

NATO COOPERATION TOWARDS SOUTH CAUCASUS

Alberto Priego*

Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO was forced to remake its image. For this reason the Atlantic Alliance has created some cooperative initiatives like the Partnership for Peace (PfP). This programme is very flexible and allows partners to choose the kind of cooperation that they want to pursue. In the South Caucasus, each country has chosen its own style of involvement in the PfP.

***Keywords:** NATO, the Caucasus, Russia, PfP, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.*

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Cold War era, NATO changed its character. After more than forty years of existence, NATO became a flexible organization where the different members and partners could find a comfortable/suitable position. The lack of a common enemy allows NATO members to adopt different and sometimes less committed positions. While there are historic members like the US or the Great Britain with a deep investment, then there are others like Spain or Belgium that rely more on the E.U for their security. This big difference is much clearer among the NATO partners. There are at least, two different sets of partner countries: those interested in becoming full members of NATO, and those interested in maintaining some kind of cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance rather than in membership.

Reinforcing this argument is the palpable existing division in the South Caucasus. On the one hand, Georgia maintains a strategy clearly oriented towards its integration into NATO. In a similar position, Azerbaijan was actively looking for its NATO membership while respecting its relations with Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, the current situation in the South Caucasus has dramatically changed but the position of Azerbaijan, while blurred, is still close to NATO.

On the other hand, Armenia seeks to cooperate more and more with NATO, although the Atlantic Alliance is still an organization in which it does not feel very comfortable. There are two reasons to explain this behaviour. The first is that NATO was created against the most important of Armenia's allies: Russia. The second is that the most important of Armenia's enemy, Turkey, plays an important role within the Alliance. Consequently, though Armenia has enhanced its relations with NATO, it may well prefer other international institutions to ensure its security.

By its own, what NATO has in mind concerning the South Caucasus is the idea of being a flexible organization to cooperate with all the PfP countries. According to this reality the

** Dr. Alberto Priego holds a PhD in International Relations from Complutense University Madrid. He currently resides at the SOAS, Department of Near & Middle East, University of London as a Visiting Scholar.*

Atlantic Alliance has tried to launch several flexible and original initiatives like EAPC, the Virtual Silk Road or the IPAPs (PfP) that allow the partners to choose the kind of their cooperation with NATO. In developing this strategy, the partner countries including the South Caucasian ones, can choose all the fields in which they are prepared to cooperate and those in which they need to be assisted by NATO.

Summing up, we can affirm that NATO's approach towards the South Caucasus is flexible and chosen by partner countries. Actually, NATO policy towards the PfP in general and towards the South Caucasus in particular could well be labelled as a form of *a la carte* cooperation. Concerning the South Caucasus, any of the three Caucasian Republics can select what kind of cooperation it prefers to develop in the framework of the PfP. For instance, Georgia is involved in most of the initiatives launched in the framework of the PfP. Georgia's most important aim is to obtain its NATO membership in the near future to deter Russia from interfering in its foreign policy. Nevertheless, Armenia does not need NATO to deter its enemies (Turkey or Azerbaijan); this task is reserved to Russia. Armenia tries to cooperate with NATO in other fields through PfP in order to diversify its foreign policy. By its own, Azerbaijan also cooperates with the Alliance, but its behaviour is more balanced than the Georgian or Armenian ones. Baku does not seek integrating into the Alliance but its relations with NATO are much stronger than those of Armenia. For this reason, we can point out that NATO Partnership for Peace programme is a flexible initiative that allows the partners to fill their foreign and security gaps.

NATO Cooperation towards the Post-Soviet Space

After the collapse of the Soviet Union NATO tried to remake its image in Eastern Europe developing a new cooperative relationship with Russia and its former allies. Thus, the Atlantic Alliance launched a series of cooperative initiatives (NACC, EAPC, etc...) intended to make it appear like a peaceful organization rather than an aggressive one.

