

The Prospects of an EU Strategy for the South Caucasusⁱ

Stefan Wolffⁱⁱ

On 11 January 2010, the European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs published a draft report on an "EU Strategy for the South Caucasus".ⁱⁱⁱ A subsequent debate on the report took place on 7 April 2010. Even though the EP has no formal role in EU foreign and security policy, it is a significant indicator of debates and concerns on what exactly the EU should be doing and why a more effective EU diplomacy is often impossible. While the report unequivocally "[r]eaffirms the need for the EU to develop a strategy for the South Caucasus", it is in itself remarkably short of concrete recommendations.

The South Caucasus region has faced significant pressing challenges since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Foremost among them are questions of peace, security and stability, and related to these are issues of good governance, democratisation, and economic and social development. Unresolved conflicts in the region are not the only challenge that the EU has to confront, but they are without doubt the key obstacles to implementing successfully any, as yet not existing, EU "strategy to assist the transformation of the South Caucasus into a region of sustainable peace, stability and prosperity and to use fully its potential to contribute to the peaceful solution of the conflicts in the region by combining its soft power with a firm approach".

The region's unresolved conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory have, and will continue to, put EU soft and hard power to the test as their dynamics are highly complex and stretch from the local conflict zones to inter-state and regional relations (among the three South Caucasus countries and with Russia and Turkey, and potentially with Iran), and to wider geopolitical dimensions involving the EU's relations with Russia, while also being of concern to the United States.

Developing a strategy to deal with the region's unresolved conflicts, thus, is as necessary for the EU as it is difficult, requiring the Union to define clearly its strategic interests vis-à-vis the region, and by extension towards other key players there. The Union also needs to examine which outcomes of any strategically driven engagement are attainable and by what means, to evaluate how desirable they are, and then prioritise its goals accordingly. Conflict management and resolution will have to be at its core of such a broader strategy. If "sustainable peace, stability and prosperity" are the Union's strategic goals in the region, conflict management and resolution strategy needs to inform the formulation and implementation of any EU policy vis-à-vis the region, and all policies need to be assessed in their impact on the region's conflicts. Does the Foreign Affairs Committee's draft report on EU strategy for the South Caucasus offer anything original in this respect?

On the one hand, it states the obvious and reiterates well-loved and oft-repeated, but essentially meaningless EU statements:

- It emphasises that "the status quo is unacceptable and unsustainable".
- It claims that it is "the responsibility of external actors to use their power and influence in ways that are fully consistent with international law, including human rights law".
- It rejects "any actor's claim to have 'privileged interests'".
- It pronounces itself against "introducing conditions for respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the South Caucasus states is unacceptable".

In relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in particular, the draft report notes that the Foreign Affairs Committee:

- "[f]ully supports the Minsk Group Co-chairs' mediation, the Madrid Principles and the Moscow Declaration; condemns the idea of a military solution and calls on both sides to avoid militant rhetoric".

As far as the conflicts over Abkhazia and South Ossetia are concerned, the draft report

- “[w]elcomes the Tagliavini Report and supports its main conclusions; supports the EU Monitoring Mission mandate and its implementation of the part which is not blocked by Russia and the de facto authorities of the breakaway regions”; and
- “notes with satisfaction that the international community remains united in its rejection of the unilateral declaration of independence”.

On the other hand, there are some quite interesting and potentially important ‘hints’ in the draft report that indicate some fresh thinking and could usefully inform the development of an EU conflict management strategy for the South Caucasus. Thus, the draft report

- “[n]otes that conflict management and conflict resolution necessitate inter alia the recognition of the rights and legitimate interests of all relevant parties and communities ... [and] interest in innovative approaches, including to the exercise of sovereignty”;
- “[n]otes that interim status for Nagorno-Karabakh could imply interim legitimisation of the de facto authorities there” provided that “these authorities ... rapidly abandon the positions that Nagorno-Karabakh includes all Armenian-occupied Azerbaijani lands and that displaced persons’ right of return cannot even be discussed at the present stage”;
- “calls for increased EU action to persuade Russia and the relevant de facto authorities to stop blocking the EUMM from entering South Ossetia and Abkhazia”;
- “considers that the EU now has the opportunity to play a greater role in the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and could do so by participating in the negotiations through the establishment of an EU mandate for the French Co-chair of the Minsk Group”;
- “encourages the Council to consider the possible use of tools from the CSDP to step up its participation in the peace-building and conflict-management processes”;
- “[c]alls on the Commission to grant substantial financial and technical support to measures [...] aiming at dialogue and mediation”.

Bearing in mind that the EU does not, as yet, have a coherent conflict management strategy for the South Caucasus (or in general, for that matter), let alone a real strategy for the region, five substantive principles should guide the EU’s thinking about the process and outcome of its engagement in each individual conflict in the region:^{iv}

1 Primacy of negotiated solutions over imposed settlements

The eventual outcomes of settlement negotiations must not be prejudged, but must reflect what is practical and feasible given the interests of the immediate conflict parties and other relevant players. In order to attain such outcomes, the EU needs to stand ready to provide adequate resources for potentially protracted negotiations, as well as leadership and technical expertise as necessary to assist in crafting a sustainable settlement. The draft report’s references to innovative approaches to sovereignty and to interim solutions are particularly noteworthy in this context.

