

*Conference*

*Wider Black Sea: Perspectives for International and Regional Security*

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**A holistic approach to security and conflict resolution  
in the Caucasus Caspian Region**

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I am pleased to be participating in this important conference on the topic of the Wider Black Sea and perspectives for regional and international security. I am particularly pleased that this conference is taking place in Armenia. It is right that Armenia should be considered as a Black Sea Region country as indeed is the case with the other countries of the South Caucasus. The region is a natural extension of the Black Sea Area.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have been sovereign nation states only for a short time in modern history. In this period they have been trying to develop their international profile and define themselves in the context of the international community. This has not been an easy process. The relations between the three countries are at best complicated. Trilateral relations are weak or non-existent, bilateral relations between Georgia and Armenia and Georgia and Azerbaijan are on many issues difficult and Armenian-Azerbaijani relations are as you all know at the moment based on a fragile cease fire.

For this reason we have seen a trend in the last three years whereby the three countries have stopped describing themselves as South Caucasus countries or from even discussing South Caucasus regional co-operation, to other frameworks that they find more comfortable. Georgia now prefers to define itself as a Black Sea country. Azerbaijan emphasises its membership of GUAM and of the Islamic Conference Organisation. Armenia describes itself as part of Eurasia and boasts of its ability to develop special relations with Europe and the Middle East, thanks largely to the well entrenched Armenian communities.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia benefit from optimising their relationships with nearby regional frameworks depending on whatever they perceive to be their national interests and security. This process is ongoing and all three countries now have a multi tiered network of relations . The strategic geographic location of the South Caucasus means that the three countries can have a foot in both East and West, both north and south. Indeed this may be the time to zoom out and see the region from a wider angle. However there is an important caveat that needs to be made and I want to flag this up right at the beginning because if ignored this can be an extremely negative factor. **Whatever configuration may exist in terms of regional cooperation, alliances, or participation in international organisations there will always remain a need for the three countries of the South Caucasus to organise the relations between them bilaterally and trilaterally.** History, Geography, demography and a range of other issues necessitate this and the full potential of the three countries will never be able to be fully realised until this is achieved. In the last two or three years all attempts to build relations between the three South Caucasus countries seems to have stopped. The Saakashvili government in Tbilisi that sees its neighbourhood as a constraint on its declared ambitions of full integration with the Euro-Atlantic institutions rather than an opportunity. This approach is wrong. Georgia should feel equally comfortable as a European, Black Sea and Caucasian country, simply because it is all three. For as long as the Karabakh conflict remains unresolved and Armenian – Azerbaijani relations remain problematic the onus is on Georgia to maintain the necessary dialogue in the South Caucasus, a process that needs also to be supported by the international community. They also seem to be taking the line of least resistance and shunning South Caucasus co-operation and opting for easier options.

Having stated this in clear terms I know want to move on to discuss why this notwithstanding we need to zoom out to a wider region if we want to consider both the problems of the region and their solutions and the potential of the region and the proper use of this potential for the benefit of its inhabitants.

What is going on in the South Caucasus cannot be seen any more simply from a local perspective. The regions prospects cannot be understood unless the potential of the region as a connector between Asia and Europe and Russia and the Middle East is appreciated and understood.

Last year I had the honour to serve as co-rapporteur for the Caucasus Caspian Commission. Chaired by the Foreign Minister of Slovenia it brought together twenty distinguished personalities from the European Union, the United States, Russia and the Region. Its ten thousand word report was published last month. As is sometimes the case with these kind of initiatives where one is trying to build consensus between people of very different views the report is in many aspects a fudge: stating the obvious and not quite following through on some key ideas. The report does however for the first time discuss this global potential of the South Caucasus and invites the local governments to have the foresight and vision to see beyond the present problems to a future that can potentially be much brighter.

Nowhere is this more necessary than in Armenia. If I am to understand correctly some of the arguments I have heard over the years the security of Armenia as a country, and of the people of Nagorno Karabakh in particular, is forever going to be dependent on hundreds of square kilometres of empty land that has been cleansed of its population and heavily mined. This cannot be right. The greatest asset of the Armenian nation is its ability of its people to interact with others and pursue commerce, culture and business. The highly successful Armenian communities from Los Angeles to Beirut, from Moscow to Tehran, from Paris to Aleppo are a proof of this. Armenia's strength does not come from barbed wire and mine fields, it comes from its ability to develop as a trade and commercial hub for the region. This requires open borders and good relations with all neighbours. Armenia must therefore look at its security from a different paradigm. The question therefore is how does one embark on building a security framework that can allow this to be achieved.

The report of the Caucasus-Caspian Commission speaks of a need for a "more holistic approach to security involving all the states of the region and other interested parties. This approach should aim to establish a new security arrangement that can help build trust between the states of the Caucasus-Caspian region and their neighbours, introduce where appropriate a European perspective as an alternative and put to a halt the slow but steady process of militarisation of the region". The report then talks about the need "to start an international debate that could lead to an inclusive CSCE type process that will consider the region's security challenges".

In this second and last part of my presentation I want to discuss further this idea and how it can be taken forward, emphasising that since the Caucasus-Caspian

Commission has finished its work and dissolved I now speak only as Executive Director of LINKS.

