

Security Dynamics in the South Caucasus since Independence: Interconnected Threats and Security Interdependence

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The article examines the security dynamics in the South Caucasus using the Copenhagen School's Regional Security Complex theory, and seeks to uncover why and how the security of the three regional countries is interconnected and influenced by the region itself and its immediate neighborhood. It views the region as a distinct security complex, and argues that the South Caucasus can be best characterized as a region if viewed through the lens of security. Any major security dynamic affecting one of the three countries of the South Caucasus has clear implications for the remaining two. As small countries with limited capabilities, interests and agendas, the major security environment of the South Caucasus states is the region itself and its neighborhood, including immediate neighbors such as Russia, Turkey and Iran. The US, as the world's only superpower, also has certain security interests in and interactions with the South Caucasus.



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Introduction

Three former Soviet states, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, are widely perceived as a single region – the South Caucasus, located at the juncture of Asia and Europe. However, a closer look reveals that the South Caucasus has never been a true ‘region’, as it lacks the common features that would qualify it as such. In fact, despite being called a region, the three countries have neither developed common and inclusive economic and security cooperation, nor established any kind of regional integration framework. Nor do they share a common culture, language or religion, and have never been a part of the same civilization. Two of the three countries of the region – Armenia and Azerbaijan - are at war with one another, due to Armenia’s occupation of 20 percent of Azerbaijan’s internationally recognized territory. Separatist sentiments in the Georgian Samtskhe-Javakheti region, supported by nationalists in Armenia, have generated fears of an additional inter-state conflict within the region. The three countries have also made divergent and sometimes conflicting foreign alliance and alignment choices, further deepening divisions within the ‘region’. Armenia is a close Russian ally and CSTO member; Georgia orients its foreign policy towards the United States and Europe; while Azerbaijan is allied to Turkey, and cooperates with both Russia and the United States.

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perceived by these states emanate from within the region or its immediate neighborhood. Any security dynamic significantly affecting one of the three countries has clear implications for the other two. Thus, as the article argues, in terms of security studies, the South Caucasus qualifies as a distinct regional security complex (RSC). As small countries with limited capabilities, interests and agendas, the major security environment of the South Caucasus states is the region itself and its close neighborhood.

Based on the tenets of Buzan and Waever’s RSC theory, the paper examines the security dynamics in the South Caucasus Regional Security Complex in order to uncover why and how

the security of three countries is both interconnected as well as linked to the region and its neighborhood.

The article is divided into three chapters. The first chapter provides a brief overview of the RSC theory, explaining why it is applicable to the South Caucasus. The second chapter examines the interconnected and interdependent nature of security in the South Caucasus, focusing on the major threats from within the region itself, which strongly affect (even shape) security and foreign policies across all three south Caucasus countries. The third chapter sheds light on security linkages between the South Caucasus and its neighborhood, including immediate neighbors such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. In the third chapter, the US, as the world's only superpower, is also examined in terms of security interests in and security interactions with the South Caucasus.

Regional Security Complex Theory: A right framework for the South Caucasus?

The Copenhagen School's materially/ideationally hybrid Regional Security Complex theory (RSCT) was first introduced in Barry Buzan's 1983 book 'People, State and Fear; The National Security Problem in International Relations'. However, it remained relatively underdeveloped for a decade, as the Cold War did not really lend itself to regional theories of security; international relations and international security were largely conceptualized in systemic terms.¹ The RSCT was first presented as a detailed monograph in 2003, in Buzan and Wæver's book 'Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security'. It argues that the "security environment of small states is their region", and "since most threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, security interdependence is normally patterned into regionally based clusters: security complexes."²

RSCT's regional and sub-regional approach (in contrast to realism's systemic level approach) improves accuracy as well

1 Azad Garibov (December 2015) Alignment and Alliance Policies in the South Caucasus Regional Security Complex, *SAM Comments*, Baku, Volume XV, p. 9, available at: <http://sam.az/uploads/PDF/SAM%20COMMENTS-5.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2016)

