

EURO-ATLANTIC INTEGRATION TRENDS OF THE SOUTH CAUCASIAN STATES

Sossi TATIKIAN

*M.A. in International Relations and
Conflict Resolution;
Senior Political Officer in the OSCE Mission
in Kosovo seconded
by the Armenian Government
(Erevan, Armenia)*

After the big bang enlargements of the EU and NATO in 2004, the Southern Caucasus was recognized as an important region for the further strengthening of stability, security, and prosperity in the Euro-Atlantic space.

NATO and the Caucasus

NATO declared a shift in the geographical focus of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership. While the continuing stabilization and integration of the states in the Western Balkans remained a high priority for NATO, the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia were declared its new geographical priority.

The views presented in the article don't reflect neither the positions of the Foreign Ministry of Armenia nor the OSCE.

Without offering the prospect of membership, NATO committed itself to refocusing its resources toward these two regions, assisting those countries willing to reform their defense institutions, launching political consultations with NATO, contributing to the international fight against terrorism, and destroying the stockpiles of outdated ammunitions. While the Individual Partnership Action Plan mechanism was formally offered to all Partners at the Prague Summit of NATO/EAPC in 2002, even if it was self-evident that it was designed for the Partners in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Moldova, PAP-DIB endorsed at the Istanbul Summit in 2004 was specifically targeted at those Partners.

Central Asia and the Caucasus were put in the same basket in all the documents on the Euro-Atlantic Partnership endorsed at the Istanbul Summit of NATO/EAPC. As a follow-up to the Istanbul Summit, the Secretary General appointed Mr. Robert Simmons, his Deputy Assistant for Political Affairs and Security Policy, as his Special Representative for Central Asia and the Caucasus. At the same time, he nominated two liaison officers for each of these two regions. While the Special Representative is mandated to facilitate a political dialog with the high-level officials of the countries of both regions, also being entitled to deliver the Alliance's political messages to the general public in his interviews and briefings, the liaison officers are authorized to deal with the practical issues of defense cooperation and reforms. The liaison officer for the Caucasus mainly resides in Tbilisi, and he frequently visits Erevan and Baku.

The fact that the Special Representative of the NATO SG was the same for Central Asia and the Caucasus was prompted by the American approach of considering these two regions strategically important in the fight against international terrorism. However, in spite of their common Soviet legacy, the South Caucasian states, especially Georgia and Armenia, do not associate themselves with Central Asia, considering themselves European and more accomplished in democratization and human rights. The developments that shortly followed the adoption of those initiatives demonstrated the differences between Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus.

The three South Caucasian states were the first Partners to engage in Individual Partnership Action Plans with NATO. The Georgian, Azeri, and Armenian IPAPs have already been adopted by the North Atlantic Council, and their implementation is currently underway. They define the Partners' objectives and plans for their consultations with NATO on political and security issues, defense, security, and military reform issues, including interoperability with NATO's armed forces already pursued within the framework of the PARP—successful Planning and Review Process of PFP, and democratic control of armed forces, as well as their cooperation with NATO in public information, science, the environment, and civil emergency planning. Every Partner is entitled to specify its individual objectives and needs, however, two components of the IPAP menu—political consultations and defense reform—are its mandatory elements. Involvement in IPAP became the main criteria of the level of cooperation with NATO of those Partners not involved in the Membership Action Plan with NATO.

The objectives of the three Caucasian states to establish individualized relations with NATO differ from each other. Georgia, the pioneer of IPAP, has formally declared its NATO membership aspirations and expects to be offered a Membership Action Plan with NATO. Since NATO is reluctant to promise Georgia MAP at this time, the country has been engaging in IPAP as an intermediary stage. Georgia is also attempting to use the mechanism of political consultations of IPAP for involving NATO Allies in the settlement of its tensions with Russia, particularly over South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The excitement over the Rose Revolution among the Allies, the intention to make Georgia a role model for other states in the region, and the concerns about the potential instability in Georgia spilling over to the rest of the region in the event its reforms fail triggered their political support and practical assistance to Georgia. At the same time, the Allies are aware of Georgia's internal problems and realize that their resolution will take time and persistence. Nor do they seem enthusiastic about becoming involved in settlement of the conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, restricting their involvement to reducing Georgian-Russian tension by continuously reminding [Russia] to fulfill its remaining OSCE

Istanbul Summit commitments to Georgia and encouraging the withdrawal of Russian forces from Georgia.

