and CSTO are reasonably comparable since they both share the goals and issues of politico-military alliances, and are both recognized by the UN as international regional security organizations. The institutional core of both organizations consists of agreements on collective security and assistance in the event of foreign aggression. The most important components of both organizations are their structures, which are geared towards combating new threats – the most significant of which are international and regional conflicts.

At the same time, the overlapping geography and complicating spheres of interests inevitably lead to the same bloc-on-bloc dynamic that manifested during the Cold War. While Washington perceived the CSTO as Kremlin's area of influence, Russia was carefully watching the developments within NATO. Whatever the Alliance's view of its Russia policy, in the eyes of many ordinary Russians and almost all of the country's foreign policy elite NATO has become the principal symbol of the West's post-Cold War politics. It is important to remember that Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (February 2013) includes a few important sentences to this effect: “Russia maintains a negative attitude towards NATO's expansion and to the approaching of NATO military infrastructure to Russia's borders in general as to actions that violate the principle of equal security and lead to the emergence of new dividing lines in Europe.”

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At the same time, NATO's enlargement to the western Black Sea and the planned enlargement of the European Union have drawn the South Caucasus *de facto* into the perimeter of Euro-

Atlantic strategic security interests. While the main European presence in the region is in the form of European companies that fulfill the leading role in the major regional oil and gas projects (BP, ENI/AGIP, Statoil), the EU's energy security interests will sooner rather than later require the EU to take a more active role in this region through political and policymaking institutions. Yet although Europe will presumably be the major consumer of Caspian gas, it has not taken a full-scale active role in the region in either security or political spheres, and has done little in terms of promoting conflict resolution in this area, despite the fact that many of the region's states are orienting themselves toward European integration. Nonetheless, despite remaining a permanent neighbor of Russia, the South Caucasus has in effect become a Euro-Atlantic borderland.

When it comes to the South Caucasus, NATO clearly has been pursuing a limited role, mainly confined to the goals defined in the Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs) and the involvement of these countries in related activities. Prior to 2008, Azerbaijan – the powerhouse of the region – welcomed stronger ties; Armenia, a CSTO member, has tried to keep maintain a balance between the Diaspora's Western aspirations and the strong Russian influence; Georgia sought quick integration and made clear its membership aspirations.

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What is interesting is that in April 2008, when NATO members rejected Georgia's request for a Membership Action Plan (MAP) during the Alliance's annual summit in Bucharest, Russia's then-President Dmitry Medvedev – sensing the alliance's hesitation – authorized direct official relations between Moscow and secessionists in Abkhazia

and South Ossetia on April 16. For more than a decade, NATO had been sending positive signals to Tbilisi when Georgian support was to its advantage, but then swiftly revoked the invitation when it was no longer geopolitically convenient.

Simply put, NATO's limited engagement has its roots not only in the political and security dynamics of these states, but also in Russia's substantial role in the area, and the ways in which the NATO-Russian relations have been shaped and enacted as a result. At the same time, this has had a negative impact on one of the main variables – conflict resolution – in the South Caucasus security equation: Azerbaijani and Georgian territories remain under occupation.

On the other hand, one can see that the South Caucasus projects two competing integration models. One, which is only nascent, envisages the region's connection to and eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic security and economic systems with guaranteed sovereignty and modernization, closely linked to internal development vis-à-vis better institutional performance, constitutional government and rule of law, balancing foreign and economic policy. On this road to European integration, Azerbaijan became the first country in the post-Soviet area to join the PfP/SOFA (the Partnership for Peace / Status of Forces Agreement) and the PARP process (Partnership for Peace, Planning and Review Process). These decisions clearly demonstrated Azerbaijan's commitment to greater integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. At the same time, as a key component in NATO's Northern Distribution Network, Azerbaijan provides a secure route for 40 percent of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force's (ISAF) multi-modal transit to and from Afghanistan. Working closely with the U.S. Transportation Command and the U.S. Air Mobility Command, Azerbaijan has aided important over-flight clearance, medical evacuation flights, as well as landing and refueling operations for US and NATO efforts, supporting the ISAF. Moreover, Azerbaijani troops stand shoulder-to-shoulder with those of the Alliance and other partners in the Balkans, Iraq, and as part of ISAF in Afghanistan. Together with Georgia, Azerbaijan is the largest non-NATO contributor to ISAF troops. In those respects, Baku and Tbilisi have behaved as *de facto* allies of NATO and the U.S. in the security sphere. At the

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same time, Azerbaijan's foreign and economic relations embrace all geographic directions, including countries in the East, West, North and South. Against the backdrop of the difficult geopolitical context of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's foreign policy has been influenced by the strategic goal of integrating into the global community and European energy security system.

