The Theory of the Three Seas
Security, Dynamics and Paradigms of EU Peripheral Regionalization

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at exploring the Mediterranean-Black Sea-Caspian axis and at focusing on endogenous and exogenous sources of stability/instability and security/insecurity affecting South Caucasus, the most critical actor of this axis in its Black Sea-Caspian segment, and the complex of policies of the most important non regional actors towards the region. Geopolitical trends, internal dynamics, anarchy/governance relations, and foreseeable external strategies will be examined.

1 - BACKGROUND

The analysis of Transcaucasia through the prism of maritime axes is quite new in the academic research and policy analysis of the region. However, symbolically, it fits into the regional dynamics for their fluid nature and into cultural identities as they feature very important symbiotic characteristics. Finally, from a historical viewpoint, the region has represented a sort of a bridge between the Caspian civilization and the Mediterranean one, and in this nexus the Black Sea has had a crucial role. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of globalization a process of macro-regional re-invention is underway.
As Alyson Bailes (Bailes, 2003) illustrates brilliantly the visions and perceptions of the Black Sea, the latter can be considered both as a bridge and a boundary. It is a boundary from a physical geographical point of view and from a background of threat projection from the Caucasus to the EU and NATO countries. On the other hand, it can be perceived as a bridge as regards transport and energy networks and societal contaminations. However, as Bailes puts it, the visions of Black Sea and the wider area are shifting from imperial assets towards an uncertain post-soviet complex. Transcaucasia, on the other hand, links Caspian basin to the Black Sea on an east-west axis and borders with Turkey, Iran and the Russian Federation. The definition by Ratzel of borders as “scars of the history” illustrates brilliantly the state of affairs in Caucasus, where borders combine the reality with the imagination. It deeply suffers a multi-level lack of security and stability caused by frozen conflicts, weak statehood, illegal trafficking, infiltration of terrorist networks, widespread corruption, economic underdevelopment, regional trade restrictions etc.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia emerged as state actors in the South Caucasus and had to face the challenges of state-building, territorial integrity and power vacuum. The event, which led to their independence, melted with widespread nationalism, ethnic strife, weak statehood and Soviet-era misgovernment triggered inter and intra-state conflicts, however, generally against a background of religious strife. So, Huntington’s vision of a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1993), stating that the cultural fault lines separating religiously defined civilizations cross through the Caucasus, and illustrating this thesis by the Azerbaijani-Armenian and Ingush-Ossetian conflicts, remains open to wide discussions. As a result of armed conflicts, external politico-military interventions and demographic movements, new, more or less de facto independent entities like Abkhazia, Adjaria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh appeared on the geopolitical arena of the South Caucasus. Actually, the region is challenged by frozen or simmering disputes - e.g. Armenia-Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh-Azerbaijan, Abkhazia-Georgia, South Ossetia-Georgia, Ajara-Georgia, Russia-Georgia, and the juridical status of the Caspian Sea. The region is also shaped by the policies of such external actors as the US, Russian Federation, Turkey, Iran, NATO, CIS, OSCE, CoE, the EU, as well as other international organizations.

2 - Internal dynamics

Since 1991, the three South Caucasus states are undergoing huge transformations regarding institution-building, state-building, identity-building, border strengthening and setting up of effective foreign and military doctrines. It is not the case of a transition period observed in the southern Europe in the 1980s or in Latin America since 1960s (Brown, 1997) since the meaning of transition
is too soft to be applied to these states. After more than a decade since their independence, these states have managed to build up democratic institutional façades, however they are still unable to stimulate and maintain fully participatory poliarchies and fill the gap between the governments and their electorate.

The endemic state weakness, conceived both as a lack of institutional capacities of a state (Kalyuzhnova, Lynch, 2000), as a polarization of the political arena combined with lack of governance and as a Max Weber’s lack of state monopoly over the legitimate use of force, is another common trouble of the South Caucasus societies. Indeed, the Georgian “Rose Revolution” in November 2003, on the one hand illustrated the lack of genuine legitimacy of the previous government, but on the other hand, considered the ease of the power change, highlighted the weakness of the Georgian state (Lynch, 2003). The democratic gap and the state weakness lies also on the basis of the last year’s “monarchic succession” in Azerbaijan and the ongoing protests of the opposition in Armenia (Lynch, 2003).

The above described state weakness was a key factor, at the beginning of the 1990s, in determining secessionist claims in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. The goal of the local political leaders was not a power change in Tbilisi and Baku, but the total disagreement with the idea of a Georgian or Azerbaijani State and the firm willingness to secede.

Moreover, the South Caucasus has no regional institutional structure enabling its actors to define common policies and explore a way out of the stalled conflicts and their efforts are directed more on a search of external support rather than on direct talks. Not even at a bilateral level there are significant achievements implying regional integration. Indeed, they are heavily dependent on external aid not only from an economic and military point of view, but also, at some extent, in terms of political legitimation.

3 - External dynamics

Regional dynamics are based mainly on a zero sum approach rather than integration and governance. As a consequence, the effect of external policies are easily amplified and commonly exaggerated by the local élites. This internally fragmented region is subject to the strategic decision making of the external actors – e.g. US, Russian Federation, marginally EU and others – for the control of the Caspian energy resources and pipelines crossing the region added to the global anti-terror struggle, where an ambiguous cold war approach, stressing a kind of balance of powers, is predominant. In fact, the Caspian basin strategically emerges as a non-OPEC huge source of oil and natural gas situated between the Middle Eastern and Russian energy networks, where apart from Russia, all external actors are newcomers.

