

2nd South Caucasus Security Forum (#SCSF2014)

New Regional Security Environment and Global Changes

Conclusions of the international conference held
on November 18-19, 2014 in Tbilisi, Georgia



Introduction

The 2nd South Caucasus Security Forum took place on November 18-19, 2014 in Tbilisi, Georgia. The conference was co-organized by Centre for European and North Atlantic Affairs (CENAA) and Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) in cooperation with partners from Central Europe (Poland, Hungary, and Czech Republic) and the South Caucasus countries (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan). Strategic supporters of the 2nd South Caucasus Security Forum were International Visegrad Fund and Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (Slovakaid).

This unique international conference has become the largest conference in the South Caucasus in the field of international relations and security. The forum was attended by high-ranking politicians, representatives of ministries, experts, academics and representatives of the media from more than 20 countries. Distinguished speakers included e.g. deputy ministers of foreign affairs from Visegrad countries, as well as deputy chiefs of the General Staff of the Slovak and Georgian Armed Forces. The conference is an important part of the South Caucasus transition program, through which CENAA aims to transfer Slovak and Central European experiences from Euro-Atlantic integration.

The agenda of the conference was divided into two days and six panels. First panel titled NATO, EU and Russian foreign policy in Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia- recent developments covered the current geopolitical issues. Later on, speakers focused on Visegrad and Eastern Partnership: visions and perspectives, discussing the main challenges and improvements that can be made in the South Caucasus region using the experience of the Visegrad system. The closing panel of the conference's first day included topic of Post-Vilnius development of Eastern Partnership and the Future Perspectives of Security Sector in EaP Countries. The Russia's behaviour of previous months has influenced future decision-making of Georgia, thus the discussion covered the possibilities of Georgian protection against Russian aggression.

The second day of conference begun with the issue of Chinese position as an insulator in the Asian Security Super Complex where speakers discussed the question of Chinese and Iranian partnership as well as the US role in the region and its implications for China. The next panel focused on current problems with protection of critical energy infrastructure. The Russian influence in this region has gained a greater impact than ever before, leading to the South Caucasus countries' worries about their oil pipelines and trying to protect them. The discussion dealt with possibilities of protection in this area. The last panel, which closed the whole

conference, discussed questions about Ukraine-NATO partnership and possible Ukrainian membership. Speakers and later on audience intensively discussed the issue from the historical perspective and expressed their opinions on the Ukrainian future developments.

NATO, EU and Russian Foreign Policy in Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia- Recent Developments

Discussion in the first panel started with the most current issue – the Russian foreign policy in different regions. Speakers agreed that the annexation of Crimea by Russian federation significantly influenced the relations between Russia and East Europe as well as South Caucasus. Countries in the region don't feel safe anymore, due to the expansion of Russian interests. The experts stressed that there is a possibility of Russia employing hybrid warfare tactics in potential conflict zones - they mentioned the Estonia case as a country with large Russian minority. Also the Russian presence in Transnistria puts pressure on Turkey and Balkan countries.

The idea of a unique role for Russian civilization, as a factor in Russian foreign policy is very disturbing because the EU has not provided any security guarantees for any of its Eastern Partnership states. The EU must pursue its own interests as a geopolitical actor and work on decreasing its security dependence on the United States. However all three actors play a major role in the international system, therefore the future of the South Caucasus will be influenced by the relationship between the EU, US and Russia.

The South Caucasus countries can only benefit by participating in integration projects. For that reason Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia are trying to balance competing interests in the region. In addition, the Russian actions in Ukraine may negatively influence events in the South Caucasus, for example the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. There has been a strong feeling, which intensified after the annexation of Crimea, that states may change borders and settle disputes by use of force, thus the Russian actions will become less and less predictable. Speakers agreed that Russia has no interest in stabilization – the frozen conflicts, especially in South Caucasus, are more favourable for Moscow. Russia doesn't want its neighbours to be stable; it wants a different setup, which Europe will never accept. Nevertheless, Russia uses the situation to increase its control in the region, even if Europe won't accept it. However the undeniable fact is that Russia broke the taboo of territorial integrity by violating that integrity in Europe.