2 Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver (2003), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, p. 4 Azad Garibov (December 2015) Alignment and Alliance Policies in the South Caucasus Regional Security Complex, *SAM Comments*, Baku, Volume XV, p. 9, available at: <http://sam.az/uploads/PDF/SAM%20COMMENTS-5.pdf> (accessed 17 December 2016)

as explanatory and predictive capacity.³ As Buzan and Wæver posit, “geographical proximity tends to generate more security interaction among neighbors”, and accordingly, regional level security interdependence is very important for understanding security dynamics in the various regions of the world.⁴ The main advantage of RSCT is that it benefits from both realist and constructivist approaches, and thus can better explain certain actors’ behaviors in the realm of security.⁵ Along with realist power calculations, it brings in ideational threats, domestic considerations, state incoherence, long-standing intra-regional enmities and amities, as well as foreign penetration, and most importantly introduces a securitization approach.

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The RSCT offers a productive formulation for examining the nature of security dynamics in the South Caucasus, a region where security concerns are far from being system-driven, and are shaped by regional processes rather than global processes. Buzan and Waever also talk about the South Caucasus as a separate security sub-complex,⁶ “a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another.”⁷ One of the leading scholars on the South Caucasus, Svante Cornell, also identifies the South Caucasus as an RSC and argues that, in fact, without the “security variable”, the South Caucasus can hardly be called a fully-fledged region.⁸ The article agrees with the vision of the RSCT that in the post-Cold War world, sources of perceived threats and security dynamics should sought in regional dynamics rather than global processes.

The key variables that the RSCT analyzes are evident in the South Caucasus – the regional countries have dissimilar identities and ideologies, struggle with weak institutional capacity, fragile rule-of-law, ungoverned territories, territorial and inter-ethnic

3 Ibid, pp.480-483

4 Ibid, p.45

5 Ibid, p.11

6 Ibid, pp.419-423

7 Barry Buzan, *People, State and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, (Brighton: Wheatsheaf, 1983), p. 106

8 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 383

conflicts and disputes, foreign influence, etc. These factors will be very helpful in understanding the threat perceptions of the South Caucasus states, and the security dynamics they produce. Moreover, the RSCT focuses on long-standing enmities and amities to understand the security relationships among the regional actors. The South Caucasus states are very rich in terms of such intra-regional relationships. Therefore, the RSCT approach is well-suited to this research, and will enable consideration of as many independent variables as possible.

Interconnected and interdependent security in the South Caucasus: The inner triangle

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus region found itself caught in a web of self-sustaining conflicts, making it one of the most volatile regions in Europe's neighborhood. As the decolonization process unfolded, the countries in the region became embroiled in intra and inter-state conflicts, almost all of which remain unresolved. These ethno-territorial conflicts and intra-regional enmities closed the way to possible peace and cooperation, hindering the emergence of a cooperative regional environment, or any kind of security community in the South Caucasus.

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Security and survival were among the primary challenges of statehood for the newly independent states of the South Caucasus. The most important security threat for the regional countries is the armed conflicts in which they are currently involved. This small region is host to two frozen separatist conflicts (in Georgia), and has witnessed two interstate wars (between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Russia and Georgia). None of the three enjoys highly developed strategic cooperation with both of the other two countries. While Azerbaijan has a strategic partnership with Georgia, it is locked in a protracted conflict with Armenia. Despite Georgia's formal cooperation with Armenia, relations suffer from Armenia's function as a Russian 'outpost' and military base, and the strong separatist sentiments in the Armenian populated Javakheti region of Georgia.

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The region's relations with its immediate neighbors are also problematic. Georgia does not have direct diplomatic relations with Russia, and despite some recent improvements, Tbilisi still holds the position that Moscow has violated Georgian territorial integrity. Armenia does not have diplomatic relations with Turkey; it claims that Ankara has committed a so-called 'genocide' against Armenians, and also formally holds territorial claims against Turkey. Ankara closed its borders with Armenia in 1993 due to Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh (*Dağlıq Qarabağ* in Azerbaijani) and other adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan, though it has experienced a degree of unease in its relationship with Iran at certain points, has developed cooperative relations with all the neighbors of the South Caucasus, including a strategic alliance with Turkey.

