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The Institutionalised West in the South Caucasus: Role and Prospects



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Abstract

This research paper is aimed at highlighting the role played by what is in this document referred to as the “Institutionalised West” – NATO and the European Union – in the South Caucasus, a region that has witnessed considerable transformations since the fall of the Soviet Union and the consequent independence of its three constituent republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Based on thorough assessment of past and present policies and strategies developed by both the EU and NATO toward the region, it argues that deepened involvement of both institutional frameworks in the South Caucasus is actually beneficial for both the region and the West, and it will be discussed why, but it also contends that the “Institutionalised West” needs to take hindering and benefiting factors more carefully into account when dealing with the three states here at stake. It particularly stresses upon the delicate balance of interaction with the “traditional” external actors that have been shaping regional politics for decades: Russia, Turkey and Iran.

In addressing the challenges, prospects, limitations and constraints that may shape the issue of an eventual integration of the South Caucasus republics within the EU and NATO, the analysis will touch upon issues of present and past interactions, future possibilities and critical issues constraining them.

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List of Acronyms

AP	– Action Plan (EU)
BP	– British Petroleum
BTC	– Baku-Ceyhan-Tbilisi Pipeline
CFSP	– Common Foreign and Security Policy
CIS	– Commonwealth of Independent States
CSTO	– Collective Security Treaty Organisation
EaP	– Eastern Partnership (EU)
EEAS	– European External Action Service
ENP	– European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	– European Parliament
ESS	– European Security Strategy
EU	– European Union
EUCOM	– United States Military Command in Europe
FTA	– Free Trade Area
GD	– Georgian Dream Coalition
GDP	– Gross Domestic Product
IDP	– Internally Displaced Persons
IPAP	– Individual Partnership Action Plans (EU)
ISAF	– International Security Assistance Force (in Afghanistan)
KFOR	– Kosovo Force
MS	– Member State
NATO	– North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NC	– North Caucasus
NIP	– National Indicative Plans (EU)
NK	– Nagorno-Karabakh
OSCE	– Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PfP	– Partnership for Peace (NATO)
SC	– South Caucasus

SSR	– Security Sector Reform
TAP	– Trans Adriatic Pipeline
UN	– United Nations
UNM	– United National Movement
UNSC	– United Nations Security Council
US	– United States
USCENTCOM	– United States Central Command
WTO	– World Trade Organisation
WWII	– World War II

Introduction

The South Caucasus (SC) region lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. It is abundant in natural resources, borders Turkey, Russia, and Iran, and has access to Central Asia and the Middle East. For a long time, the region has been an Iranian, then a Russian colony, and later became part of the Soviet Union. Since 1991, the states of the region – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – gained their independence and started working towards statehood and self-determination as sovereign states. These events made evident the region's strategic and economic importance.

As a consequence, the “Institutionalised West”,¹ hereafter defined as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), started to show interest in the region following the immediate aftermath of independence. Then, having established links with the newly independent states, both organisations have incrementally intensified their activities in the area. In this regard, this research paper is dedicated to highlight the role of the “Institutionalised West” in the SC. Still, the region is new in the international arena, and has so far witnessed considerable transformations since the end of communism. It is a very peculiar region, and while all three republics are now internationally recognised as independent entities, they all have many internal problems, notably related to corruption, political elite dominance, and traditional external actor interference (Russia, Turkey, and Iran). We argue in this paper that involvement of both NATO and the EU in the South Caucasus is beneficial for both the region and the West, and we will discuss why, but we also contend that the “Institutionalised West” needs to take hindering and benefiting factors more carefully into account when dealing with the region. Indeed, it should not be forgotten that even if we are taking a general stance on the SC, it consists of three *different* countries, with *different* realities and needs, even if there are similarities among them.

This research paper is thus concerned with the prospects of developing the relationship between SC and what is referred here as the “Institutionalised West”. Taking into consideration the current political and economic situations of both the SC

¹ V. Socor (2004) “NATO Prospects in the South Caucasus. Building Stability and Security in South Caucasus: Multilateral Security and the Role of NATO”, Central-Asia Caucasus Institute, p. 2.

states and the West and the balance of power at play within the SC region, this research paper will address the challenges, prospects, limitations, and constraints that may shape the issue of an eventual integration of SC countries within the EU and NATO, and make proposals in this regard. Here, the use of the word “integration” does not equate to that “membership” to the EU and NATO. We rather stress upon the fact that the word “integration” is used in this research context to qualify the need, in words and deeds, for furthering the relationship and partnership between the “Institutionalised West” and the SC republics.

The main question here turns thus to be: What role for the “Institutionalised West” in the SC? This will be supported by answers to questions: If any, what has been missed out during the integration process and what needs to be done? What are the benefits and barriers to the interaction? In this view, this paper will start by giving an introduction to the profile of countries of the SC and their breakaway regions. Later, the prospects for NATO and EU integration will be analysed. This analysis will touch upon issues of past and present interactions, future possibilities, and critique. What are the other actors concerned in this process and what is their role? In this view, the paper will comment on the external actors, which have a crucial role to play in the activities of the SC. This research is adopting a constructivist approach to international relations. Analysis will be taken in that light, supporting the view that reality is a construct, and it is in our hands to create the direction in which we are going.

1. South Caucasus: Country Profiles

Map of the South Caucasus



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Generally speaking, the South Caucasus (SC) has traditionally been a cross-road region between North-South and East-West. Seven decades of Soviet control resulted in the isolation of the region from the rest of the world. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the newly independent SC countries faced deep economic, social, and ethno-political problems. Today, with better-established economies, trade partners, and the so-called “frozen” conflicts (instead of active), the SC is a more stable place.² Hughes and Sasse believe that the absence of initiation of

² J. Nichol (2010). “Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia: Security Issues and Implications for US Interests”, Congressional Research Service, p. 1.

new conflicts may be seen as a stabilisation of the post-Soviet space steaming from a process of regeneration after the chaos of the 1990s.³ Today, the SC countries are more certain about their international allies and the path(s) they would like to follow in pursuit of their national interests. At the same time, even if there is still a substantial risk of violent conflict occurring, there is however less probability that governments would prefer pursuing aggressive solutions since due to more established polities and economies, they have more to lose in this decade than they had as newly independent republics. However, post-Soviet Union institutional legacies still remain, notably in terms of permanence of territorial conflicts and structural impediments to political reforms.⁴ Like all the other former communist countries, the SC states underwent comparable processes of state and economic transformation, sovereignty-building, and internationalisation. During the early independence era, the SC faced two simultaneous and contradictory challenges of state and nation building and ethno-political mobilisations of sub-national groups that demanded for autonomy or secession.⁵

While this research paper is dealing with the relationship between the “Institutionalised West” and the South Caucasus (SC), it is worth mentioning that the Caucasus region is divided into *South* and *North Caucasus* (NC). The history and geography took these two sides of the same region in very different directions. SC has always been a land of power struggles among various empires due to the geostrategic location and mineral resources of local statelets and kingdoms. If the SC is a mountainous region, the NC is even more so, deeply protected as it is by its landscape. Consequently, the latter suffered fewer conquests until it was conquered by Imperial Russia in the early 19th century. During the Soviet period, the SC comprised the three union republics of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia that were considered to have a right of secession during the dissolution. The NC territories, on the other hand, as constitutive parts of the Russian Federation were not granted such a right. They were classified as either autonomous republics or autonomous regions. Today, after the dissolution, the NC is considered as an integral part of the

³ J. Hughes, and G. Sasse (2010). “Comparing Regional and Ethnic Conflicts in Post-Soviet Transition States”, in *Regional and Federal Studies*, p. 13.

⁴ L. Alieva (2006). “EU and South Caucasus”, CAP Discussions Paper, p. 8.

⁵ Hughes and Sasse (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 3, p. 21.

internationally recognised borders of the Russian Federation. The NC consists of Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia.⁶

Due to the more mountainous geography of the NC, the SC was conquered before its Northern counterpart. At the same time the North Caucasian populations resisted conquests more fiercely than their Southern neighbours. The relationships between the Northern and Southern parts of the region are today relatively weak, and there is little movement or migration. The only ethnicities from the North that are represented among the populations of the Southern republics are Ossetians, Abkhazs, and Lezgis (Lezgis are the ethnic group living in the North Caucasian Republic of Dagestan, Russian Federation). Multi-ethnicity of the Caucasus region greatly contributed to Russia becoming a multi-ethnic society and empire. In the Caucasus region as a whole, Georgia was the first nation to become part of Russia. Georgian Monarch Irakli II, pledged support from the Tsarist Russia against the conquests from the Ottoman and Persian Empires and surrounding mountainous people. In a short period after Russia accepted to help Georgia, the latter became a Russian colony. Azerbaijan and Armenia were ceded to Russia by the Persian Empire as a consequence of successive wars between the two empires (more information about this is given further in the paper in the section dealing with Iran as an external actor). Finally, in order to conquer the Caucasus, Russia had to fight with the Ottoman Empire and local tribal groups. Consequently, Russia was the only country that managed to make the whole Caucasus region subject of its Empire.⁷

Neither throughout history nor in the present context, can the Caucasus be seen as a coherent entity. Russia never favoured the development of substantial political or economic links between the Northern and Southern parts of the region. This, combined with a mountain range, which remains an obstacle to the development of stronger relations, resulted in weak ties between both sides. It should also be noticed that unlike the interactions between most ethnic groups in the world, the relationship between the Caucasian people is not characterised by religion, but more by history and choices of political alliances. Let us give an example. After the Georgian (Christian) war with Russia in 2008, the Chechen (Muslim) president, Ranzan Kadyrov, along with other groups in the NC, accepted the independence of

⁶ C. Zurcher (2007). *The Post-Soviet Wars: Rebellion, Ethnic Conflict, and Nationhood in the Caucasus*. (New York: New York University Press), p. 13.

⁷ A. Jersild (2002). *Orientalism and Empire: North Caucasus Mountain Peoples and the Georgian Frontier, 1845-1917* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), p. 13.

