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THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN ENSURING SECURITY IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of international organizations in ensuring security in the South Caucasus amidst contemporary challenges. By examining the involvement of entities like the OSCE, UN, EU, NATO, and CSTO, the research evaluates their contributions to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and regional stability. The study contributes to the existing literature by providing a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted roles played by these organizations in the South Caucasus. It highlights the successes and limitations of their efforts in addressing regional conflicts, thereby offering valuable insights into the complexities of international interventions in conflict-prone areas. The results indicate that while the OSCE, through its Minsk Group, has played a pivotal role in mediation, it has faced criticism for slow progress and perceived biases. The UN's broader mandate has allowed for comprehensive peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts, yet its resolutions often face implementation challenges. The EU's diplomatic and financial initiatives promote stability but are sometimes viewed as insufficient. NATO and CSTO's rivalry further complicates the security dynamics, with each organization vying for influence, impacting the region's geopolitical stability.

Key words: South Caucasus, International Organizations, OSCE, UN, EU, NATO, CSTO, Conflict Resolution.

Introduction. The South Caucasus region remains a hotspot of geopolitical tension and conflict. The region is characterized by unresolved territorial disputes, ethnic conflicts, and the strategic interests of global powers. The region faces challenges from Russia's influence and the presence of international organizations such as the OSCE, UN, and EU, along with alliances like NATO and CSTO, reflecting the complex security dynamics where local conflicts have broader implications for regional stability and international relations.

In this regard, **the study aims to** analyze the role of international organizations in ensuring security in the South Caucasus amidst contemporary challenges and it seeks to evaluate how these organizations contribute to conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and stability in the region.

The study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a comprehensive overview of the multifaceted roles played by international organizations in the South Caucasus. It highlights the successes and limitations of these organizations in addressing regional conflicts.

The research adopts a **qualitative methodology**, utilizing both primary and secondary sources. It involves a systematic review of relevant literature, including scholarly articles, reports from international organizations, and policy documents. Additionally, comparative analysis is employed to assess the effectiveness of various international organizations in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts in the South Caucasus.

Theoretical and Conceptual Approaches to Understanding Security

Security refers to protection against harm, danger, or threats, encompassing physical and digital safeguards, and achieved through systems, protocols, and policies (Buzan, 1997, p. 12; Hughes & Lai, 2010, p. 23). In theoretical terms, 'security' focuses on preventing deliberate harm (e.g., theft, cyberattacks), while 'safety' pertains to preventing accidental harm (e.g., natural disasters, workplace injuries) (Buzan, 1997, p. 14).

In international relations, security encompasses measures to protect state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interests, addressing military and non-military dimensions like political, economic, and environmental factors (Hughes & Lai, 2010, p. 25). It involves managing risks such as terrorism, interstate conflicts, and cyberattacks, while fostering cooperation on global challenges like climate change and pandemics (Buzan, 1997, p. 15). Security remains central to state foreign policies and international relations research.

Security encompasses various levels, each addressing specific threats and protective measures. *Physical security* focuses on safeguarding buildings, infrastructure, and individuals through systems like access control and surveillance. *Information security*, including cybersecurity, protects digital assets such as data and networks via encryption and intrusion detection. *Operational security* ensures the protection of supply chains and critical infrastructure through risk assessment and crisis management. *National security* defends a country's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and citizen safety through military, intelligence, and law enforcement efforts. *Human security* prioritizes individuals' physical safety, economic stability, and social welfare through healthcare, education, and social programs. *Environmental security* targets threats to the natural environment, including climate change and pollution, using conservation and sustainable development strategies. Finally, *economic security* safeguards financial systems and economies against crises and instability through trade and monetary policies (Lipschutz, 2011, pp. 25–26).