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Among the regional conflicts, the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—stemming from Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts (roughly 20% of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories)—is no doubt the most serious security threat in and for the region.

of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts (roughly 20% of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territories) —is no doubt the most serious security threat in and for the region. The conflict began at the end of the 1980s, when Armenia sought to annex the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast of Azerbaijan (NKAO), moving to fill the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict gradually evolved into a full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan once they gained independence, leaving approximately 30,000 dead and over a million IDPs and refugees.⁹ In contrast to the other ongoing separatist conflicts in the region, this is clearly an interstate war, where one regional country (Armenia) has occupied a significant portion of the territory of another (Azerbaijan), with tremendous

investments by both sides in terms of manpower and arms. The conflict has resulted in the securitization of almost everything related to Armenia in Azerbaijan and vice versa. Thus, anything that is seen as posing an advantage to Azerbaijan is perceived as to the detriment of Armenia, and vice versa, leading to zero-sum

9 Azad Garibov (2015) 'OSCE and Conflict Resolution in the Post-Soviet Area: The Case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict', *Caucasus International*, Istanbul, Vol. 5, No: 2, p: 76. Available at: <http://cijournal.az/post/osce-and-conflict-resolution-in-the-post-soviet-area-the-case-of-the-armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-azad-garibov-98> (accessed 12 December 2016)

bilateral relations.¹⁰ The conflict is not frozen, although international experts have described as such. In reality, it is closer to a ‘no war, no peace’ situation.¹¹

Though this oldest and bloodiest war in the post-Soviet space has never been truly frozen, the increased intensity of clashes since the April 2016, more commonly known as the ‘Four-Day War’, demonstrated once again that the conflict can flare up at any time, destabilizing this already fragile region. As no peaceful solution is visible on the horizon, the Line of Contact (LoC) between the armed forces of Azerbaijan and Armenia has become the most militarized area of the former Soviet Union. Azerbaijani and Armenian societies have also seemingly grown more nationalistic as fighting intensifies and casualty rates on the frontline increase.¹²

Thus the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represents the key security threat for Azerbaijan. The conflict has dominated foreign policy and national security discourse in Baku ever since independence. The country’s leadership repeatedly hails the restoration of territorial integrity as Azerbaijan’s top priority. Azerbaijan has made clear its preference for resolving the issue diplomatically, and if this is not possible, using military means to restore its territorial integrity. Azerbaijan and Turkey have also imposed trade bans – closing their borders with Armenia until the conflict has been resolved, or at least until there has been a significant improvement in the peace process, which is the only international effort to coerce Armenia to peace. Accordingly, Azerbaijan also tries to isolate Armenia as much as possible from regional economic projects. As the result of Armenia’s territorial aggression towards Azerbaijan, Yerevan has been excluded from large-scale economic projects such the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, and

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10 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 385

11 Azad Garibov (2015) ‘OSCE and Conflict Resolution in the Post-Soviet Area: The Case of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict’, *Caucasus International*, Istanbul, Vol. 5, No: 2, p: 77, Available at: <http://cijournal.az/post/osce-and-conflict-resolution-in-the-post-soviet-area-the-case-of-the-armenia-azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-conflict-azad-garibov-98> (accessed 12 December 2016)

12 Azad Garibov (2017) A Year After The “Four-Day War”, Guns Continue to Speak Louder than Diplomats in Nagorno-Karabakh, *CACI Analyst*, Available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13439-a-year-after-the-%E2%80%9Cfour-day-war%E2%80%9D-guns-continue-to-speak-louder-than-diplomats-in-nagorno-karabakh.html> (accessed 20 May 2017)

the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway – all of which have changed the economic landscape of the region. In the absence of this conflict, Armenia would offer the most economic route for these oil, gas and rail transportation projects.

