

**THE SOUTH-EAST EUROPE
CO-OPERATION PROCESS:
AN UNSPECTACULAR, INDIGENOUS REGIONAL CO-OPERATION SCHEME
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**A BRIEF HISTORY:
FROM RANDOM MEETINGS TOWARDS AN INSTITUTION**

With the ending of the Cold War, regions situated on the fault lines of the old blocks witnessed a proliferation of regional co-operation initiatives. To name a few in or close to the region: the Black Sea Economic Co-operation Organisation, the Central European Initiative, SECI (South-east Europe Co-operation Initiative), and last but not the least, the Stability Pact for Southeast Europe. Trilateral or quadrilateral ad hoc arrangements, formed according to political convenience can be added to this list. The Balkan region (nowadays somewhat euphemistically called South-east Europe) could not stay behind this development and indeed, it is chronologically the first. With the first signs of the Cold War ending, the yearly meetings of the ministers of foreign affairs started (Belgrade 1988, Tirana 1990), but these were inevitably interrupted during the Bosnian War. It became necessary to wait until the summer of 1996 for the Sofia Meeting (devoted to inviting the EU to provide assistance to the region) followed by the Salonika and Istanbul meetings. The Salonika Declaration of the ministers was a major step towards the formalisation or the institutionalisation of an indigenous process of co-operation and good neighbourly relations. Greece, Turkey, the FRY, Albania and Macedonia strongly supported the further institutional development of the process. Bulgaria and Romania, while supporting closer Balkan co-operation were rather cool towards institutionalisation.

The Declaration set forth, besides the traditional areas of co-operation, several ideas that were in many respects a novelty for intra-Balkan relations, such as the strengthening of political co-operation, including security matters. The Declaration also tasked the Political Directors to meet regularly and to prepare proposals for the institutionalisation of the co-operation process. Although not mentioned in the Declaration itself, Greece invited a few months later (November 1997) the heads of state and governments of the Salonika participants (Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), Macedonia, Romania and Turkey) with the addition of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia as observers, for an informal meeting in Crete. Despite its informal character, or maybe thanks to it, this meeting proved to be very useful for starting high-level consultations as a group, as well as for bilateral dialogues between the leaders, such as the talks between the Greek and Turkish prime ministers, Mesut Yılmaz and Costas Simitis, and between Milosevic and Fatos Nano of Albania.

Another important aspect was that the leaders, while considering the Greek idea for the establishment of a permanent secretariat (with its headquarters in Salonika) premature, asked the ministers to continue the examination of the institutional aspects and report their findings. The holding of regular meetings between the leaders and the foreign ministers was also decided upon. In accordance of the then unwritten rule of rotation, Turkey hosted the ministerial meeting in Istanbul (8-9 June 1998) and the summit meeting in Antalya the same year (12-13 October). Both meetings were held under the shadow of the impending Kosovo

crisis. The ministers invited the FRY and the Kosovo Albanians to enter a dialogue to work out a solution based on the twin principles of territorial integrity and autonomy. Although they could not convince the FRY's Foreign Minister, Zivadin Jovanovic, to accept the insertion in the final Declaration of a paragraph in this sense, the meeting nevertheless provided a good opportunity to express unequivocally their views on a question seriously affecting peace and stability in the region. Obviously, it was an opportunity lost for the FRY to rally the regional countries behind reasonable positions.

In the same respect, the Antalya Summit was more successful, since on the second day, Minister Jovanovic accepted the insertion of such a paragraph following the agreement concluded the same day with Ambassador Holbrooke under the threat of NATO force.

Turkey informally presented to the Antalya Summit Meeting a draft for the 'Charter on Good Neighbourly Relations and Co-operation', which was later finalised and adopted at the Bucharest meeting of leaders in November 1998.

The Charter is an important step towards the institutionalisation of the Process. It regularises the periodical meetings, creates the Committee of Political Directors and defines the areas of co-operation into groups similar to the OSCE main documents. It is, in fact, an elaborate compendium of principles and rules of conduct and its adoption by the leaders means the de facto establishment of a regional organisation.

