

# A Regional Security System for the Caucasus<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union the Caucasus region became the site for some of the most serious inter- and intra-state conflicts. The political elites of the newly independent states have been well aware that their security could not be considered apart from each other, and that they were confronted with a pattern of ethnic conflicts which was specific for their region.<sup>3</sup> Seen from this perspective, the Caucasus constitutes a regional formation with its own characteristics. This awareness of the regional dimension of the security problem did not lead, however, to the creation of a unitary institutional framework for the Caucasus favouring conflict settlement and regional cooperation. The failure in designing a regional security arrangement was not due to the lack of interest in the idea of Caucasian integration. Political movements in the region have developed a radical rhetoric of Caucasian unity, but with radically opposed contents. Caucasian unity has been defined in a way which may be considered as simultaneously overinclusive – the various views of Caucasian unity are generally based on a kinship relation, a cultural affinity or an alliance with nations or political forces which are external to the region – and underinclusive – the various views of unification generally exclude some of the nations and political forces from their definition of a unitary Caucasus.

Non-regional states have been mapping the Caucasus in function of their own security interests. Their priorities are defined in military, political or economic terms. Such definitions lead invariably to the inclusion of the Caucasus into a larger regional framework, generally including the Caspian states and the Central Asian region. This risks to lead to a neglect of the specific regional pattern of conflicts and of the interdependency linking the various parts of the Northern and the Southern Caucasus. These conflictual and dependency relations, which constitute a regional formation, are to be differentiated from the pattern of conflicts and interdependencies in adjacent regions. Definitions of the region in exclusively economic terms – such as the view of the Caucasus as part of a Silk Road linking European and Asian markets – stress the common interests of all Caucasus countries but fail to address the complexity of a conflictual process of regional integration, in which economic interests are not always predominant.

The lack of regional institutional arrangements favouring associative forms of security led to attempts to address the security threats through balance of power policies. All regional actors have tried to revise the existing forms of distribution of power through alliances with regional and non-regional powers. Military policies figured high in such an approach to the regional security problems. The resulting system aimed at counterbalancing dominant forces but did not exclude hegemonic types of dominance. Russia has been making use of its military preponderance in the region to build a close alliance with Armenia and to extract concessions from Georgia. It has secured a division of labour with the UN and the OSCE in their attempts to settle the secessionist conflicts of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno Karabakh. Georgian expectations of recovering its territorial integrity through cooperation with Russia have however not been met. Russia failed likewise to find acquiescence in Azerbaijan for its regional policies and mediating activities. Russia's striving to establish a hegemonic role in the Southern Caucasus has further been weakened by its lack of economic resources and by political instability in the Northern Caucasus.

In their moves to counterbalance the Russian presence in the region, Western states are taking advantage of their preponderance in economic resources and military know-how. Countries such as Georgia and Azerbaijan are presenting their attempts to cooperate more closely with Western countries as a means of increasing their leverage in the internal and external conflicts in which they are involved. Linking their own security interests to the interests of Western states – though for instance common energy policies – would in their view secure a future increase in the provision of public goods such as military support or what further seems necessary to protect their territorial integrity. Such expectations are surely effective in creating legitimacy on the domestic level. Western support to Georgia and Azerbaijan has also strengthened their bargaining power vis-à-vis

Russia. But it will be impossible, even with a significantly increased presence of Western powers in the region, to change the pattern of secessionist and ethnic conflicts in the region. The existing balance of power in the Caucasus is creating deadlock for all parties involved. Non-regional powers striving for a hegemonic role in the region are unable to deliver sufficient public goods to secure security and economic development. The lack of integration, to a large extent a consequence of their own policies in the region, is hurting their long-term economic and military interests.