The conflict has also dominated and shaped Armenian foreign and security policy since the collapse of the USSR. In a quest for military and economic support, Armenia approached Russia, and has now become dependent on Moscow for its security and economic wellbeing. Armenia's isolation due to its occupation of Azerbaijani

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territories has further deepened the Yerevan's dependence on Moscow, as well as led Armenian politicians to seek opportunities for cooperation with Iran. Currently, Russia is not only the Armenia's sole provider of natural gas, it also controls the country's railway network, electricity distribution and production facilities, as well as many other strategic sectors of Armenia's economy.¹³ Armenian state borders are jointly protected with Russia within the framework of the Moscow-led CSTO, and Russia has one of its largest military bases abroad in Armenia. Armenia also joined Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union in the beginning of 2015. Armenia's unique situation is that despite having Russia and Iran as its key regional allies

and partners, it has managed to maintain positive relations with the US and the West. In this regard, the existence of a wealthy and politically active Diaspora in the United States and Europe has enabled Armenia to sustain these relations, despite the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and its alliance with Russia. Moreover, it also succeeded in achieving the adoption of section 907 of the Freedom Support Act in the US Congress in 1992. This act prohibits all US state assistance to Azerbaijan due to its blockade of Armenia, ignoring the fact that Armenia has blockaded the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan and occupied Azerbaijani territories in and around Nagorno-Karabakh, factors which render the Act highly misleading.¹⁴ Moreover, due to the lobbying efforts of the Diaspora, Armenia has become one of the top per capita recipients of US aid.

13 Vladimir Socor (10 December 2013) 'Armenia's Economic Dependence on Russia Insurmountable by the European Union', *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 10 Issue: 221*, available at: http://www.jamestown.org/regions/russia/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41740&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=48&cHash=408a5840473a1f08b45f64b8178116ba#.VrgpN_nhDIV (accessed 30 December 2015)

14 Svante Cornel (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 259-260

For its part, Georgia has been put in a difficult position by the Armenian-Azerbaijani zero-sum relationship. While Georgia has an interest in maintaining good relations with both states, it has, for a number of reasons, developed better relations with Azerbaijan than Armenia. First of all, Baku is without a question the economic hub of the Caucasus, and arguably the economic center of the entire southern rim of post-Soviet states.¹⁵ By virtue of its oil resources and its geographical position on the Caspian shore, Azerbaijan holds a central position in the various transport corridor arrangements. Georgia, on the other hand, is one of the two possibilities for transport and other links between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the West, the other being Armenia. Due to the impossibility of any Armenian-Azerbaijani cooperation, Georgia's role in oil and gas transportation, TRACECA, and other transportation projects has dramatically expanded. In this sense, Georgia has a vested interest in Armenia's economic isolation.¹⁶

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Similar to its regional neighbors, Georgia's security threats come from its immediate neighborhood. The country's main problem is the internationalized separatist conflicts. The country has two separatist entities - Abkhazia (*Apkhazeti* in Georgian) and South Ossetia (*Samxret' Oseti* in Georgian), which have been de facto independent since the beginning of the 1990s. In addition, the situation with separatism in Javakheti, the Armenian majority region of Georgia, is difficult due to support for separatist groups by both Russia and Armenia.¹⁷ From this perspective, both Georgia and Azerbaijan must deal with separatists who have gained control of parts of their respective territories. As a result, Tbilisi and Baku have a common stance with regard to separatism and minority questions; both support the preservation of territorial integrity and vehemently reject separatism and secession.¹⁸ At the same

15 Svante Cornell (1999) 'Geopolitics and strategic alignments in the Caucasus and Central Asia', Perception, June - August, Volume IV - Number 2, available at: <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/SVANTE-E.-CORNELL.pdf> (accessed 11 January 2015)

16 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 388

17 Nika Chitadze (2015) 'Samtskhe-Javakheti as a Potential Flash Point in Georgia: Ethnic-Confessional Composition and Integration Challenges', *Caucasus International*, Istanbul, Vol. 5, No: 3, p: 113, Available at: <http://cijournal.az/post/samtskhe-javakheti-as-a-potential-flash-point-in-georgia-ethnic-confessional-composition-and-integration-challenges-nika-chitadze> (accessed 13 January 2017)

18 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 386

time, efforts towards cooperation among these unrecognized entities– Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia –also pose a shared concern for Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The separatist conflicts also create fertile ground for foreign influence and intervention in Georgia. Georgia-Russia relations would not face the problems they currently do if these conflicts were not live. The conflicts were not, in fact, created by Russia

The separatist conflicts and the Russia's resulting military intervention in the country in 2008 have indirectly, but significantly, affected Georgia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The conflicts massively increase the incentives for Tbilisi to foster its alliances with Baku and Ankara.

as many argue, and primary responsibility lies within domestic dynamics. However, Russian intervention prolonged the conflicts, and led to Georgia's loss of military control over the region. The conflicts also resulted in a spillover of security dynamics in the Northern and Southern Caucasus due to support by the 'Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus' for Georgia's separatist entities in the early 1990s.¹⁹ The separatist conflicts and the Russia's resulting military intervention in the country in 2008 have indirectly, but significantly, affected Georgia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. The conflicts massively increase the incentives for Tbilisi to foster its alliances with Baku and Ankara.