South Ossetia (predominantly Christian) and Abkhazia (divided into Christians and Muslims) and received Ossetian refugees. On the contrary, starting from 2005 Azerbaijan (predominantly Muslim) deported most of its Chechen refugees and migrants back to Russia in the middle of the Chechen-Russian war as Azerbaijani government authorities considered that they were “raising crime levels” in the country, while always acting friendly toward Georgians coming to Azerbaijan. Conversely, Georgia also is acutely concerned with chronic instability in Russia’s North Caucasian territories, since both its separatist/breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia geographically fall into that region. Due to that fact, the volatile situation in the NC has a greater effect on Georgian regional policy. Armenia and Azerbaijan are far less concerned. The only relationship Azerbaijan has with the NC is mostly related to the few Chechen refugees and Lezgi minorities living in the country. Lezgis, however, are not demanding self-determination and are well integrated into Azerbaijani society. Armenia certainly is the least interested one in the NC as it does not have any NC minorities; neither borders with Russia, hence NC.⁸

Looking back at the SC, one can say that with three unresolved conflicts and three bordering states with ambitious regional agendas of their own, the region quickly became a new frontier for NATO and the EU. Both of the unions want to interact with the SC republics and form bonds due to narrowing down geographical proximity, mutual security concerns, and high potential for mutually beneficial trade. However, unresolved conflicts hold back regional development,⁹ and lower standards of collaboration. Finding sustainable solutions to unresolved ethnic conflicts is tricky as the region is characterised by multiple intertwined factors that make it difficult to define the boundaries of a specific ethnic community. Many different people belonging to different ethnic and linguistic groups are indeed living together. That remains a major factor contributing to the political and social instability and the increased complexity of the region. While some ethnic groups demand for secession or self-determination, the others have casual relations with national state authorities and the majority population, and are generally not seeking for autonomy or

⁸ A. Merlin (2011). “Relations between the North and South Caucasus: Divergent Paths”, in *The Caucasus Analytical Digest*, p. 2.

⁹ N. Chamberlain, and I. Davis (2012). “NATO and the South Caucasus: Closer to War than Peace?”, *NATO Watch*, p. 1.

independence.¹⁰ Stability and success in the region depends on how this factor will be taken into consideration by local and foreign actors.

Foreign interests in the region, both before and after the Soviet period, emerged first as a result of appetite for the energy producing potential of the SC. Today, it is however clear that energy interest is only one, albeit essential, element of the more complex and strategic balance dynamic in the region. It is highly likely that future will see ever greater competition over the SC's energy resources and alliances.¹¹ Nevertheless, the degree of competition will depend on the extent to which energy trade develop between the United States, European countries and the SC, and the direction in which future political developments will take Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Struggles for state building are somewhat an issue of the past. Today, each regional country has developed its foreign policy in line with its own interests and those of its neighbours, and consolidated its sources of income. This made the SC countries stronger and more independent. It also resulted in a shift in the regional balance of power and created higher levels of confidence. Now, the SC is entering a new period of change, the outcomes of which will depend on the choices that will be made by each respective state authorities in terms of domestic policies (and their impact on internal stability), the directions of their foreign policies and their choices of alliances.¹²

¹⁰ N. Gosset (2013). "Caucasus and Central Asia: A Geopolitical Introduction", Presentation made at the Higher Staff Course of the Royal Military Academy, Royal Higher Institute for Defence, Brussels, 22 February 2013.

¹¹ O. Oliker (2003). "Conflict in Central Asia and South Caucasus: Implications of Foreign Interests and Involvement", Rand-Publications-Mr-All Series, p. 185.

¹² J. Boonstra, and N. Melvin (2011). "Challenging the South Caucasus Security Deficit." Documentos de Trabajo, Fride, Madrid, p. 1.

1.2. Georgia



After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Georgia formulated its foreign policy with a pro-Western orientation, especially after Mikhail Saakashvili's inauguration as a new president in 2003.¹³ This approach schematically included:

1. Attracting Western investments.
2. Seeking Georgia's participation in NATO security structures.
3. Seeking political, economic, and security ties with the West.¹⁴

Today, Georgia is a lower middle-income country. Agriculture continues to play a prominent role in Georgian economy, up to 20% of the GDP. However,

¹³ M. Freire (2013). "Security in the South Caucasus: The EU, NATO, and Russia", Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, p. 2.

¹⁴ A. Gegeshidze (2009). "Post-War Georgia: Resetting Euro-Atlantic Aspirations", in *The Caucasus Analytical Digest*, p. 6.

services and some segments of industrial production have also picked up in recent years. Since 2000, Georgia has been a World Trade Organisation (WTO) member.¹⁵

Amid some positive developments in the economic, political and security spheres, Georgia has faced myriad challenges after its independence. In the immediate aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country spiralled down in chronic and violent civil disorder that came along with the fragmentation of its political elite. After the Rose Revolution (November 2003) that overthrew President Eduard Shevardnadze, and the resulting ascension of Mikhail Saakashvili to power, the Constitution that bore the legacy of the Soviet leadership era was modified in such a way however that it gave extraordinary powers to the executive in order to carry out much needed quick and radical reforms. It cannot be denied that President Saakashvili did indeed achieve some important successes, notably in areas such as fighting corruption and police crime. Still, many problems remain to be tackled in the domains of government accountability, transparency and the independence of the judiciary and law enforcement bodies.¹⁶ In 2013 incumbent President Saakashvili accepted to enact a new change of constitution demanded by the opposition so as to make Georgia a more democratic place and find better ways of solving the above-mentioned problems. The latest constitutional update (2012) allowed to create a stable division of power within the government and has resulted in the creation of a parliamentary system (instead of a presidential one) in Georgia. Moreover, in that context of broader constitutional change, there was a peaceful shift of power during the parliamentary elections of 2012. The opposition to Mikhail Saakashvili's United National Movement – the Georgian Dream coalition led by Bidzina Ivanishvili – won the parliamentary elections held on 1 October 2012. And with the election of the Georgian Dream's candidate to the October 2013 presidential election, Giorgi Margvelashvili, the new constitution finally entered into the force, turning Georgia into a genuine parliamentary regime.¹⁷

¹⁵ European Commission (2005). "Country Report: Georgia", European Neighbourhood Policy, p. 15.

¹⁶ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

¹⁷ See, for instance, J. Nichol (2012). "Georgia's October 2012 Legislative Election: Outcome and Implications", Congressional Research Service, Washington D. C.

1.3. Azerbaijan



Azerbaijan today is a lower middle-income country. Its economy is highly dependent on oil and gas related activities, which make up 86% of total exports. In a policy move purportedly inspired by the Norwegian example, the Azerbaijani government established a state oil fund to invest in non-energy sectors and save some revenues for future generations. Arguably, this fund will be crucial in managing the adverse effects of oil boom and smoothing the medium-term growth. The fund's activities have been showing some progress with non-energy sector, which have been growing 10% annually. The main non-energy source of the economy has been the construction sector, which accounted for 12% of the economic boom in 2003. Agriculture is the second biggest export sector. Azerbaijani soil is fertile with a good agricultural basis spread over 4.5 million hectares of cultivable land. The most cultivated products are cereals, cotton, fruits, and vegetables. Azerbaijani public finances are being brought close to the international standards and have allowed

bringing down inflation after the years of hyperinflation in the early 1990s.¹⁸ These developments were made possible because Azerbaijan is a country very rich in oil and gas and its geostrategic location makes it a perfect transit route (like Georgia) between East and West. The new oil routes helped Azerbaijan to be directly connected to both the West and the East at the same time, and energy revenues and trade became structuring factors of Baku's foreign policy.¹⁹

So far, Azerbaijan government authorities' ability to draw lessons from the past experiences of other hydrocarbons producers has allowed the country to mitigate the adverse effects faced by other oil countries. Azerbaijan, indeed, has been relatively successful in using the opportunities offered by its hydrocarbon reserves to improve its economy. Yet the same certainly cannot be said about political transformations and democratisation. Oil and politics in Azerbaijan are highly interdependent. After the dynastic transfer of power from the father Haydar Aliyev to his son Ilham Aliyev in 2003, the latter found himself dependent on the support of established political elites. In order to stay in power, I. Aliyev started to distribute big shares of the nation's oil revenues to compliant political elites that helped him to come to and consolidate power. Apart from the political elites, the oil revenues have also been used to strengthen the security and defence establishments. Azerbaijani security and police forces are well paid and enjoy a somewhat privileged position in comparison with the rest of the society. Thus, in return they are also expected to remain loyal to the ruling oligarchy. Government fears that more transparency would reveal the degree of corruption and undermine the regime legitimacy in public eye.²⁰

The corruption problem is indeed particularly acute within Azerbaijan's society, economy and politics. Certainly, it is a chief obstacle to enhancing the development of the country.²¹ Azerbaijani corruption is different from the Georgian one as it existed prior to M. Saakashvili's arrival into power. In Azerbaijan, corruption is structured, hierarchical, and exists in most levels of the society. It is part of the economy. In Georgia, until President Saakashvili's administration, corruption

¹⁸ European Commission (2005). "Country Report: Azerbaijan", p. 14.

¹⁹ L. Simao (2012). "The Problematic Role of EU Democracy Promotion in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh", in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, p. 197.

²⁰ F. Guliyev (2013). "Oil and Political Stability in Azerbaijan: The Role of Policy Learning", in *The Caucasus Analytical Digest*, p. 9.

²¹ European Commission (2005), *op cit.* above ref 18, p. 14.

was a widespread phenomenon, but the central government, unlike in Azerbaijan, did not have a control of it outside of the capital, Tbilisi.²²

1.4. Armenia



Armenia is a landlocked country, whose borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed due to the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) “frozen” conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Consequently, its only access to the world is through Iran. In order to open the borders, the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia needs to be solved, but as Varuzhan Nersessian, the acting head of the OSCE Division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Armenia, told: “*the creation of an atmosphere of trust is crucial for regional development and solution to the conflict, however, these do not exist.*”²³

²² S. Cornell, and Nilsoon (2009). “Georgian Politics since the 2008 War”, in *Demokratizatsiya*, p. 252.

²³ F. Cook (2006). “NATO’s Role in South Caucasus Region”, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, available at <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=998> (as last accessed on 13 May 2013).

Of course, border closure has been affecting the Armenian economy in a very negative way. Yerevan's main trading partner is Russia, which gives credit to Armenia and sells weapons and military equipment at discount price. Armenia already ceded big part of its infrastructure industry to Russia as a debt relief. Within the country, there is a high unemployment rate, low salaries, corruption and a large shadow economy, which contributes to Armenia's vulnerability to money laundering. Nevertheless, the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has shown acceleration since the 1999, mainly due to construction and trade picking up. Unfortunately, full benefits of liberal trade regime have not been achieved because of the country's high dependence on Russia and the border closure. However, Armenia has the most open investment policy among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) concerning provision of services and establishment taxes as its economy heavily depends on foreign investments. The Armenian government wants to develop the economy by increasing public spending, but it does not have enough fiscal capacity to do so.²⁴

From a political point of view, Armenia remained fundamentally stable until 1998. Then, President Levon Ter-Petrossian was forced to resign under military pressure as rumours had been spreading that he wanted to settle the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.²⁵ From that time, Armenia's internal political situation has been all the more complex, with the president acting as the head of an oligarchic system linking businesses and politics. This is not really an Armenian specificity. This is indeed the case for all SC countries, even though Georgia has shown some improvements in this regard, with M. Saakashvili.²⁶ The year 2013 has seen important protests over Serzh Sargsyan's re-election as a president. Sometimes called "Hello Revolution", the nascent popular uprising was headed by an Armenian-American citizen, Raffi Hovhannisian, who came second to Sargsyan in the 2013 presidential election.²⁷

1.5. Internationally non-recognised breakaway republics

The SC is a region marked with a legacy of unresolved, so-called "frozen" conflicts: the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia and

²⁴ European Commission (2005). "Country Report: Armenia", European Neighborhood Policy, p. 12.

