

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Study Group Regional Stability in the South Caucasus (RSSC SG)**

#### **“Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance”**

**25<sup>th</sup> RSSC SG Workshop**  
**30 March - 02 April 2023**  
**Tbilisi, Georgia**

PfP Consortium of Defense  
Academies and Security  
Studies Institutes



The RSSC SG met for its 25<sup>th</sup> workshop in Tbilisi, Georgia, to discuss the future of the South Caucasus in the context of the erosion of Russian hegemony in the region. The continuing war in Ukraine and the upheaval which it has created in the geostrategic and geopolitical environment cannot be ignored, as there is empirical evidence that other regional actors are seeking to take advantage of Russia's weakness. This would necessarily affect the ability of South Caucasus countries to determine their policy orientation – individually or jointly. What follows is a synopsis of the debates during the workshop concluding with a set of general recommendations.

### **Scenarios for a Future Russia**

Scenarios for a future Russia cannot be divorced from the kind of relations that might follow in the wake of the end of war in Ukraine. To some, there is no stopping the revisionist trend currently at play among Russian foreign and security policy elites – irrespective of Russia's performance in Ukraine. This sort of revisionism is not akin to structural conflict (such as what we have seen during the Cold War) and thus would not be propitious for a “Gorbachevian thaw.” Thus, the West must abandon the “bogeyman” narrative and develop an “exit strategy” in a context where Russia can neither win nor lose.

The leverage of the Russian Federation to manage the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan might be affected, and the stability of the South Caucasus could suffer yet again, as the presence of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh might be put in question past 2025. Armenia and Azerbaijan are united in their criticism of Russia's presence – though for different reasons – and an eventual withdrawal may have implications on other fronts as well – as a credible leader of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), for instance.

The future of Russia is dependent on new trade routes and the opening of geopolitical corridors which will help it skirt sanctions and develop new partnerships. Thus, the North-South routes towards the Persian Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean are becoming existentially critical for Russia. This explains the Russian-Turkish “co-opetition” (a symbiosis of cooperation and competition).

If Russia succeeds in fostering stable links with Türkiye, Iran and other key Middle Eastern actors, it may effectively sideline the clientelist relations of the United States in the Middle East, thereby creating a genuine multipolar world whence it might emerge, some analysts believe, a new regional order where Russia could have the upper hand. In this context, the belief that Russian influence might be evaporating discounts the fact that Russia is the only actor who can leverage the Israel-Iran dialogue.

This is a significant departure from the traditional strategic Russian thinking that “Russia will not be Russia without the Black Sea”, quipped by Boris Yeltsin in 1996 (and echoed by Pavel Grachev). The future depends on how the West will perceive Russia, especially with regards to Crimea. If Russia lost Crimea, then the Black Sea would be also lost. If regional cooperation emerges, then Russia's influence in the wider Black Sea may be curtailed. If dividing lines endure, and if South Caucasus countries maintain relationships with larger hegemony, stability will be more fragile, but Russian dominance over the Black Sea would still be maintained.

This last appraisal is in line with the pessimistic view of Russian-South Caucasus relations. Russia may still apply selective pressure on its neighbours. Its presence in Karabakh, for instance, supports its mediating power between Armenia and Azerbaijan. This in turn would affect Georgian relationships in the region. An optimistic scenario would see Russia adopt a more constructive attitude which could stimulate regional cooperation on common energy projects – this may



eventually lead to the closer integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia. In the short term, we may see a greater focus on Central Asia as Russia seeks to evade sanctions. Another assessment is that there is no “future Russia” because in reality, the Cold War never ended; it merely changed shape.

There was no consensus as to what could be expected of Russia in the future. Towards the West, Russia’s relationship will remain competitive at best, and confrontational at worst. In the South Caucasus, Russia’s presence will continue being felt. The weakening of Russia may force it to become more constructive in its approach. The effects are lacklustre and suboptimal, but have had implications for relevant international organizations, such as the OSCE. Few alternative solutions have been provided.

Russia’s role in the South Caucasus eroded to such a point that the South Caucasus countries are also looking for other strategic relationships besides those with Russia. On the other hand, discussions show that support for the CSTO should not be underrated. In this context, Russian dominance may endure within that organization. Türkiye has the potential of becoming the dominant Black Sea power, which may lead Russia to seek increased interdependence with it.