Georgia's conflicts with separatists and Russia have also created a dilemma for Armenia, as a country which hosts major Russian military base and is a staunch Russian ally. Its isolation by Azerbaijan and Turkey means that Georgia's territory and ports are vital for Armenia's foreign trade. According to the official Armenian sources, almost 70% of Armenia's foreign trade goes through Georgian ports and railway/motorway networks.²⁰ Therefore, while Armenia remains committed to its alliance with Russia, it faces challenges in maintaining good relations with Georgia. However, Yerevan is seen by Georgia as siding with Russia, a sort of Russian Trojan horse in the Caucasus. At times this has led to strained relations between Yerevan and Tbilisi.²¹ Despite being irritated by Armenia's function as a Russian

19 International Alert (July 2012) 'The North Caucasus factor in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict context', available at: http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/publications/201209NorthCaucasianEN_0.pdf (accessed 21 January 2017)

20 Nika Chitadze (2015) 'Samtskhe-Javakheti as a Potential Flash Point in Georgia: Ethnic-Confessional Composition and Integration Challenges', *Caucasus International*, Istanbul, Vol. 5, No: 3, p: 113, Available at: <http://cijournal.az/post/samtskhe-javakheti-as-a-potential-flash-point-in-georgia-ethnic-confessional-composition-and-integration-challenges-nika-chitadze> (accessed 13 January 2017)

21 Svante Cornel (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 385

‘outpost’ as well as the situation in Javakheti, Georgia also needs to maintain relations with Armenia. Due to Armenia’s significant influence in Javakheti, the deterioration of relations with Yerevan could exacerbate the relationship between the Georgian central government and the Armenians of Javakheti with potentially dire consequences, a danger that is seen as clear and present in Tbilisi.²²

Moreover, the region’s separatist conflicts have produced (or at least served as a pretext for) the second interstate war in the South Caucasus – the August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia, making the region even more volatile than before. Along with Armenia, Azerbaijan also faced serious challenges during the war between Russia and Georgia. Azerbaijan had advanced cooperation with both Moscow and Tbilisi. But despite Moscow’s irritation, understanding the importance of independent and friendly Georgia for its security, Azerbaijan stepped in as an alternative supplier when Russian gas exports were cut after Tbilisi rejected a dramatic increase in price in 2007. At the same time, Azerbaijan opened up its market to Georgian goods for which Russia used to serve as the chief export market, and these actions effectively halted Moscow’s economic ‘choking’ of Tbilisi.

But despite Moscow’s irritation, understanding the importance of independent and friendly Georgia for its security, Azerbaijan stepped in as an alternative supplier when Russian gas exports were cut after Tbilisi rejected a dramatic increase in price in 2007.

Azerbaijan’s economic security is also closely linked to its regional allies, Georgia and Turkey. These two countries are the transit countries of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and the Baku-Supsa oil export pipelines as well as the South Caucasus and Trans-Anatolian (TANAP) natural gas pipelines, and the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, which is scheduled for completion this year. These major projects form the backbone of Azerbaijan’s energy and transportation strategy, and are responsible for the lion’s share of Azerbaijan’s export revenues. For Georgia, the pipelines are major source of economic revenue due to the significant transportation fees they bring. They also help guarantee Azerbaijani, Turkish, and Western support for Georgian independence. Any threat of conflict inside or involving Georgia threatens to create security implications for Azerbaijan and Turkey. During Russia-Georgia war in 2008, Russian military jets dropped bombs near the