THE SOUTH-EAST EUROPE CO-OPERATION PROCESS (SEECP) AND THE NEW INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Obviously, such multilateral co-operation schemes in the Balkans are not new. The 1934 Balkan Pact, conceived essentially as a joint defence initiative against German expansionism, is a well-known example. Although the Pact's activities slowly extended into other areas, the exclusion of some its natural members, interference from the major European powers and, even more importantly, the emergence of confrontational camps before the Second World War, stopped its full development. Conditions in the early 1990s were completely different and they offered those Balkan states not involved in the Yugoslav wars or other territorial disputes immense possibilities to further good relations and regional co-operation. The collapse of communism and its political, military and economic structures, left the West (the USA and the European Union) as an unchallenged power centre which offered prospects for economic and social development, as well as security. However, the new democratic regimes, had to face a very difficult adaptation process that had only just started. In Bulgaria, a reformed socialist party with dubious democratic credentials, hesitant in making its final choice was in power. The FRY was still in the process of disintegration and at odds with most of its neighbours. Relations between the south-west Balkan States (Albania, Greece and the Republic of Macedonia) were tense. Even so, a regrouping similar to the period that had preceded the Second World War was no more possible. The rules of the new political game are well defined (the UN and OSCE) and, in contrast to previous historical periods, the major powers are not in search of selective clients for narrow national interest, but of democratically oriented co-operation partners and problem-solvers. Some regional countries, therefore, considered regional co-operation arrangements to be useful tools to avoid isolation or an intermediary for rapprochement with EU and NATO.

On the domestic front, the Balkan people were supporting democracy and market oriented economies. Region-wide understanding, mutual accommodation and co-operation therefore

became natural alternatives for countries (with one notable exception) that are not involved in territorial disputes or ethnic conflicts. Although conflict and co-operation, the two contradictory concepts are the realities of the region, with the West's new approach to the region, stability and self-confidence are gradually setting in. This new atmosphere has contributed greatly to the improvement of bilateral relations. A striking example is the new era of Turkish-Bulgarian relations. It has also created an awareness of a new destiny - of interdependence for regional prosperity and security. In an age of unprecedented proliferation of information, sensational events inevitably attract media attention. If there is nothing sensational in the SEECP to publicise it, this does not detract from its value.

OBJECTIVES AND LIMITATIONS

The European Union and the US strongly support regional co-operation and this is necessary, even a precondition, for the stabilisation and then the integration of a volatile region into the Euro-Atlantic institutions". Obviously, such integration, which almost all governments in the region have declared to be a national strategic objective, cannot be achieved without major reforms in the states and changes in the people's and political élites perceptions of their neighbours. The European Union and NATO are not ordinary international organisations but their members form solid blocks of solidarity.

Unfortunately, the history of the region did not permit a tradition of coming together and mutual problem-solving to become established. There is rather a habit (thanks also to foreign interference throughout of modern history) of looking beyond borders for solutions. Advanced co-operation, let alone integration, necessitates a new outlook. There is still much to do to correct the perceptions born of the region's historical legacy and aggravated by decades of negative state propaganda. Serbia seems to be an extreme example in this respect, but it is not the only one.

SEECP as a regional co-operation arrangement can contribute substantially in this respect too if full use is made of its potential. It has not yet reached this stage of maturity. The hardships of an exceptional period of transition, as well as wars, conflicts and ethnic tensions have also hampered the full development of SEECP into a co-ordination centre for regional co-operation.¹ We also have to take into consideration the historical leftovers: various controversial issues (in particular territorial and ethnic issues), bilateral disputes and a lack of mutual confidence.

The impact of Turkish-Greek relations should be taken into account too. Both countries have vital interests in the peace, stability and development of the region. Despite their bilateral disputes and differences in their outlook towards regional issues, Greece and Turkey have carefully kept these out of the SEECP forum and they have even been able to co-operate effectively. It should be admitted that one of the reasons for the formation of trilateral and quadrilateral co-operation schemes on the sidelines (and one has to suspect that political ambitions too play a role here) is the competitive character of the Turkish-Greek relations. The new atmosphere in relations between Greece and Turkey, which have the largest and strongest economies in the region, will greatly help the development of the SEECP. (It should be noted that the Turkish economy alone is larger than the rest of the Balkan economies combined.)

An additional reason for this state of affairs might be the unintentional slowing down caused by extreme concentration of some states on their dominant strategic objective of Euro-Atlantic integration. The political élite and the peoples in general consider the EU and NATO to be virtual panaceas. However, much more can be done without deviating from these strategic objectives. The European Union has only recently started to replace its policy of dealing with regional countries individually by a more articulate regional approach. A good example to change is the Stability Pact. However, the EU's differentiating concepts (such as the 'Western Balkans'), which encourage unnecessary competition among them, are still on the agenda.

Several projects foreseen in the Process are now transferred to South-east Europe Co-operation Initiative (SECI) or the Stability Pact. Here again financial considerations may be relevant, although it is difficult to conclude that they (and not a political preference for a Western leading role) are the main concern. On such occasions, the ideal way for regional countries to proceed would have been to submit projects jointly, as the Stability Pact Co-ordinator consistently suggests, curbing the intra-regional competition or the top-down process to the maximum extent possible.