²⁵ J. Nichol. (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p.6.

²⁶ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

²⁷ M. Grigoryan (2013) "Armenia: Does Post-Election Protest Initiative Have Legs?", on *Eurasia Net*. (27 February 2013), available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66615>.

the conflict(s) between Georgia and its breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The chief reason why these conflicts do not get solved has to be related to the fact that, in every case, all opposed protagonists receive heavy military backing from one or several protective powers, therefore making any outcome impossible to predict. Additionally, these conflicts came to represent an issue of “honour” for the parties involved. If a compromise is found by political elites, they run the risk of losing their credibility in public eyes and even their position in power as was the case of Levon Ter-Petrossian, the former president of Armenia, who resigned after having been accused of rigging the 1998 election, causing thousands to go into the streets to protest the results.²⁸ Some studies however show that this may not be the only actual reason why political elites would be reluctant to compromise. Indeed, the ethnic card has often been used by local political elites to accumulate power and reduce chances of social upheaval in a SC context where someone in power tends to give preference to the people from its own region. For example, the current president of Armenia, S. Sargsyan, is originally from the NK (he was a military commander during the NK War).²⁹ The same situation exists in Azerbaijan, where President H. Aliyev, a native from Nakhchivan region, brought to power people from his own province.³⁰

a. Nagorno-Karabakh

Conflicts within the former Soviet Union borders led some scholars to argue that since the 20th century, the nature of conflicts has shifted from patterns of inter-state to intra-state conflicts.³¹ Among those, the NK conflict is certainly the most worrisome due to two main factors. First of all, it is between two sovereign states. Secondly, three regional powers (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) have different stands on it. As a consequence, there is a danger that if the conflict escalates, it can become international as it will also involve regional powers. Azerbaijan receives big amounts

²⁸ S. N. MacFarlane (2012). “Frozen Conflicts in the Former Soviet Union – The Case of Georgia/South Ossetia”, *Hamburg Yearbook*, p. 23.

²⁹ “President of Armenia”, World Diplomacy (1 December 2011); available at <http://www.worlddiplomacy.org/Countries/Armenia/LeaderArm/LeaderArm.html>.

³⁰ A. Ergun (2011), *Democratization and Civil Society in Post-Soviet South Caucasus*, Istanbul, IOS Press, p. 52.

³¹ J. Hughes, and G. Sasse (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 3, p. 13.

of revenues for its energy trade, which can lead to a shift of balance in favour of Azerbaijan and it may seek less peaceful ways of resolving the conflict.³²

The struggle between Armenian and Azeri people over NK is rooted in the politics of Soviet boundary-making. The NK territory was historically included by Stalin within the boundaries of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan, although the majority of the region's population was mostly made of Armenians. In 1992, the Armenian population of NK, then backed by the newly independent republic of Armenia, demanded independence.³³ This led to open conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1994, Russia negotiated a ceasefire between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the NK, which was nonetheless not recognised as an independent state, even by Armenia itself.³⁴ The Minsk Group, consisting of Russia, the United States and France, was then established to facilitate the peace talks and has remained thus far the main negotiation framework. However, due to both sides' fear of losing the disputed region, progress of talks has been very slow. Since 2005, the Minsk Group has been trying to negotiate a "hybrid" peace plan according to which Azerbaijan would offer a high degree of autonomy to NK in return for a formal return of the breakaway region under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction and of the return of the Azerbaijani refugees. In the meantime, Armenia has been consistently resisting any solution that would bring NK territory back under Baku's control, even if nominally.³⁵ The current number of internally displaced ethnic Azeri persons from NK and adjacent occupied districts are estimated at up to 800,000. The same estimates for Armenian refugees and IDPs from Azerbaijan are 300,000.³⁶

Today, the NK's situation is pretty much the same as it was in 1994. It is still a disputed territory between two sovereign states, with no international recognition or rights. Both Azerbaijan and Armenia keep on spending vast amounts of money on arms, and peace talks keep on going in circles. Against this background, nothing substantial has been achieved during these nineteen years of negotiations.³⁷ Yet, half

³² T. C. German (2007). "Visibly Invisible: EU Engagement in Conflict Resolution in South Caucasus", *European Security*, p. 365.

³³ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

³⁴ European Parliament (2006). « Note d'information sur les "conflits gelés" au Caucase du Sud, la situation générale de la région et ses relations avec l'UE », Direction générale des politiques externes de l'Union : Direction B, p. 7.

³⁵ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

³⁶ European Commission. (2005), *op. cit.* above ref. 18, p. 10.

³⁷ A. Paul (2010). "Nagorno-Karabakh – A Tickling Time Bomb", European Policy Center, p. 2.

of the NK residents are still living in their own region, which, because of its international status is cut off from the rest of the world and struggles in poverty. The other half of its population is living in Azerbaijan and has lost much of its hopes of ever returning back home. In addition, the population of NK itself has often had very limited voice during peace talks, if none at all.³⁸

b. South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The first war between Georgia and its breakaway region of South Ossetia broke out at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1992, a ceasefire was reached with Russian help. Following the first South Ossetian war, another civil war broke out between Georgia and its Abkhazian autonomous region. Hostilities were stopped in 1994 with the mediation of Russia and the United Nations.³⁹ At the heart of the conflict was the South Ossetian will to unify with neighbouring North Ossetia as a single constituency of the Russian Federation. Abkhazia, for its part, wanted independence from what it then considered to be its domination by ethnic Georgians. Both of these conflicts need also to be viewed as a direct result of the rise of the Georgian nationalism at the wake of the independence, which made minorities feel concerned and demand secession. Separatist entities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia managed to maintain *de facto* independence for more than ten years. Even if until the 2008 events these territories were officially recognised as Georgian (including by Russia itself), Georgian forces could not advance close to the regions, where peace was monitored by Russia.⁴⁰

The “frozen” conflict was refuelled when M. Saakashvili came to power, having promised to re-establish Georgian territorial sovereignty during his electoral campaign. Once elected, many Georgian people expected him to fulfil his promise. So in the summer of 2008, he progressively sent Georgian troops further from the established cease-fire line, closer to the breakaway regions. It is worth noting that shortly before the Georgian troops attempted to recapture the South Ossetian and Abkhaz territories, the G. W. Bush Administration in Washington had promised Georgia NATO membership in a move that may indeed be regarded as a strong manifestation of support for M. Saakashvili’s policy. From a Russian perspective,

³⁸ L. Simao (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 20, p. 198.

³⁹ S. N. MacFarlane (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 30, p. 23.

⁴⁰ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

Georgian courting of NATO at the time was unacceptable as it could lead to further Western intrusion in what Moscow still consider its “backyard”.⁴¹

After the nine-day war, an agreement was reached between Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Nicholas Sarkozy on a “division of labour” through which Russia was to safeguard South Ossetia and Abkhazia, while the EU was to make sure that Georgia would not resort to military force again. Tbilisi, followed in this by most ranks among the international community, consistently refused to recognise any South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence,⁴² which were only recognised as such by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Tuvalu.⁴³ Since then, the number of incidents at the borders has been kept low.⁴⁴

⁴¹ S. N. MacFarlane (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 28, p. 26

⁴² N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

⁴³ “On the International Recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”, Embassy of the Russian Federation in the Republic of South Africa (5 August 2011); available at <http://www.russianembassy.org.za/ia/caucasus4.html>.

⁴⁴ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

2. NATO and the South Caucasus

Due to great power politics and the sometimes difficult management of the Cold War geopolitical legacy, i.e. cooperation *vs.* competition with post-Soviet Russia, NATO's involvement in the SC region has been so far restrained to soft-power cooperation. European powers, especially France and Germany, are generally considered more inclined than the US to keep NATO's regional profile low.⁴⁵ It is our thesis, however, that due to the enlargement of the Institutionalised West's eastern borders in recent years and the increasing energy interdependence between the SC and the West, this approach may not be most suited for Europe fostering its wider security interests. Furthermore, prospects for NATO integration have certainly the potential to provide SC countries with incentives for the peaceful resolution of existing conflicts within the region.⁴⁶ The relations of interdependence within and around the SC region are marked with security issues fuelled by external actors each involved with ambitious regional agendas on their own,⁴⁷ and pulling each region constituent in separate directions. We believe that if integrated into one single framework, this interdependence could lead to conflict resolution. Yet, because of the dependence on several external actors, each country in the region sees self-preservation in a different context from its neighbours. Since the November 2003 "Rose Revolution", Georgia has seen the framework for its security protection in a pro-Western perspective, therefore tending to antagonise Russia.⁴⁸ For Azerbaijan, the main security guarantor is Turkey,⁴⁹ even if Baku prefers to bend to the demands of the West and Russia alike. When it comes to Armenia, it primarily looks toward Russia and Iran, but also has diversified relations with the West.⁵⁰ In order to establish themselves in the region, traditional regional powers tend to build upon existing conflicts (and their real or supposed ability to manipulate them). Caucasian countries therefore end up staying dependent on third stronger countries. On the

⁴⁵ G. V. Niculescu (2011). "The Role of NATO in Wider Black Sea", European Geopolitical Forum, International Conference on Regional Security Dynamics in the South Caucasus, p. 2.

⁴⁶ L. Simao (2011). "EU-South Caucasus Relations: Do Good Governance and Security Go Together?", in *Political Perspectives*, p. 48.

⁴⁷ N. Chamberlain, and I. Davis (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 9, p. 1.

⁴⁸ S. N. MacFarlane (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 28, p. 27.

⁴⁹ O. Oliker (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 11, p. 203.

⁵⁰ A. Lobjakas (2009). "NATO Lacks the Stomach for South Caucasus Fight", *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, p. 2.

contrary, if SC countries become more embedded within the framework of NATO or the EU, the self-preservation issue will shift from conflicts forecasted by the influence of traditional regional powers, to the need for cooperation and interdependence. Consequently, Western borders would become more conflict free and cooperative.

