



Briefing Paper No.25

11 September 2012

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Promoting a more transparent and accountable NATO

NATO and the South Caucasus: Closer to war than peace?

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NATO's new frontier in the South Caucasus

The South Caucasus (consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) are fast becoming a new frontier for NATO. While most attention has focused on Georgia's aspirations to become a NATO member and Russian opposition to alliance enlargement in Eurasia, NATO's role and interests in the region are much broader and growing. The region's new role as a transport and energy corridor is fueling this interest, but the alliance will need to tread carefully. There are several unresolved ethnic and political conflicts, as well as three bordering Eurasian states (Russia, Turkey and Iran) with ambitious regional agendas of their own.

(The alliance's role in energy security, still as yet undefined – photo credit: NATO)



NATO's activities in the region have been cautious and low-key, and although alliance membership is still proposed for Georgia, there are no specific deadlines. NATO's current interests are mainly dictated by operations in Afghanistan (to which all three South Caucasian republics contribute). The Georgian Afghanistan contingent is the largest, currently consisting of around 800 personnel although Tbilisi has promised to increase that number to 1,500. Azerbaijan is especially important for its role in transport logistics, with almost one third of all NATO cargo bound for Afghanistan transiting via that country.

This, then, was the backdrop to NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen's three-day visit to the region. His itinerary was as follows:

- *5-6 September, Armenia:* The Secretary General met the President of Armenia, Serzh Sargsyan, and delivered a keynote speech at the University of Yerevan on the first day of his visit. On the second day he met Minister of Foreign Affairs, Edward Nalbandian and the Minister of Defence, Seyran Ohanyan.

- *6 September, Georgia:* The Secretary General met the President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, and also participated in the Annual Session of Georgian Ambassadors, hosted by the Georgian Foreign Minister, Grigol Vashadze.

- *7 September, Azerbaijan:* The Secretary General met President Ilham

Alyiev and delivered a keynote speech at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy in Baku.

This briefing examines the NATO Secretary General's visit to the region and explores the nature and scope of the alliance's deepening dialogue and cooperation with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia.

NATO-Armenia cooperation

Armenia's relationship with NATO, and indeed the entire path of its Euro-Atlantic integration, is restricted by the country's close ties with Russia. The country has also been subject to a blockade from both Azerbaijan and Turkey as a result of the

long-running Nagorno-Karabakh ethno-political conflict. This drove Armenia to consider closer relations with NATO and the EU about seven years ago.

During the NATO Secretary General's visit, the [Armenian News Agency](#) reported that Armenia and NATO are cooperating in the field of democratic, institutional and military reforms and are supporting peacekeeping missions. Armenia wants to deepen political and practical cooperation via the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP), while the official stance is that it does not seek to join NATO.

During President Sargsyan's earlier [visit to NATO HQ on 6 March](#), the discussion also focused on Armenia's partnership with the Alliance. Armenia was officially thanked for its contribution to the alliance's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan. Rasmussen said:

NATO and Armenia share many political priorities and security interests. And we have built up our cooperation and dialogue over many years. Our relationship contributes to regional security and Euro-Atlantic security. And we want to take it forward in that way. Let me stress that the South Caucasus region is important for our Alliance, and Armenia is an important partner for NATO.

In his [speech at the Yerevan State University](#), the Secretary General said that Armenia has been an important NATO partner for many years and that the country's contributions to NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan were significant and highly valued. Armenia has been contributing troops to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) since 2004 and first deployed personnel in support of ISAF in 2010. In 2011 this deployment was increased from 40 to 126 troops. In 2008, soldiers from NATO-member states participated in a joint military exercise on Armenian territory.

(NATO Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen addressing faculty and students at Yerevan State University – photo credit: NATO)



The Secretary General added that NATO was also assisting Armenia with border security, defence reform and cyber security. He saw no contradiction between good NATO-Armenia relations, and good relations with Russia. Following his talks with Armenian President Serzh

Sargsyan, the [Secretary General again thanked Armenia](#) for its strong contribution to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan and Kosovo. He also highlighted NATO's support for Armenia's defence reforms, civil defence and disaster relief efforts, stressing NATO and Armenia's achievements to date. He called for the forging of an even closer partnership.

In response to a question during a subsequent [press conference](#), the Secretary General reiterated that good relations with Russia **and** NATO were not a contradiction for Armenia. Indeed, he stressed that NATO itself had good relations with Russia and was actively working to improve them.

NATO-Georgia cooperation

Georgia is the second largest non-NATO ISAF troop contributing nation and planned deployments this autumn will make it the largest. The country also supports Operation Active Endeavour, NATO's counter-terrorist maritime surveillance operation in the Mediterranean. Previously, Georgia also contributed to KFOR.

