

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL CO-OPERATION IN SAFEGUARDING PEACE AND STABILITY ¹

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Abstract: The report is dedicated to the economic, cultural and defence co-operation in support of regional stability and security. Each of these strands of co-operation is explored and practical examples are given in order to illustrate the opportunities that are open through co-operation. The main points are summarized in three key words – profit, learning and trust.

Key words: regional co-operation, economic development, culture, education, defence.

1. INTRODUCTION

I had different intentions on how to start this presentation, but listening to some of the last reports during the field trip and to the discussions here, I changed my mind a bit. The reasons to do that are actually two.

One of them is that we discussed a lot of issues, we agreed on many points and disagreed on some. We went through a variety of topics, regions, initiatives and organizations. That is why I think this final narrative should serve the purpose to sum up and to emphasize the most significant advantages of regional co-operation.

My second reason is that we accentuated a lot on military issues in the field of regional co-operation. At the same time we had some presentations touching upon other points such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the poverty and disparity as factors for insecurity in some regions. We also talked about negotiations, building bridges and looking for peaceful settlement of conflicts. This means that we did not undertake a purely military approach to global and regional security, but a broad one, which engages many more aspects than those specifically dedicated to national armed forces and defence policies.

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For these two reasons I will structure my presentation onto three basic pillars of regional co-operation.

So, what is regional co-operation about?

2. ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION

Let me start by saying the well-known truth that states with high living standard tend to fight less than those with low welfare. For this reason the development of economy and trade is of utmost importance. Interstate co-operation in this respect could be very useful in several aspects.

First, nations could co-operate for better connectivity in terms of transportation and communication. Business needs suitable infrastructure and if a well-built railroad in one country is not linked with a railroad in its neighbouring country, it becomes totally useless for export purposes. If a tourist knows that he/she will not be able to travel comfortably, one would probably choose another destination. States should put a lot of effort in establishing connectivity not only within their boundaries, but together with all their neighbours.

We, on the Balkans, for many years had not developed the regions in close vicinity to the boundaries due to certain ethnic problems. As a result the population in these areas lives in worse conditions than the one inside our states and there is no a single non-interrupted highway connecting all Balkan states with both Europe and Asia. This is a huge impediment for business and tourism and we have recently invested a lot of money and effort trying to overcome this shortfall. Improving our transport corridors, we hope to become better off and change the whole perception for our region from one being tormented by conflicts to a one based on mutual understanding and stability.

Then, and it comes as a second point, states could negotiate either bilaterally or multilaterally for different types of trade agreements in order to facilitate their economic relations. Isolation in economy is the first step to poverty. We can observe the positive effects of the internal market in the European Union for the development of its economy and trade. As far as I know, the EU is a major economic power in the world without being the biggest one in terms of population, resources and area. No single European country could have won one of the first places in world economy without the free movement of people, goods, capital and services, which form the basis of our regional co-operation and integration.

A third aspect of economic co-operation is the construction of diversified pipelines, which ensure the security of supply of gas and oil in any situation. I remember the energy crisis in 2009, when Russia decided to stop the gas influx to Europe because of a dispute it had with Ukraine as a transit country. Many of the countries in Eastern and Central Europe, which were totally dependent at that time on Russian gas, suffered severely. Not only did they have to use their reserves and

switch to alternative energy resources, but they also lost a lot when it comes to industry and production. I hope we have learned our lesson since then and now we are more willing to search for collective solutions together with our individual efforts for obtaining energy security.

I am pretty sure that without too much brainstorming we can easily put forward other areas of economic co-operation that would certainly contribute to regional stability. And if we can summarize the issue of economic co-operation in one word, I would suggest the word **PROFIT** – not only in terms of money and welfare, but also in terms of security, which derives from the better living standard achieved through economic means.

3. CULTURE AND EDUCATION

In addition to that, regional co-operation could be also established in the field of culture and education. I am particularly fond of this aspect because it very much helps in overcoming stereotypes among nations. By the way, stereotypes are one of the greatest sources of fear and there is no nation in the world, which has no fears, especially the small countries. The question is how a state overcomes fears – by closing up, refusing communication, maybe even starting a nuclear program, which totally drains out its resources; or another approach – tries its best to understand its neighbours and maybe even exchange good practices with them.

And I will give another example coming from my region. There is an area between Bulgaria and Serbia, which once belonged to Bulgaria, but for several decades now it has been a part of Serbia. Since there lives a population of approximately 25 000 Bulgarians, to whom Serbia has recognized the right of being a national minority, sometimes Bulgarian media organize shows about these people. In the last show of that kind a journalist came to a local librarian in a town in Serbia populated with Bulgarians. I was really struck by what she said and it was basically: when in the past Bulgarians came here, they used to burn all Serbian books, later on when Serbs came they put on fire all Bulgarian books. So each time boundaries change we, as local people, have to start from the scratch.

