South Caucasus - from tiltyards to cooperation platforms

The South Caucasus is a region of intertwining transport hubs and energy centres, it is a clashing arena of geopolitical interests of the world's top players, it is a region, torn apart by internal contradictions, with a multitude of problems, but it is also a region with great potential which is difficult to implement due to a number of developments. At present, another problem, along with fierce disagreements, is the multi-vector direction undertaken by the universally recognized entities of international law: Georgia looks to the West, Armenia looks to Russia, Azerbaijan, in no small measure due to the country’s resources, strives to remain independent, however, the country is gradually integrating into the alliance of Turkic-Speaking States. Can such a different direction policy give stability to the region? For example, let’s assume a vertical column supported by three evenly tied ropes at an angle 120 degrees to each other. Can the laws of mechanics be effective in geopolitics?

The head of the political analysts’ Club “South Caucasus” (Baku) Ilgar Velizade explains the policy of Azerbaijan, characterized by the absence of a particular line of direction, as follows: the country due to its geographical position, unlike its neighbours Georgia and Armenia borders with the three largest countries of the region – Russia, Turkey and Iran. “This condition does not allow the country to carry out sudden geopolitical feints, which could have serious consequences both for Azerbaijan and its neighbours. At the same time, while organizing its foreign policy priorities, official Baku tries to take into account the realities of regional policy and incorporate them within the context of Azerbaijan’s interests,” said Ilgar Velizade in his statement to NEO.

Under the influence of tens of billions of investments owing to the implementation of oil and gas contracts, Azerbaijan is changing rapidly. Huge financial resources are invested in projects, both domestically and abroad. This has a direct effect on Azerbaijan’s choice of foreign policy priorities. “Today what is more important for Baku is not to choose between East and West, but rather to improve its position in the region so that both East and West could be equally interested in maintaining stable, predictable and dynamic relations with Azerbaijan,” says Velizade.

At the same time, the regional priorities of Baku are evident: the format of bilateral relations, especially with its neighbours, the regional format as part of the five Caspian states (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan), participation in the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, relations with the EU and with individual EU countries, as well as with the United States. “By selecting a non-aligned status and by becoming a member of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Azerbaijan has essentially defined its vector of interest on the international arena. As a result, today Azerbaijan is a country that more or less successfully balances between the interests of the leading geopolitical and regional players,” comments Ilgar Velizade.

According to the political analyst, Azerbaijan acts as a bridge between the South Caucasus and the Caspian-Central Asian region rich in oil and gas. In addition, the country provides the shortest land route from Iran to Russia, which makes its transit position an important geopolitical factor. This has contributed to the fact that Baku is currently involved in three trilateral cooperation platforms in the region: Azerbaijan-Turkey-Georgia, Turkey-Iran-Azerbaijan and Turkey-Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan. “In the political structure of the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan acts as a bridge between the emerging platforms of cooperation, which gives the country’s foreign policy a more sustainable and inclusive structure in intraregional and international politics,” remarks Velizade.
Political analyst, research scientist at the Center for Regional Research of the Public Administration Academy of the Republic of Armenia Johnny Melikyan considers the root cause of a multi-directional foreign policy of the three countries of the South Caucasus to be the ethnic conflicts that broke out in the late 80s: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (between Armenia and the Nagorno-Karabakh republic on one side, and Azerbaijan on the other) and the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts (between Georgia on one side; Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other).

"The attitude of the national elites of the new republics to the former union center, as well as the involvement of official Moscow into the above mentioned conflicts, have created conditions under which the foreign policy of the three South Caucasus countries is formed. However, over the years, all this has created a situation of balance of power and the disruption of such a balance in the region could lead to conflict," said Johnny Melikyan in his interview to NEO.

However, in his opinion, in spite of confrontation and conflict, in the first half of the 1990s the policies of Tbilisi and Baku were almost in line with that of Yerevan. The two countries were part of the CIS, although their membership was confirmed at different times, and even part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although, just like Uzbekistan, they chose not to renew their membership, preferring to become members of the GUAM alliance (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova). Taking all this into account the three South Caucasus countries with varying degrees of intensity have cooperated with NATO, and later with the Eastern Partnership for cooperation with the EU.

"The problem of Russian-Georgian relations is well known. Azerbaijan, seeking to distance itself from both Russia and the West (the EU and the USA), while maintaining equal relations with all geopolitical players, has demonstrated commitment to the "seesaw policy", the foundations of which were laid down, according to the Russian political analyst Sergey Markedonov, by the third president of the republic Heydar Aliyev. The essence of this policy is to be a friend both in Washington and Moscow and this has become the hallmark of Azerbaijan’s post-Soviet foreign policy.

As far as Armenia is concerned, it should be noted that in the mid-2000s, along with the increasing activities of European institutions in the South Caucasus, there was a decline of interest by Moscow to the region and to the former Soviet area. This gave Armenia an opportunity to shift towards European integration, at the same maintaining military and political ties with Russia. However, after President Vladimir Putin's initiative to create a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Russia saw a change of priorities, including its priority in regard to the South Caucasus. Accordingly, Armenia also revised its relations with the EU, and set out on a course for integration into the EEU," remarks Johnny Melikyan.

