
Bring Back The Stability Pact

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It's time to revive an old plan to create a Balkan-like stabilization plan for Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

BRUSSELS | Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are often regarded as a bridge and transit area between Europe and Asia. But these South Caucasus states form a weak chain of deep-rooted separatist regions, exposed to unresolved conflicts, widespread levels of crime and corruption, extremism, and spillover from impending instability in the Middle East, Iran and Afghanistan. These countries are still transit routes in the world economy rather than major economic players.

At the 1999 Istanbul summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the then-leaders of the region began to call for a concept of regional cooperation for the Caucasus that bore strong resemblance to the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe, which was initiated in Sarajevo earlier that year. It was unclear what the politicians meant in operational terms, except that a 3 3 2 formula gained standing: three representatives for the South Caucasus states; three for neighboring Russia, Iran and Turkey; and two for the big outsiders, the United States and the European Union.

Prominent think tanks chimed in with more specific schemes for a regional stability plan, sparking some interest.

Several years later, however, all parties appear half-hearted in their support for the idea. So is it already obsolete or is the time ripe to start working seriously on the plan?

To answer this question it is useful to examine the concept of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe and the experiences gained.

Lessons learned and best practices are certainly a useful benchmark for developing a stability initiative for the South Caucasus. There are numerous similarities between the regions. The Balkans and the South Caucasus are about the same size and both conflict-ridden regions are inundated with post-communist transitional difficulties, including problems arising from ethnic mosaics.

But one has to bear in mind that there are important differences.

The so-called frozen conflicts in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan are still unresolved. Unlike in the Balkans, where potential EU accession has been the "carrot" leading states to dampen conflict situations, the Caucasian states do not have this prospect.

Not ready for open frontiers: Georgian border police keep an eye on their neighbors. OSCE photo.

Even if Europe is today more involved in the region, it will remain only one of several major international actors - the United States, Turkey, Iran and Russia - which place great strategic importance on maintaining a sphere of influence.

As a consequence, the international community is much more divided over the

Caucasus than the Balkans regarding the international status and the political future of these diverse countries.

The Stability Pact was a complex attempt to deal with the Balkans as a region, recognizing that all political units in the region and the conflicts between them were components of a larger whole. The basic idea of the pact was to create a process of continued movement over time from loose and unorganized structures to stable ones.

The pact has also proved to be an attempt to "Europeanize" the Balkans to the point where "war becomes unthinkable," as analyst Srdjan Vucetic has noted. Thus, the pact was conceived as the international community's first comprehensive conflict-prevention strategy. It rests on the premise that to build a lasting system of conflict prevention, democratization, economic development and security need to be addressed simultaneously so that they mutually reinforce each other.

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The pact's greatest success was the creation of a new geopolitical space and the promotion of a true spirit of partnership and joint commitment to objectives between recipients and donors. This has helped foster the now widespread maxim that regional problems require regional solutions. A cooperative and constructive atmosphere in combination with new capacities unleashed through the work of the pact have paved the way for the development of a positive, "can do" culture in the region. In this sense, one of the major achievements of the Stability Pact was to help bring warring countries back to the negotiating table and to break the ice between adversaries.

The South Caucasus remains a broken region, which can only be repaired in a larger framework. A stability pact for the South Caucasus would provide a useful umbrella for a variety of regional cooperation ventures. The framers of the pact should carefully examine the experience gained in the Balkans when laying out the objectives and structure of the plan.

A first step would be to identify the range of initiatives that are already providing contact among people in the South Caucasus. The objective is to encourage the region to effectively use and further elaborate the existing tools of regional cooperation as well as to facilitate the incorporation of individual initiatives in the long run into a bigger institutional scope.

A number of initiatives that encourage regional countries to work together are under way. For example, in 1998 the Eurasia Foundation launched the South Caucasus Cooperation Program to promote and strengthen cross-border partnerships among civic activists, entrepreneurs, journalists, professional associations, educators, and other citizen groups. Another promising development was the establishment of the Caucasus Business and Development Network, which laid the foundations for businesspeople to work together.

EUROPEAN ACTION

The EU also invited the South Caucasus countries to work together to enhance regional and cross-border cooperation and share responsibility in conflict prevention and resolution. To date, the EU has signed "action plans" with the three countries and the promotion of regional cooperation is a high-ranking priority in each of these plans.

The efforts, however, have all come from outside. Although there is economic interaction between Armenia and Georgia, and economic and security cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia, there have been no serious internal attempts among the three to work together.

Areas that lend themselves more easily to trilateral coordination include trade, health, trans-border crime and drugs, as well as environmental, educational, energy and scientific matters. The region in coordination with key partners such as Russia, the United States, the EU and international financial institutions should examine the feasibility of further developing or establishing joint initiatives in these areas.

A stability pact for the region could act as a catalyst for the establishment of new initiatives for inter-governmental, business and civic society cooperation. It could become a benchmark and source of inspiration if put together in the right way. The structure of the Balkan pact cannot simply be photocopied. A step-by-step process, gradually building on existing areas of cooperation and securing the support of partners seems to be the best way forward.

Loss of appetite for further confrontation, a climate of trust and the readiness of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to carry out political and economic reforms, to prevent conflicts in the region and to promote further regional cooperation are necessary first steps for the success of any such initiative. The extent of the three states' support for regional cooperation on economic, energy and transport issues will also depend to a certain degree on a unified backing by the United States and Russia. Both have significant interests in the region: Washington wants a foothold because of the region's importance as a corridor from Europe to Central Asia, as a bridgehead to control and pressure Iran, as well as its energy resources. Russia, on the other hand, regards the South Caucasus as its traditional backyard of influence and opposes growing involvement in the area by the West.

The intentions are clear: the West and Russia have both the ambition of being the major players in the South Caucasus. Russia, however, is slowly but surely being forced to draw back from this region. A peaceful and regionally integrated South Caucasus would foster democratization and would bring the area closer to Western standards.

To counter this development, one of Russia's tactics might be to slow down Western advances by keeping the so-called "frozen conflicts" active and thus all three states in a weakened state of political and economic dependency.

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