²² Ibid p.387

BTC and Baku-Supsa pipelines.²³ Though the pipelines were not hit, Azerbaijan was still forced to temporarily suspend oil delivery, as well as its maritime oil exports from Georgia's Black Sea ports of Poti, Batumi and Kulevi, which resulted in the loss of considerable projected incomes.²⁴ Additionally, 're-borderization' attempts by South Ossetia – moving forward the de facto borders inside Georgian territory - left the 1.6 km section of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline under separatist control in 2015, generating significant concerns in Baku.²⁵

Security linkages between the South Caucasus and its neighborhood: The outer quadrangle

The South Caucasus countries' relations with its three regional neighbors, namely Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as the US, are of the utmost importance for the security dynamics. At the same time, the security of the Caucasus has a direct bearing on the national security of these states, which justifies their inclusion into the security complex.²⁶ Certainly, these powers are much bigger than the small states of the South Caucasus, and accordingly they have broader security agendas and interests. Consequently, their importance for and influence over the South Caucasus is much bigger than vice versa. Moreover, relations with these countries are of vital importance for the South Caucasus, whereas the South Caucasus, despite its direct importance, is not an area of core national interest for any of the abovementioned powers. The internal dynamics of the South Caucasus facilitate their intervention in the regional affairs; their policies are capable of influencing and shaping the security dynamics in the South Caucasus. By contrast, the South Caucasus does not enjoy the same leverage in the 'outer quadrangle'. For instance, Georgia can hardly influence decision-making in the US, nor Armenia can do this in Russia, even in regard to issues directly related to the South Caucasus when the strategic priorities of Washington

23 Steve Levine, (2008) 'Targeting the Pipeline', *Steve Levine*, August 14, Available at: <http://stevelevine.info/2008/08/targeting-the-pipeline-2/> (Accessed: 1 January 2017)

24 Daly, C.K.J. (2008) 'Turkey and The Problems with the BTC', *The Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor*; August 13, Available at: http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5btt_news%5d=33887&no_cache=1#.Vcx-u_ntmkq (Accessed: 28 January 2017)

25 Гамцелидзе, Д. (2015) 'Почему Грузия разочаровывается в прозападном курсе', *Carnegie Moscow Centre*, 23 July, Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2015/07/23/ru-60818/idtt> (Accessed: 8 January 2017)

26 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 383

or Moscow are at stake. Only Azerbaijan's relations with its ally Turkey could be considered exceptional here – this is a much more reciprocal alliance, and Baku possesses lobbying power and other political and economic leverages to influence the decision making in Ankara, as demonstrated by Azerbaijan's dissatisfaction and consequent failure of Turkey-Armenia protocols of 2009.

The South Caucasus region in comparison to its neighbors (in 2015)

Name	Territory (thousand km ²)	Population (million people)	Nominal GDP (billion USD)
Russia	17 000	144	1 326
Turkey	718.2	78.6	798.4
Iran	1 648	79.1	425.3 (2014)
The South Caucasus	186	16.3	77.4

Source: The World Bank

Looking to the separate neighboring powers, the South Caucasus is important for Russia as a part of the country's so-called 'near abroad', and as the entry point to the riches of Caspian and Central Asia. Similar to the rest of the post-Soviet region, Russia fiercely opposes any other influence in the South Caucasus, even though it fails to openly dominate the region on its own. It has extensive security and economic interests in the region, has played and continues to play certain roles in all intra and inter-state conflicts in the region, and is allied with Armenia, which hosts a formidable Russian military base in its territory. Russia also aligns with Iran in the South Caucasus, in order to block other foreign, particularly Western and Turkish influences in the region. Despite its lack of domination, Russia is no doubt the country that shapes the region most. It has more tools at its disposal to influence the South Caucasus, and much stronger interests in the region.²⁷

Similar to the rest of the post-Soviet region, Russia fiercely opposes any other influence in the South Caucasus, even though it fails to openly dominate the region on its own.