The Armenian political scientist believes that when scrutinizing regional relations, several mutual relation formats can be observed: Armenia-Russia, Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey, Azerbaijan-Russia, Armenia-Georgia, including the integrated formations: the EU-Georgia, the EU-Armenia, Armenia-EEU which due to sound relations between the states in the region have created a stable "status quo" and have maintained a balance of power that prevents the escalation of violence and conflict. "A confirmation of this is the recent escalation along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, as well as the battle line in Nagorno-Karabakh, where only after the intervention of Russia and the trilateral meeting of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Russia, tensions relatively decreased and the status quo remained unchanged," points out Johnny Melikyan.

The Director of the Caucasus Institute for Regional Security (Tbilisi) Alexander Rusetsky tries to figure out why the South Caucasus gives preference to confrontation rather than to cooperation. "It is clear that neither the region as a whole, nor any of its constituent states benefit from confrontation. Thousands, millions if we take a larger historical period have been killed and maimed; there has consistently been an influx of migrants. The economy has been devastated. The total economic damage to the South Caucasus countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union is unaccounted for. There is no information on the number of victims the conflicts have claimed. And there are no estimated figures showing the level of development these countries would have reached if they had not been drawn into these fratricidal wars," says Alexander Rusetsky.

In general, a common development strategy does not exist. Many even deny the existence of such a region. Although, it is worth remembering that erstwhile this region, then named the Transcaucasian Federation, was a co-founder of the USSR. And before that, it existed as the Transcaucasian Sejm. During Soviet rule, there was a specific regional policy which was very dynamic: starting from tourism and ending with the energy industry. Today, it is unclear how exactly to construe the South Caucasus and how to use this term. It is evident that if this issue remains unsolved, cooperation is out of the question.

Today the South Caucasus consists of three countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, which according to
Rusetsky is not quite right. The AGA format (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Armenia), is one of the formats of South Caucasus cooperation, but not the only one.

Firstly, because part of Russia is also in the South Caucasus, since it is located below the Caucasus mountain range. Secondly, most of the north-eastern Turkey is in the South Caucasus and before 1919-1920, the South-Western Caucasian Republic (capital: Kars) existed on the territory of modern Turkey.

Thirdly, according to several authors, the north-western provinces of Iran are also part of the South Caucasus.

The fourth point is that Georgia, with part of its territory in the North Caucasus, cannot be considered only as a South Caucasus country, just as Russia cannot be considered as a North Caucasus country.

This is important to bear in mind, says Rusetsky, since in the context of the Greater South Caucasus there are multiple formats of cooperation, at the same time very confrontational. "I would divide the South Caucasian forms of cooperation into bilateral formats, trilateral formats, quartets, quintets and sextets. And by involving non-regional players other forms of multilateral cooperation emerge," adds Alexander Rusetsky.

An example is the AGT format (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey), actively supported by the West and having a strong economic base owing to the oil pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, the South Caucasus gas pipeline Baku-Tbilisi-Erzerum and the railway project Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, among others.

The second format is the IRA format (Iran-Russia-Armenia), having military, political and conspiratorial foundations. It exists, having no specific structure, but it can contend with the AGT project.

Other leading formats of regional cooperation are: the Kislovodsk format (1 + 3), where Russia is trying to stabilize relations; the Caucasian Alliance ARTAG (3 + 2), here both Russia and Turkey assume the roles of stabilizers; the GITARA format, which Iran is about to join and finally Michael Emerson’s stability pact for the Caucasus known as the "Caucasus octave": (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) plus (Russia, Turkey, Iran) plus (the US and the EU).

"In any case, it is necessary to realize that by simplifying the prospects of regional cooperation, which implies reducing it to the format of AGA (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Armenia) not many prospects come into view. Based on the current geopolitical and geo-economic interests of the various players, the South Caucasus security and cooperation system can only be seen as part of all the existing and possible formats.

Otherwise, the relevant confrontation line will be unclear. The creation of a common win-win strategy can be accomplished. For this to happen the perception of the current system has to be altered and all parties must come to a different level of analysis and decision-making," says Rusetsky. According to the political analyst, this is an opportunity to organize cooperation between the different formats and an opportunity to actually address the issue of constructing a unified system of security and cooperation in the South Caucasus in terms of global security. It will also be an opportunity to create a multilateral system – the South Caucasus Regional Governance which will be a system of consultation and cooperation between the countries of the region, as well as an opportunity to create a single economic area of the Greater South Caucasus, with the participation of regional and non-regional players.

"The above can become a basis for defining the common regional strategy and courses of action. Discussions and consultations may begin within the OSCE format and in doing so will be dedicated to the 40th anniversary of this organization," said Alexander Rusetsky in his interview to NEO.

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