The other model is based on the idea of regaining predominance over the South Caucasus through military presence, manipulation of ethnic conflicts, control over energy supplies, takeover of insolvent industries through debt-for-assets swaps, establishment of pro-Moscow political groups in local areas. This is Russia's approach. This situation has influenced Armenia's decision not to join the operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, and to withhold over-flight rights during the Iraq campaign. Its close relations with Russia and Iran have limited its foreign policy decisions. Generally, by having territorial, cultural, historical and moral-psychological claims against three of its four neighbors (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey), Armenia has limited itself in terms of regional partners. Consequently, following the collapse of USSR, Armenia has remained very dependent on Russia, with fundamental economic and security (including military) links that feed this dependency.

This action is consistent with policies formulated two decades ago by Yevgeny M. Primakov, the mastermind of the Russian domination strategy in the early 1990s regarding the "near abroad" - the newly independent states that emerged from the rubble of the collapsed Soviet empire. One marker of this is the Russian-Armenian military ties, cemented through amendments to a 1995 treaty regulating the presence of a Russian military base in Armenia, with the Kremlin's basing rights for several thousand Russian troops extended to 2044.

Thriving on the insecurity and weakness in the region, this integration model aims to draw states into a Russian-led political, military and economic bloc, in which Moscow would exercise enormous political and military power over states' policies. This is the case with Armenia, the only CSTO member of the South Caucasus states, which is pursuing a partially deluded strategy aimed at preserving the NATO-Armenia relationship (at least

on a paper). At the same time, the recent statement by Nikolai Bordyuzha, the head of the Commonwealth of Independent States' CSTO, may deprive Armenia of this too. On June 16, 2014, in Moscow, Bordyuzha stated that the foreign ministers of the CSTO countries (Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan) had recommended suspending dialogue with NATO.

From NATO's perspective, Armenia can almost be regarded as a "lost cause", given Yerevan's almost unconditional support for multiple Kremlin-led initiatives and the lack of pro-NATO or even pro-Western groups in domestic politics - despite major state investments in promoting Western and NATO interests.

Despite operating largely within Russia's orbit, over the last several years Armenia's EU aspirations have meant that West has provided at least some form of a counterweight to Russia's pressures. Armenia's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU and its decision to join the Customs Union has demonstrated the depth of this crisis; the country has now essentially lost the right to an independent foreign policy. In addition, Yerevan has faced an economic blockade, enacted by Azerbaijan and Turkey following Armenia's occupation of the Azerbaijani territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and the seven adjunct districts. Now Armenia will not be able to build its own relations with Iran and Georgia; the only way out to the outside world. This decision will reshape Yerevan's relations both with the West and with Russia.

Since the end of the Cold War, NATO has redefined its *raison d'être*: extending its membership, broadening its political goals and widening its zone of operations. But a quarter of a century that after the fall of the Berlin Wall, relations between NATO and Russia are at their lowest point. Today the Kremlin-led CSTO is following Primakov's doctrine, calling for a new geopolitical and economic architecture – not only in Europe but throughout the entire world, based on massive spheres of influence, capitalizing on its military power (and willingness to use it), its unique geopolitical position in relation to the Atlantic to the Pacific, its massive energy resources, and its gas and oil pipelines as a force multiplier.

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This indicates that the embers of the Cold War are still smoldering, although they are unlikely to engulf the whole world in a major conflagration, as had been the case for some four decades prior to 1991. The crises in the Middle East, including those triggered by the Arab Spring, the role of Western countries there together with the withdrawal of NATO and the U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, require major revisions to NATO's approaches. Consequently, the organization needs to step up its foreign policy efforts.

The swiftly moving events in Ukraine and Crimea are having a seismic impact on Western policies towards Russia and on the issue of NATO expansion, generating contradictory signals. NATO needs to formulate a solid policy toward the South Caucasus. This policy also needs to commit to the resolution of the conflicts in Azerbaijan and Georgia on terms that would ensure the independence, security and consolidation of states; the strategic payoff to the alliance would be of historic proportions. The ongoing Ukraine crisis should move NATO members to grasp the value of commitment and the importance of standing up to bullies. True independence is priceless. As Ilham Aliyev said, "Independence is the condition when the state and leadership of the country are able to implement independent policy according to the interests of its nation." Otherwise, you will be left with a regional player like Armenia, a weak country extremely vulnerable to foreign dominance.