Nevertheless, the most pro-Western countries like Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic or the Baltic Republics wanted to go further. Continuing to see in Russia a potential threat to their security, they needed some security assurances in order to face Russia, which had controlled their countries for forty years during the Cold War. All these states were actually looking for their survival and their perception of having been abandoned when the Second World War concluded explains much of their strategy. For its part, Russia perceived itself as a defeated state that had to avoid losing more weight and influence in Europe.

Despite the rapprochement between Washington and Moscow, from the point of view of Russian interests, NATO was still considered as the most dangerous and aggressive organization. Russia's relations with the alliance have been determined by its domestic issues. Although NATO needed to improve its image especially in Russia, Washington did not want to repeat the same mistake again: leaving the future of Eastern Europe in Russia's hands. Taking into account the dual dimension of the problem, Warren Christopher introduced an innovative tool (the so called Partnership for Peace programme) which allowed NATO to face this significant challenge. Through this project NATO created a cooperative framework to reform their defence sector while leaving NATO's door opened for those interested in going

further. Russia not only could not blame NATO for seeking its enlargement, but also couldn't avoid participating in the programme.

In the case of the South Caucasus, when the Partnership for Peace emerged, an important regional division became apparent. Although neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan had real aspirations of becoming members of NATO, both governments decided to maintain an active role in the PfP. Nevertheless, Armenia, whose relations with Azerbaijan were rather difficult, decided to move closer to the Russian position than to the NATO one, thus boycotting any PfP initiatives. Armenia considered that it could not cooperate with an organization in which its main enemy, Turkey, was one of the major actors. This was the first significant division in the South Caucasus, as far as the cooperation with NATO was concerned.

Armenia's loyalty towards Moscow was strengthened in 1995 when NATO published its enlargement study. Suddenly Russia decided to block any sort of cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance. Moscow advised its allies, including Armenia, not to cooperate with NATO in the framework of PfP. Russia felt that NATO had created the PfP just to enlarge the organization. Russia boycotted any cooperative initiative including the Partnership for Peace. For this reason, the distance between Yerevan and the other two Caucasian capitals grew increasingly larger. Indeed the Russian military assistance to Armenia reached unexpected levels and Yerevan became the most important Russian ally in the region, thus strengthening its historical alliance with Moscow.

In contrast, in 1999 Azerbaijan and Georgia decided not to renew the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security, leaving the Russian-led security structures. Azerbaijan and Georgia felt that this security agreement was very unsuitable for their interests, taking into account that Russia had supported separatist movements in both countries. However, Armenia not only renewed this agreement, but also signed a new one (CSTO) in 2002.

Far from that, Azerbaijan and Georgia started to cooperate in the framework of a new regional organization called GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova) oriented towards NATO and United States.

The key point of NATO's interest in the Caucasus was the September 11 terrorist attacks. After being attacked by Al-Qaeda, Washington decided to change its strategy towards the Greater Middle East. The South Caucasus's importance for NATO and the US increased tremendously. For this reason, the Partnership for Peace Programme was redefined and the South Caucasus and Central Asia became crucial for the War on Terror launched by the US. Nevertheless, NATO's interest in the South Caucasus was also driven by other issues such as, transnational crime, separatism and its growing strategic importance as an energy corridor.

The tour made by its Secretary General in 2003 constituted a landmark step in NATO's interest in the South Caucasus, even if it was not the first time the Secretary General visited the region.¹ However, on that occasion, Lord George Robertson confirmed the Alliance's interest in the region by paying a three-day visit.² During the visit, NATO's Secretary

¹ Speech by Irakli Menagarishvili (Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia) welcoming Lord George Robertson, NATO Secretary General, Tbilisi, Georgia, 26 September 2000.

² Devdariani, Jaba NATO interest in the Caucasus Security confirmed by Secretary General's visit, in Eurasia Insight, May 2003.

General stressed the role of the South Caucasus for the security of Europe³. Indeed, Lord Robertson reminded the South Caucasian republics that NATO's door remained open for them although the way would be long and tough. Today, one can observe how hard and long this way has been for the South Caucasian countries, especially for Georgia, which has real aspirations of gaining NATO membership.