The SC region is strategically important for NATO as it links East and West, and can play an important role as an energy, transport and trade corridor. Overall, its strategic importance for NATO stems from its geopolitical location, currently as a hub for NATO troops and equipment going in and out from Afghanistan, its proximity to Iran, and last but not least, the abundance of gas and oil, which can directly reach Western markets through Turkey only (a NATO MS).⁵¹

All three SC partner countries have so far provided valuable support for NATO-led operations. One of the commitments that all three states took when joining NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) was to solve their inter-state conflicts. Through the PfP programme, NATO established a military cooperation framework with the region. Armenia has been contributing troops to Kosovo Force (KFOR) since 2004 and to International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Azerbaijan also actively supported KFOR in the past. It is also currently supporting the ISAF mission in Afghanistan with overflight rights, and is contributing to the development of Afghan national security forces through financial support and training in demining. When it comes to Georgia, as those lines are being written (September 2013), Tbilisi is the largest non-NATO ISAF contributing nation, with up to 800 military personnel deployed in Afghanistan. Likewise, it has been supporting Operation Active Endeavour – NATO's counter-terrorist, surveillance operation programme in the Mediterranean Sea. Georgia has also taken major steps to re-equip its military with Western-made weapons as it has been unable to supply its military with Russian made equipment since the 2008 Russo-Georgian War. The much valued Georgian military analyst, Giorgi Tavdgiridze, has argued that since the 2008 war it has become harder for Tbilisi to work toward raising its standards up to NATO's as some European countries are now reluctant to send NATO-calibre weapons to Georgia for

⁵¹ "NATO's Partners in the South Caucasus", NATO (10 September 2012), accessed at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_89866.htm (5 May 2013)

fear of upsetting Russia.⁵² Meanwhile, in 2008 NATO had positively assessed Georgia's actions in meeting its Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) goals.⁵³

Additionally, NATO and the SC states cooperate beyond security and defence capacity building issues: for instance, in areas such as border security and disaster preparedness.⁵⁴ At the same time, the latter benefit from US aid policy for the post-Soviet states – the so-called “FREEDOM Support Act”. US/NATO interests in the region are also the result of a geopolitical competition aimed at reducing Russia's influence at the “Southern vector”,⁵⁵ and partly ending the security and economic dependence of these vector's countries on Russia.⁵⁶

In the end of 2001, just after the September 11 attacks, Georgia and Azerbaijan made public their desire to join NATO. Since they became NATO partner countries, both have been active members of successive anti-terrorism coalitions, e.g. providing transit passages and troops to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and Iraq. They also supported Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In this respect, as Vladimir Socor believes, politically and diplomatically, Tbilisi and Baku have already been acting as *de facto* NATO members.⁵⁷ In 2001, Azerbaijan also ratified the UN Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism and the country's criminal code now penalises the funding of terrorism following NATO/US/EU standards.⁵⁸ This assistance is reciprocal. Thus, Washington has also been actively supporting Azerbaijan and Georgia's efforts to stop Chechen terrorists from using their territories to transport logistics.⁵⁹ This very fact that territories of SC states have started to be used as logistic routes by terrorists is notably why NATO needs to enhance the institutionalisation of its relations with SC countries that are becoming increasingly important in this domain. V. Socor stresses that anchoring the SC republics in the Euro-Atlantic system around the cornerstone of conflict management action plans

⁵² Idem.

⁵³ J. Nichol (2008). “Georgia (Republic) and NATO Enlargement Issues and Implications”, Congressional Research Service, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Op. cit.* above ref. 53.

⁵⁵ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

⁵⁶ N. Chamberlain, I. Davis (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 9, p. 5.

⁵⁷ V. Socor (2004), *op. cit.* above ref. 1, p. 2.

⁵⁸ European Commission (2005), *op. cit.* above ref. 18, p. 12.

⁵⁹ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 12.

would have a strategic pay-off. In the future, US CENTCOM plans to ship the equipment out of Afghanistan, across the Caspian Sea, to Azerbaijan and beyond. This route will be used for about 5% of goods exiting Afghanistan over the years 2013-14.⁶⁰ Armenia, on the other hand, has been more reluctant to actively participate in NATO operations because it does not want to complicate its relations with Russia. However, Armenia should also be encouraged to exercise NATO option.⁶¹

As can be seen, each country in the SC has a different degree of cooperation with NATO. Right now, NATO's IPAP with Georgia prioritises the supervision of goals related to the future membership set out in the Bucharest Summit and overseeing NATO's assistance related to the Russo-Georgian War with the supervision of the NATO-Georgia Commission. Georgia also expressed its willingness to participate in the post-2014 mission to assist and train Afghan security forces after ISAF's mission will end.⁶² Azerbaijan in turn wants to achieve NATO standards and to get closer to NATO institutions without seeking membership. That is the reason why the cooperation between NATO and Azerbaijan, as outlined in the IPAP, is mostly related to NATO's support to security reform in Azerbaijan. Like Georgia, Azerbaijan is also an active ISAF contributor.⁶³ Armenia, for its part, wants to increase its practical and political cooperation with NATO, but, as Azerbaijan, does not seek membership. Consequently, Armenia's IPAP is mostly concerned with the roadmap for reforms.⁶⁴

US interests in the SC do not only include the region's geostrategic location and strong help in anti-terrorism coalition building. Washington is also interested in the Caspian energy resources. The Obama Administration wants to build a Southern corridor from Central Asia, through the SC states and Turkey to Europe, in order to supplement the energy routes passing from Russia and to avoid a route passing through Iran.⁶⁵ In its testimony to US Congress (2008), General Brantz Gaddock,

⁶⁰ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

⁶¹ V. Socor (2004), *op. cit.* above ref. 1, p. 13.

⁶² "NATO's Relations with Georgia." NATO (2013).

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm. Accessed 16 August 2013.

⁶³ "NATO's Relations with Azerbaijan." NATO (2013).

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49111.htm. Accessed 16 August 2013.

⁶⁴ "NATO's Relations with Armenia." NATO (2013).

http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49111.htm. Accessed 16 August 2013.

⁶⁵ D. Mavrakis, F. Thomaidis, I. Ntoukas (2006). "An Assessment of the Natural Gas Supply Potential of the South Energy Corridor from the Caspian Region to the EU", *Energy Policy*, p. 1671.

then Commander of US European Command, declared that the SC indeed is an important region for Europe's energy diversification.⁶⁶ Moreover, the proximity of the region to Iran raises its importance to the West, especially to the US, in a general context where Iranian politics and the nuclear issue in particular rank high among Washington's concerns.⁶⁷

Russia and the US compete for influence over the Caspian energy resources. US/EU interest in the Caspian and Central Asian oil/gas resources are the main strategic point at core of their interest in the region since provision of these resources to the West is lessening its dependence on those from Russia and the Middle East.⁶⁸ The SC therefore has a crucial role to play in this strategy. The region displays vast energy reserves that can be directly traded through a direct route passing through Turkey. One of these routes, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, is already in function. Secondly, any Central Asian energy lines directed to the West need to pass through the SC, if it is to bypass Russia.⁶⁹ Then, none of the SC countries is in a position, unlike Russia, to instrumentalise a monopoly over energy trade since none of them holds as much power in foreign relations as customer countries. The probability is therefore small that any of them will risk jeopardising a mutually beneficial relationship to abuse its position. Finally, energy from the SC does come along with less associated risks than more unstable energy routes coming from the Middle East. This may be considered as a valuable reason why the US is actually so actively supporting the development of a Southern Corridor for Caspian/Central Asian gas and oil exports transiting Turkey to Europe.⁷⁰

Washington, indeed, has long been helping and supporting the securitisation of SC energy through EUCOM initiatives aimed at coordinating and complementing US security activities in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan through the Caspian Regional Maritime Security Cooperation Programme. Also, US Naval Forces in Europe have

⁶⁶ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 50.

⁶⁷ E. Nuriyev (2001). "Geopolitical Breakthrough and Emerging Challenges: The Case of the South Caucasus", *Journal of International Affairs*.

⁶⁸ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

⁶⁹ V. Socor (2004), *op. cit.* above ref. 1, p. 6.

⁷⁰ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

been actively promoting maritime security in the Caspian Sea through routine engagement with Azerbaijan by increasing the latter's naval capabilities.⁷¹

Taking into consideration all the benefits and risks associated with it, NATO has been cautiously enlarging its scope toward the most Eastern parts of the European continent, but did so according to the logic that enlargement is not an end in itself. Rather, enlargement must be seen as a tool to widen security by including peripheries so as to keep safe the Euro-Atlantic area. Certainly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union left NATO's role uncertain. Originally decided to be considered as part of that forum, Russia made the implicit choice to withdraw by re-activating policies aimed at regaining a dominant (if not hegemonic) role in the former Soviet Union area. Now, in order to play an active role in the SC, NATO needs to take into consideration the particular dynamic of the region, including its power balance, legacy of conflict(s) and the interplay of regional powers, especially Russia. In this regard, while SC countries and NATO are already collaborating in many security-related areas and certainly have mutual interests in such collaborations, a greater role for NATO in the region requires careful handling.⁷² It should be underlined, however, that since the independence of the three SC countries, NATO has been playing a more active role than the EU.⁷³

The very first time the NATO secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, visited the SC was in 2004. He then toured all three capitals to find out whether there was an interest in joining NATO. At that time, Armenia, most dependent upon Russia, refused outright.⁷⁴ Yet, as far as in 2000, Armenia's Foreign Ministry had announced that the country would have liked to increase its participation into the PfP.⁷⁵ Azerbaijan, for its part, which conducts the same kind of multi-vector foreign policy as Armenia (though in a different shape and outcome), did not give a clear answer to Secretary General de Hoop Scheffer about its intentions related to NATO. Georgia, on the contrary, was eager and agreed for deepening its collaboration with NATO.

⁷¹ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 41.

⁷² P. Aikaterini (2012). "Is NATO Enlargement in Black Sea Feasible?", *Caucasian Economic Triangle*, p. 3.

⁷³ B. Shaffer (2003). "Iran's Role in the South Caucasus and Caspian Region: Diverging Views of the US and Europe", in *Iran and Its Neighbors. Diverging Views on a Strategic Region*, Berlin, SWP, p. 18.

⁷⁴ A. Lobjekas (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 50, p. 2.

⁷⁵ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 6.