In our research, it is evident that within the field of international relations, particular emphasis is placed on security levels such as national security, information security, environmental security, and economic security. National security pertains to the protection of a nation's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the safety of its citizens from both external and internal threats. This encompasses a broad spectrum of activities, including military defense, intelligence gathering, economic stability, and social cohesion. National security can be defined as the safeguarding of a state's political, economic, and social stability against internal and external threats. These threats can originate from various sources, including terrorism, cyberattacks, economic instability, natural disasters, and geopolitical competition. National security is a complex and multifaceted concept, and its definition can vary depending on the country and historical context in which it is used (Qasimov & Nağıyev, 2015, p. 27).

International Organizations and Security Stabilization in the South Caucasus. International organizations contribute significantly to the development and adherence to norms and legal frameworks that guide conflict resolution. They play a crucial role in shaping international humanitarian law, human rights standards, and principles for conflict prevention and resolution. Through treaties, conventions, and resolutions, these organizations establish rules and mechanisms to address regional conflicts, hold war criminals accountable, and promote peaceful coexistence. These norms provide a foundation for negotiations, set standards for diplomatic conduct, and shape the expectations of the international community (Gürbüz, 2019, pp. 7–10).

OSCE

The South Caucasus is a focal point for international organizations like the OSCE, which has been actively involved in regional conflict resolution since the 1990s. The OSCE employs a comprehensive security approach, addressing political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions, alongside a cooperative security strategy that emphasizes collaboration among all parties. Its conflict prevention efforts focus on addressing emerging conflicts swiftly and peacefully. The OSCE has facilitated dialogue in key conflicts, including Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. While its efforts have been instrumental, the organization has faced criticism for slow responses and limited success in achieving comprehensive settlements, particularly from Azerbaijan and Armenia. Despite these challenges, the OSCE remains a crucial actor in promoting peace and stability in the region.

Beyond conflict resolution, the OSCE promotes human rights, democracy, economic development, humanitarian aid, and environmental protection in the South Caucasus. Its conflict resolution efforts

include mediation and negotiations through mechanisms like the Minsk Group, promoting peaceful resolutions grounded in dialogue, international law, and territorial integrity. The OSCE implements confidence-building measures, such as monitoring ceasefire agreements and investigating violations, while conducting monitoring missions to observe and report on conflict zones. Additionally, it provides humanitarian aid, facilitates the return of displaced persons, and supports post-conflict reconstruction. By engaging with governments, civil society, and regional actors, the OSCE fosters inclusive dialogue and participation in resolving regional conflicts (Demir, 2018).

The OSCE, through its Minsk Group established in 1992, has been a key mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, promoting dialogue between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, the Minsk Group facilitated numerous negotiations aimed at peaceful resolution, emphasizing principles like non-use of force, territorial integrity, and self-determination (Barutcu, 2012). The OSCE also implemented monitoring mechanisms to oversee the ceasefire and reduce tensions along the contact line and borders (AzVision, 2013). While maintaining diplomatic channels, the OSCE's role has depended on the willingness of the parties to engage and implement solutions.

Following the Second Karabakh War and the 2023 operations, Azerbaijan has criticized the Minsk Group's effectiveness, calling for its dissolution and a new conflict resolution format. The government argues that the Minsk Group failed to achieve a peaceful resolution over 30 years and perceives it as biased, citing its lack of condemnation of Armenia's occupation (Bayramlı, 2022). Azerbaijan also deems the Minsk Group outdated, asserting that the conflict's resolution through military operations rendered its role irrelevant. While countries like the U.S. and France urge continued cooperation with the Minsk Group, others, such as Russia, support Azerbaijan's call for a new framework (Gurbanova, 2022, pp. 49–50).

UN

The United Nations (UN) plays a significant role in providing humanitarian aid and fostering recovery in the South Caucasus, particularly in conflict-affected areas. During the 1990s, UN agencies, including the World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), delivered emergency food, medical aid, and shelter materials to internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) ensured legal protection for IDPs, while the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) supported demining operations and conducted awareness campaigns on landmine risks in the region (Yüksel & Yüce, 2022, pp. 1024–1025; TASS, 2020).