Visegrad and Eastern Partnership: Visions and Perspectives

The aim of the second panel discussion was to emphasize the outcomes from current cooperation within Visegrad group and recommend the key functional factors to the South Caucasus countries. The experts emphasized that the future of South Caucasus countries depends chiefly on attitudes and efforts of the states involved in the partnership process. The attention was focused also on EU's benefit, which it has brought into this partnership. The European Union has brought a high level of prosperity to the Visegrad states. Therefore V4 states are prepared through the International Visegrad Fund to share their knowledge and insights with Eastern Partnership countries, which have decided to stay on the path of democratic development. Speakers have set several factors within V4, which can also be beneficial for the Eastern Partnership countries. As key area we can consider the experiences from integration and reforms. As an example of experience-sharing, the experts emphasized Ukraine, where Slovakia will focus on assisting with security sector reform, capacity- building and energy reform. In case of Georgia, Visegrad countries can be helpful with their experiences in the field of capacity-building and educating the youth in democracy and development of civil society. Speakers have concluded that most importantly, we cannot treat the Eastern Partnership countries as a one single group.

Post-Vilnius Development of Eastern Partnership and the Future Perspectives of Security Sector in EaP Countries

From the beginning the third panel speakers touched on the sensitive question of the possibility of Georgia's defence against Russia's potential aggression. Since the Ukrainian war, Georgia started to feel unprotected. No peace treaty has ever been signed, which has only added to its worries, especially given that compared to Russia, Georgia is such a small country. Moreover it would take four to five days for international community to respond to war and to stop the escalation. Georgia's job is now to explore the alternatives to defend itself. The country has already begun finding the common interests in the region with its neighbours. One example is the security agreement between Ukraine and Georgia. Georgia and Ukraine are in similar circumstances due to common threat from Russia. Ukraine has more troops, Georgians are better trained. Perhaps building a common defence initiative between Ukraine and Georgia is a good idea in the long term. It was also stated that Georgia should keep up its foreign presence. Current defence budget cuts should be re-examined. Georgia has to adjust its needs to its reality. Modest estimate from one of the experts was that there is little possibility for Georgia to join NATO in the next five years. Furthermore experts presented three observations. First, not all local problems are because of Putin or Russian aggression. Second, not all solutions are responses by NATO or external support. Third, internal support and resilient

democracy are more important. Also 25 years since the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe, from Prague to Georgia the countries have in common protests and ineffective governments. Armenia's tilt toward Eurasian Union instead of EU was a strategic mistake. Too much importance was placed on single leaders and not enough on democratic civic institutions. Amid the arms race in the region, the countries are often prisoners of presidential palaces: leaders are shackled to their own hawkish rhetoric. The situation between Armenia and Azerbaijan is MAD. There are no real partners for peace, no results and both sides are frustrated. The only winner of the Nagorno-Karabakh is Russian Federation – the main arms supplier to both sides.

Nevertheless, there are some reasons for optimism as Armenia has begun western-style security sector reform. Security and military sector need to decrease reliance on Russia. The danger for Armenia is isolation and insignificance. Armenian-Turkish normalization has a potential to greatly improve the region. Therefore the normalization is a basic minimum. It is the first step forward.

Asian Security- Chinese Position as an Insulator in Asian Security Super Complex

The second day of the conference started with fourth panel discussion about Chinese, American and Russian interests in the Asian region. During the debate it was stated that Pacific region is encountering a growing power of China and because of that the region is becoming unbalanced, according to western world. The experts claimed that the US's applied exclusive policy towards China, creates an unbalanced situation in the region. However China is seen as game changer, which questions US dominance in the region. Nevertheless, China is vulnerable in terms of political and social order. Its further development depends on the region stability. In comparison, China's military is still weak, it has no real allies, and its main region rivals – Japan, South Korea and Taiwan – are better equipped in terms of military capacity. One speaker emphasized, that all lines of energy resources must be secured, which includes land and sea. China is more dependent on regional rather than global development. It is essential for China to stop US dominance in the region. Washington has strong alliances with other countries in the region and has its military bases around China. The US position within the region is rather ambiguous – it claims that it is not responsible for the conflicts within the region, but it would give full support to its allies in case of need.

In addition, the experts doubted whether China could become an economic power in the following decades. For instance, relations with North Korea, Russia and Pakistan are based on cooperation or strategic partnership, but they are not considered as allies. Being a major world power requires alliance with many countries and China

lacks this option. Asian region is also formed by nationalism which has strong basis in China, Japan and Vietnam. The biggest US interest should be balancing China without causing it embarrassment.

Experts also touched on the role of Iran. Although the Middle East is not important for China, because the region is too far off geographically, still the energy resources and potential energy routes forces China to take into consideration Iran and the Middle East region. Despite the fact that China has voted for sanctions against Iran, it has no unilateral sanctions of its own, thus it can continue the economic cooperation. The negotiations between Iran and the western countries about its nuclear programme still continue – Iran’s government claims that it pursues this policy in terms of modernization of the state and the nuclear power would be used only for civilian purposes.

