South Caucasus Zones of Peace

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This paper explores the transformative potential of establishing Zones of Peace or demilitarized zones in the South Caucasus as a practical conflict transformation mechanism in times of ongoing conflicts. Since the official peace negotiations are currently in a stalemate and have not achieved tangible results in the past, it is vital to start rebuilding linkages between the societies of the South Caucasus. Learning from the experiences of other countries in establishing Zones of Peace, the formation of demilitarized and integrated communities that gradually expand could precede the future peace in the South Caucasus.

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Introduction

The South Caucasus has suffered from armed conflicts since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the past 25 years, official negotiations have delivered few results, human suffering has continued, societies have grown further apart, and very little effort has been spent to advance interconnection and interdependence between the region's societies, a step necessary for conflict resolution.

Prior to the ethno-national policies of the Soviet Union followed by the post-independence nationalist politics, ethnic or religious identity was not a defining factor of the communities of the South Caucasus. Yet, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, nationalism and identity politics became the primary political instruments of attracting the support of the masses[1]. Within the last 25 years, the groups who held power have used increasingly more divisive nationalism and enemy images to mobilize society, which in turn made the conflicts increasingly intractable.

Another important factor regarding the South Caucasus is the influence of external forces, which plays a significant role in shaping the political situation inside the region. The South Caucasus continues to suffer from the collision of global interests and powers, such as Russia and the "West". Turkey backs Azerbaijan and Russia is Armenia's ally, while Georgia strives to join the NATO and the EU. These divisions contribute to a further alienation between the South Caucasus countries and societies. The seeds of a global conflict already exist in the South Caucasus. If the international community does not prioritize conflict resolution in the region, conditions are ripe for a full blown global conflict. Relations between Russia, the US, the EU, Turkey, and Iran are tense over multiple issues. New international actors, such as China and India, could positively contribute to changing the dynamics of the South Caucasus political map, complementing the role that the other global actors with entrenched interests play in the region.

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[1] For a more detailed discussion of the politcization of ethnicity in the Soviet Union and the ethnic framing of the conflicts in the South Caucasus see (Abbasov, et al. 2016).

Creating demilitarized Zones of Peace in the South Caucasus may be a unique starting point to help restore the multicultural and peaceful life of all communities in the region.

The Concept and Implementation of Zones of Peace

Zones of Peace, or "safe zones", have been designed in different formats in armed-conflict regions around the globe. They can take varying shapes ranging from maritime trade zones, nuclear free zones, or demilitarized zones. All Zones of Peace are designated territories where integrative acts are encouraged and violent acts are forbidden (Hancock and Iyer 2007).

The method is not new. Places where individuals, groups, or community members have been immune from arrest and physical attack or other types of violence have existed throughout history, from the Egyptian civilization to classical periods to Medieval Christendom (Mitchell and Nan 1997).

We have identified three models of Zones of Peace based on their endurance and quality:

- The first is the zone of negative or hazardous peace, in which peace is kept on an unstable or temporary basis by deterrence, threat, or lack of capacity or will to be involved in violent conflict. In other words, this is called "absence of war", although the probability of war stays real and tangible (Kacowicz 1998). The South Caucasus today hangs between war and negative peace.

- Another one is the zone of stable peace, in which peace is kept on a consensual and reciprocal basis. The possibility of war and violence is small. The core conditions to the development of a stable peace zone include: a) the option of changing the territorial status quo through violence is removed from national agendas; b) a nation's nonmilitary intervention in the internal affairs of another is minimal; c) the states of the zone of stable peace support economic cooperation rather than a heroic or romantic glance toward the future. Unlike negative peace, stable peace requires no violence

both within the country's borders as well as in international relations. A stable peace zone is a community of political entities that is pleased with the status quo, in which international and domestic conflicts may happen but are managed through non-violent means. (Boulding 1991)

- A third type, the pluralistic security community has expectations of peaceful change, in which members share common values and norms as well as political institutions and are deeply interdependent. The idea of a pluralistic security community is directly associated with the notion of integration. (Kacowicz 1998)

Some of the best known contemporary examples of conflicts where Zones of Peace have been successfully implemented are in Colombia, the Philippines, and Ecuador. Zones of Peace functioned to maintain inhabitants of these countries and secure them from violence neighboring these zones. Eighty-six communities were saved in a larger Zone of Peace in Ecuador and throughout the mountainous Peru-Ecuador border (Nan, et al. 2009). In these countries, Zones of Peace were proposed by a variety of actors – community members and organizations that were targeted by violent armed conflicts, civil society and grassroots peace and development organizations, or local government entities. These zones declared themselves impartial in the conflicts and requested that none of the parties in conflict should view these communities or their members as "the other".

