

Unity Through Security: Assumptions, Opportunities, Suggestions

By Victor Kipiani, Chairman, Geocase

Regional security around the Black Sea has been a frequent topic of discussion over recent years. The explanation for this is logical when one considers the far-reaching changes that are ongoing in the region as well as the rearrangement of the global order. It is also noteworthy that old norms and standards have mostly been rendered useless, whereas new ones have not yet been fully established. Discussing this issue is very important, and it is vital that these discussions be based upon competent evaluations and the country's national interests, rather than upon internal political or party assumptions. A stronger motive for unity than Georgia's security and welfare could hardly be imagined.

Introductory Observations

Improving Georgia's security system and finding new approaches or solutions is a constant process. This is unsurprising given the fact that, since we regained our independence, our region and the world in general have been under constant transformation. The centers of regional and global power have shifted from time to time, and new centers have emerged, enlarging, reducing or modifying military or political alliances. On the other hand, the appearance of additional risks and challenges is also the result of deep geopolitical and socioeconomic processes that demand constant improvements to our national security system and its adequate alignment with changeable risks.

The aim of this paper is to discuss security aspects from a geographical point of view—evaluating problems from a very specifically Georgian angle, but also studying their impact upon regional partners and strategic allies—in order to present and analyse the 'big picture' dynamically instead of statically. Pursuing such an approach of 'total interests' makes it possible to imagine a security model that would enable the national and geostrategic interests of every participant to merge with each other.

We have already discussed this topic in earlier papers, but this time we intend to develop some issues and sub-issues more widely.

Waiting for NATO's Expansion

The development of a modern Georgian state is impossible to conceive without close co-ordination and cooperation with the country's Western partners. This cooperation, along with many national programmes or initiatives between countries, mostly exists within the close-knit relations that exist between Georgia and the Alliance. It should also be mentioned that the promise that was made several years ago regarding Georgia's NATO membership remains precisely that—a promise that has quite frankly not acquired a tangible specificity since 2008. Moreover, over the past few years a certain hesitation has been noticeable even within NATO regarding the question of the Alliance's further enlargement to the east—a hesitation whose neutralisation will, we fear, require more time and effort. And besides, this quite unique security system established after the Second World War has been confronted with even greater challenges by the Trump administration's unorthodox attitude towards the Alliance's unity as well as by renewed discussions over the autonomy of European security. It is no accident that during the most recent NATO summit, its Secretary-General was specifically tasked with drawing up a package of recommendations for the next summit that will encourage the Alliance's transformation and improve its effectiveness.

It is obvious to all that alignment with NATO's current requirements is not only in the interests of the Alliance's formal members but also in those of its partner countries, including Georgia. While we wait for reforms to the Alliance, our country's cooperation with this security umbrella must continue—whether as part of the NATO-Georgia project defined by the 'substantial package' or any other project—and any opportunity must be used for the further rapprochement and integration of Georgia's national security system with the Alliance.

The Relevance of Bilateral Alliances

Bilateral alliances and links are historically speaking nothing new in the security sphere. Some of them were created shortly after the end of the Second World War and have stood the test of time. What should be underlined, however, is the greater flexibility, mobility and adaptability to changing circumstances of bilateral alliances and unity in terms of political and military operations, particularly when compared to multinational ones. Furthermore, based upon the geopolitics of this or that region, the formal and functional load of a bilateral alliance may go further than its initial aim and expand into a much larger functional dimension. The US military presence in South Korea, for example, is not only linked to maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula but also 'closes' a strategically much vaster geography with its accompanying functionality. In general, such an approach is the result of a conceptual attitude in Washington which holds that US national security neither begins nor ends at the country's borders, and that complete and effective security is in practice achieved by 'geographical coverage' obtained through close cooperation with supportive partner countries. The bilateral alliance between the US and South Korea is a concrete example of this, as its direct aim—deterring North Korea—has been accompanied by practical 'side effects' such as blocking the further expansion of the Soviet Union and China. It is also noteworthy that, politically, the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula has broadcast a strong message of support for the countries of the region.