As a power with growing aspirations, the South Caucasus is important for Turkey on the basis of its strategic location and resources. With an uncertain relationship with the western European states, towards which Turkey has been oriented for the last 100 years, Ankara is pondering its prospects as a regional

²⁷ Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver (2003), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 419-423

power in its own right. As such it needs to exert a certain amount of influence in the neighboring regions, including the South Caucasus and Central Asia.²⁸ Moreover, Turkey is particularly interested in building partnerships with Turkic speaking nations. Therefore, Turkey is naturally interested in the Caucasus as both a home to a Turkic speaking nation - Azerbaijan - and as the gateway to Central Asia, a huge region that is also populated by Turkic speaking peoples. The South Caucasus is also a gateway to the Caspian region's oil and gas reserves, for which Turkey is very keen to serve as a transit route to global markets. Last but not least, Armenia's allegations against Turkey require Ankara's attention. Armenia continues to make territorial claims over six eastern provinces of Turkey, and has developed (together with its powerful Diaspora) an international campaign to achieve the recognition of the so-called 'Armenian genocide'. All these factors underpin Turkey's interest and involvement in the South Caucasus, and drive its interest in an alliance with Georgia and Azerbaijan, with the former as the key transit country and with the latter as the key regional ally.

The Georgian-Russian war of August 2008 served as a catalyst for raising Turkey's security concerns and interests with regard to the South Caucasus. Turkey's immediate quest for security intensified its focus on the South Caucasus, and within the context of the 'zero-problems with neighbors' policy, the Turkish leadership proposed the establishment of a 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform' to resolve conflicts in the South Caucasus region.²⁹ However, the highly ambitious proposal – which would have included Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia – never materialized, partly due to deep divisions among the members-to-be.

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Iran is another important neighbor of the South Caucasus, holding certain stakes in the regional security dynamics. Tehran, despite its publicly declared Islamic solidarity policy, has cultivated a comprehensive partnership with Armenia, which continues to occupy the territories of Azerbaijan. Many

28 Svante Cornell (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 384

29 Eleni Fotiou (June 2009) 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform': What is at Stake for Regional Cooperation?', *ICBSS Policy Brief no.16*, available at: file:///C:/Users/Kamal.Makili-aliyev/Downloads/PB_16.pdf (Accessed: 8 January 2017)

regional experts explain this by referring to Iran's fear of possible Azerbaijani national liberation aspirations in north-western Iran, which is a home to more than 25 million ethnic Azerbaijanis.³⁰ Iran is also concerned about the South Caucasus countries' relations with West, and has lined up with Russia to block this influence. It also opposes Turkey's influence in the region. Iran's interests are also linked to the South Caucasus via the Caspian Sea, where Iran has long rejected the existing maritime borders, and has repeatedly puts forward claims over the maritime territory of Azerbaijan.

The US constitutes the final key foreign power with interests in the South Caucasus. Despite its geographic distance, the world's sole superpower should also be included in the regional security complex, due to its capacity to influence the region with its enormous power projection, political, and economic capabilities. In the beginning of the 1990s, the US approach to the South Caucasus was mainly characterized by indifference and ignorance, and the region was viewed through the 'Russia-first' lens. But from the mid-1990s, Washington started to craft its own strategy towards the region. Throughout the 1990s, the US interests in the region were shaped by two important groups: the Armenian lobby and energy investors. The Armenian lobby in the US was able to take advantage of US ignorance of the region in the beginning of the 1990s to push through the adoption of infamous section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which banned US state support to Azerbaijan.³¹ Later, the importance of the South Caucasus, particularly of Azerbaijan, increased with influence of oil companies as well as Washington's discovery of Azerbaijan's importance in unlocking Caspian resources for the West. The 9/11 terrorist attacks against the US increased Washington's security relations with the regional countries, leading to full-scale US involvement in the region. In particular, the US supported 'Rose Revolution' and government change in Georgia created a staunch US ally in the region. Along with Georgia, Azerbaijan's continued cooperation with the US in Afghanistan and on other security

Later, the importance of the South Caucasus, particularly of Azerbaijan, increased with influence of oil companies as well as Washington's discovery of Azerbaijan's importance in unlocking Caspian resources for the West.