Following a dialogue with the alliance about its membership aspirations and the declaration at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that the country will become a member – cooperation is now being taken forward through the framework of the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC) that was established in September 2008. The NGC met for the first time three months later at the level of Foreign Ministers to discuss the security situation in the Euro-Atlantic region, the ongoing process of reform in Georgia and NATO's assistance to those reforms. Yet while Tbilisi is on par with the Balkan countries in terms of its aspirant country status, it has still not started negotiations on a MAP (membership action plan),

The Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia continue to be sources of tension, in particular following the conflict with Russia in August 2008. Since then Russia has recognized the two breakaway regions and strengthened its military presence there, while Georgia has had to

accommodate tens of thousands of displaced population from formerly Georgia-controlled parts of South Ossetia.

Following talks with President Mikheil Saakashvili in Tbilisi on 6 September, the [Secretary General](#)

praised Georgia for its strong commitment to NATO and to democratic reforms.

The Secretary General also addressed the Annual Session of the Georgian Ambassadors. He noted Georgia's "very significant" contribution to the ISAF mission in Afghanistan and welcomed Georgia's commitment to be part of a new NATO-led mission after 2014 to train, advise and assist Afghan security forces. "We are deeply thankful for the courage, determination and professionalism that your troops show every day," he told his audience.

The Secretary General also commended Georgia for its commitment to find a peaceful resolution in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and reiterated NATO's "unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally recognised borders".

He encouraged Georgia to maintain the momentum of democratic reforms and described the conduct and the run-up to the parliamentary elections in October and presidential elections in 2013 as a litmus test for Georgian democracy. "I trust that all political players in Georgia will play a responsible role in this process," and "The future is in your hands. But know this: you have a friend in NATO - and a future home in NATO", he said.

Responding to a journalist's question whether Russian intervention in South Ossetia and Abkhazia was intended to stop NATO enlargement into former Soviet spheres of influence, the General Secretary said that if that was the case, then Russia's objective "had failed", adding that he hoped Russia would respect Georgia's desire to join NATO. This reflects what the General Secretary said in his introductory remarks, that "Georgia will become a member of NATO".

(Tserovani Internally Displaced Person (IDP) settlement, Georgia is one of the largest IDP camps for people displaced by the 2008 war – photo credit: International Crisis Group/ flickr)



NATO-Azerbaijan cooperation

Azerbaijan joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (later renamed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council) in 1992 and joined the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1994. The country's decision to work on an Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO in 2004 focused on reform and institution building.

However, Azerbaijan's approach to NATO is different to that of its neighbours. The country is not linked to a military bloc, namely the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), like Armenia, nor as strongly committed to NATO membership as Georgia. In 2011, Baku joined the Non-Aligned Movement and the country's relationship with NATO is mainly pragmatic, as indicated by the Individual Partnership Action Plan that NATO and Azerbaijan agreed in December 2011.

Azerbaijan, like its neighbour, currently contributes 94 personnel to ISAF and actively supported the operation in Kosovo. This year's annual 'NATO Week' in Azerbaijan opened with a conference, mainly focused on crisis management, at the NATO International School of Azerbaijan. A ceremony was held in the capital Baku to mark the official opening of the second NATO-sponsored mine-clearing project in the country. Key speakers included James Appathurai, the Secretary General's Special Representative for the Caucasus and Central Asia and Ambassador Khazar Ibrahim, Head of the Mission of Azerbaijan to NATO. They underlined progress in the NATO-Azerbaijan partnership, highlighting in particular Azerbaijan's valued contribution to the operation in Afghanistan.

Following his talks with President Alyiev on 7 September, the Secretary General thanked Azerbaijan for its participation in the NATO mission in Afghanistan and for the country's additional support through over flight and transit lines. Rasmussen also expressed his appreciation of Azerbaijan's intention to continue to support Afghanistan after the ISAF mission ends in 2014.

The Secretary General also stressed that the alliance was determined to build closer ties and to work with Azerbaijan in dealing with the security challenges of the 21st century. The Secretary General said NATO could, for instance, serve as a platform to strengthen cooperation on energy security – but without giving any details on how this might be achieved. Azerbaijan was also urged to keep up the pace of defence and security sector reform.

During his speech at the Azeri Diplomatic Academy, the Secretary General urged Azerbaijan and Armenia to move in the direction of reconciliation. He said that "Azerbaijan has a

complicated neighbourhood. And the most pressing regional challenge remains finding a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict". He added, as he had committed to in Yerevan the previous day, that he was "deeply concerned by the Azerbaijani decision to pardon Ramil Safarov" and that his crime "should not be glorified".

President Aliyev said that his decision to pardon Safarov was perfectly legal and his repatriation "was carried out in accordance with European conventions and his release in accordance with Azerbaijan's constitution". He added Azerbaijan wanted to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute peacefully.

Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict

The Armenian News Agency reported that Armenia ARF youth and student unions planned to protest during the visit about NATO's lack of comment on the Ramil Safarov affair.¹ The students demanded restoration of justice and urged NATO to condemn Safarov's release and extradition to Azerbaijan, as well as terminate NATO-Azerbaijan cooperation. While he was never going to do the latter, in response to questions in the press conference after his talks with President Sargsyan, the Secretary General did say that he was "deeply concerned" about the decision to pardon a convicted murderer, that it would "damage trust" and that "crime should not be glorified". He also said he would convey that message in his visit to Azerbaijan and would be making an effort to reduce tension in the region.