Many believe that the time has come for a CSCE type arrangement for the region that would create a mechanism for the countries of the region, plus the interested outside powers, to come together in a framework that, like the CSCE was comfortable for all players and with an agenda wide enough for all participants to see a benefit. Nearly two decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union there are still issues arising from the new situation created by that process that need to be resolved. Issues of borders and citizenship between the ex Soviet republics, the future of the unrecognised entities, relations with third countries and the all important issue of the security of the countries of the region from new and old threats.

The success of the CSCE was based on its inclusivity and on the principle of consensus. A Caucasus-Caspian Security and Co-operation Conference can only succeed if all the interested parties are represented and if they all see some benefit in the process.

One may ask why this role could not be taken on by the OSCE. Others disagree, saying that the OSCE whilst bringing in the experience of the last decades also has certain baggage that it would be better for the new arrangement not to have to carry. Also important players like Iran, and possibly China will need to be brought into the new arrangement if it is to be taken seriously.

Iran poses a particularly challenging problem given its stand off with the international community on the issue of nuclear energy development. However Iran in the Caucasus has overall been a constructive player. Its participation in a Caucasus-Caspian security arrangement is not only essential given the geography and its ties with the region, but may even be a positive way in which it can be engaged on an issue of common interest.

Many questions arise on the timing and remit of such a new arrangement. The CSCE took more than a decade to come to fruition with the approval of the Helsinki Final Act. A process in the Caucasus-Caspian Region need not take so long but will nonetheless be complex and difficult to negotiate.

The remit of a new initiative also poses questions.

- ***Should it, like the CSCE, have three baskets or should it focus on raw security?***  
Whilst issues of governance and human dimension will pose tremendous challenges to any new framework, given the diversity of political systems now straddling each other in the region, many believe that what is needed is a holistic approach that addresses security threats from all its angles, including for example environment
- ***Should it limit itself to the South Caucasus or should it look at the Caspian Region and also deal with sensitive issues such as Caspian Sea delineation?*** Azerbaijan has security concerns related to the Caspian that would make consideration of the issues surrounding this part of the region essential
- ***And finally can the issue of the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh also be dealt with in this framework.*** Here again there are two schools of thought – the first argues that putting these three complicated conflicts in the remit of the new initiative will essentially kill it before it starts given the failure of the international community so far to solve these problems. However a counter argument is that there is a better chance of these conflicts being solved within the broader framework of a Caucasus Caspian security arrangement where everybody's concerns can be addressed and where concessions can be mutually negotiated as part of a wider framework.

The conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh hang like the “sword of Damocles” over the South Caucasus. They have drained the region politically, economically and emotionally. Different sides have different views as to how the conflicts started and why. They articulate this in long expositions that are not always rational nor historically sound. Yet despite the fact that to the outsider it is clear that the region must move on and start tackling the wider, even more serious challenges, it would be a big mistake to underestimate the deep emotions that underpin the intransigent positions of the different sides.

The international community has over the last decade and a half struggled to manage the conflicts. Its best achievement has been in stopping them flaring up again. The UN in Abkhazia, the OSCE in South Ossetia and the United States, Russia and France, working in the framework of the OSCE Minsk process in

Nagorny Karabakh have put considerable effort in resolving the conflicts, so far without any results. Sometimes we are told that progress is being registered in the negotiations on Karabakh and the co-chair are indicating the likelihood of a breakthrough soon. Yet even if this happens, this is likely to be the beginning of a difficult negotiation process rather than the end.

A political solution, even if one assumes the good will of all the parties, is always going to be difficult, as the two principles: territorial integrity and self determination compete for legitimacy. The political discourse in the region – both in the Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and in the unrecognised territories, adhere to an absolutist approach to sovereignty with little consideration for the process of globalisation that increasingly push towards integration. Some discussion is starting on alternatives to this absolutist vision. It needs to be encouraged.

There is an urgent need to break the vicious circle that perpetuates the problem and the trends described above may be creating an opportunity for this to happen. For this to work there must be very clear and tangible gains for all sides and concessions that will not require any of the sides to abandon their entrenched positions. Whilst the three conflicts are very different and have a different dynamic there are common features and possibility for a common (or similar) approach to their resolution.

This will require as a basic minimum

- the end of the isolation of the unrecognised entities;
- the end of even the pretence on the part of the unrecognised entities that they are independent states, but without necessarily their acceptance to being part of a larger state;
- a much more robust international commitment to the peace process and to the region long term.

Another important regional issue is connected with the Turkish-Armenian relations. I very much hope that in the near future we can see these relations normalised. However if the two countries on their own are not able to free themselves from the baggage of history, perhaps within the context of a Caucasus-Caspian Security and Co-operation Conference they will.

In the meantime both on Karabakh and Abkhazia, on Turkish – Armenian Relations and Caspian Sea Delineation a much more comprehensive debate needs to take place amongst civil society. Security in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is no longer the prerogative of diplomats and generals; it is no longer about barbed wire land mines and buffer zones. It requires populations that are aware of the issues and about leaders who have the vision, as well as the strength and the courage to pursue difficult and sometimes unpopular decisions.