Generally speaking, NATO aspires to develop relations with all three South Caucasian countries at the same rate, however, if Georgia manages to swiftly carry out the pledges it has undertaken in accordance with IPAP, it might become increasingly difficult not to accommodate Georgia's urge to receive special treatment in return for its clearly stated pro-Western orientation. Since Georgia is still far from NATO's standards, a mechanism similar to the intensified dialog on membership aspirations and related reforms launched with Ukraine a year ago might also be offered to Georgia.

Azerbaijan has not presented a request to become a NATO member, although its officials ambiguously mention Euro-Atlantic integration as an objective. The current Azeri leadership has declared that NATO membership is not on the country's agenda, and maintains good relations both with Russia and NATO. Although NATO has made it clear that it has no intention to duplicate the mediation efforts of the OSCE Minsk Group, Azerbaijan will undoubtedly attempt to use the mechanism of IPAP political consultations to carry out anti-Armenian propaganda and advocate its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as it tried to do in all other formats of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership and other international forums. At the same time, Azerbaijan, together with Georgia, will most probably try to promote the idea of NATO's involvement in developing pipeline security measures.

Armenia's development of IPAP with NATO shortly after Georgia and Azerbaijan was somewhat unexpected, since until recently Armenia has been traditionally considered a pro-Russian state, and its cooperation with NATO as face-saving. Armenia's IPAP became the most evident embodiment of the long-declared principle of complementarity, which means that Armenia is aimed at maintaining balanced relations with all the powers active in the Southern Caucasus. It is also a way to advance Armenia's European integration as well as its international engagement in general. Besides, Armenia's involvement in IPAP is a counter-balancing measure to promotion of the Azeri stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and to the creation of misperceptions about Armenian policies among the Allies. A number of Armenian officials stated between 2003 and 2005 that although NATO membership is currently not on the country's agenda, it is not excluded in the long run. However, Armenia's IPAP might be overshadowed by Armenia's growing energy dependence on Russia.

After the three South Caucasian states, Kazakhstan and Moldova expressed their willingness to enter IPAPs with NATO. Uzbekistan declared its intention to develop an IPAP even earlier, but the development of the Uzbek IPAP was frozen right at the beginning due to violations of human rights in that country and subsequently halted due to the Andijan events. Other Central Asian states have not shown an interest in the IPAP mechanism.

Although there are no more wide gaps between the levels of practical cooperation between the three Caucasian states and NATO, the style of their cooperation still fluctuates. While Georgia rushes to join all the NATO initiatives and the practical steps of its cooperation are accompanied by public political declarations, Azerbaijan pursues rhetoric only in connection with its desire to involve NATO in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia has adopted a pragmatic approach, being reserved in its public statements and closely examining NATO's new initiatives before committing to them, instead gaining a good reputation for the quality of their practical implementation. Due to these differences in manner of presentation, the NATO member states also perceive the cooperation of these states in different ways. Whereas Georgia takes a lot of political credit for everything it has committed to do, Armenia often loses political credit and has difficulty overcoming the prevailing stereotype that it is pro-Russian and its cooperation with NATO is not sufficient. Even if the people at NATO Headquarters have started giving Armenia credit for the quality of its implementation, that good reputation does not always reach the practitioners and analysts in the capitals of the NATO states.

The South Caucasian states are also trying to show that they are not only security consumers, but also security providers by contributing to the NATO-led or NATO-backed peacekeeping operations to the extent of their capabilities or rather ambitions. All three of them participate in the Kosovo Force and in the operations in Iraq. Azerbaijan is highly appreciated by the Allies for being part of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan.

However, NATO also makes the Partners feel that the Euro-Atlantic Partnership is not only about defense cooperation and contribution to peacekeeping, but also about sharing values and respecting the principles of the EAPC and PfP. Given that approach, in 2004, NATO canceled the cooperative “Best Effort” PfP exercise, which was to be held in Baku, due to persistent attempts by the Azeri authorities to prevent Armenia from participating in the exercise. Thus, NATO demonstrated that it will not tolerate violation of the Partnership’s fundamental principles, one of them being inclusiveness. The cancellation of that exercise also significantly improved NATO’s image in Armenia, at least partly rooting out the perception existing in the country’s general public that since Turkey is a NATO member, the Alliance will always be biased against Armenia and in favor of Azerbaijan.

The faster pace of the states in the Southern Caucasus to commit to the newly suggested format of IPAP manifested their greater readiness or at least willingness than the Central Asian states to launch the reforms required in accordance with the Individual Partnership Action Plans. Having already had a similar experience with the Council of Europe, they also seem more open to hear critical comments on good governance, rule of law, elections, and human rights protection in their respective countries. Although only implementation of IPAPs will show the North-Atlantic Alliance how genuine and durable is their commitment to defense reform, especially due to the involvement of all three of them in unsettled conflicts. However, they are likely to be more prepared for that sensitive and costly endeavor.