30 Svante Cornel (2001), *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, RoutledgeCurzon, p. 43

31 Barry Buzan & Ole Wæver (2003), *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, p. 421

issues which increased US interests in and commitments to the region. However, since the Obama-initiated ‘reset policy’ with Russia in 2009, the region has witnessed declining American involvement in the region. Level of Washington’s involvement in the region still remains low following the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president in 2017.³²

Conclusion

At first glance, the South Caucasus seems to be ideally located to become a region of cooperation, with every chance of building a security community where internal conflict is unthinkable, to use Karl Deutsch’s words.³³ The region is small, comprised of

Due to the intra-regional conflicts, the region is exposed to the influences of its larger neighbors, which play a significant role in shaping the regional security dynamics and the course of hostilities.

nations that can benefit significantly from economic and security cooperation to strengthen their sovereignty, protect themselves from the negative influences of neighboring powers, and build a firm regional stability conducive to sustainable development. However, the reality is the opposite – the South Caucasus is a conflict-riven region which has experienced a number of separatist conflicts and interstate wars; there are multiple intra-regional contradictions and enmities; and the regional countries’ relations with their neighbors

are problematic. Due to the intra-regional conflicts, the region is exposed to the influences of its larger neighbors, which play a significant role in shaping the regional security dynamics and the course of hostilities. Membership within or orientation towards the conflicting alliances strengthens intra-regional rifts, further decreasing the chances of peaceful conflict resolution in the South Caucasus.

Thus, the South Caucasus region can be best characterized as a region if viewed through the lens of security. The most important commonality for the South Caucasus countries is interconnected nature of their security. The source of key security threats is the same, namely the South Caucasus region and its immediate neighborhood. This area forms a distinct

32 Azad Garibov (2017) A Year After The “Four-Day War”, Guns Continue to Speak Louder than Diplomats in Nagorno-Karabakh, *CACI Analyst*, Available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13439-a-year-after-the-%E2%80%9Cfour-day-war%E2%80%9D-guns-continue-to-speak-louder-than-diplomats-in-nagorno-karabakh.html> (accessed 20 May 2017)

33 Hasan Ulusoy, ‘Revisiting Security Communities after the Cold War: The Constructivist Perspective’, *Center for Strategic Studies of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey*, available at: <http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Hasan-Ulusoy3.pdf> (accessed 30 January 2017)

regional (in)security complex – an area where the security of each regional state cannot realistically be considered separately. Most of the security threats are located within this security complex, and the responses to these challenges should also be formulated from inside this space.

Militarization and confrontation tendencies persist across the region. Armenia continues to host a major Russian military base and Moscow is not expected to withdraw from this country anytime soon. Armenia seems unlikely to abandon its so-called ‘genocide’ recognition campaign against Turkey, or to make tangible compromises in the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. Thus, Armenia serves as a source of instability in the region, and its policy opens the way to foreign penetration to the region. This non-reconciliatory position also ensures the continuation of Yerevan’s conflict with Baku and confrontation with Ankara, as well as the continuation of Armenia regional isolation and the closure of its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Re-opening these borders would boost Armenia’s failing economy and counter the rapid depopulation of the country.

Thus, while integration to Euro-Atlantic structures brings certain benefits in the form of institutional reform, democratization, and economic development, it does not provide the much-needed security guarantees against the threat of Russian backlash.

Georgia remains committed to its NATO and EU aspirations, despite its failure to achieve formal membership. Georgia also faces challenges resulting from its foreign alignment choices. Russia will likely maintain its grip over Georgia’s separatist regions and put pressure on Georgia in regard to its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Thus, while integration to Euro-Atlantic structures brings certain benefits in the form of institutional reform, democratization, and economic development, it does not provide the much-needed security guarantees against the threat of Russian backlash. At the same time, Russia holds the key to Georgia’s most important challenge – the resolution of the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Among the three countries of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan is most open to cooperation with regional countries and bigger neighbors, contributing to the overall stabilization of the region. Accordingly, Azerbaijan enjoys cooperation with all three of the neighboring big powers, and partners with Georgia within the region. Due to Armenia’s aggression against Azerbaijan, there

are no political or economic relations between the two countries. Indeed, this conflict is currently the key obstacle to region-wide cooperation in the South Caucasus. Both Armenia and Georgia are keen to host foreign military bases that can provide national security guarantees at the risk of broader regional security. By contrast, Azerbaijan refuses to host any foreign military presence. Baku has repeatedly declared that its territory cannot be used against any regional or neighboring country.