In summer 2004, the NATO summit was held in Istanbul. There, the NATO Allies decided to increase their involvement in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, creating two important positions: that of the NATO Special Representative and two NATO Liaison Officers (one for each region). What are its functions and responsibilities? The Secretary General's Special Representative for the South Caucasus and Central Asia tries to coordinate NATO's policy towards these two regions. In practical terms, the Special Representative provides the Secretary General with advice on NATO's policy in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Besides, the Special Representative works directly with regional leaders in order to improve their cooperation with the Alliance. The first and the current Special Representative is Robert F. Simmons, who was appointed in August 2004 by the Secretary General.

In November 2006, NATO held a new summit. The city of Riga organized a summit where the overall theme was future NATO enlargement. Although, there was no NATO commitment on the Georgian integration process, the Allies encouraged Tbilisi to continue its efforts to become a member of NATO.

NATO's Bilateral Cooperation with the South Caucasian countries

Each South Caucasian country has its own interests in cooperating with NATO. While Georgia is searching for a protector against Russia, Azerbaijan just wants to diversify its foreign and security policy. The case of Armenia is more complicated; whereas its attitude towards NATO has dramatically changed over the last few years, Yerevan still considers that Russia is its main ally and protector against "the Turkic threat".

Georgia's cooperation with NATO

Georgia has been identified as the most ambitious country in its drive to join the EU and NATO. Cooperation between NATO and Georgia can essentially be defined as a case of balancing⁴ against Russia. Tbilisi perceives Russia as the threatening power and tries to deter it through an alignment with NATO and the US.

Since early 2005, when Saakashvili came into power, Georgia became even more pro-Western than before. The Rose Revolution was just the beginning of an alliance between Washington and Tbilisi that has an extension in NATO. Georgia's main alignment is actually with the US, but Tbilisi prefers it to be conducted under the NATO umbrella in order to deter

Available at www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051903_pr.shtml

³ "The Caucasus region is of a crucial importance for the security of the whole Euro Atlantic Area" *NATO Release*, May 2003.

⁴ Gangale, Thomas, "Alliance Theory: Balancing, Bandwagoning and Détente", *International Relations*, (October, 2003, vol 720), OPS-Alaska and San Francisco State University.

Available at http://pweb.jbs.net/~gangale/opsa/ir/Alliance_Theory-htm

Russia from attacking Georgia. For this reason it can be affirmed that Georgia is trying to balance the perceived threats from Russia with its partnership with NATO and the US⁵.

Georgian cooperation with NATO has two implications for the security of the region. The first one is its fast growing defence budget. Georgia is working very hard to enhance its defence sector to meet NATO's standards as well as to achieve NATO interoperability levels. For this purpose, following the explanation given by its government, Georgia has doubled its defence budget in order to qualify for NATO membership. This fast growing defence budget is being used to modernize the Georgian army, though Russia accuses Georgia of creating a security dilemma. The reality is that the secessionist regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), too often supported by Russia, are afraid of being attacked by the new updated Georgian army.

The second security implication has to do with its integration with NATO. Tbilisi has worked very hard in its path to NATO, carrying out an ambitious Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), being part of the Intensified Dialogue and working on the approval of its Membership Action Plan (MAP). However Russia and the two secessionist republics (South Ossetia and Abkhazia), which are heavily oriented towards Moscow, would not allow the Georgian accession into NATO. If finally Georgia gets its NATO membership, Tbilisi would invoke Article 5 of the Washington Treaty to call on its allies to defend it every time Russia decides to attack the border area. For this reason, Georgia-NATO cooperation and, overall, its accession into NATO are very contested within the Atlantic Alliance itself. Those countries with a strong relationship with Russia are not supportive of Georgian aspirations to become a member of NATO. This is the case of Germany, which signed several energy agreements with Russia, that allow the latter to supply up to forty per cent of Germany's total gas consumption⁶. This has been one of the major issues blocking Georgia's accession into NATO.

Indeed there is another problem: the question of the two secessionist republics, i.e. South Ossetia and Abkhazia. What will happen with these two territories if Georgia joins NATO? South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both, are clearly Russia-oriented and, even more, Russian peacekeeping forces are protecting the Russian passport holders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If Georgia wants to become a member of NATO, it should settle these two conflicts first.