The UN Security Council (UNSC) has been instrumental in addressing conflicts in the South Caucasus. In the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, UNSC resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884 (1993) called for a cessation of hostilities, respect for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, and the return of displaced persons. The UNSC also endorsed the OSCE Minsk Group's mediation efforts and emphasized the need for peaceful dialogue, confidence-building measures, and regional cooperation.

The UNSC has further contributed to conflict management through peacekeeping initiatives, such as the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), which monitored the Abkhazia conflict from 1993 to 2009, promoting stability and dialogue during its mandate (Coppieters, 2014). Additionally, the UNSC has stressed the importance of normalizing relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan, advancing economic cooperation, and fostering regional integration as pathways to peace and stability.

EU

The European Union (EU) actively engages in resolving South Caucasus conflicts, including the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, by promoting diplomacy, mediation, and peaceful negotiations. Since the early 1990s, the EU has supported dialogue between conflicting parties and provided platforms

for engagement. After the 2020 Second Karabakh War, the EU intensified its efforts, offering humanitarian aid, advocating for refugee and IDP return, and discussing demilitarization and border demarcation plans for the Karabakh region (Paşkin, 2023). However, the relevance of these discussions waned following recent military developments.

The EU's involvement is driven by its commitment to humanitarian principles and the need to address the war's humanitarian crisis. Additionally, the war highlighted broader security concerns for the EU, given the region's role as a transit route for energy resources and transportation. Ensuring stability aligns with the EU's energy diversification and connectivity strategies. The EU also seeks to assert itself as a key regional actor, using the conflict to showcase its conflict-resolution capabilities and strengthen its geopolitical influence.

Long-term, the EU aims to foster regional integration and cooperation among South Caucasus countries, promoting dialogue, trust, and economic partnerships. Initiatives such as the deployment of a civilian monitoring mission to the Armenia-Azerbaijan border underscore its commitment to stability (Paşkin, 2023). Additionally, the trilateral Brussels talks on May 14, 2023, reinstated the Brussels format for negotiations. During these talks, Pashinyan officially recognized Karabakh as part of Azerbaijan's territory, signaling progress under EU mediation (Ordahallı, 2023).

Comparison

As a comparison, Table 1 highlights the differences and similarities among three international organizations – OSCE, UN, and EU – involved in the resolution of regional conflicts in the South Caucasus.

Table 1

Comparison of OSCE, UN and EU participation in Regional Conflict Resolution

Aspect	OSCE	UN	EU
Mandate	Focuses on security, conflict prevention and resolution.	It has a broader mandate covering peace, security and development.	First of all, it focuses on political and economic unity.
The role of conflict resolution	Serves as a mediator in peace processes.	Acts as a mediator and provides peacekeeping operations.	Emphasizes conflict prevention and diplomatic dialogue.
Special mechanisms	Minsk group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict	Various specialized agencies and peacekeeping operations	European Neighborhood Policy and Special Envoys
Membership	It consists of 57 participating states.	193 member states are members.	There are 27 member states.
Recruitment process	Consensus decision-making among participating states	General Assembly (one vote per member state)	Adoption of supranational decisions with the participation of member states
Sanctions	Limited ability to impose economic or political sanctions	It can impose sanctions with the resolutions of the Security Council.	It has the ability to impose economic sanctions.
Peacekeeping operations	Conducts monitoring missions and deploys observers.	Deploys peacekeeping forces.	Financially supports peacekeeping missions.
Material resources	It is financed by the contributions of the participating states.	It is financed by assessed contributions from member states.	It is financed by the EU budget and contributions from member states.
Humanitarian aid	It supports humanitarian efforts in conflict-affected areas.	Provides humanitarian aid.	Provides humanitarian aid and development assistance.
Regional integration	It promotes regional cooperation and dialogue.	Participates in regional cooperation initiatives.	It contributes to regional integration and economic cooperation.