The lack of progress concerning the implementation of inter-governmental agreements on the establishment of transport routes and the impossibility to lift existing economic blockades are gravely affecting the interests of the states in the region and of non-regional actors. These policies may be considered as a direct consequence of a securitization of economic policies.<sup>4</sup> A securitization of economic or political issues has the following characteristics: it tends to lead to a subordination of the interests of non-state economic and political actors to state interests. Second, a securitization of economic and political issues makes all types of negotiations difficult. It is not easy to accept a compromise solution when the basic interests or even the survival of the ethnic community or the state is declared to be at stake. Third, a securitization of a particular issue is leading to the mobilization of extraordinary resources, where economic cost-benefit calculations are subordinated to higher state interests which are not economic by nature. The securitization of economic or political issues is justifying an enhanced mobilisation of economic and human resources to the detriment of long-term economic development and political modernization.

Negotiations on a settlement of secessionist conflicts in the region has to address the question of how to desecuritize ethnicity. The Soviet ethno-federal construct was a pyramidal matrioshka-like structure of Union republics, Autonomous republics and Autonomous regions. All these entities were considered to realise a right to national self-determination for a particular "titular nation", but according to an asymmetrical and highly hierarchical pattern. The break-up of the Soviet Union has in several cases dissolved the existing links of subordination between Union republics and the political entities which were incorporated into them. The selective approach of the international community in its policies of recognition - it recognized exclusively the existence of Union republics as sovereign states - failed to find acceptance in Autonomous republics such as Chechnya and Abkhazia. The secessionist leaderships of these political entities stressed the fact that they were republics, which implies statehood. As statehood necessarily includes sovereignty they considered that they were to be treated as sovereign states. As sovereign states they further claimed that they had the right to decide autonomously if they should constitute themselves as independent states.<sup>5</sup> Autonomous regions such as Nagorno-Karabakh or South Ossetia did not find their previous status acceptable either. The leadership of the Autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh strove for reunification with Armenia, then for independent status and then as a compromise formula - as proposed at the end of the 1990s during the OSCE-led negotiations on a settlement - the status of a sovereign entity linked to Azerbaijan in a loosely structured "Common State". South Ossetia has from its side been striving for upgrading its status to that of an Autonomous republic and for reunification with North Ossetia, one of the Autonomous republics which are part of the Russian Federation.

The securitization of ethnicity achieved through the Soviet form of political modernization rendered political solutions which challenged the privileged status of the "titular nation" unacceptable. The titular nations of the former Union republics are not ready to accept a loss of control over the totality of the territory which they consider their homeland, including over subordinated political units such as the former Autonomous republics or regions. Secessionist regions refuse to accept that the previous links of double dependency - from the Soviet leadership and from the leadership of the Union republic - would be replaced by new forms of subordination to state institutions which are under the control of another "titular nation". A peace settlement which would be based on the reincorporation of the secessionist political entities on the basis of traditional hierarchical relations existing in federal states would not find legitimation among the secessionist elites. Russia, Georgia and Azerbaijan would not, from their side, agree on a confederal type of political arrangement, as this would enshrine the sovereign status of the secessionist regions and give them some kind of international recognition as sovereign entities. This would possibly lead to a full secession. No compromises seem to be possible concerning these principles. Traditional federal and confederal models have few chances of being accepted as a basis of negotiation by the parties to the conflict. The dead-lock in the

negotiations can only be overcome through the design of such a type of a "Common State" which would at the same time secure the principle of territorial integrity, the equal status of the various national communities and the implementation of non-hierarchical relations between federated states in domestic and foreign policies.

## Exploring Alternatives

The expectation that an external actor may be able to establish an absolute hegemony through a preponderance of its economic and military resources, the provision of public goods and by finding acquiescence among all regional actors may be considered as unrealistic. No hegemon may in the future be able to influence the pattern of conflicts in the Caucasus to the same degree as the Soviet Union after the invasion of Georgia in 1921. Attempts to establish a hegemonic type of relationship may only influence the distribution of power in the region. Such a situation, characterized by the absence of a dominant actor able to enforce a pattern of cooperation in an anarchic framework, does not necessarily lead to the impossibility of establishing a cooperative security framework. A similar situation existed in Europe in the 1970s, where no single hegemon was able to extend its dominance over the whole of the Eurasian continent. All states which participated in the CSCE process had sufficient incentives by their own to establish a new pattern of cooperation, independently from existing hegemonic relations.