However, the outlook in this respect also is changing. During the preparatory meetings of the Stability Pact, political directors have probably achieved a first by agreeing on a joint position paper. SEECP participants were also able to co-ordinate their political actions, their assistance to Kosovo refugees and their support for NATO operations. They have formed a nucleus of a Multilateral Force, which is referred to as within the framework of the Defence Ministers meeting, to express a NATO connection. Countries increasingly perceive their security in a regional context.

INSTITUTIONAL ASPECTS AND MEMBERSHIP

The charter states, "The SEECP is open, by agreement among the participating countries, to the participation in appropriate forms to States which geographically belong to this area and declare their full adherence to the present Charter". It therefore introduces three criteria for membership, the most limitative one being the consent of the participants.

The geographical criteria too is important (SEECP could not be as liberal as the Central European Initiative (CEI) in this respect: all SEECP members, except Greece and Turkey are CEI members also) and, on this basis, a majority of the participants did not consider the Russian and Ukrainian applications as acceptable. Croatia and Bosnia, although they belong to the region by all accounts, prefer to participate as observers, for different reasons. Croatia is in fact an active participant in many respects.

The FRY, although a founding member, is at present excluded from the meetings because of its inability to fulfil its obligations regarding the Charter. Some members floated the idea of limited or restricted participation, but without success. (FRY too found it unacceptable²). The present formula used for the FRY participation in The July 14th Declaration of the Ministers is that they "reiterated the status of the FRY as a SEECP participating country, considering the FRY's chair as temporarily vacant, to be resumed as soon as conditions would allow it." It remains to see whether this apparently simple formula will be easy to implement in practice since some countries link it to the issue of succession.

Organisation wise, the Heads of State and Government will meet once every year and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs "at least once a year". The Host country chairs the meetings,

including the meetings of the Committee of Political Directors, which regularly meets thrice a year. The Committee, in a sense executive organ, has the flexibility of establishing subsidiary organs. The Charter introduced also the "troika" arrangement, which became operational during the Kosovo refugee crisis.

The SEECP has no budget and permanent secretariat. Secretarial work is assumed by the host, which means on a rotational basis. Some ideas are now floated for the formation of a small secretariat without a permanent seat, on a rotational basis.

The obvious conclusion is that the efficiency of the SEECP will depend much on the will and ability of the chairman in office to take initiatives and to make use of the various tools contained in the Charter.

PROSPECTS

While assessing the merits and efficiency of the Process, one has to be realistic: It cannot be an alternative to wider integration move, but an important supportive or complementary element. In the Charter, the leaders themselves declare their "...willingness to closely participate in, and closely co-operate with all other international organisations and regional initiatives aiming at promoting security, stability, economic and social prosperity in our area, including in particular with UN, NATO, EU, OSCE,...". To find solutions to some of the problems, like the Yugoslav question, are beyond the capability of the region itself, and these are also European problems. In the economic field too they have to look towards Europe: Among the participants there are no powerful enough economies which can pull up the rest, although the intra-regional economic activity is steadily gaining importance.

Yet, fortunately the Balkans is not solely a region of controversial issues and conflicts, but at the same time of prospects and potentials. The important point here is the gradual development of a collective understanding to the effect that several of the problems are common or are of interest for their security, stability and prosperity, such as the systemic reforms, internal and external security, minorities and ethnic issues, organised crime and border control, etc. They only can solve them and outside powers can rather help solutions. Joint approaches and a better-organised co-operation are therefore necessary. Precisely in this respect the SEECP is a valuable instrument with great potential for the future, provided that the Governments are able put into practice the declared political will and encourage their national agencies to promote direct, operational co-operation with their regional counterparts. As a welcome development, NGO's, Parliaments, and in particular private sector, and local administrations in border areas are increasingly playing an effective role. But even in its present stage of development the role of the SEECP as an institution for bringing together of the Heads of State and Governments, Ministers and of Political Directors to discuss the issues of common concern is an achievement which cannot be underestimated. After all, this is a region that passed through the ordeals of serious conflicts and experienced a long period of political and ideological divisions. It still is faced with risks and uncertainties and needs assistance. Bosnia and Kosovo examples have shown that even a forceful, direct economic and military involvement of the West cannot bring fast solutions, let alone the reconstruction of societies or political entities in turmoil. The concept of "ownership" is valid at a regional scale too. The Charter in this respect also offers wide co-operative and preventive tools.

However, it should be recognised that the primary function of the SEECP is political. Trying to channel the present, unprecedentedly active process of co-operation through the SEECP is neither necessary, nor realistic.

1 It is significant that among the 35 or so listed projects (often in competition with each other) only one, the Trade Promotion Centre, sponsored by Turkey, has (partially) materialised. Although the underlying reason is mainly a lack of financial resources, the implementation of a considerable number of projects do not necessitate important financing.

2 Obviously, none of the participants are ready to bear a FRY rhetoric against the international organisations in which they are members or aspiring to be members.