This extended partnership was set at the 2004 Istanbul Summit, where the MS decided to integrate the SC states into NATO partnership concentric circles. The roadmap is to implement individual plans, purportedly tailored according to the specific needs of each country, including military and civil development⁷⁶. So far, Georgia has been the first nation joining the IPAP framework,⁷⁷ and its most active implementer. It established a full civilian control over its military and security services.⁷⁸ There also is a Georgia-NATO Liaison Office that was opened in order to help the country to achieve its commitments undertaken with NATO. Yet joining the Alliance would eventually become possible after the resolution of conflicts, whereas Georgia is actually keeping on relying on NATO mechanisms to find solutions to its problems of separatism.⁷⁹

NATO membership is believed to have been promised to Georgia by the Bush Administration shortly before the Alliance's 2008 Summit in Bucharest. Then, purportedly due to the grave concerns expressed by Paris and Berlin, Washington decided to back down.⁸⁰ Instead, in Bucharest, Georgia was "just" offered a candidacy.⁸¹ What followed was the Russo-Georgian War,⁸² after which Tbilisi seemingly gave up its near future aspirations of joining NATO. Support for Georgia's NATO membership fell from 70% in 2008 to 49% in 2009.⁸³ Some segments of the Georgian society today oppose NATO membership on the ground that they believe it would force them to accept the independence of breakaway regions.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, NATO has been acting reluctantly toward the prospect of any Georgian membership. During the 2009 Georgia-NATO Commission meeting, the US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates, told Georgia that the US was still exploring its ties with Russia at which the Obama Administration did not have yet a

⁷⁶ F. Cook (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 23.

⁷⁷ "Individual Partnership Action Plans", NATO (25 July 2012); available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49290.htm (as last accessed on 15 May 2013)

⁷⁸ F. Cook (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 23.

⁷⁹ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

⁸⁰ A. Lobjakas (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 50, p. 3.

⁸¹ "Bucharest Summit Declaration", NATO (2008)

⁸² A. Lobjakas (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 50, p. 3.

⁸³ A. Gegeshidze (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 14, p. 6.

⁸⁴ J. Nichol (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 53, p. 4.

comprehensive look at the time.⁸⁵ A Georgia-NATO Commission was then established in 2008 in order to oversee NATO's assistance to Georgia after the war with Russia and to supervise the implementation of the process set forth in Bucharest.⁸⁶ Also, during the 2009 NATO Foreign Policy meeting, then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stressed that Russia cannot be penalised for the failure to comply with international law concerning its actions in Georgia.⁸⁷ Yet, in the meantime, the 2009 US-Georgian Charter on Strategic Partnership outlines that the US supports Georgian sovereignty, territorial integrity and cooperation.⁸⁸ Georgia was further mentioned in the 2012 Chicago Summit Declaration. The declaration informed that Georgia is meeting its NATO aspirations through reforms and that NATO consequently believes there is a need to strengthen its ties with the country and to increase political dialogue. In another paragraph of the same declaration, it was further mentioned that NATO supports Georgia's territorial integrity and supports the fact that the country is trying to resolve its dispute with Russia by peaceful means rather than resorting to force.⁸⁹

The SC region is an important one for NATO, both strategically and for its members' energy security. Until the Russo-Georgian War, NATO was giving positive messages to SC capitals and much was expected in terms of opportunity for furthering the relationship. As a direct result of the war, both NATO and SC countries became more cautious about their cooperation. Obviously, what happened between Georgia and NATO in 2008 was not carefully planned, and Russia's messages at the time that it felt threatened as a consequence of being jeopardised were then largely ignored. However, such risks in the future might be mitigated by better taking into account the specific power dynamics of the region and by including all interested parties (thus including Russia). Indeed, as NATO was taking a big step toward Georgia it could be expected that Moscow might react in an unfriendly manner.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War has increased tension in the whole region and created fear that something might go wrong again.⁹⁰ Critical in contributing to the

⁸⁵ Idem

⁸⁶ *Op cit.* above ref. 63.

⁸⁷ J. Nichol (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 53, p. 8.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 8.

⁸⁹ "Chicago Summit Declaration", NATO (2012)

⁹⁰ N. Chamberlain, I Davis (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 9, p. 5.

current atmosphere of tension also is public discontent with ruling power elites currently widespread in the region. Whereas there have not (yet?) been large-scale protests of a revolutionary type in any of the SC countries (since the November 2003 “Rose Revolution” in Georgia), demonstrations, however, have been multiplying in recent years, mostly displayed by youth, and general public mood is that of a need for change. This might not necessarily mean to entail a change of power, but it certainly means that civil societies and wider public opinions across the SC are eager for greater public participation in government affairs and want to see some change in the way it is being governed.⁹¹ Fear from Russia, on the one hand, and discontent of the public on the other, all together contribute to an overall atmosphere of tension. Unless taking the risk of turning it into a threat to its interests, this can be a good opportunity for the Institutionalised West to increase its footprint in the region.

This is a challenging task due to numerous obstacles that can hurt Western interests there, of which Russian opposition to any furthering relationship is certainly the most important one. NATO would not want to wound its relationship with Russia at the expense of smaller countries. In case of an attack on Georgia, NATO would need to send troops to support it against Russia, something none of the NATO MS clearly is willing to do. From NATO MS’s point of view it now appears clear that it is preferable to have Georgia as a NATO partner, instead of a member.

Partial Conclusion

Overall as far as the region is concerned, NATO does not appear in hurry to extend its range of activities to countries that lack sustainability and do not themselves appear to be ready, militarily, politically, and economically, for a more enhanced NATO cooperation. At the same time, enthusiasm in the region for deepening relations with NATO cooled down after 2008. The SC states themselves seem now more inclined to pursue some aspects of cooperation that better meet their national demands. Consequently, instead of focusing on deepening relations in general, which could facilitate reaching NATO standards and increased cooperation, they prefer to cooperate within areas that more narrowly benefit their national interests.⁹² Weighting out the benefits and barriers to enhanced cooperation, the

⁹¹ “Youth Activism and Protest in the North and South Caucasus”, National Endowment for Democracy (May 4 2011), available at <http://www.ned.org/events/youth-activism-and-protest-in-the-north-and-south-caucasus>.

⁹² J. Boonstra, N. Melvin (2011), *op. cit.* above ref. 12, p. 7.

partnership between NATO (and the “Institutionalised West” in general) and the SC capitals is therefore a task that needs to be developed gradually and handled with care. Alongside NATO, the EU has been less active so far in the SC. The relationships between the EU and the SC republics are still low. Yet it needs to be reviewed in turn.

3. The EU and the South Caucasus

The process of European integration and its enlargement has significance for states beyond Europe's clearly defined geographical boundaries. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, it has given hope that even the states considered to be at the periphery of Europe can lead to an enhanced relationship and, provided adequate reforms, even to accession status.⁹³ With the process of successive European enlargements to the East in 2004 and 2007, the geography of Europe's periphery has been changing, and so has been the SC region's proximity with it.

The EU's interest toward the SC region is mostly driven by the former's desire to diversify its energy sources. Arguably, the region's proximity to Turkey, a NATO MS and EU candidate, also matters to this.⁹⁴ Still, the focus of EU policies toward the region is mostly related to enhancing energy security, but the region has more to offer. SC, indeed, was the cradle of early modernisation process in that part of the world, which drove local political regimes toward republicanism and secularism (19th Century). This indicates a historically embedded reform potential within SC societies that, if developed, can have a positive impact on states beyond the region's borders. The substance of EU policies toward the SC, encompassed within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), should therefore be developed in such a way as to enable the region to realise its reform potential so as to reach peace and prosperity. In this regard, whilst the relative strength of SC state institutions has allowed so far the broadening of the relationships between the EU and the region, the dominance of political elites and their monopoly over resources, as well as interferences by third actors, has always been a constraint.⁹⁵

The growing recognition and significance of the region for the EU can be seen in the EU's growing engagement with the region since 2004, especially with the launching of the ENP, which is seen as a tool to address the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours and promote shared values. However, it should also be mentioned that the EU has not gone very far in the development of mutual relations so far, whereas enhanced cooperation and improved communication may certainly lead to more trust and transparency building. The ENP expects much from its partners, but

⁹³ L. Alieva (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 4, p. 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ L. Alieva. (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 4, p. 2.

does not offer itself much in return.⁹⁶ It wants partner countries to change, but does not offer a significant upgrade in relations or other benefits. As scholar Leila Alieva points out, when the EU decided to include the SC in the ENP, it developed negotiated Action Plans (APs) with Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. It also established National Indicative Plans (NIP), which are tools to finance specific projects that contribute to the implementation of APs. Alieva further notices that according to the EU, Armenia is the easiest negotiator, Georgia is a more difficult one because of its high expectations, such as inclusion into the Free Trade Areas (FTAs), and Azerbaijan is the most cautious one. In relation to security and foreign policy, APs identify negotiated priority areas and cover dialogues on international and regional issues. For Azerbaijan, priorities include NATO and energy cooperation. The Armenian part includes energy cooperation and water management, and in the case of Georgia, the priority area is the improvement of relations with Russia. All of the APs have similar structure and outline, which all point at common challenges faced by all the countries in the region, such as the weakness of democratic institutions and the rule of law, as well as the dependence of legislative and judiciary bodies on the executive.⁹⁷

Consultations over APs with Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia started in 2005. They defined roadmaps for further harmonisation between the EU and the states concerned. The aim is to enhance partnerships beyond limited cooperation and progress further toward integration. APs are not about foreign policy. They are mostly concerned with issues of domestic politics. Two key issues that challenge the smooth run of ENP implementation through APs in the region can be identified. First of all, it is difficult for the SC countries themselves to negotiate their own priorities. Secondly, the very approach developed by the EU toward the region finally turned it not to be considered as a priority by SC capitals. Indeed, priority partners for the region rather appear today to be NATO, the US, Russia, and Turkey. Overall the EU's APs did not come along with such a sense of urgency as other agreements with other partners.⁹⁸ As can be seen from these agreements, the partnership areas for the EU and NATO differ. The EU is focused more on domestic reforms concerning democracy and rule of law, whilst NATO, with partnership frameworks such as PfP and IPAP, is more directly aimed at military cooperation and Security Sector Reform

⁹⁶ T. C. German. (2007), *op. cit.* above ref. 32, p. 358.

⁹⁷ L. Alieva (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 4, p. 10.

⁹⁸ N. Popescu (2006). “The EU and South Caucasus – Learning Lessons from Moldova and Ukraine”, in *The Journal of Foreign Policy of Moldova*, p. 2.

(SSR) within the region; both looked at with greater interest by Baku, Yerevan and Tbilisi.