I retell this bit of our Balkan history to reiterate how vitally important it is to be open to other nations and cultures, as well as to understand the past, but to avoid its mistakes in order to build a better future not just for our states, but for our people. My belief is that this ethnic and religious tolerance is achievable only through good education, aimed at reconciliation. I have heard that France and Germany in order to overcome their centuries-old contradictions had an initiative to write together their history books. This is a good example of how co-operation in culture and education can bring fruitful resolution to conflicts.

To sum it up in one word – regional co-operation is also about **LEARNING** and overcoming of fears.

4. DEFENCE

Since all of us here deal with defence and security, I would also like to point out a few ideas on how regional co-operation in the field of defence has a positive role for peace and stability.

We heard one of our prominent speakers here saying that NATO as an alliance has lost its *raison d'être* after the end of the Cold War, because the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact did not exist anymore. As I have the floor now, I will take the opportunity to argue that this statement was very one-sided.

NATO in our understanding is far more than a military alliance, it is in fact more of a political nature. What gathers us there, is the belief that all our societies have similar grounds for development in terms of democracy and human rights. As our German colleague pointed out a few days ago – we have common values and common interests. To some of you this may sound rather abstract. So I immediately give another example. The Alliance hasn't solved the Cyprus issue, but it has kept Greece and Turkey away from war. This is to a great extent due to the fact that they both understand their mutual obligations as NATO allies, which put political constrain to their dispute. So although NATO has not contributed to the resolution of this issue, it has certainly something to do with the avoidance of armed conflict.

Then we also have the collective defence clause, stipulated in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, meaning that an attack on one of the Allies will be considered an attack on all of them. This clause has a very strong deterrent effect. If a nation decides for any reason to use aggression against one of the Allies, it should be ready to face the counterstrike of all other Allies. And this applies to other aggressors – article 5 was invoked for the first time after Al-Qaeda's strikes on the United States in 2001.

For the small member states, like mine, this is a huge guarantee for security. And believe me, being on the Balkans, is not a very comfortable geographical position for a small state. The perspective on global geopolitics from that corner of the world is quite different from the assessment that there is no need for NATO, because the Soviet Union does not exist anymore.

Third argument in favour of our regional Alliance is the cost of defence. I completely disagree with the thesis that collective defence is more expensive than individual national defence. There are so many collective instruments in the field of military capability planning and development that we actually spend less for defence than if each of our member states had to do this on its own. So in addition to the greater guarantees for security, the Alliance costs less. This in simple terms is called effectiveness.

In order to be frank, and I intend so, I would have to say that the international community is still not effective enough when it comes to collective effort in peace support operations. For this reason some of the leading organizations in the field of

security and defence such as the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, NATO and even the European Union look for solutions aiming at better co-ordination in the planning and conduct of operations. Sometimes they use different terminology in their strategic documents, but the term Comprehensive Approach more or less encompasses the idea of streamlined co-ordination in several aspects:

- Ownership of the local population achieved through better assessment of the local needs and assistance provided according to this assessment;
- Inclusiveness in the process of rehabilitation of states, international organizations, NGOs, military and civilians, men and women;
- Co-ordination on international (strategic) and operational level among all contributors;
- Confidence-building measures in order to win the peace;
- Result-oriented activities for lasting stabilization of the conflict region.

All these aspects are a product of co-operation and we all should work for their fulfilment.

Regional co-operation in the field of security and defence has many more aspects, not just building alliances. I would like to remind the importance of arms control treaties for the cessation of the arms race during the Cold War. They were a real instrument for confidence and security building.

Nowadays, when we have great disagreements with Russia and some tend to predict that this is actually the beginning of another cold war, the arms control regime is one of the topics used to maintain dialogue and it could become the basis for relieving the pressure. The OSCE under the auspices of which these treaties function, provides the forum for discussions between the Western countries and Russia on a very hot topic like Ukraine. So this is another example of how regional co-operation can be useful for security.

So the third word that I will draw in terms of regional co-operation is building **TRUST**.

5. CONCLUSION

Even if you forget everything mentioned so far, these three points: **PROFIT**, **LEARNING** and **TRUST** should be acknowledged. To me these are the most important effects of regional co-operation.

I do not intend to go deeper into these realms. It is obvious that each country can only benefit from a constructive behaviour according to its scale and power. Major states play a role in arranging world affairs, whilst smaller ones can be effective contributors to security by taking part in different forms and initiatives of

regional character. Saying this, I might sound naïve, because the world is very far from the ideal and utopic status of total peace and we have great security concerns. However, further improvement of what we have achieved so far is a step in the right direction.

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Plamena Karaivanova has Master Degrees in International Relations and Law, as well as a Doctor of Philosophy Degree in International Law. She has been working as a government expert at the Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Bulgaria since 2003 particularly in the area of Bulgaria's integration to NATO and the European Union as well as to security and defence issues related to international organizations.

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