It is not impossible that a cooperative security framework will be established in the Caucasus. Since the end of 1999, the governments of Turkey and the Southern Caucasus have been making separate proposals for a security arrangements such as a Stability Pact for the Caucasus. In their speeches to the OSCE Istanbul summit, the Armenian president Robert Kocharian and the Azeri president Heidar Aliev both advocated a South Caucasus security system that would complement the existing European security arrangements.<sup>6</sup> Kocharian also pointed out that the urgent need to create a "regional or sub-regional system of security" was due among others by the withdrawal of Azerbaijan and Georgia from the existing CIS- Agreement of Collective Security.<sup>7</sup> From the perspective of Armenia, such a new system would be helpful to avoid the difficult choice between an alliance with Russia or the West. From the perspective of Azerbaijan, the power of a single hegemon does not constitute a guarantee for peace and stability in the region. According to the Deputy Foreign Minister of Azerbaijan, Araz Azimov, the only guarantee of regional security would be the absence of a unilateral guarantor.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a regional security pact has not yet been presented in an elaborate form by any of the governments involved. Its implementation would surely depend on the negotiations taking place in the region, such as the one concerning the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh. A resolution of this conflict would bring about dramatic changes in the relations between Armenia and all neighbouring states, increasing the possibilities for new cooperative schemes to be implemented in the region. The same is true if a breakthrough could be achieved concerning Abkhazia or Chechnya. It remains difficult at the time of writing to predict the chances of success for such negotiations. Diplomats dealing with the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan repeatedly announced in 1999 a breakthrough, without, however, producing any positive results which could be presented to the public. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the appeals made simultaneously by the governments of Azerbaijan and Armenia for a new regional security arrangement do however, demonstrate that the dead-lock in the negotiations has led to a mutually hurting stalemate. This may be considered as a sign that both sides are aware of the need for productive negotiations. It also shows that the parties involved in this conflict are conscious of the fact that an institutional settlement of such a conflict, which is regarded by one of the parties (Armenia) as an intra-state and by the other (Azerbaijan) as an inter-state conflict, requires that such differences are subsumed under an overarching institutional device.

It is not the intention of this article to design concrete mechanisms for a regional stability pact or a regional security organisation. It may suffice to sketch some main principles which would facilitate its effectiveness, taking into account the explanatory factors of the failure of the present forms of integration. A regional security institution for the Caucasus would have to be based on the principles of associative security arrangements.<sup>9</sup> Such a rule-based form of interaction has to favour a climate of dialogue and cooperation, and facilitate communication concerning threat perceptions and transparency concerning the military policies

of individual states. This kind of arrangement does not necessarily have to aim at replacing regional alliances but rather to integrate them and to constrain their destabilising potential. This could be made possible through a close trilateral cooperation between the three powers with hegemonic ambitions in the region (Russia, the EU and the US) in delivering public goods such as technical assistance, financial support and in facilitating it through security organisations such as the CIS or the OSCE - the work of peace keeping forces.<sup>10</sup> Their cooperation would be based on the fact that their main interests, though competitive, are not necessarily divergent. Their failure to act in common would indeed carry the danger of even more serious confrontations in the region, which are detrimental to all.

This form of integrating the three would-be hegemonies in a local regional arrangement means that the present system of balance of power, which is to be considered an important impediment to integration, has progressively to be transformed - due to the strength of the cooperative security arrangement - into a system where the creation of alliances addressed against the one or the other party would progressively recede into the background. The same would be true concerning the use and the threat of the use of force or the refusal to agree on forms of co-operation which entail the risk of bringing greater profit to the opposite party than to oneself. A security organisation such as NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC), whose self-declaratory aim is to overcome the cold-war system of a balance of power but which is presently used in the Caucasus region in a complex system of alliance-building, would have to develop activities which are more in line with its political rhetorics. A similar transformation would have to take place in the CIS, which is at present mainly used in the region by Russia to counterbalance Western influence and by Georgia to drive a wedge between Moscow and the secessionist government of Sukhumi.

