

Western bias

The CSP contains some proposals about ways to achieve regional stability that express a Western viewpoint or European bias. For example, if a peacekeeping force is felt to be necessary to help with peacebuilding in the region, it would be deployed under the aegis of the OSCE. This provision is intended to spare the feelings of the Russians, already irritated by NATO's post-Cold War military role in Eastern Europe. At the same time, the roles assigned to Russia and Iran in the proposed framework are hard to reconcile with some local notions about how regional cooperation should be shaped. A number of local players firmly believe that regional cooperation will be impossible without reducing Russia's influence or feel that only the US and NATO are able to move decisively in emergencies.

The "southern dimension"

The "southern dimension" is a concept designed to eliminate a major problem in the first draft of the CSP. It was actually no easy matter to argue for a stability pact in the Caucasus, and a regional focus to boot, that relegated Russia to the second rank with Turkey and Iran. Quite obviously, Russia belongs in the front rank with the other three Caucasian states. Any organization that restricted its activities to the South Caucasus when there were obvious connections between the problems of the South and North Caucasus must be doomed to failure.²⁰ Moreover, and this explains why the authors of the CSP chose to put Russia in the second rank, it is impossible to organize a regional pact where Russia and the other three Caucasian states are on an equal footing without Russia emerging as totally dominant – for obvious reasons of disproportionate political and military weight compared to the other partners.

Choice of the OSCE as coordinator

Since the break-up of the USSR, the OSCE has played a pivotal role in the South Caucasus. Though its achievements thus far have been fairly modest, the OSCE has helped to establish contacts and cooperation at all levels between the protagonists in the South Ossetia conflict. It has also contributed to regional stability through its observation missions along the Russo-Georgian border next to Chechnya. In addition, it is the sponsoring agency for the Minsk Group overseeing the Nagorno-Karabakh peace process. With its numerous members, political institutions, field missions, overall approach to building security and extensive network of partners in all areas, the OSCE is well equipped to become the coordinating body for efforts at regional stabilization.

However, two shadows loom over this promising picture. To begin with, the OSCE, like the UN and other international organizations present in the region, is limited to countries. This makes it a forum for promoting the official positions of regional states but with no voice for the secessionist republics or other sub-regional entities. To be accepted by these entities as a neutral body, the OSCE has to make room for them in the working groups on Caucasian issues.

²⁰ This comment on the "southern dimension" is based on a remark by Jean Radvanyi, a geographer specializing in Russia and the Caucasus, in an interview with the author, October 2001.