It is a well-known fact that US-South Korean defense cooperation is not the only example of this kind of alliance: there are other interesting examples (USA-Japan, USA-Philippines, etc.) with the same idea of a partnership. Every one of these alliances has its own unique characteristics, as this approach is not based upon a common formula or single universal frame. These characteristics are the specificity of a given region; the regional interests of the alliance's leading actor and their degree of importance (e.g., 'vital', 'substantial', 'peripheral'); the abilities of the leading actor's regional partners; the leading actor's relationships with immediate neighbors; and so on and so forth. Even a current event can have a fundamental impact on the formation of a bilateral alliance. These and many other directly or indirectly linked factors must be considered when envisaging Georgia's membership of a bilateral alliance with its own specific configuration—from a so-called 'visiting armed contingent' agreement all the way to a bilateral defense. We will also add that, whatever the precise format of any horizontal or bilateral cooperation, its vital component must be the establishment of Georgia as a self-sustainable and autonomous national center within the framework of bilateral military planning that enjoys the continuous economic and military support of the country's defensive capabilities.

Various important steps have already been taken as part of our country's strategic cooperation with our main ally. Several targeted programmes aiming to improve Georgia's defensive capabilities are invaluable, and the relatively recent Georgia-US framework agreement on deepening defense and security cooperation is vital, as well as the adoption of a bilateral memorandum on carrying out Georgia's defense readiness programme. Even the fact that around 60 percent of Georgia's military staff and officers have been through educational and retraining courses as part of US military education and training programs is sufficiently significant in itself.

Regional and Thematical Alliances: a Growing Trend

Multilateral alliances with multiple members are good in general, but we believe that their existence in their old forms and content should be revised and adapted. It is a fact that the intentions and roles of the so-called 'super-alliances' (e.g., NATO, the Warsaw Pact) were more fitted to the period of confrontation between the two global and ideological mega-camps of the Cold War. Nowadays, the Cold War's parameters have finally disappeared, and the fundamentally different grounds upon which a 'Cold War' between the USA and China might possibly be built would exclude any resemblance with the one that opposed the USA to the USSR. In fact, the political and ideological grounding of mega-alliances has currently become more difficult, as have the economic justification and timely management of such large alliances. NATO's current crisis could most likely be attributed to the undoubted delay with which it is aligning itself with new realities, but we also realize that this problem is much more complex and requires greater attention to detail. In any case, a question arises: besides the bilateral formats we have already mentioned, what could serve as an effective alternative to large, multilateral alliances?

In our opinion, such an alternative exists in cooperational models with a regional twist. This could be described as a regional-thematic system whose functional intention is linked to a unity of interests with the aim of accomplishing specific thematic tasks in a specific region.

It should be mentioned that the format of such associations—e.g. certain ‘regional North Atlantic alliances’—does not necessarily require a coarse bureaucratic approach or the existence of permanent structures. Moreover, in our modern world an alliance or association free of excessive and formalized linking threads could present certain advantages. The most important requirement is for the united subjects of the alliance to have naturally linked interests. Also not to be excluded is the fact that countries that belong to such associations may not even have overlap in obligations in case of a military attack upon one of them. The so-called ‘Quad’, for example, is precisely such a ‘free regime’ alliance that unites the USA, Australia, India and Japan. The Quad’s creation within a specific region serves the functional task of deterring expansionism and revisionism. In other words, such functional associations of several members may not even be based upon strict contractual requirements, but may represent a thematical form of cooperation between states enjoying appropriate levels of practical ‘capacity and willingness’.

Alongside a security agenda, it is also possible to direct regional-thematic alliances towards accomplishing different task, e.g. mutual assistance during natural disasters, combating cyber warfare, adopting a unified approach to telecommunications technologies and coordinating work around different humanitarian initiatives and programs.

We therefore do not exclude the possibility that this trend, as described in this part of the paper, might become a topic of discussion between Georgia and its strategic ally and partners in practice. That said, it is of course understandable that initiating an appropriate dialogue requires an expression of goodwill from every interested party. Besides, any dialogue as such should be based upon regional specificities and the current regional ‘picture’. Common analysis is helpful to efforts to properly guide the process towards a format of cooperation and defining dates. Considering all this, we would now like to outline the following initiative which could help moving into a right direction.

The Black Sea Declaration: Towards more West in the Region

Discussing regional cooperation has become increasingly frequent at different forums or gatherings in the Black Sea region, and this rising interest is absolutely logical given the geopolitical and geoeconomic developments the region is witnessing. In general, many bilateral or multilateral papers have been dedicated to relations in the Black Sea region.

This tendency is of course welcome, but there remains the feeling that the Black sea region is still not being paid a quality and level of attention commensurate with current events. Many also feel that the region is undervalued, and that the responses to certain challenges that have been proposed to date do not reflect the region’s true geopolitics—an opinion that we share.