Zones of Peace may be established in three different time frames – before, during, or after a peace agreement.

Since none of the conflicts in the South Caucasus are resolved, we suggest focusing on experiences of implementing Zones of Peace prior to an agreement as an integral part of the peace processes.

Zones of Peace, which have a primary aim of protecting civilian populations, create policies and practices of neutrality, non-belonging, and non-alignment with any conflict party to prevent violent activities from happening within the Zones of Peace. Zones of Peace might also be set up on humanitarian grounds during both the intra and inter-state conflicts (Hancock and Iyer 2007).

Experiences in the South Caucasus and Looking Ahead

Safe areas, or demilitarized Zones of Peace for the people living in the South Caucasus, can be implemented prior to reaching comprehensive peace agreements in the region. The South Caucasus already has some experience with such zones. The market of Sadakhlo, with its trans-border trade community on the Armenian-Georgian border, used to be a self-spurred contact zone for Azerbaijanis and Armenians, while Georgians met people from Abkhazia and South Ossetia at Zugdidi and Ergneti markets, respectively. Tbilisi and Moscow, where Armenians and Azerbaijanis regularly meet and cooperate, can also be considered a Zone of Peace.

Not only were the Georgian markets economically beneficial, they also enabled day-to-day communication between people from across the conflict divides, thus building confidence. These markets, however, were shut down under the pretext of fighting, smuggling, or economic unviability, although government regulation could have been a more effective way of handling the markets without damaging their peace-building potential. The Ergneti market, where Georgians and South Ossetians cooperated, functioned the longest from among the three, but it also was shut down in 2006, shortly before the escalation that culminated in the five-day war of August 2008.

Since developing full-fledged Zones of Peace, especially in areas where military escalations still take place, will take time, reopening previously existing marketplaces that allowed Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, Abkhazians, Ossetians, and others to trade across the conflict divides could allow the parties to the conflicts to build confidence before engaging in more advanced steps.

Learning from the experiences of other countries in establishing Zones of Peace, the formation of demilitarized and integrated communities that gradually expand could precede the future peace in the South Caucasus.

Since the official peace negotiations are currently in a stalemate and have not achieved tangible results in the past, it is vital to start rebuilding linkages between the societies of the South Caucasus. Mutual isolation contributes to

dehumanization and makes the progress in official negotiations impossible. In order to prevent another disastrous war in the fragile South Caucasus, it is highly important to find ways of creating safe areas for the daily communication of people in the region.

To date, the political leaders of this region have failed to find a peaceful and suitable mechanism for moving the region forward. Thus, it is time to learn from successful international experiences and translate them into effective peace processes in the South Caucasus. During ongoing conflicts around the world, Zones of Peace have been established and have helped to advance the peace processes. Similarly, Zones of Peace in the South Caucasus could be instrumental in transforming the currently existing negative peace – a "no peace and no war" situation – into a positive one. As already mentioned, these zones would create a precedent of peaceful coexistence where the parties benefit from daily interaction. The spaces can be chosen within the recognized boundaries of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, or that of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh, or partially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A tax-free system could be applied in several smaller Zones of Peace in the South Caucasus, hence encouraging international businesses and trade. The populations near the borders and lines of contact most affected by war and isolation would benefit, and they would build mutual trust and economic prosperity. The Zones of Peace can be demilitarized areas organized by the regional countries with the international community's support. The zones can have a special status, with their own laws and regulations that ensure inclusivity and local-level democracy. As a later stage, the entire South Caucasus could become a single Zone of Peace.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

EU – European Union

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization

US – United States

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