2 Inclusiveness of negotiations

Comparative evidence of conflict management indicates that negotiations should include all relevant parties if whatever settlement is obtained is to have a chance of being fully implemented and sustainably operated. Such inclusion need not be unconditional, but conditions need to be determined and enforced with care. While a commitment by all parties to non-violence is essential, the non-prejudicial approach to negotiation outcomes outlined above suggests that demanding prior acceptance of certain provisions of a settlement, such as continued territorial integrity or the permanence of demographic changes, might be counterproductive by undercutting the support that negotiators need from their constituencies. Pre-conditions, if they are imposed at all, should also be judged by whether they can be delivered and whether they are meaningful. In this context, the draft report rejects conditions for respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of existing states and the refusal to discuss refugee returns.

3 Comprehensiveness of agreements

The three conflicts in the South Caucasus are primarily secessionist in nature. Yet a mere compromise about who is to control which stretch of territory will be insufficient for any settlement to be sustainable. Experience indicates that security, economic and cultural concerns need to be addressed alongside territorial claims. This will require the parties to make concessions and settle for compromises. This is an often painful and risky

process both for the negotiators personally and for the parties they represent; mediators need to be acutely aware of ‘red lines’ and carefully tease out the space for compromise between them, tabling proposals at key moments. Such proposals may be specific, to address a particular impasse during negotiations, but they may also be broader, considering the interests of external parties whose support will be needed for settlement implementation and operation. The draft report’s emphasis on recognising the rights and legitimate interests of all relevant parties and communities and its encouragement of Council and Commission to become more engaged in, and support financially and technically, mediation processes indicates constructive and forward-looking thinking.

4 Building broad coalitions of support for negotiated settlements

Difficult as it may be to reach a settlement at the negotiating table, the process of securing its implementation is often even more fraught with the risk of failure. The EU will need to put significant effort into securing support for a particular settlement from key constituencies of those represented in negotiations, external stakeholders and interested parties, as well as to manage potential spoilers and limit their ability to undermine a settlement agreement once it has been negotiated. Such a broad coalition of support would need to include civil society and media, diaspora networks, regional and international organizations, neighbouring states and relevant great powers, in order to offer the political elites who have negotiated a settlement the necessary backing and give them the room for manoeuvre to accept compromises and make concessions. This vital dynamic is clearly recognised in the draft report, underlining the importance of reducing competition between external players and increasing the common ground of their various approaches be they states and/or regional and international organisations, of supporting civil society actors and fostering dialogue across national and communal boundaries, and of monitoring spoiler activities.

5 Need for long-term external assistance

Achieving a negotiated settlement in any conflict is a difficult enough task on its own. Its subsequent implementation and operation, moreover, will be long-term projects of state-building that would, without external assistance, lack the necessary human and material resources to be completed successfully. The EU has significant experience—of both success and failure—in this from its engagement in the western Balkans over nearly two decades, and it will increase the likelihood of its success in conflict management if it commits to long-term, post-settlement engagement with the former conflict zones by providing security guarantees, development aid and institutional capacity building and training. Even though the draft report does not explicitly refer to past EU experience here, it is clear in its recognition of the need for long-term and well-funded assistance programmes in the framework of existing EU engagement with the three countries of the region, including the Union’s European Neighbourhood Policy and Eastern Partnership.

The EU is now at a major juncture in the development of its international diplomatic profile and capabilities. A week ago, on 26 April 2010, political agreement was finally reached among the Union’s 27 foreign ministers on the establishment of the European External Action Service. Developing a coherent and comprehensive EU strategy for the South Caucasus needs to be high up on the agenda of the EEAS and is likely to prove one of its first major test cases. Incorporating a systematic approach to managing and settling the region’s conflicts will not only be essential for the success of the South Caucasus strategy as a whole but can also serve as a blueprint for a more general EU conflict management strategy.

ⁱ The following is a written version of comments made at the seminar “Prospects for the Caucasus”, Centre of International Studies, University of Oxford, 3 May 2010. Copyright (c) Stefan Wolff 2010.

ⁱⁱ Professor of International Security, University of Birmingham, England, UK, stefan@stefanwolff.com.

ⁱⁱⁱ All quotes from European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, *Draft Report on an EU Strategy for the South Caucasus*. Brussels, 11 January 2010. Available online at http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/afet/pr/799/799032/799032en.pdf.

^{iv} In this section, I draw in part on R.G. Whitman & S. Wolff, “The EU as a Conflict Manager: The Case of Georgia and Its Implications”, *International Affairs*, vol. 86, no.1, pp. 87-107.