Protection of Critical Energy Infrastructure

The fifth panel focused on the current issue of potential blackmailing of states by powers possessing energy sources and the protection of critical infrastructure. Speakers highlighted that contemporary energy policy should be based on freedom of transit. In a case when supplier and the transit country have a dispute over some issue, the third party (the consumer) cannot suffer as a result. Unsurprisingly the Ukrainian-Russian conflict was mentioned. Not too long ago Europe suffered the consequences due to this political crisis. Even today, when Georgia has few additional alternatives, Russian army is stationed close to these pipelines and can easily cut off the gas in case of a military action. It was stated that energy safety rather than hard security is the main risk in terms of perception. Also human accidents, environmental disasters and other threats have an impact on the market rather than military coups or terrorism. It is obvious that the media creates hard security risk perception, but thus far oil prices are pointing in another direction and remain unchanged.

The discussion also touched on the question of the South Caucasus region. The oil and gas infrastructure in Azerbaijan is essential for the country. If one pipeline is damaged it stops the entire system. Azerbaijan provides 1.1 percent of the whole world energy trade with any disruption’s direct effect on world prices. Moreover, the Caspian Sea is in the terrorism activity area, and Armenia is a threat to Azerbaijan in terms of military attack. As an example, the South Corridor pipeline was mentioned. This pipeline would allow introducing the Caspian oil into European market and would also provide easier access to Iranian, Iraqi and Kurdish oil, adding their pipelines into the main pipeline system. Azerbaijan invests a lot of money into this project but faces strong opposition from Russia. Moscow has certain other tools

like terrorism, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict or even tensions in the north of Azerbaijan, which could have a negative effect on the future of this oil policy.

Unfortunately the security determines the costs. Therefore the experts proposed two suggestions what Europe needs to do in order to secure its energy supplies. First, the EU and especially the European Council need to have a better approach towards conflicts within the region. The EU has to take a clear position towards territorial disputes and state coherence should be considered to be the most important factor. Second, it should ensure greater protection through the support from NATO. It is needed and should be something more than the Article four, which is based only on more talking, negotiating, and less than the Article five, which is based on fighting. It should be some kind of 4.5 Article. This metaphorical suggestion emphasized stronger military cooperation, participation in training and other areas. This would not only strengthen regional security and enhance even further NATO's prestige, when security wouldn't be seen only in negative light. Such an approach would lead to cooperation among states. EU could be seen as an example, how energy security can create cooperation. The security dilemma, when one state increases its military capacity and the neighbour country needs to match its military growth, can be overcome by cooperation. Also, diversification is the key element here. For a conclusion, it was suggested that the main task for every government should be setting up the legal basis for creation and implementation of Special Forces to protect the energy sources, search for alternative recourses and pursue new techniques.

Ukraine-NATO: Partnership or Membership?

The biggest attention was drawn to the very last panel of the whole conference, which discussed one of the most controversial questions. Speakers focused on the possibility of Ukrainian membership in NATO as well as the current geopolitical trends. It was stressed that Ukraine has only 10 percent of its military capabilities it had in 1991. President Poroshenko builds on his predecessor's vision of NATO-Ukraine relationship. In principle, Ukraine wants to be ally of NATO but without membership, however the Alliance should help Ukraine in case of Russian aggression. Notably President Yanukovich completely excluded Ukraine from NATO membership, while President Poroshenko thinks about it as a long-term perspective. In addition 47 percent of Ukrainian public supports the country's NATO membership while 36 percent is against, according to recent polls.

Other opinions included statements that Maidan was not a failure of the EU or the US Eastern policies, quite the opposite. If NATO fails, it means to accept Russian rules in Ukraine and Georgia; therefore NATO needs to restore its deterrence role.

Other possible impact could be the situation when member states will turn from collective approach towards more individual, which will generate nationalistic tendencies in their foreign policies.

Also NATO needs to raise costs for Russia - by more aggressive economic sanctions, by denying access to the markets and finances, by deterring future aggressions, providing weapon systems, intelligence-sharing and training of armed forces and by deploying permanent forces to its eastern member states. Moreover we have to recognize that the consequences of “Ukrainian failure” would lead to the disorganization of the state and its institutions – therefore there is no long-term alternative to NATO membership. More likely there is a need to build up a coalition of willing by Ukraine, Poland, Romania, some Central European states, under the US leadership because without strong US leadership there will be very few countries willing to assist Ukraine in achieving NATO membership.■

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- Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS)

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