The basic assumption is that Russia and the West are in for a long-term conflict. Some relationships are beyond repair, others are difficult to manage, and therefore, the future becomes difficult to predict, and even harder to plan for.

### **The Future of Multilateralism in a Changing Geopolitical Environment**

Some commentators argued that multilateralism – expressed as the UN, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe – has failed in the South Caucasus, others stated that it is premature to suggest this. Their argument was that for nearly a quarter of a century, multilateral presence, either in the form of the UN, the OSCE or the EU, had prevented conflict and loss of life (even if it had been unsuccessful in preventing a resumption of hostilities). Also absent (in discussions) was the CSTO, which could have been expected to intervene, or at least voice concern, over the deteriorating situation in the Lachin corridor. However, last February, the UN International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued, upon Armenian request, a provisional measure to ensure unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo along the Lachin Corridor. In conclusion, there is still life left in multilateral institutions.

The more pertinent multilateral initiative remains the 3+3 format set up to manage intra-regional competition in the wake of the second Karabakh war. Still, only Azerbaijan and Türkiye are apparently

in favour of this model, while Iran, Armenia and Russia are not really interested. In fact, the increase of attacks against Azerbaijani interests and personnel in the region reflects competition over the region. Weak as it is, it is too simplistic to believe that Russia may become more constructive. On the contrary, it may become more intransigent, and this intransigence may find expression in Karabakh.

The second discussion period allowed for some clarification of statements made in the panel, specifically pertaining to issues of energy transfer and management. The current security climate may yet preclude any cooperation over energy transfers.

### **South Caucasus Survival and Tomorrow’s Russia**

There is a great opportunity for the South Caucasus to escape Russia’s dominance, as the latter seeks to establish geostrategic links with the Middle East. This connectivity project is of critical importance to Russia. Overall, there are concerns that Russia may expand its economic influence in the wider region, while it is sharing geopolitical influence with others.

The Russian presence in the South Caucasus still deters against resumption of hostilities in all conflicts of the South Caucasus. Failing that, actors would have to rely on self-help for their security. For example, in 2022, Armenia was in a better position to negotiate thanks to the weapons it had purchased.

In contradistinction with the previous panel, the conclusion was that international presence – which would be resisted by Azerbaijan – is needed. Armenia, no longer a strategic priority of Azerbaijan’s (that distinction now falls to Iran), does not view Nagorno Karabakh in status terms anymore. It seeks security for the Armenian community there through the good offices of multilateral organizations, or security guarantors who are not from the region.

Russia is a declining political power in the South Caucasus, but it increases its presence commercially. This is felt most keenly in Georgia where Russian draft-dodgers have sought refuge. This may greatly sustain Georgia’s economy since Russians bring their skills and resources to the local economy. Whereas Russia before applied its mediation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it has now turned somewhat away from the South Caucasus. Iran-Russia cooperation, however, has increased as a result.

The new economic framework may create patterns of interdependence which the West may be critical of. By engaging in the economic interdependence via Russian displaced citizens, Georgia may end up being the target of sanctions by the West, which would negate its chances at integrating NATO and the EU.

There was some disquiet at the prospect of Armenian rearmament. But some participants stated that Armenia is not preparing for war, but for the eventual Russian withdrawal from Karabakh in 2025. Also, a stronger posture would enable it to better resist diplomatically to Azerbaijani demands. In its very essence, the issue is the security of that community, not how that security is provided.

A final peace deal between Armenia and Azerbaijan is needed. There were questions as to what the components of that peace agreement might be. Azerbaijan wants peace, and quickly, because Iran is its primary focus now, not Armenia. The urgency of a guaranteed peace deal (far better to speak of security regime) in the South Caucasus is made manifest by Iran's pretensions in the region, especially with regards to the proposed corridor from mainland Azerbaijan to Nakhichevan through Armenia's Syunik province. There seems to be mutuality between Iran and Russia with regards to the need to establish a reliable North-South connection.

Finally, and most tellingly for multilateralists, Azerbaijan would resist any demands or conditions laid down by the international community. Following those very rich discussions, the group addressed one single question on which to base policy recommendations; "what kind of peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan?"