For these reasons, NATO does not agree to present any schedule for the accession of Georgia into NATO. Current NATO Secretary General, Jaap de Hoop, stated in October 2007 that Georgia should try to settle its internal conflicts to become a member of the Atlantic Alliance.⁷

⁵ "The aim of balancing is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed" Waltz, Kenneth N., *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 282.

⁶ "Russian-German pipeline that run via Ukraine deliver forty percent of the German gas supply and eighty percent of the European gas supply" Bryza Matthew J., "The Policy of the United States toward the Black Sea Region" in Asmus, Ronald D., (ed) *Next steps in forging a Euro-Atlantic strategy for the wider Black Sea* (Brussels: GMFUS) p. 47

⁷ "NATO: finding solutions to conflicts in Caucasus vital for security of entire Euro-Atlantic region" *PanArmenian Network*, 4th October 2007.

Armenian Cooperation with NATO

Armenian interest in NATO is less vital than the Georgian one. While Georgia perceives Russia as the threatening power, Armenia regards Russia as its protector against its enemy Turkey. Therefore, Armenia is more confident in Russia than in NATO, an organization in which its enemy, Ankara, is deeply involved. Nevertheless, from September 11 terrorist attacks on, Armenia has drastically changed its foreign policy approach. For several years, Armenia relied exclusively on Russia to protect its interests, whereas now Yerevan has diversified its foreign and security policy. Armenia has adopted the so-called multi-vector foreign policy to ensure its national interest.

From early times, Armenia and Russia have maintained a traditional alliance though it has not been very fruitful for Armenia over the past years. From 1991, Armenia had been isolated and dependent on Russia for its survival, including in the economic sphere. Then Armenia began to think about other “big brother” possibilities such as the U.S or Europe. The September 11 events increased the regional imbalances in the space covered by the so called Greater Middle East⁸, what represented a window of opportunity for Armenia. Yerevan decided to implement a new foreign and security policy called the multi-vector model. It means that Armenia maintains its strategic partnership with Russia, while trying to strengthen its relations with other powers such as the US or France.

As for NATO, Armenia has decided to be more involved in Partnership for Peace exercises. Besides, President Robert Kocharian signed an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO as a proof of Armenia’s commitment with the Atlantic Alliance. The US requested Armenian support in Iraq, and as a result, a group of 46 Armenian peacekeepers were sent to Iraq in January 2005. By its own, the Congress of the United States started in 2007 debates concerning the adoption of a resolution recognizing the so called “Armenian Genocide”. The adoption of the resolution was adjourned after one of the traditional American allies in NATO, Turkey, vigorously protested against such attempts by the Congress.

It must be noted that Armenia has greatly softened its historical aversion towards NATO. Previously, Armenia perceived NATO just as an organization that strengthened its eternal enemy Turkey. While in the past Armenia just followed Russian NATO policy, today Yerevan considers the Atlantic Alliance as an important key to apply its multi-vector foreign policy. Therefore, Armenia has already adopted IPAP, though Yerevan does not officially aspire to NATO membership or to build a “Georgian scenario”⁹.

⁸ Priego, Alberto “The Emergence of Southern Caucasus as a cornerstone of the Greater Middle East”, REEI (www.reei.org) (January 2007, vol.13), p. 13

⁹ “He (Kocharian) has always made it clear that he will not build relations with Russia by the Georgian scenario” Tadevosyan, Ara “Armenian-between the wider Black Sea Region and the Greater Middle East” in Asmus, Ronald D., (ed) “Next steps in forging a euroatlantic strategy for the wider Black Sea, (Brussels: GMFUS) p. 159

Armenian behaviour with NATO can be described as one of bandwagoning,¹⁰ because after 2001 Yerevan has aligned itself with the Atlantic Alliance more actively in the hope of profiting from its dominant position. Nevertheless, Armenia still relies on Russia for its security, especially concerning its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan. Thus, although Armenia has enhanced its relations with NATO adopting the IPAP, it remains an active member of the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

The case of Armenia proves that NATO, after the end of the Cold War, has become a flexible international organization.