The EU and the Caucasus

In parallel to the processes within NATO’s Euro-Atlantic Partnership, the European Neighborhood Policy, developed by the European Union in the context of the EU’s big bang enlargement and designed for its immediate neighbors, was extended to include the countries of the Southern Caucasus, with which the acceding countries Bulgaria and Rumania, and the candidate country Turkey share either a sea or land border. Other immediate neighbors of the EU candidates, including Croatia and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, are not being asked to be a part of ENP since they are already participants of another framework—the Stabilization and Association Process—designed specifically for the states in the Western Balkans and explicitly aimed at their full integration into the European Union. Unlike the SAP, the ENP does not promise the prospect of membership, but intends to deepen the political relationship and economic integration of engaged EU neighbors based on their commitment to democracy and human rights, rule of law, good governance, a market economy, and sustainable development. If tangible progress is achieved in conflict settlement in the Caucasus, it will introduce serious amendments in the Action Plans with the EU and the IPAPs with NATO, paying special attention to regional cooperation.

The Stabilization and Association Process is being implemented through the bilateral Stabilization and Association Agreements between the European Union and its participants. Likewise, in order to accomplish the tasks outlined in the ENP, the EU offered its engaged neighbors bilateral instruments—Action Plans. In 2005, the EU Commission made recommendations to develop Action Plans with the three states of the Southern Caucasus. The purpose of these Action Plans is to define an agenda for relations with the European Union for the next three to five years, given the particular needs and capacities.

Negotiations on elaboration of the EU's Action Plans with Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan are underway, although future approval of the Azeri Action Plan will await settlement of the dispute between Azerbaijan and Cyprus after the establishment of air communication between Azerbaijan and the Turkish Cypriot Republic. What is more, given the EU's regional approach to the Southern Caucasus, it might freeze the Action Plans with Armenia and Georgia as well. Jeopardizing the Action Plans of Armenia and Georgia because of Azerbaijan's specific bilateral problem with an EU country aroused their discontent, making them demand more individualized approach by the EU to the countries in the region.

The EU chose Tbilisi as the location for its first and still only full-fledged delegation in the Caucasus. It also nominated a Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus in 2003. The term of Ambassador Heikki Talvitie from Finland ended at the beginning of 2006 and Ambassador Peter Semneby from Sweden succeeded him in that position. It was stated that there has been a change not only in the representative, but also in his mandate, and the EU authorized the new Representative to contribute to the settlement of the conflicts in the Caucasus. It is worth mentioning that both representatives of the EU to the Southern Caucasus are from Scandinavian countries, like the Head of the U.N. Mission to Kosovo, the U.N. Envoy for the Review of the Implementation of Standards for Kosovo, and the U.N. Special Envoy for the Final Status of Kosovo. That choice might be conditioned by the reputation of the Scandinavians as unbiased intermediaries.

At present, the EU officials are expressing general satisfaction with the mediation efforts of the OSCE in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and are not keen either to replace or to duplicate its mediation efforts. Reportedly, the possibility of deploying EU peacekeepers after signing a peace agreement is under consideration in the context of the peace negotiations over Nagorno-Karabakh. The EU has provided economic assistance to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, at times accompanied with confidence-building measures. It has also promised wider assistance in post-conflict rehabilitation after the settlement of the conflicts all over the Caucasus.

As in case of NATO membership, Georgia is trying to be in front of the South Caucasian states in EU membership too, striving in particular to be associated with the Baltic Sea region rather than with the Caucasus. Georgia has adopted full integration into the European Union as an ultimate goal, while for Armenia, European integration is a long-term objective. This orientation reflects the prevailing recognition of Georgian and Armenian society that their identity and cultural roots are historically European. The main difference between the aspirations of Armenia's and Georgia's Euro-integration is that Armenia does not seek NATO membership at this time, while integration into the EU and NATO has been a dual-track policy throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Azerbaijan has expressed its intention to become a member of the European family, while remaining a member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and considering itself an integral part of the Islamic world with its historical past and religious and cultural values. Azerbaijan's striving for European integration is even vaguer than that for Euro-Atlantic integration.