The main obstacle to the general political development of the region and the development of its relations with the “Institutionalised West” certainly is the legacy of conflict within the region. SC states have strong aspirations to integrate Western structures, but are impeded by several conflicts maintained in a state of “freeze” that seemingly benefits everyone.⁹⁹ Yet, with increasing importance of the SC and rising globalisation and interdependence, the consequences of those conflicts certainly can reach wider Europe.¹⁰⁰ The problems of the SC can no longer be regarded as being external to the EU. Furthermore, due to the nature of local disputes, the EU has more advantage compared to other states and institutions in their resolution through its soft power. Yet, any potential solution offered by the EU, such as its Stability Pact for the Caucasus, needs to be developed in strong partnership and communication with all the parties involved. In a somewhat similar vein, Alieva recommends greater empowerment and better inclusion of civil society organisations in the implementation and monitoring process, as well as closer work with local governments.¹⁰¹

Of all the three SC countries, Georgia appears to be the keenest one on increasing the EU’s participation in the region, especially in the field of conflict management. Yet the EU currently does not participate in ongoing negotiations on the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia since Russia is objecting on bigger EU participation in this regard. This stance certainly restricts the EU’s present and potentially future role in the region. Whilst the EU’s current involvement is limited to political support for existing negotiation schemes and financial support for rehabilitation of conflict zones, Brussels needs to take a more active role. The ideological implications of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War on European security space are clear: it showed that there is no common European security space today. Russian behaviour also suggests a return to the old traditional balance of power influence on the continent.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ P. Aikaterini (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 72, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ L. Alieva (2006), *op. cit.* above ref. 4, p. 13.

¹⁰² S. N. MacFarlane (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 28, p. 32.

Since 2004, the EU's approach to the SC has been mainly guided by the ENP, the 2003/08 European Security Strategy, and the normative principles that underpin the EU's external action. In the cooperation area, the EU does face some serious challenges, which are mainly to be related to weak local institutional strategies and local conflicts.¹⁰³ Accordingly, the EU is also cautious that higher levels of action can generate problems with key regional players. In the meantime, increased interdependences and the transnationalisation of non-traditional security threats started to put a strain on European security as a whole. For instance, according to the International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, whereas none of the three SC countries are drug producers, Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming a drug transit hub from Afghanistan. Georgia is also a matter of grave concern since its breakaway regions notoriously serve as conduits for drug smugglers.¹⁰⁴ In order to create a more effective approach to this and many other problems that are potential spill-overs, the EU needs to get more actively involved with partner states. Cooperation does not necessarily need to be bilateral, as it could also be multilateral and would even fit better the type of foreign policy that SC governments themselves are accustomed to conducting.¹⁰⁵

Establishing the European External Action Service (EEAS) was intended to provide the EU with more legitimacy and supranational competence in the field of foreign policy. So as in this case, it could develop more innovative and coherent approach toward the SC region. Whether the EU decides to further its ties with the region or to promote its shared values and interests, caution is needed. A common ground that could benefit both sides has to be found. Otherwise, cooperation might stop being attractive for SC countries. Economic and trade relations between them and the EU are admittedly a key area for developing common interest. Georgia and Azerbaijan already have very active energy trade with the EU, and with plans for developing pipelines, this trade relationship will unavoidably deepen.¹⁰⁶ Trade between the EU and Armenia is dominated by precious gems. They are exported to Armenia, where they get polished before being re-exported to the EU.¹⁰⁷ In this regard as in others, beneficial two-sided trade creates stronger ties and carries along the potential of positive spill overs in areas such as security.

¹⁰³ M. R. Freire (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 13, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ J. Nichol. (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 21.

¹⁰⁵ J. Boonstra, and N. Melvin (2011), *op. cit.* above ref. 12, p. 5.

¹⁰⁶ European Commission (2005), *op. cit.* above ref. 18, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ European Commission (2005). *op. cit.* above ref. 24, p. 18.

Security-wise, the European Security Strategy (2003) encompassed the need for the EU to take serious action toward troubles in the SC since it shall become soon a neighbouring region.¹⁰⁸ In 2008, the EU Commission reviewed the implementation of the 2003 ESS, which coincided with Polish proposal of Eastern Partnership (EaP). The issues touched upon included the need for the EU to diversify its energy because of the lack of security regarding existing routes. Moreover, the revision gave an extended place for security issues in the SC itself, especially as 2008 also was the year of the Russo-Georgian War. The EU then stressed that the term “frozen” coined to regional conflicts is inaccurate. Rather, they should be considered as active due to their real terms impact on political conditions in the region and beyond. The panel emphasised the importance of stronger EU engagement in the region to create a “ring of friendly states at its borders” for enhancing member states’ security.¹⁰⁹

The EaP was introduced under the leadership of Germany and the new Central and Eastern European member states as a counter-weight to the Mediterranean Partnership initiative backed by France in order to support the development of Europe’s Eastern neighbours, namely Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia (and later Belarus). Although developed within the ENP framework, the EaP initiative is focused on moving toward a more multilateral cooperation with the region. Notwithstanding, it was criticised for duplicating already existing initiatives while bringing nothing new.¹¹⁰ As a matter of fact, from this and other documents in which the SC is mentioned, it may indeed appear that the EU does want to take a more active role in the SC region. It must nonetheless be added that the EU external action in the region is actually constrained by its lack of resources regarding those it must spend in other areas where individual European countries already have closer links and/or more pressing concerns. However, building a stronger relationship with the SC, especially in the area of trade, does not necessitate many financial resources. Furthermore, the economic, social, and security benefits it will bring certainly outweigh the resources it requires to be spent in. Eventually, threats to European security and stability from the region may be better managed by way of controlled

¹⁰⁸ European Union (2003). “European Security Strategy”, p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ G. Grevi, D. Helly, D. Keohane, A. de Vasconcelos, and M. Zaborowski (2009). “The European Security Strategy 2003-08: Building on Common Interests”, European Union Institute for Security Studies, p. 37.

¹¹⁰ M. Lapeczynski (2009). “The European Union’s Eastern Partnership: Chances and Perspectives”, *The Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, p. 146.

expansion and institutionalised cooperation through soft security approach.¹¹¹ The actions and expectations of actors are shaped by the degree of effective interaction, respect they feel and incentives they receive to further political reforms and economic development.

The EU managed to become a unique event in the world by uniting formerly conflicting countries shortly after the war, through concentrating on shared benefits and values, rather than differences and threats. It therefore certainly can serve as an example to those countries that ended up seeing their territory torn apart by conflicts. Eventually, it may serve as a motivating force for the SC region to try to achieve the same benefits. As the European project was made possible with respect for the depth of interdependencies between its constituent members, the post-Soviet countries also have strong interdependencies and impact on each other's internal politics.¹¹² The SC countries are no exception to this. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are also shaping each other's actions through mutual interdependencies. A noticeable difference however is that formerly communist countries, including the SC republics, still have daunting difficulties in managing these interdependencies at best. Yet things are improving. Recent developments in the energy sphere are a good example of this. While Azerbaijan has considerable energy resources, it needs to transit them through Georgia in order to reach Turkey and EU customer markets. As a consequence of this, these two countries have managed to establish strong economic ties as valuable partners. Concomitantly, there exists a good trade partnership between Georgia and Armenia. Access to Georgian ports is indeed critical for Armenia maintaining its foreign trade, as its only geographic exit to the world is through Iran and Georgia. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War, which resulted in grave temporary malfunction of Armenia's transportation corridor, cost Yerevan a US\$ 670 million loss in foreign trade.¹¹³ This event, in combination with the sudden increase in gas prices by Gazprom for Armenia in 2013, and consecutive public protests against Russia, pushed Armenian President Sargsyan to put the normalisation of Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey high on its foreign policy agenda. Meanwhile, Azerbaijan government authorities themselves were also made aware of the damaging impact of the war on the country's economy. Shortly after the Gazprom incident,

¹¹¹ John O'Brennan (2006). "Bringing Geopolitics Back In: Exploring the Security Dimension of 2004 Eastern Enlargement of the European Union", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, p. 2.

¹¹² J. Hughes, G. Sasse (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 3, p. 14.

¹¹³ N. Mikheidze (2009). "After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Implications for the Wider Caucasus and Prospects for Western Involvement in Conflict Resolution", Background Paper on the Conference on 'the Caucasus and Black Sea Region: European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) and Beyond', p. 10.

Azerbaijan offered to sell gas at preferential prices to Armenia in return for NK “occupied territories”.¹¹⁴ Even though this proposal was made under strict political conditions that prevented Yerevan accepting it thus far, it nevertheless appeared to be the first genuine attempt since the war toward the resolution of the NK issue.

Overall, interdependencies can lead to either stabilisation or more conflicts in the region. The involvement of key players (especially Russia) will also have a decisive role in the direction these will push. Yet, whatever that direction will be, or whether the EU will play a greater role in the region or not, SC politics will durably influence EU politics due to energy and geographical proximity. A critical impediment to higher EU involvement in SC certainly remains Russian policies toward the region. The EU, indeed, appears to have difficulties in affirming itself vis-à-vis Russia as it is dramatically dependent on Russian gas and oil.¹¹⁵ However, by staying away from its neighbours, the EU is also pushing them away from itself and from developing shared values. Series of semi-structured interviews with officials from Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova demonstrated that in recent years there has been a shift from a “desire to join the EU” to a “desire to get benefits” from it. When the EU’s stance on the APs was discussed throughout a series of interviews made by Kratochvil and Tulmets, it was revealed that Brussels actually tends to treat its ENP partners in a “take it or leave it” fashion, which admittedly creates negative field effects. During these interviews, they found that the European Commission has always insisted on the point that the APs are to be called “consultations” instead of “negotiations”. This may be considered as contributing to drive partner countries off from achieving higher standards in areas where the EU wants them to go. In principle, these “consultations” are supposed to serve as a platform where partner countries can inform the Commission about their needs and complaints and where, conversely, the Commission can convince them to accept its proposals. However, these consultations never led to a shift or a change in the Commission’s proposals. Partners always ended up facing situations in which they were forced to comply, irrespective of their own critiques. From the start, the ENP has stressed the importance of shared identities and beliefs in the purported prospect of an eventual

¹¹⁴ A. Jackson, “SOCAR Brings Gas to Armenia Negotiations”, *Natural Gas Europe* (3 July 2013); available at <http://www.naturalgaseurope.com/socar-brings-gas-to-armenia-negotiations>.

¹¹⁵ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

enlargement. Later, the Commission's stance changed. So did the partner countries' stances toward the EU.¹¹⁶

As is the case with other post-Soviet transition countries, things move and change fast in the SC. Since 2004, when ENP was launched, the region has witnessed many transformations, including improved governance, extension of foreign policy and new partnership building, rapid developments in the field of economy due to energy trade, normalisation attempts with conflicting countries. Yet, even though it is generally presumed that the EU will become the largest consumer of Caspian gas, it has not taken any active role in the region. Here, the new projected Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) might well be a new opportunity for starting to re-examine prospects for closer cooperation. Since 2004, the EU has also developed more capabilities for dealing with external actors; notably through the 2009 Lisbon Treaty, which made possible the creation of the EEAS, the launching of a more sustainable Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), and gave a legal voice to the EU in international relations.¹¹⁷ Moreover, the TAP, unlike the ENP, is an economic agreement. Usually, states are more eager to cooperate around sound economic objectives serving the interests of all sides involved.

