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Regional Cooperation in the South Caucasus: Good Neighbours or Distant Relatives?

By Tracey German. Farnham, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2012. x + 195 pp. £ 55.00. ISBN 978-1-4094-0721-8.

There are 2 geopolitical perceptions of the South Caucasus, which consists of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Some authors and political actors consider these 3 states as a small region comparable to other regions such as Southeast Asia—comprising the members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—or the region of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) in Latin America. Others see the South Caucasus as a more or less hostile neighborhood of 3 post-Soviet states that are linked together and to Russia by territorial conflicts. The author of this book, a political scientist at the Defence Studies Department of King's College, London, argues that although relations between the 3 states exist on different levels, the South Caucasus cannot be referred to as a real region in the political sense. Obstacles to joint regional development include not only various recent conflicts, but also profound historical differences in language, religion, and tradition. Analysis in the book focuses on the 3 countries' current political relations.

From a geographical point of view, the South Caucasus is more divided than unified. After a short introductory chapter, Chapter 2 sets out a conceptual framework and examines whether the South Caucasus corresponds to accepted theories of regions. Neither geography nor history allow a concept of "region" to be applied, although distant political actors such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the European Union (EU) would like to do so. The Black Sea Economic Cooperation is the only regional organization of which all 3 states are members. Consequently, the following chapters address the reasons for this lack of unity. Chapter 3 analyzes the relations of the 3 states to their immediate neighbors, revealing different political positions toward Russia, Turkey, and Iran, as well as toward NATO and the EU. While Armenia is trying to strike a balance between a general orientation to the West and a strategic partnership with Russia, Georgia sees itself as part of the European tradition and hence focuses on NATO and the EU. Azerbaijan, in turn, considers itself independent based on its large Caspian oil and gas reserves, simultaneously entertaining an economic partnership with Russia and looking to Western European markets. Moreover, Azerbaijan is seeking regional cooperation—but not with Armenia, owing to the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Chapter 4 deals with current security challenges in the region. The various frozen conflicts are identified as main obstacles to improving the security situation, given that no state is willing to set aside its territorial claims. However, some progress has been made in environmental cooperation, in response to common problems. Chapter 5 analyzes the crucial role Russia plays in the South Caucasus. The superpower is seeking to maintain its influence on the region; while supporting Armenia, it is also pursuing economic interests in Azerbaijan. Russia's relations with Georgia were broken off after the 2008 war over South Ossetia, but there have been slight signs of a possible rapprochement in the forthcoming post-Saakashvili era. Regardless of these tensions, Russia is an important partner in foreign trade for all 3 states. The political and economic influence of Turkey and Iran is often undervalued; it is pointed out in Chapter 5 that Turkey, above all, is playing an increasingly important role in the fields of energy and communication. Chapter 6 introduces the Western organizations—NATO, the Organization of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU—as additional actors in the region and highlights their aim to strengthen efforts toward mutual understanding and toward mitigating ongoing conflicts. More than the other political actors analyzed, these Western organizations are interested in seeing the South Caucasus evolve into a political region.

The book is based on a broad overview of the literature and on interviews with several actors in the region. It offers a highly systematic survey, considering not only existing cooperations between the 3 states, but also opportunities for future political consolidation, as well as the 3 countries' relationships to other political actors in the region and beyond. It is well written and clearly structured. Nevertheless, while the book is of great help in gaining a better understanding of regional problems, the political—or, rather, geopolitical—view it offers does not distinguish between political opinions and actions playing out in the 3 capitals, on the one hand, and the local situation in remote areas, including mountain areas, on the other.

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