When applying the table to the South Caucasus, we see that the OSCE's focus on security, conflict prevention, and resolution is crucial for a region plagued by protracted conflicts and security issues. The UN's broader mandate encompassing peace, security, and development allows for a comprehensive approach to the complex problems in the South Caucasus. The EU's emphasis on political and economic integration aligns with the region's aspirations for stability, cooperation, and regional development.

The OSCE, UN, and EU have played significant roles in addressing conflicts and promoting stability in the South Caucasus. The OSCE's Minsk Group has been pivotal in facilitating negotiations for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, while the UN has contributed to peace processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU, through initiatives like the European Neighbourhood Policy, has fostered dialogue and regional integration. South Caucasus countries – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia – actively participate in these organizations to shape regional security efforts. The OSCE's consensus-based decision-making and the UN General Assembly's equal representation provide platforms for these nations to address regional issues. Georgia's EU membership aspirations further enhance dialogue on regional problems. While the OSCE's capacity to impose sanctions is limited, the UN Security Council has employed sanctions in conflicts like Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Nunner, 2016, pp. 29–30). The EU, with its ability to implement economic sanctions, influences regional dynamics and promotes adherence to international norms.

The Rivalry Between CSTO and NATO in the Security System of the South Caucasus *CSTO*

In addition to the organizations discussed in the previous section, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is also relevant to regional conflicts in the South Caucasus. The CSTO is a military alliance of six former Soviet republics – Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan – established in 1992. The CSTO has several mechanisms at its disposal to assist in conflict resolution, as outlined in Table 2.

The CSTO's approach to resolving regional conflicts in the South Caucasus has been met with varied reactions. Some countries, like Armenia, have welcomed CSTO intervention in the region. Other countries, such as Azerbaijan, have been critical of the CSTO's involvement, arguing that it is biased in favor of Armenia. The CSTO's approach to resolving regional conflicts in the South Caucasus is based on the principle of collective security.

Following the Second Karabakh War, Armenia began to view the CSTO with a renewed sense of relevance. Immediately after the war, Armenia requested the CSTO to intervene in Nagorno-Karabakh. However, the CSTO declined, citing that Nagorno-Karabakh is an internal territory of Azerbaijan and that there was no formal request from Azerbaijan. This decision was met with significant disappointment in Armenia and raised questions about the CSTO's commitments. Despite this disappointment,

Table 2

Mechanisms Available to the CSTO

Mechanism	Explanation
Peacekeeping Forces	CSTO has peacekeeping forces that can be deployed to help resolve conflicts. Peacekeeping forces of the CSTO have not been officially deployed in the region yet.
Military Trainings	The CSTO conducts regular military exercises to be prepared to prevent foreign military aggression. CSTO military exercises help to improve mutual coordination of CSTO soldiers, as well as to prevent aggression from outside powers.
Military Sanctions	CSTO can impose military sanctions against countries involved in conflicts. Although the CSTO exerted diplomatic pressure on Armenia and Azerbaijan in the past in order to put pressure on them to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, they did not resort to any concrete military sanctions.

Armenia remains committed to the CSTO. However, Armenia is also seeking to diversify its security options. In recent years, Armenia has strengthened its relations with Iran. Consequently, the CSTO is no longer as critical for Armenia as it once was. The Pashinyan administration is even considering withdrawing from the organization (Kaleji, 2024).

NATO

Another international organization with significant influence on regional conflicts in the South Caucasus is NATO. Traditionally associated with security dynamics in the Euro-Atlantic region, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) engages in the South Caucasus primarily through the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program, which aims to develop cooperation and dialogue with non-member countries. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia are participants in this program. Through PfP, NATO engages with these countries in political consultations, military cooperation, joint exercises, and capacity-building initiatives. This partnership provides a platform for addressing security challenges and conflict resolution in the region.

