

Regional Cooperation:

Myth or Reality

The assessment of the South Caucasus regional cooperation's current stage is unambiguous – no serious developments have been made in the framework of trilateral relationships - yet, parallel developments are being recorded in the context of various international projects. The BSEC, developments in the framework of TRASECA and INOGATE, European Integration and the three countries separate integration into the international structures comes to prove the aforementioned statement. The integration processes in the frameworks of the CIS countries are considered memorandum-oriented rather than bilateral and trilateral projects (Armenia-Russia, Iran-Greece-Armenia, Turkey-Georgia-Azerbaijan, etc.) designed to, in general, promote regional development while simultaneously containing certain political implications.

Current geopolitical environment conditioning future actions of the South Caucasus countries can be described by following:

- The US military presence in Iraq would reside for a long while and the western (particularly the US) pressure will constantly increase for the various ways of communication to stay opened;
- The role of the US is growing in Georgia. Therefore, the function of the regional development machine seems to belong to Georgia;
- Russia predominantly loses its role in the South Caucasus;
- The expansion of the European Union and NATO changed the role of the region. Hence, the present attitude towards the region could be drastically changed as well.

Subsequently, the geopolitical role of the South Caucasus remains uncertain. Given the territorial dimensions and economical status of the region, for the developed countries it seems unattainable to consider the South Caucasus countries separately. Hence, in the near future our position should be finally determined in respect to being part of Caspian, Black Sea, Middle East, or another unity.

Developments in the economic environment are obvious enough in the three South Caucasus republics. Although the present economic developments are achieved on account of the opportunities granted by globalization, nevertheless, the isolated development is fraught with serious consequences.

A variety of obstacle-related factors raised regarding the South Caucasus integration process can be actually considered favorable in those processes and for the role Armenia assumes to take within it.

- Conditioned with the Russian factor, the Abkhaz and South Ossetian issues motivate the west to exert pressure on the South Caucasus collaboration encouragement.
- The negative attitude towards Iran makes the South Caucasus attractive as a corridor.

The fact that the Nagorno Karabakh conflict resolution would lead to regional cooperation, or the regional cooperation would bring to the conflict a resolution, are myths in reality. Actually they are interconnected, yet, the establishment of peace and cooperation in the region depends upon a variety of other factors.

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Actually the Karabakh issue, in the context of the current geopolitical developments, can lose its weight to the other regional urgent issues and the integration processes can escape the Karabakh issue, the solution of which can be indefinitely postponed under US pressure.

In the Karabakh issue, discussions of public opinion, both in Armenia and Azerbaijan, is frequently touched upon, yet is considered an inappropriate subject. Meanwhile, the way various officials quote public opinion, even though no wide-scale and fair survey has been conducted either in Armenia or in Azerbaijan in respect to the Karabakh issue, has become confusing. Yet, it can play a vital role in this phase.

Today the key to further regional cooperation is the South Caucasus countries internal policy, as the foreign powers would constantly remain more pragmatic affording an opportunity to do merely what we are ready for. In this situation new factors occur forcing revision to the existing stereotypical approaches.

- Georgia is given less attention while it can play a useful connecting role in the South Caucasus;
- The country elites express no readiness to propose solutions to existing regional issues (compromise over the real processes), therefore, freer and more capable circles should be comprised in the regulation processes;
- Parallel to the future regional development and cooperation, including conflict resolution and foreign negotiations, the local negotiations are also considered to be quite essential (inter state public-political discussions within various formats). The unification of the elite and political power as well as public interests becomes possible merely through this way.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion on “Regional Cooperation: Myth or Reality” held in May 19, 2004, in the International Center for Human Development. The participants of the round-table were freelance analysts, government officials, members of the media and representatives of international institutions.