Supra-national organizations and initiatives, like the CIS and its Collective Security Agreement, NATO through its PfP program, GUUAM², OSCE, UN, EU,
CoE etc., are active in the region. Their actions are often conflicting, as regards the security-oriented groupings, and not always coordinated and complementary, as regards conflict resolution and democratization. To sum up, while Armenia declares to have a complementary foreign policy doctrine, but depending on the Russian military presence ensuring security of its western borders, Georgia and Azerbaijan are pursuing a more explicit and pro-active US-oriented foreign policy. As a consequence, it is clear that Southern Caucasus can be viewed neither as a regional security complex, nor as a region itself. Indeed, it’s the southern part of the wider Caucasus that includes a portion of the Russian Federation northwards. However, the EU approach to the region is referred to its southern section, given that any European policy comprising the Caucasus as a whole may be seen by the Russian Federation as interference into the sphere of its domestic jurisdiction.

This approach is also backed, from a formal point of view, by the existence of international borders dividing South Caucasus from North Caucasus and the commonly shared threats and interests of the regional actors.

4 - EU policies

It is clear that the region constitutes a security challenge to the EU given its internal instability, including threats of terrorism and organized crime, the porosity of its borders, and unresolved ethnic conflicts. In fact, South Caucasus can become an exporter of instability and insecurity towards the southeastern part of the EU and an importer of a sort of “balkanization”, thus, it can undermine the EU relations with such global actors as Russia and the US. On the other hand it represents an alternative source of energy security for the EU. Caspian energy resources have attracted considerable investments from the EU member states. It is also important to highlight that the European vocation and a long-term integration within the EU are high on the official agendas of the South Caucasian leaderships.

However, the EU hasn’t had a proper strategy in the South Caucasus, if by strategy we mean a coherent relationship between end means. Since 1991 the EU allocated more than a billion euros in the south Caucasus without reaching considerable results. This figure did not discourage the EU policymakers. On the contrary, they decided to strengthen the EU political profile in the region.

Meanwhile, the EU has to cope with two revolutionary issues. The first consists of the greatest enlargement of the history of the EU leading to a redefinition of the internal institutional and political dynamics. The second fundamental change is brought by the completion of the works of the Convention on the Future of Europe and the presentation of a draft constitution of a new Union. It will redefine, among others, the sphere of the EU’s foreign and security policy. On 11 March 2003, a Communication entitled “Wider Europe-Neighbourhood:
A New Framework of Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours\textsuperscript{6} was published by the European Commission. The concept of Wider Europe was referring to countries’ bordering with the Europe of 25. The document encourages a stronger EU role in the reform promotion, shared responsibility for conflict prevention, sustainable development, preferential trading relations, perspectives for movement of persons etc\textsuperscript{8}. As regards South Caucasus states, the document stated that “Given their location, the Southern Caucasus therefore also falls outside the geographic scope of this initiative for the time being”\textsuperscript{9}.

In June 2003, the three Transcaucasian states returned central in the EU foreign and security discourse. During the Thessaloniki summit the draft EU Security Strategy\textsuperscript{10} written by Javier Solana was approved. By proposing preventive engagements in countering threats Solana cited South Caucasus, and it’s increasing importance, among other regions like Balkans as sources of insecurity for the EU\textsuperscript{11}. The Greek government holding the EU Presidency in the first half of the 2003, supporting the proposal made by the German government in 2001, on 7 July 2003 appointed the Finnish diplomat Heikki Talvitie as EU Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus\textsuperscript{12}. His mandate highlights the necessity of intra-regional cooperation and the “constructive engagement with key national political actors neighboring the region”. The task of the newly appointed EUSR includes also “assisting the countries of the South Caucasus in carrying out political and Economic reform, preventing and assisting in the resolution of conflicts, promoting the return of refugees and internally displaced persons, [...], supporting intra-regional co-operation and ensuring co-ordination, consistency, and effectiveness of the EU’s action in the South Caucasus”\textsuperscript{13}. As stated before, the South Caucasus represents a source of threats and opportunities for the EU. In the set of the opportunities the energy sector\textsuperscript{14} and the vision of the region as a core periphery linking Europe to Asia\textsuperscript{15} emerge. Both of these resources need a firm European political will and stronger involvement.

As much as threats are concerned, it has to be stressed that frozen conflicts lay at the very basis of the insecurity generated by the Southern Caucasus. The need of a honest broker for the conflict settlement is more and more crucial in the region. Logically, neither the US nor the Russian Federation can fully fulfill this role given their direct involvement in the region by means implying zero sum dynamics in order to safeguard their national interests. The region is crowded by international organizations, however peace processes are generally stalled. There is room and concrete mutual need for a proactive role of the EU as a credible honest broker in the local peace talks and as a model of regional integration. The question is whether the EU members after the 1 May enlargement will be determined and conscious enough to effectively prevent threats caused by a potential escalation of ethnic confrontations in the Southern Caucasus. Last year’s political evolution inside the EU towards the Southern Caucasus demonstrate a genuine political realism of the European decision-makers. Yet, all of the work remains ahead in terms of giving these intentions political substance.

2 A regional grouping including Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova and aiming at security cooperation, counter-terrorism, pipeline security etc.


4 However, it does not exclude the Russian perception of the Caucasus as a whole, inside the “Near Abroad” doctrine, Yeltsin’s “Caucasian Home” and Putin’s “Caucasus Four” initiatives.


7 Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the countries of the Southern Mediterranean

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 “A Secure Europe in a Better World”, Javier Solana, High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy,


11 Ibid. In the section: “We should take a stronger interest in the problems of the Southern Caucasus, which in due course will also be a neighbouring region”.

12 Council appoints an EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus – Decision taken by a written procedure, Brussels, 7 July 2003, 11027 03 (Presse 196)

13 Ibid.

14 See INOGATE

15 See TRACECA
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