NATO emphasizes the necessity of conflict prevention and crisis management in the South Caucasus. It seeks to promote stability and security by addressing the root causes of conflicts and providing assistance during crisis situations. NATO supports dialogue, diplomatic efforts, and confidence-building measures among regional countries to prevent escalation and promote peaceful resolutions. To enhance regional stability, NATO collaborates with South Caucasus countries to improve their defense capabilities. This collaboration includes training programs, military education, defense reforms, and interoperability efforts (Cornell & others, 2004). NATO's assistance helps strengthen the defense institutions and capacities of South Caucasus countries, contributing to their ability to manage conflicts and maintain security. In consideration of the security challenges in the region, NATO cooperates with South Caucasus countries in combating terrorism and preventing the proliferation of weapons. This partnership aims to tackle transnational threats, enhance border security, and prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction. NATO's expertise and support in these areas contribute to regional security and stability (Priego, 2008).

NATO promotes regional cooperation with South Caucasus countries and other neighboring states. This includes initiatives aimed at fostering dialogue, economic integration, and cooperative security measures. NATO's support for regional cooperation helps strengthen trust, build relationships, and collectively address common challenges, which can contribute to resolving regional conflicts.

In summary, NATO's involvement in the South Caucasus reflects its commitment to regional security, stability, and conflict resolution. Through the Partnership for Peace program, security cooperation, conflict prevention efforts, and regional initiatives, NATO aims to contribute to the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the South Caucasus (Həsənova, 2017). By promoting dialogue, supporting confidence-building measures, enhancing defense capabilities, and assisting in crisis management, NATO plays a role in resolving regional conflicts and strengthening cooperation among South Caucasus countries. NATO's continued engagement is essential for supporting lasting peace, stability, and reconciliation in the region.

The Rivalry

The CSTO-NATO rivalry in the South Caucasus arises from competing geopolitical interests. The CSTO, led by Russia, seeks to maintain influence over former Soviet republics, aligning them with Russian strategic goals. NATO, representing Western interests, promotes stability, democracy, and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. This ideological divide drives their competition for influence in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, offering contrasting security guarantees and economic incentives.

Both organizations employ diverse strategies. The CSTO emphasizes military alliances, joint exercises, and political pressure, while NATO engages through its Partnership for Peace program, fostering cooperation, training, and capacity-building. Each uses diplomatic channels to promote their

security frameworks, with the CSTO prioritizing collective security under Russian leadership and NATO advocating cooperative security and democratic governance.

Support for these blocs is split along geopolitical lines. The CSTO is backed by Russia and regional allies like Belarus and Kazakhstan, while NATO is supported by the U.S. and EU member states promoting Western integration. This external backing intensifies the rivalry, pushing South Caucasus nations to navigate complex pressures by balancing relationships with both.

This competition risks further polarizing the region, complicating conflict resolution and creating a fragmented security landscape. Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia may adopt flexible alignments to maximize benefits, but ongoing CSTO-NATO engagement is likely to exacerbate divisions and hinder long-term regional stability.

Conclusion. International organizations play distinct roles in South Caucasus security. The OSCE's Minsk Group focuses on mediation and confidence-building in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict but faces criticism for slow progress and perceived bias, particularly from Azerbaijan. The UN addresses peacekeeping, humanitarian aid, and long-term stability but struggles with resolution implementation. The EU emphasizes diplomacy, economic cooperation, and humanitarian aid, though its efforts are sometimes seen as insufficient in fast-changing situations. NATO and CSTO engage in military cooperation and collective security, but their rivalry complicates regional dynamics and conflict resolution.

Persistent territorial disputes, ethnic conflicts, and global power competition create a volatile environment requiring a comprehensive security approach. Effective conflict resolution demands integration of military, political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Collaboration and coordination among international organizations are crucial, as their interplay can either enhance or hinder overall effectiveness.

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