The importance of the Black Sea region as a geopolitically distinct space is undeniably great if we consider the Black Sea's status; the maritime transport arteries that cross it; its proximity to two large normative camps; its role as a vital gate on NATO's eastern flank; and, finally, the region's role as a 'safety locker' for Western security between Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Even this short list would be enough grounds to increase the essential recognition of the Black Sea region in terms of international and regional security.

In a word, it is urgent that regional efforts towards a Black Sea format of cooperation be intensified, and the sooner the better. That said, these efforts should be pursued with appropriate levels of caution and observation, with every risk being carefully calculated. Such a balanced approach is dictated by the region's specificity, particularly considering ongoing geopolitical (and not ethnic) conflicts, the problem of Russian occupation and Russia's aggressive policy, the peculiar legal status of the Turkish Straits, and so on. It would indeed be inadmissible for these rather important circumstances to limit the priorities of those Black Sea states that are striving towards integration with Western geopolitical civilization. What must also be considered is the fact that, in order to better outline the Black Sea region, any initiative must unambiguously do away with the supposed ostensible weakening of Western strategic interest in the region: every step taken by parties interested in the proper development of the Black Sea region should debunk any doubts over its 'peripherality' and 'secondary status'.

At the same time, it is essential that actions to establish a Black Sea 'free unity' be in alignment with the principles of modern diplomacy; that they be as compact and purposeful as possible; that they be flexible and immediately adaptable to regional challenges; and that they represent a modern multilateral and regional-thematic model fitted to real scenarios.

Considering all this, we believe that the signing of a Black Sea declaration would be a proper step in the right direction. Such a document would underline the unity of interests of Black Sea states as well as the United States' firm and irreversible interest in our region. It is noteworthy that, along with the other issues that its signature would imply, such a declaration made by a strategic ally would send another strong signal that the West does not recognize Russia's 'zone of influence' in the Black Sea region, and does not recognize any other revisionist or authoritarian country's view of it.

By mentioning the uniqueness and specificity of the Black Sea region in the format of complex measures directed towards common Eurasian stability, the Black Sea declaration, on its own, would be a step towards the establishment of stability and peace in the region. The declaration should also define grounds for the repeated assessment and revision, if required, of regional security principles. Doing so would give a green light to defining a new and regional *modus vivendi* in alignment with current times.

We would also consider it vital to draw the attention of the declaration's participants (declarants) to the need to attract additional investments in the region. A preliminary 'warm-up' idea for declaring a large-scale regional project might for example be a 'Black Sea Prosperity

(Development) Network’, whose aims we would consider including the mobilization of financial resources for the development of regional infrastructure, decreasing dependence on certain energy resources and carrying out social and environmental programs.

One of the advantages of the Black Sea Declaration format lies in its freedom from formalized structures, and at the initial stage this format should exclude the creation of standing institutions. At the same time, in order to ensure proper coordination, it would be advisable to hold regular high-level summits between the heads of the declaration’s members and high-ranking US officials. In order to do so, as a kind of ‘work in progress’ note, we would suggest a ‘Black Sea Declaration [Number of Members]+1’ format. We believe that the role of such regular summits would be to support the independence of the region’s countries as well as their sovereignty and territorial integrity; the summit’s participants would also discuss regional geopolitical (pseudo-ethnic) conflicts and other issues of general regional security, international terrorism, cyber security, illegal migration and other relevant topics.

It would be advisable for the declaration to underline US activity in different regional projects—from defense to culture—as this would serve as a strong lever for the region’s integration with Western shared political unity.

We also believe that a Black Sea Declaration should prepare the ground for future trade agreements, properly configured for a regional scale of coverage, or even for the establishment of one or several complimentary trade blocs.

Concluding Statements

New threats in the Black Sea region indisputably increase the relevance of Georgia’s efforts, and those of its international allies and partners, to minimize regional risks and attempt to neutralize some of them. Achieving this process requires adequate levels of competence, courage, purposefulness and vision, as well as leadership.

To repeat it again: there is a prevailing assumption that the world currently lacks the resources and readiness to rapidly progress along the most desirable path. It is certainly true that we hear many declarations and considerations where considerable part of them seems lacking specificity and a proper connection to reality. Our extraordinary, non-standard times demand extraordinary, non-standard approaches. What is certain is that Georgia and its strategic ally and other partners are currently at a ‘historic turning point’, and that a successful outcome is our common and long-term interest—as well as a matter of honor.

Victor Kipiani
Chairman, Geocase