A regional organisation or stability pact which would encompass the Southern Caucasus without integrating Russia would lead to the inverse consequences of those depicted above: instead of transforming the present regional organisations away from a balance of power logic, it would subsume the non-confrontational logic of a stability pact or regional organisation under the present logic of alliance building. A regional security arrangement would - in order to avoid similar consequences - further have to encompass Iran which is as yet no part of present security institutions present in the region. After its failure to mediate in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict,<sup>11</sup> Iran had played, through its open support for Armenia, a significant role in the relations between Azerbaijan, Armenia and Turkey.

Regional and non-regional actors have defined the Caucasus region according to different cultural or even civilisational contents. A regional security arrangement which would be based on the same values and principles as the OSCE would be able to overcome these divisions, as has already been the case for the OSCE itself. This organisation includes among its member-states countries with very different political traditions such as Denmark and Kazakhstan. The capacity of the OSCE to operate with universal values and to implement them in concrete policies, such as the monitoring of elections, demonstrates that it should not be too difficult to overcome the risk for "civilizational clashes" in the Caucasus.

Regional and non-regional actors do not attach the same significance to their military, political or economic interests in the Caucasus. The European Union has developed support programmes in the fields of communications and infrastructure. Energy security for an enlarged European Union and democratization of state structures belong to its long term objectives. In so far as their military interests are concerned, the EU Member states defend very different policies. Some are actively engaged in military cooperation activities or send military observers to hot spots such as Abkhazia,<sup>12</sup> whereas others are entirely absent from the region. The European Union does not presently play any role in this regard. Russia has taken a great interest in the military dimension of national security. Such differences between the priorities set by the various actors do not facilitate their cooperation. They can, however, be overcome by relatively traditional methods. Those who negotiated the functioning of the CSCE in the beginning of the 1970s were confronted with a similar problem. Not all participating states attached the same importance to the human rights dimension of European security or to the international recognition of post-war borders. The use of different baskets has been very useful to avoid a stalemate in defining priorities and to facilitate simultaneous progress in different security dimensions. Such a system should preferably be included in a regional security arrangement.

A solution concerning the political status of secessionist regions would inevitably lead to the lifting of economic blockades – which directly or indirectly affect the interests of all countries in the region – and to agreements concerning the establishment of new transport routes. The institutionalisation of a security dialogue in a cooperative framework would lead to a desecuritization of some political and economic issues which are presently highly securitized. The extraordinary material and political means which are presently mobilized to enhance the individual security of the regional actors could be used for economic development purposes. The desecuritization of political life could lead to a different type of agenda-setting at the governmental level, facilitating political democratization and modernization. The desecuritization of economic and political life would also enforce the position of non-state actors – such as economic actors or NGO's with political objectives – in the integration process.

The conception of shared sovereignty has not found acceptance among the political elites in the Southern Caucasus. These countries are all based on the Soviet tradition of a "titular nation" exercising exclusive privileges over a particular multi-ethnic territory. The failed attempts of former Autonomous republics to find recognition for their statehood and of former Autonomous regions to upgrade their political status, and the refusal of former Union republics to have the principle of equality being included in an agreement with secessionist republics has led to a stalemate in the negotiations. It is surely difficult to find a compromise concerning such questions in an international order in which sovereignty is still considered to be the cornerstone of independent statehood. There have been various moves to create regional organisations which were primarily to include non-recognized states and unofficial movements. The Abkhaz secessionists have for instance stressed the need for pan-regional initiatives in the Caucasus. This would strengthen their position in relation to Georgia.<sup>13</sup> The military support received by the Abkhaz side from paramilitary troops of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus during the 1992-93 war was highly significant, even if it is not probable that such a type of military alliance may ever be repeated in the future. On 21 May 1999, the Abkhaz parliament requested the Parliamentary Assembly of the Russo-Belarusian Union to be granted the status of an observer, just as this had already been granted to Yugoslavia and Armenia.<sup>14</sup> This represented for Abkhazia one more attempt to achieve a certain form of recognition by the outside world. But it is unlikely that such initiatives will lead progressively to a full recognition of Abkhazia's independent statehood.