As a matter of fact, the EU's desire to become a global actor will be shaped not only by its own actions but also by the way(s) it is perceived by its neighbours. This certainly requires a better understanding of the challenges developing at the outskirts of the EU. Karl Deutsch *et al.* conceptualised security communities as transnational spaces where shared identities and common interests develop based on practical and processual interactions. These transnational interactions, in the long run, give rise to shared expectations of peaceful change.¹¹⁸

Partial Conclusion

Today, both the EU and SC countries seem to be ready for a more committed correlation compared to the first years of the dissolution of the Soviet Union or the launching of the ENP. However, the region has its own specificities and should be

¹¹⁶ P. Kratochvil, E. Tulmets. "Constructivism and Rationalism as Analytical Lenses: The Case of the European Neighbourhood Policy." *Politics*. (2010): P. 31.

¹¹⁷ "Treaty of Lisbon: Amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty Establishing the European Community." *Official Journal of the European Union*. (2007).

¹¹⁸ L. Simao. (2011). *op. cit.* above ref. 46. p. 36.

treated in line with those. External players, historically, play a crucial role in the dynamics of the SC. Neither for the EU nor for the region itself, it is therefore possible (and suitable) to exclude these third actors. Rather, in order not to create more tensions and allow a smooth transition to commonly shared ideas and principles, they need to be included, or at least to be taken into careful consideration. Russia, in particular, fears losing yet another periphery to the West. Also, events in Azerbaijan and Armenia might have a direct effect on Iran's internal politics due to the large Azerbaijani and sizable Armenian minorities living on its territory. Finally, Turkey is overall supporting a stronger Azerbaijan at the expense of Armenia.

4. Interacting with “traditional” external actors

The “traditional”, i.e. regional powers involved in the domestic and foreign politics of the SC states, in degrees of influence, are:

1. Russia
2. Turkey
3. Iran.

Complex, context-based, and often contradictory political moves by regional great powers have been shaping the politics of the SC for decades. It is therefore essential to understand these dynamics in order to prevent a full-fledged war both within the region and beyond. In the contemporary period, and sometimes before, the driving factors of these dynamics have been framed by cooperation *vs.* competition for energy, economic power and security policies. In recent years, the growing polarisation in international affairs has also influenced the relationship among aforementioned regional powers and the impact they have on the SC. With the increasing geo-strategic and energy importance of the region, Russian attempts to monopolise energy lines, the re-assertion of Turkey as a major international player, and Iran’s antagonism on the international stage, it is likely that the consequences of the interactions of these three major players among each other and with the region can have global field effects.¹¹⁹

The SC states are weak in comparison with big external actors, especially in areas such as foreign policy and security/military footprint. Each of the three aforementioned powers has a different agenda when it comes to involving in Caucasian affairs. For Russia, the SC is a traditional sphere of influence. Iran has strong historical interests in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Turkey has dense socio-cultural/ethnic ties with Azerbaijan and a vivid historical legacy with the Armenian people. Furthermore, all three have been drawn to the region through threats to their interest, which they perceive are emanating from the region. In the new independence era, the region has been a playground for Russia, Turkey as well as Iran, whereas

¹¹⁹ S. J. Flanagan (2013). “The Turkey-Russia-Iran-Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics”, *The Washington Quarterly*, p. 163.

sovereign political choices made by the SC states are now shaping those made by external actors toward the region.¹²⁰ Georgia, for instance, once very close to Russia, has now eventually decided to break free from its former protector by seeking new alliances in the West. Meanwhile, after the 2008 war, Tbilisi has gone increasingly closer to Ankara as it realised that reaching the level of proximity with the West it expected was unlikely for now. Also, due to ethnic, economic and political ties, and certainly the anti-Armenianism of both foreign policies, Azerbaijan has long chosen to become Turkey's partner. Armenia, for its part, chose Russia as its primary protector and Iran as a friend of convenience.

In order to strengthen their position and guarantee their national interests, the SC countries found themselves in need for choosing a protector state against the background of local conflicts. Whereas all those conflicts are different in their pattern and sociology, they however share some peculiar similarities. Indeed, all of them share the undisputable influence of a protector state that holds a historical influence on the local actors in conflict. Russia, for instance, has long been indirectly supporting secessionists in the SC region, whilst combating them fiercely in the NC.

4.1. Russia

Under Vladimir Putin's presidency, "frozen" conflicts re-became the cornerstone of Russian politics in reasserting its influence over "difficult" neighbours.¹²¹ While Russia was putting itself back on its feet, the military intervention in Georgia provided Moscow with a golden opportunity for showing to all parties, former Soviet countries, and the West alike, that it still has the required power for shaping its periphery.¹²²

Russia has a firm, strategic partnership with Azerbaijan, but it is not Baku's only and by far most important ally. When it comes to Armenia, Moscow is the ultimate guarantor of the country's sovereignty and traditionally its main ally. Taking into consideration Russia's influence and impact in the region, it would be very

¹²⁰ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 1.

¹²¹ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 1.

¹²² S. N. Macfarlane (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 28, p. 28.

difficult for Moscow to remain neutral in case a new round of war breaks out over NK.¹²³

As far as the Georgia's sovereignty conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia is concerned, Russia's positive role is unavoidable to its resolution. It is indeed difficult for Abkhaz and South Ossetian authorities to negotiate directly with Tbilisi since they get all financial and military support from Moscow, which they would not want to jeopardize by making even a modest gesture of reconciliation toward the Georgian government. This is a good example of why Moscow's strategy concerning the SC "frozen" conflicts has been described as one of "controlled instability".¹²⁴ Furthermore, Russia has been attempting to create military alliances and armed control over its ex-Soviet regions within the CSTO framework, sometimes seen as a Russian-driven "NATO-like" structure.¹²⁵ Georgia and Azerbaijan, which are not members of it (contrary to Armenia), frequently voiced concerns over the potential

¹²³ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

¹²⁴ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

¹²⁵ While Moscow claims that the CSTO is a credible regional political-military alliance offering a comprehensive framework as effective provider of collective security in the post-Soviet area (i.e. Central Asia and the Caucasus), there appears to be a common understanding at the time those lines are being written that the Moscow-backed collective security organisation remains very far from qualifying itself as anything close to an eastern competitor to NATO, may it be in terms of military capabilities and activities in the field or in respect of existing mechanisms for awareness raising and knowledge sharing. While being formally in the same legal category as NATO (regional security organisation in Eurasia with credentials in accordance with the UN Charter Chapter 8), the CSTO has combined defence budget of MS which is 15 times lower than combined defence budget of NATO MS, so it cannot pretend to be equal to NATO. The backbone of NATO cooperation is the integrated military structure with joint planning staff and operations staff at the different levels. Military cooperation in CSTO is more of a detached nature and can hardly be called a joint structure: it looks more like a series of cooperation between Russia and the other MS. CSTO does have a joint headquarters, which is headed on rotation basis by the chiefs of the general staffs of the MS, but it has no integrated military structure. Nothing close to a supranational organisation, the CSTO, rather than a truly grid multilateral structure, may be arguably best described as "a network of bilateral relations" somewhat following the familiar pattern and socialisation mechanisms of the erstwhile Warsaw Pact, which was similarly the sum of total bilateral relationships (of varying quality) between Moscow and each individual MS. Conversely, individual MS do not have strong ties in the area of collective security among themselves, or to very limited extend only. In fact, all evidences bring to the conclusion that the mechanisms of intergovernmental "enhanced cooperation" within the CSTO framework have incrementally developed on an ad hoc basis in such a way that the privilege of "being in the driver's seat" seems de facto entitled to Moscow only, which appears in Vladimir Socor's terms to "[...] stand at the centre [of this system] like the centre of a wheel around which the spokes are arranged" (V. Socor, 2012: 3).

negative impact of CSTO in the region, especially after the massive military exercises that were organised just after the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.¹²⁶

Although, when M. Saakashvili came to power, Georgia had attempted to distance itself from Russia, the election of Ivanishvili as new prime minister in a political regime deemed to become a parliamentary one has been raising fear Georgia might start re-strengthening its ties with Russia, hence reversing those closer ties to the West it had so far developed with the West. On the other hand, as NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen declared in a press conference in Armenia in November 2012: good relations with both Russia and NATO are not a contradiction.¹²⁷ One may therefore believe that the same statement, which does not exclude the possibility of a multilateral approach, is also applicable for any other country in the region. Furthermore, this can be supported by the idea that unless it is not given too much room for action, Russia does not have the same power as it used to have (and pretends to have). To a large extent, indeed, today's Russia is much weaker than Soviet Union was, and any appreciation of "Russia's come back" as global superpower are by far exaggerated.¹²⁸ However, as once again demonstrated by Ukraine's crisis and the Crimean affair, Russia's antagonism to any Western enlargement to what Moscow considers its "natural sphere of influence" is all real whether the "Institutionalised West" expands its borders and partnerships eastwards, getting closer to Russia. As testified by the experience of the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, successive "gas battles" over Ukrainian transit routes and now the annexation of Crimea, Moscow will fiercely oppose any step made in the direction of Ukrainian or Georgian membership to NATO.

4.2. Turkey

Turkey's activity in the SC is to a certain degree interlinked with Ankara's relations with Russia. Russian-Turkish relations are not characterised by open hostility or clear friendship, but are rather marked by complexity. Going back to history, the Ottomans supported the political aspirations of Turkic and Islamic people in the SC. Russia, in turn, assisted Slavic and Christian people's revolt against the Ottoman rule. Later, Vladimir Lenin supported Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's Turkish revolution and the early relations between modern Kemalist Turkey and the Soviet

¹²⁶ J. Nichol. (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 26.

¹²⁷ N. Chamberlain, and I. Davis (2012), *op. cit.* above ref. 9, p. 2.

¹²⁸ O. Oliker (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 11, p. 240.