Azerbaijan's Cooperation with NATO

It must be stressed that the case of Azerbaijan is quite interesting. First of all, Azerbaijan is probably the most secularized Muslim country in the World. The majority of the Azerbaijani Muslims follow the Shiite direction¹¹. Secondly, the Azerbaijanis are ethnically Turks. Thirdly, the Russian and the Kemalist heritages turn Azerbaijan into a European country in the middle of the Greater Middle East. Moreover, Azerbaijan has enormous oil and gas reserves and does not belong to OPEC.

After becoming independent in 1991, Azerbaijan sought to follow the Turkish Kemalist model of statehood. He aspired to become a member of the Euro-Atlantic Community while preserving their Azerbaijani identity. For these reasons, Azerbaijan started to actively cooperate with Turkey, with the US and NATO. From 1994 on, Azerbaijan has been an active member of the Partnership for Peace Programme (PfP) participating with Turkey in several international peacekeeping missions (KFOR, ISAF)

Although Azerbaijan considers NATO membership an option, for the time being it is not a priority for him. It is not a secret that Azerbaijan's neighbours (Iran and Russia) do not feel comfortable about any NATO enlargement to the region. Thus, Azerbaijan tries to combine his efforts to cooperate with NATO in the framework of the PfP and IPAP with his more or less friendly relations with Iran and Russia.

Azerbaijan's foreign policy is mainly aimed at protecting its interests in the dispute with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave in Azerbaijan primarily populated by Armenians. This conflict, while dormant after the cease-fire of 1994, has still the potential of getting out of control and destabilizing Azerbaijan and the whole region again. The conflict remains unsettled to date and determines to a great extent the Azerbaijan's foreign policy. All the Azerbaijani presidents have adapted their foreign and security policy to this priority. Azerbaijan's interest in any international security organization, including NATO or CIS, is always related to supposed international support on the question of restoration of his sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.

¹⁰ "the goal of bandwagoning is usually self-extension: to obtain values coveted" Schweller, Randall. L., "Bandwagoning for profits. Bringing the revisionist state back, *International Security*" (Summer, 1994, Vol. 19, no1), p. 74

¹¹ Priego, Alberto., "The Creation of Azerbaijani Identity and its influence on foreign policy". *UNISCI Discussion Papers*, (May 2005, vol. 8), p. 2.

As far as NATO is concerned, Azerbaijan would like to see the Alliance getting involved in the conflict and providing peacekeeping forces. Nevertheless, NATO has rejected several times this possibility as a result of Russian and Armenian pressures. On her own, Armenia with the support of Russia will always impede any NATO involvement in the conflict, as Armenia achieved her goals during the war and any negotiation might cause a worsening of her current position.

Although Azerbaijan has not achieved his goals on Nagorno Karabakh, the same cannot be said about other issues. For instance, NATO and the US have helped Azerbaijan regarding energy security. In this sense, the construction of the BTC oil pipeline has given Azerbaijan more relative power as the pipeline constitutes an energy corridor alternative to the northern (i.e., Russian) one. On his side, Azerbaijan has contributed to NATO by participating in several PfP programmes and international peacekeeping missions. That's why one can argue that the cooperation between NATO and Azerbaijan can also be labelled as one of bandwagoning for profit.

Conclusion

Summing up, after the demise of the Soviet Union, NATO turned into a flexible organization where members and partners can develop their own strategies. In the case of the South Caucasus, each country has dealt with the Alliance in a different way. While Georgia has adopted a balancing strategy, Armenia and Azerbaijan have chosen different sorts of bandwagoning behaviours.

By itself, this flexibility has allowed NATO to survive post-Cold War international changes, such as the rise of international terrorism and other international threats or the proliferation of WMD. NATO has benefited from the vacuum of power created after the break up of the Soviet Union. The aforementioned flexibility allows NATO to be involved in a space traditionally dominated by Russia. Nevertheless, Moscow cannot accuse NATO of using the PfP to enlarge the organization because each PfP member can choose its own form of involvement in this programme.