(Armenia vs Azerbaijan – photo credit: karpidis/ flickr)



The Secretary General also referred to the issue in his university speech, in which he said that regional development was being held back by unresolved conflicts: closed borders, minefields, trenches and closed airspace. "This region has more barriers to cooperation between neighbours than almost anywhere in the world. We need to break down those old barriers of mistrust. And we must build up new bridges of regional reconciliation" he said. Rasmussen also stressed that there was no military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and while NATO was neither directly involved nor would take sides, it would continue to support the Minsk process and efforts towards a peaceful settlement. Finally he stated:

I am deeply concerned by the Azerbaijani decision to pardon the Azerbaijani army officer Safarov. The act he committed in 2004 was a terrible crime that should not be glorified. The pardon damages trust and does not contribute to the peace process. There must be no return to conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Tensions in this region must be reduced, and concrete steps must be taken to promote regional cooperation and reconciliation.

It was a decision that has been widely condemned. Thomas de Waal from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warned that "This is a black week for those who are seeking a peaceful settlement of the long-running Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict". This is now a full-blown state-to-state row, with as yet unknowable consequences given that thousands died in the six-year war over Nagorno-Karabakh that ended in 1994.

Armenia has suspended diplomatic relations with Hungary and observers fear for the future of the Karabakh negotiating process, already at a critical point. There were tough questions to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in June as to why there was not a sharper US response to violations of the Armenian-Azerbaijani ceasefire. De Waal concluded:

The current format of quiet mediation by France, Russia and the US is not strong enough to move the two sides from their intransigent positions. The reception given Safarov suggests that the situation is moving closer to war than peace. This slide can be halted, but the time to

start working harder on diplomacy is now.

Conclusion: US and EU interests driving NATO policy in the South Caucasus?

With the Georgia-NATO status quo unlikely to change in the near future—neither the European member states nor a US administration under President Obama are interested in pushing for Georgia's membership, whatever the NATO Secretary General may say in public—the alliance's relationship with the other two South Caucasian states is growing more interesting.

In June 2010, President Barack Obama thanked Azerbaijan's leader for support in Afghanistan and said that he wanted to "broaden and deepen" US ties with the strategically located nation. The then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates' visit was

designed to ease strains in relations with a country which provided important Afghan supply lines and energy export routes.

Reuters reported that a US-backed push for a rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the former's historical ally Turkey, had damaged ties between Washington and Baku. The United States was accused of siding with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a territory that has been under ethnic Armenian control since the 1994 cease-fire. President Obama warned against the use of force in the region, something Azerbaijan has repeatedly threatened.

Azerbaijan is a major oil producer and a key hub on an alternative route for Central Asia and Caspian Sea energy to Europe. Most significantly, this alternative supply route bypasses both Russia to the north and Iran to the south. Given this geo-strategic importance, [the United States offered to expand military relations](#) and practical assistance in response to Azerbaijan's criticisms about not getting higher-level visits and about not seeing the fruits of their 'strategic partnership'.



(Reinhard Mitschek, managing director of Nabucco Gas Pipeline International – photo credit: publicsbgo/flickr)

[Jim Nicol of the Federation of American Scientists](#) concluded that the United States has fostered ties with all three countries in the South Caucasus (the other being Georgia) partly to end their economic and security dependence on Russia, noting also that the Russian-Georgian conflict had increased tension in the whole region. Nicol also argues that the United States had pursued close ties with Armenia to encourage its democratization and that successive administrations have supported private investment in Azerbaijan's energy sector as a means of increasing the diversity of world energy suppliers. Of course, the US is not alone in seeking this objective. The EU is planning to build the Nabucco pipeline to carry Azerbaijani and other gas to Austria.

At NATO's Bucharest Summit in April 2008, the allies noted a report on "NATO's Role in Energy Security," which identified guiding principles and outlined options and recommendations for further activities. These were reiterated at the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in April 2009 and the Lisbon Summit in November 2010.

Among the areas identified where NATO might be able to provide added value were "projecting stability" and "advancing international and regional cooperation". The depth and range of NATO's involvement in the quest for energy security in the South Caucasus will largely depend on promoting further cooperation with and between NATO's three partner countries in the region. It will not be an easy task.

Endnotes:

¹ Azerbaijani military officer Ramil Safarov was imprisoned in Hungary for murdering Armenian military officer Gurgen Margarayn during a NATO training course in 2004. Hungary recently released Safarov, who had served eight years of his life sentence, following an extradition request from Azerbaijan. On his return to Baku, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev pardoned Safarov and the government treated him as a hero. He was given an apartment and personally promoted to the rank of major by the defence minister.