### **Interactive Discussion: "What Kind of Peace Agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan?"**

Some participants were adamant that there will be no Russian presence on the contact line beyond 2025. This would naturally trigger significant disquiet among the Armenian community which requires some form of protection. In other words, full application of the November 2020 Trilateral Statement is what is being sought. This means that an international presence (instead of Russian peacekeepers) would also be unacceptable. Nevertheless, Armenia still insists on a foreign presence (such as EU monitors) to guarantee the safety of the Armenian community in Karabakh.

To the notion that "Armenians must integrate into Azerbaijani society" was opposed the need to not neglect the rights of ethnic groups as rights of self-determination must be respected within the confines of territorial integrity. There was much debate as to the validity of the principles of the Helsinki Final Act in the settling of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. In that regard, the Final Act was, if not dead, at least of very limited utility in shaping outcomes. All communities (Armenians within Azerbaijan, and Azerbaijanis within the Armenian-controlled parts of Karabakh, for instance) should be afforded the same treatment.

Some suggested that, under international law, the Armenian community in Karabakh did not represent "a people" in the context of *uti possidetis* and external self-determination. Bearing in mind that there is a need to find constructive solutions to intractable conflicts, the co-chairs warn of the broader implications of such cookie-cutter definitions, especially at a moment where international law is being so severely tested. The co-chairs will examine the feasibility of hosting discussions to flesh out details around the proposals above in future workshops.



### **Policy Recommendations**

The following policy recommendations emerged from the interactive discussions pertaining to the current tense geopolitical and strategic context:

1. The broadest recommendation put forward was not to reproduce the errors of the past. In that vein, there has been broad agreement among participants that the negotiation and conclusion of a comprehensive peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan should remain a key regional priority for all actors involved. This should be an essential building bloc of a new regional security architecture built upon an unambiguous, shared commitment to the Charter of the United Nations and the Alma Ata 1991 Declaration.
2. The rights of persons belonging to ethnic groups must be fully respected. Equal rights should be affirmed for all citizens within their states, in line with relevant international conventions. To that end, a viable, internationally supported mechanism for constructive talks between Baku and the Armenians from Karabakh is necessary to guarantee the safety and rights of all citizens.

3. Art. 6 of the November 2020 Trilateral Statement has to be fully implemented. This should include, but should not be limited to, the implementation of the February 2023 UN International Court of Justice decision on a provisional measure to ensure the unimpeded movement of persons, vehicles, and cargo along the Lachin Corridor. In any case, the co-chairs signal that there should be a mutually agreed cooperation mechanism – if no substitute for Russian peacekeepers can be found – to address the legitimate security concerns of both Baku and the Armenians from Karabakh.
4. All stakeholders should develop trade and economic aspects of regional cooperation. In particular, the abolition of blockades, the creation of an open border regime, and in general, the facilitation of the transfer of resources. In this last respect, countries should cooperate to contain smuggling in the region.
5. Leverage the influence of neutral civil society in the whole region. Confidence building could take the form of trans-border cooperation and tolerance of educational systems, identity markers and cultural exchanges.
6. It is recommended that the public's awareness be raised of Iran's pretensions in the region, so as to mitigate the latter's attempts at destabilization by shifting the existing regional balance of power.

These policy recommendations reflect the findings of the 25<sup>th</sup> RSSC workshop on “Discussing a South Caucasus Short of Russian Dominance”, convened by the PpF Consortium Study Group “Regional Stability in the South Caucasus” in Tbilisi, Georgia, 30 March – 2 April 2023. They were prepared by Frederic Labarre (Royal Military College of Canada, Kingston) and by Dr. George Vlad Niculescu (European Geopolitical Forum, Brussels) on the basis of the proposals submitted by the participants. Valuable support in proofreading and page-setting came from Sara Milena Schachinger (Austrian National Defence Academy, Vienna).

The Co-Chairs are grateful for the input of all participants, including comments received from Armine Arzumanyan, Christoph Bilban, Prof. Damjan Krnjević Mišković, Dr. David Matsaberidze, Dr. Benyamin Poghosyan, and Yeghia Tashjyan.