Complementarity, Impediments, and Ambiguity

Obviously, the strategies of the EU and NATO in the Southern Caucasus are complementary, if not dual-track. They share such values as commitment to democratic and economic reforms, human rights, fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law. A division of labor has taken place between the Union and the Alliance to promote reforms in the region and its integration based on the comparative advantages of each of them. Commonalities and even some overlapping between Individual Partnership Action Plans with NATO and Action Plans with the EU are noticeable, which makes it necessary

to synchronize them. Both of them are based on the same values of democratic reform, rule of law, human rights, and fundamental freedoms, and both of them challenge the engaged countries to show the extent to which they share those values. And both of them are not about enlargement, but about a deepened partnership.

Important obstacles to Euro-Atlantic integration of the South Caucasian states are the unsettled conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, the absence of good neighborly relations between Armenia and Turkey, and the lack of a culture of regional cooperation.

In spite of the prospect of bridging the gap between territorial integrity and self-determination by granting conditional independence to Kosovo, even if such a solution must be imposed on Serbia, the EU and NATO member states involved in the process are trying to avoid making it a precedent for the other unsettled conflicts in the Euro-Atlantic area. Nevertheless, that reluctance is most conditioned by Russia's involvement in the conflicts over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria as an interested party, which is not the case for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Besides, Armenian-Turkish relations remain the last Iron Curtain in the Euro-Atlantic space. Armenia expects NATO and especially the EU to put pressure on Turkey to establish diplomatic relations with Armenia and to open borders. NATO has the approach of non-interference in the bilateral relations between its members and partners, instead providing them with a common security umbrella for reducing tension. The European Union has included a vague paragraph in the negotiations' framework for Turkey's accession to the EU, requiring it to establish good neighborly relations, which is simply a repetition of the respective Copenhagen criterion, without naming Armenia and the nature of the problem.

Regional cooperation in the Caucasus has become a hostage of the unsettled conflicts. Armenia believes there is no need to wait for settlement of conflicts in order to launch cooperation. Cooperation should be outlined not after the conflicts are resolved, but at the same time as the political settlement process, thus synchronizing political, security, and economic dialogs. However, Azerbaijan opposes launching any regional cooperation involving Armenia before settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and is trying to exclude Armenia from regional projects and initiatives. Georgia allies with Azerbaijan or Armenia when it needs to pursue its political and economic interests, and as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project and affiliation with GUAM illustrate, it partners more often with Azerbaijan than with Armenia.

Georgia has also launched a project with Turkey to build a new Tbilisi-Akhalkalaki-Kars railroad, trying to replace the existing one between Tbilisi and Kars via Gumri, which has been not functioning for more than a decade because of Turkey's blockade of road and rail networks with Armenia. The European Commission has stated that it will not fund the project since it contradicts the spirit of regional cooperation.

Often the officials of the EU and NATO express the futility of launching regional cooperation in the Caucasus in the short term. Armenia believes that they should not give up the objective of promoting and deblocking it by putting more pressure on Azerbaijan and Turkey.

Recently both the EU and NATO have been referring more and more often to the possibility of launching cooperation in more inclusive regional arrangements than the Caucasus, such as the wider Black Sea region or the Baltic states plus the Caucasian states format. Bringing the states of the Black Sea and Baltic Sea regions that have already completed their Euro-Atlantic integration and will shortly complete their European integration together with the three Caucasian states has the potential of creating a favorable environment for relaxing security concerns, extending the peace zone, and contributing to the cooperative spirit. However, these formats have some constraints for playing an enhanced role as well. One of them is the likelihood that they will promote collaboration between individual Caucasian states and the Baltic or the Black Sea region states, but not cooperation among the Caucasian states themselves.

The Caucasus, along with Balkans, has always been the hotspot of wider Europe. The states in the Western Balkans started developing regional cooperation and deepening their reconciliation only after the EU reiterated its determination to fully support their European prospects at the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit. Even being subjected to the EU's conditionality principle, discarding old policies and mentality is not a smooth process in the Western Balkans, and it is difficult to predict whether the region will stabilize or destabilize after defining the final status of Kosovo.

The policy of both the EU and NATO toward the Southern Caucasus is obscure and raises a range of questions. How they can achieve better complementarity in the region?

Do the proposed Action Plans offer sufficient incentives to encourage reforms? What will follow the implementation of those Action Plans? After the EU and NATO digest their big bang enlargements, will they offer pre-accession instruments to those countries? If so, what will be the scenario of enlargement in the region—will the EU and NATO adopt a regional approach, trying to integrate all three countries at more or less the same rate, or take an individualized approach contingent on their willingness, conditional on their performance, and dependent on their interstate relations? What will be the consequences of extending the enlargement policy to the Southern Caucasus for the EU, NATO, the region as a whole, and its individual states? All these questions need answers both from the Union and the Alliance, as well as from the three states in the region.