

THE BALKANS AND THE CAUCASUS: CONCEPTUAL STEPPING-STONES TOWARDS THE FORMATION OF A NEW SINGLE GEOECONOMIC, GEOPOLITICAL, AND GEOSTRATEGIC REGION

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The author

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I. Introduction

The formulation of conceptual stepping-stones requires the consideration of at least two defining factors:

First, how have the Balkans and the Caucasus evolved since the end of the Cold War?

Second, what are the guiding principles in the formation of this new, vast economic, political, and strategic region stretching westwards from the Adriatic Sea and eastward from the Caspian Sea? This region is influenced by and influences global economic, political, and security processes, and benefits from the eastwards enlargement of the democratic civic and security space embodied by NATO and the EU.

II. The Balkans and the Caucasus After the End of the Cold War

The area stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Black Sea and further eastwards to the Caspian Sea was a zone of bipolar conflict during the Cold War period. The shift from a bipolar structure to the still undefined structure of the international system has had one interim result - the tendency towards unilateral US domination and counter-efforts by other powers to promote multilateral solutions within global power relationships. The regional outcome of these processes in the post-Cold War period has been the conversion of the Balkan-Black Sea-Caspian area into two globally important hotspots of conflicting state interests. The major by-products of these contradicting actors and factors in the last ten years have been crises and wars in the Balkans and in the Caucasus. The risk of this zone erupting into conflicts was neutralized by a wise and prospective 'Black Sea policy' of Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania, Russia, and Ukraine. The involvement of Russia and Ukraine in the peacekeeping efforts of the international community in Bosnia and Kosovo, alongside troops from the Black Sea and Balkan states mentioned above, favored this development. At the national level, these processes in the two regions of conflicts resulted in the individual countries' gravitation towards one or another center of global power. Both the EU and NATO have been perceived in Southeastern Europe as such centers of global power.

The structural shifts in the international political system during the last decade have changed the Balkan-Black Sea-Caspian Sea area in ways that can be defined in geo-economic, geo-political and geo-strategic terms as follows:

- In geo-economic terms, the area has the potential to form an encompassing single zone, which would have to be developed and the feasibility of which remains to be proven. This potential can already be seen in both conflicting and common interests, especially on the issue of the transportation of the energy resources to the world markets. At this point, however, neither of the constituent sub-regions of this broader area can function as a single and meaningful functioning economic region within the global economic system.
- Three geopolitical zones have been formed within this broad area:

Southeastern Europe (or the Balkans), the Caucasian region, and the Caspian Sea region. They are rapidly evolving into a single geopolitical zone in the context of the global counter-terrorism campaign.

- In geo-strategic terms, the area already constitutes a single zone, as could be seen during the NATO campaign against Yugoslavia; such a development was indicated by the membership of Turkey and Greece in NATO, NATO's enlargement to include Slovenia, Romania, and Bulgaria, the special relations between NATO and Russia, the active links between NATO and Ukraine, and by NATO's cooperation with the Black Sea-Caucasian-Caspian Sea region in the Partnership for Peace program. Their cooperation in the fight against terrorism reinforced this perception

III. The Guiding Principles of the Formation of the New Encompassing Region

Though the requirements of shaping such a functioning region are probably diverse, two deserve special mention:

First, the principle of the 'incremental steps' reflects the logical requirement of the gradual, evolutionary enlargement of the EU and NATO. The formation of 'security communities' and 'security complexes' as well as the acquirement of the features of states, societies, and economies that meet the legal requirements of membership in both institutions needs a patient and purposeful attitude. It is a historic task to find ways of incorporating such huge centers of regional power as Russia and Ukraine in Northern Europe and Turkey in Southern Europe in the integration processes of the EU without bringing imbalances to the present structure. All actors in this unique social experiment are expected to be responsible and proactive players. The enlargement of NATO is a positive step to that end.

The second principle that deserves mentioning is that of 'fairness and inclusiveness' in the process of distributing energy resources. Producers, investors, 'transit' countries - all those involved in the production and delivery of oil and natural gas from the well to the world's energy markets deserve a fair share of the profit. Once the 'problem-solving' approach begins to match the 'bargaining' in the process of negotiating the details of the energy distribution, and once policy decision-makers aim for a 'win-win' situation, the future of the new single geo-economic, geo-political, and geo-strategic region stretching from the Balkans to the Caspian Sea will be secure. The campaign against political violence movements will influence or induce tendencies and processes that will cement the formation and definition of this region.

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