Initiatives in which exclusively non-recognized states or movements would take part do not have more chances of success in favouring integration than regional organisations in which only central governments of recognized states would participate. Both types of organisations exclude a cooperative framework with political actors whose actions are perceived as a threat for the own security. The alternative to such attempts is constituted by organisations where various levels of governance and various types of political entities are fully represented. The linkage of a peace settlement to the creation of a type of regional organisation which, contrary to the OSCE and other traditional forms of regional institutions, would include the governments and/or parliaments of unitary states, federal governments and of federated states or of other self-governing political units would indeed constitute a way out of this deadlock.

Such an option should not be considered as utopian. Both the Nordic Council and the British-Irish Council are organisations of this type. The Nordic Council was set up in 1952 to foster co-operation between Denmark, its autonomous territories the Faeroes and Greenland, Finland, its autonomous Swedish-speaking Aland Islands, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.<sup>15</sup> The characteristics of the British-Irish Council (BIC) are particularly interesting for the Caucasus. This model includes a prominent security dimension which is largely absent from the Nordic Council. The British-Irish Council (BIC) has been established in the framework of the Good Friday Agreements of April 1998 on Northern Ireland.<sup>16</sup> The BIC allows direct co-operation between such entities as Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, the Channel Isles, the Isle of Man and the governments of Ireland and Britain. It is also called "Council of the Isles", a title which is less state-centred as the other name, but which has the disadvantage of being strongly reminiscent of the British state before the creation of the Irish Free State. The inclusion of the BIC in the Good Friday agreement was fundamental for the Northern Irish Unionists acceptance of the package deal. It was intended to supersede the North-South institutional links between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with East-West links between the Republic of Ireland and the United Kingdom. The first meeting of the BIC took place after the establishment

of a coalition government in Northern Ireland in 1999. All the actors involved are free to develop institutional links among each other. The BIC goes beyond consultation between the partners into the possibility of 'joint-decision making' on matters of mutual interest, such as economics, politics and culture.

It is interesting to note that such a type of institution is not only expanding the scope of possibilities for non-sovereign political entities to develop foreign policy making but is also suited to opposing political movements.<sup>17</sup> For British patriots, the inclusion of such a form of devolution into the political modernization of the British state institutions constitutes an instrument to renew and strengthen the unity of the nation. For the Scottish nationalists of the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP), who are convinced of the fact that independent nation states are best placed to interrelate with each other, it is a possible future instrument to develop autonomous foreign policies, once they are part of the Scottish government. The SNP wishes to cultivate 'Celtic' links between Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Scotland and Northern Ireland may also fashion working relations independently from London - which would be welcomed by the SNP - or Dublin - which is favoured by the Unionists. The BIC may create room for competing national heritages. Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland cultivate Celtic identity, shared by Scotland, Wales and Ireland, whereas the Unionists may strive for closer cultural and historic links with Scotland (such as the intellectual flowering in both regions in the 18th century).

The fact that it had been possible to find acceptance among movements pro and against secession of Scotland or Northern Ireland for common political institutions which favour governmental dialogue and cooperation may be a good omen for the Caucasus. The numerous hurdles in establishing a coalition government in Northern Ireland and in implementing the various clauses of the Good Friday Agreement show, however, how difficult it also may be, even in countries with a long-standing democratic culture, to abandon faith in the ultima ratio of the use of force.