Union were rather cooperative. Yet, relations between both sides later grew increasingly difficult when, during the Cold War, Turkey decided to join NATO and contributed to halting the spread of communism by creating a Southern bulwark. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of communism, Ankara and Moscow started a pragmatic cooperation based on some common energy and economic interests, and also Turkey's disappointment with the EU.¹²⁹

The current relationship between Russia and Turkey is more practical even though both countries try to make it appear strategic. Recent years have seen the growth of tourism, investments and trade between the two countries. Yet Russia and Turkey lack common agenda and have more divergent than convergent interests to make their relationship truly "strategic". The main area of their interaction is bilateral energy trade partnership. In this area, there is some cooperation, but also competition. Turkey, like the EU, does not want to rely too heavily on Russian oil and gas. Russian attempts to control the energy of the Black Sea and the Caspian Basin halt Turkey's attempts to become the key element of an East-West transit corridor.¹³⁰

When it comes to its relationships with the individual SC states, Turkey has a different stance on each of them. The country started to establish ties with new independent states just after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it is certainly with Azerbaijan that it has furthered them the most. Ankara is Baku's number one strategic partner. The two countries have numerous areas of partnership, including myriad of agreements in the political, military, economic, cultural and social spheres.¹³¹ Georgia and Azerbaijan cite the country as their main trade partner, their business being mostly based on energy.¹³² That is why Ankara fosters stability in the region, so that it can safely diversify its energy sources. Turkey plays an important role in transporting energy from Caspian to the markets in Europe. It is already transporting oil with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and will start transporting gas through the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP).¹³³

¹²⁹ S. J. Flanagan (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 119, p. 164.

¹³⁰ S. J. Flanagan (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 119, p. 166.

¹³¹ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

¹³² O. Oliker (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 11, p. 200.

¹³³ G. Winrow (2009). "Turkey, Russia, and the Caucasus: Common and Diverging Interests", Chatham House, London, p. 6.

Georgia and Turkey, after the former's disappointment with Russia and the West (though at a different level) and the implementation of an active trade partnership with Azerbaijan, started extending their ties. After the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, Tbilisi's attention shifted to solving the problems related to South Ossetia and Abkhazia rather than furthering relations with Ankara.¹³⁴ The Turkish authorities, however, have been continuously offering support to Georgian and Azerbaijani armed forces so as to raise their military standards up to that of NATO.¹³⁵ Certainly, the main obstacle for Turkey expanding its influence in the SC region is embodied in pan-Turkish national and Ankara's historical hostility toward Armenia. Turkey's relationship with Armenia is strained over Ankara's support of Azerbaijan in the NK conflict and the official status of mass murder of Armenian people on Ottoman soil in 1915, which modern Turkey has always officially denied to be of a genocidal nature.¹³⁶ Now, it is argued that Turkey wants to normalise its relations with Armenia as a consequence of its "new vision of SC", but without jeopardising its own interests and its relations with Azerbaijan and Russia.¹³⁷

As previously mentioned, the August 2008 Russo-Georgian War had negative consequences for Armenia. At the time indeed, Russia blocked products coming from Georgia on its territory, but the routes that were blocked were also those used by Armenia for its own imports and exports. It was noted at the time that if Turkey had then opened its borders with Armenia, it could have helped both Georgia and Armenia at the same time and would have therefore dramatically improved Turkey's relations with Yerevan. Yet the opportunity was not taken at the time, as Ankara continued to put conditions that, if it was to be the case, Armenia should stop claiming genocide and resolve the NK problem. Armenia refused, and the borders stayed closed to the satisfaction of Azerbaijan.¹³⁸ There is still a long way to go to be done to for normalising the relations between Ankara and Yerevan.

¹³⁴ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 6.

¹³⁵ G. Winrow (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 133, p. 6.

¹³⁶ O. Olker (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 11, p. 199.

¹³⁷ J. Nichol (2010), *op. cit.* above ref. 2, p. 28.

¹³⁸ G. Winrow (2009), *op. cit.* above ref. 133, p. 7.

4.3. Iran

Ottoman/Persian and Turkish/Iranian relations, unlike Russian/Turkish relations, are characterised by constant competition and sometimes conflict. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran created dramatic differences between pro-US Turkey and anti-US Iran. In the meantime, both countries have been using mutually beneficial energy and economic cooperation to avoid confrontation. Tehran, nonetheless, strongly mistrusts Turkey's military partnership with the US.¹³⁹ Iran's relationship with Russia, on the other hand, has seen both confrontation and collaboration. Struggle for a regional hegemony has however given a more confrontational dimension to the relationship between both countries throughout history.¹⁴⁰ In the First and Second Russo-Persian Wars of 1813 and 1828, Iran lost most of its Northern territories – today's Azerbaijan and Armenia, and parts of Georgia and Dagestan as well – to Russia. Iran considers the results of this event to be the most humiliating treaties of its existence.¹⁴¹ The last decade, however, saw a shift in Russian perspective on Iran. Moscow then started to see Iran as a potential market, especially for conventional arms, and as a counter-balance to Turkish and US interests in the SC. Similarly, the growing difference between Washington over arms control in Syria, recently led Russia to open a new scope of cooperation with Iran.¹⁴²

Yet, like Turkey and European countries, Iran is also facing energy problems with Russia, e.g. concerning the demarcation of oil- and gas- rich Caspian Sea. Since 2009, Tehran has become more active in the SC region area so as to offset Russian influence and protect its energy and security interests in the Caspian Sea.¹⁴³ At core, Iran's objectives in the SC remain to counter-balance Western and Turkish influences there and to ensure overall security in the region that otherwise might threaten its own internal stability. Iran enjoys excellent relations with Armenia, with which it has developed a fruitful bilateral cooperation framework since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By far, Tehran's political influence over Azerbaijan is not as strong. This is at first the result of certain irredentist claims in Azerbaijan stemming from the large ethnic Azeri minority living in Iran, but also due to the orientation of Azerbaijani

¹³⁹ S. J. Flanagan (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 119, p. 164.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* p. 165.

¹⁴¹ *The Circle of Ancient Iranian Studies* (2013), available at <http://www.cais-soas.com/index.htm> (as last accessed on 10 July 2013).

¹⁴² S. J. Flanagan. (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 119, p. 165.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 173.

policies toward Western allies and Turkey. Additionally, warm relations between Iran and Armenia made Azerbaijan cautious, the same way as close interaction between Turkey and Azerbaijan makes Armenia cautious.¹⁴⁴ Officially, Iran's stance over the NK conflict is one of neutrality since it has direct borders with both SC republics in conflict. Yet, it has some interest in keeping Azerbaijan involved in the conflict so that the country remains unattractive to Iran's own Azeri minority.¹⁴⁵ In general, Armenia and Iran have good relations. Yerevan and Tehran signed a number of agreements at the height of the NK conflict. Iran sells fuel to Armenia, and Russian energy provision to Armenia is often delivered through Iran's territory. Yet, whereas Iran's relations with Azerbaijan are strained, they nonetheless remain tactically calm. For instance, in spite of lasting disputes over the Caspian Sea demarcation, Iran has offered Azerbaijan to give up its claims if Baku would act so as to include Iran in big international energy projects. Yet, when the so-called "contract of the century" was signed over energy trade between the region and the West, Iran was finally excluded. Then, Tehran went back to its old rhetoric and even sent warships threatening British Petroleum (BP) vessels surveying in the Caspian Sea.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, since 2008 Russia also has abandoned its common position with Iran and started signing bilateral treaties with Azerbaijan concerning demarcation lines and energy sharing.¹⁴⁷

Partial Conclusion

Considered all together, all three regional powers – Russia, Turkey and Iran – have so far been the most important external factors moulding the destiny of the SC region. As the region was opening up to new horizons since the fall of the Soviet Union, they also expected to and acted so as to keep or gain ground. If one considers the need for developing an effective multilateral cooperation between the "Institutionalised West" and the SC, these traditional regional actors should be taken into greater consideration, but with a controlled degree of their dominance during the talks. As recent events demonstrated, it is hard to envisage that a solution could be found or progress could be made in any other way.

¹⁴⁴ N. Gosset (2013), *op. cit.* above ref. 10.

¹⁴⁵ B. Shaffer (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 73, p. 19.

¹⁴⁶ Contract signed in 1994 between Azerbaijan national government authorities and several Western oil majors over the exploitation of Azerbaijani oil reserves.

¹⁴⁷ B. Shaffer (2003), *op. cit.* above ref. 73, p. 19.

Conclusion

The SC countries have the potential for featuring in NATO and EU agendas. They also have the potential to exert major spill over effect on the West and regional powers. This influence, however, may be positive or negative depending on the route each independent SC nation will choose to take, the alliances its government authorities will pursue, and the degree of interaction/integration it will develop with the “Institutionalised West”.

Today, the SC countries are racked with ethnic conflicts, corruption and lack of democracy. However, recent years have also seen considerable progress in these matters. As a result of Baku’s successful lobbying, the European Parliament (EP) has already decided that Azerbaijan could be withdrawn from the list of countries that need observer mission for elections.¹⁴⁸ Armenia, after the Gazprom incident, started to distance itself from Russia. Regarding the tense relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, some hope may now eventually be permitted. As a matter of fact, after Azerbaijan offered to include Armenia in its gas provision plans, anecdotal events such as the screening amid protests of the film “The Swing of the Coffin Maker” by Azerbaijani film-maker Elmar Imanov at Yerevan’s international movie festival might be an indicator of the inevitable steps toward a peaceful resolution of the Armenian-Azeri conflict.¹⁴⁹ Several years ago, indeed, such moves would have been unthinkable. Georgia also, in its own way, is trying hard to break free from its former bounds.

So far, there has been an overall limited involvement of the “Institutionalised West” in SC affairs. Endemic corruption, oligarchic political elites’ ambivalent attitudes, the legacy of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and unresolved “frozen” conflicts must indeed be considered as decisive factors in this. Up to now, the EU has been even less active than NATO. However, things have been changing recently. The main link between the West and the SC is energy. The launch of the BTC oil pipeline

¹⁴⁸ “European Parliament Withdraws Election Monitoring from Azerbaijan Ahead of Presidential Elections”, *PR Newswire*, 12 July 2013; available at <http://www.prnewswire.co.uk/news-releases/european-parliament-withdraws-election-monitoring-from-azerbaijan-ahead-of-presidential-elections.html>.

¹⁴⁹ “Nationality is of no Importance at International Film Festivals – Golden Apricot Film Festival”, *Tert*, 13 July 2013; available at <http://www.tert.am/en/news/2013/07/13/adrbejanakan-film/>.

and the resolution of the TAP case for directly transporting Caucasian (and Central Asian) gas to the European markets consolidated that link. Where this new, consolidated relationship is to lead still remains to be seen, but improved strategies and institutionalised communication channels can only contribute to establish strong relationships with SC capitals that will benefit both sides.

Yet it should not be forgotten that SC countries have had to conciliate major powers in their direct vicinity, which have so far played a critical role in shaping the region's destiny and therefore are closely watching any innovation bearing the potential to limit their influence and impact on their own domestic situations. Both SC countries and the "Institutionalised West" are following multi-vector policies. Hence, when furthering mutual relations, the existing multilateral approach should not be damaged, otherwise it would create hindrances on the way to reciprocal development.

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