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## Footnotes

1. I wish to thank Andrei Belyi, Viacheslav Chirikba, Michael Emerson, George Hewitt, David Tirr, Nathalie Tocci, Robert M. Cutler, J. Paul Goode, Tom Graham, Maarten Theo Jans, Irakli Laitadze, Tamara Kovziridze, Neil Melvin, Richard J. Reeve and Alexei Zverev for their very useful comments and criticism to this paper. A more in-depth analysis of the problem of Caucasian regional integration is due to be published in 2000 in *The Journal of Civil Wars*. ([back to top](#))

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3 On the idea of a regional security formation see Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, New York & London, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, pp. 186-229. For an application of this notion of a regional security formation on the Caucasus see Bruno Coppieters, 'Conclusions: The Caucasus as a Security Complex', in Bruno Coppieters (ed.), *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels, VUBPress, 1996, pp. 193-204, also on <http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/> ([back to text](#))

4 On the concept of securitization see the various publications of the authors of the Copenhagen School such as Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, London, Lynne Rienner, 1998. On the Soviet traditions in securitizing policy issues see Bruno Coppieters, 'Een Overladen Veiligheidsagenda. Een Terugblik op de Ondergang van de Sovjet-Unie en op de Houding van de Vlaamse Vredesbeweging', to be published in: *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*, Spring 2000. ([back to text](#))

5 Abkhaz scholars have claimed that the status of an Autonomous republic in the Soviet federal structure logically implied a form of statehood and that statehood logically should imply sovereignty. Contrary to Tatarstan, Abkhazia has extended the claim to sovereignty to a claim to independence. Abkhaz independence was declared in 1999. ([back to text](#))

6 *RFE/RL Newline*, Vol. 3, No 227, Part I, 22 November 1999. ([back to text](#))

7 Ara Tadevosian, 'Armenia's 'Diplomatic Success' at OSCE Summit', in: *IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service* No 8, 25 November 1999 published on-line: [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net) ([back to text](#))

8 Ara Tadevosian, 'Armenia Forced to Choose between Washington and Moscow for Friends', in: *IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service* No 12, 23 December 1999 published on-line: [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net) ([back to text](#))

9 On balance of power mechanisms operating in cooperative security regimes see Ralf Emmers, 'The Balance of Power Factor in Regimes for Cooperative Security: The Early Days of ASEAN and the ARF', paper presented for the 24th Annual Conference of the British International Studies Association held at the Manchester Conference Centre 20-22th December 1999. ([back to text](#))

<sup>10</sup> See Sergiu Celac, Michael Emerson, Nathalie Tocci et al., *A Stability Pact for the Caucasus. A consultative document of the CEPS task force for the Caucasus*, CEPS, Working document no 145, May 2000. ([back to text](#))

11 See Abdollah Ramezanzadeh, 'Iran's Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis', in: Coppieters (ed.), op. cit., pp. 163-177. ([back to text](#))

12 Out of the 109 military observers present in October 1997 in UNOMIG forty were from EU countries. See Coppieters, 'Western Security Policies and the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict', in: Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili and Natella Akaba (eds.), *Federal Practice. Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia*, Brussels, VUB University Press, 2000, p. 45. ([back to text](#))

<sup>13</sup> See Stanislav Lakoba, 'Abkhazia, Georgia and the Caucasus Confederation', in Bruno Coppieters, Ghia Nodia and Yuri Anchabadze, *Georgians and Abkhazians. The Search for a Peace Settlement*, Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, Sonderveröffentlichung, Oktober 1998, pp.113-121, also electronically published

<http://poli.vub.ac.be/publi/>

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14 *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 25 May 1999. ([back to text](#))

<sup>15</sup> On the Nordic Council as a model for the British-Irish relations see Simon Partridge, 'Nordic-style institutions recommended for Irish-British islands', in: *Eagle Street. Newsletter of the Finnish Institute in London*, January 1998 and various other papers published in the same newsletter. This publication is available on the internet site <http://finnish-institute.org.uk/>

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<sup>16</sup> On the British-Irish Council see Vernon Bogdanor, *Devolution in the United Kingdom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 107-108. A report of the first meeting has been published in *The Irish Times*, December 18, 1999. See also Graham Walker, 'The Council of the Isles and the Scotland-Northern Ireland Relationship', in *Scottish Affairs*, No 27, Spring 1999, pp. 108-123. ([back to text](#))

17 On the following: Ibid. ([back to text](#))