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**WIDER BLACK SEA:
PERSPECTIVES FOR INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY**

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
YEREVAN, ARMENIA
January 14-15, 2008

Armenian International Policy Research Group (AIPRG) together with Association of Swedish Graduates of Armenia (ASGA) and British Alumni Association (BAA) propose to organize an international conference on the Wider Black Sea region with a particular focus on international and regional security perspectives. The Wider Black Sea region roughly consists of the Black Sea littoral states, Moldova, Greece and the countries of the South Caucasus. It is a region in transition. The notion of the Wider Black Sea region has geopolitical and geo-economic connotations and in parallel, though to a lesser degree than, the wider or Greater Middle East region can be encountered so often in the international political parlance. The region as a political and strategic whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts, and lies in the heart of legitimate geostrategic interests of the main international and regional players.

There are four major factors generating growing debate on the Wider Black Sea region:

1. The first factor is the argument that the formula of democratic integration and collective security, offered through closer relations and eventual integration with EU and NATO, could help transform and bring peace and stability to this region just like to Western Europe in the early post WW II period and to Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. Despite the existing major differences between Central and Eastern Europe then and the Black Sea region today this argument was given a powerful boost with after the Big Bang wave of NATO enlargement in 2002 and the Rose and Orange revolutions and the debate over the perspectives of the third wave of Euroatlantic enlargement is still on strategic agenda.

2. The second factor that has enhanced general awareness of the importance of this region is instability in the Greater Middle East region.
3. The region is also of enormous importance for energy supply and energy transit from the Caspian and Central Asia to European markets. Located in geo-strategically important and sensitive region, the role of the wider Black Sea will only grow in the future not only as a major energy transit route but a buffer region vis-à-vis an increasingly volatile and unstable Middle East. It will be especially key in the decades to come as Europe seeks to ensure diversity of energy suppliers.
4. The region is a large market with huge economic potential, which would benefit tremendously from regional integration. This notion has been shared through time by some of wider Black Sea countries. The proof of the fact is various political and economic regional organizations, initiatives and networks being woven since the collapse of the Soviet Empire (BSEC, GUAM, the Community of Democratic Choice, 3+3 initiative etc.).

While the mentioned factors are a proof of the growing strategic importance of the wider Black Sea region there are also certain obstacles that still prevent a shared understanding and a more coherent strategy to emerge in a more meaningful way.

1. The first hurdle lies in the region itself and its weakness: these countries are weaker and less well-known than their counterparts in Central and Eastern Europe were when they opted to go West in the early 1990s and their place in the nowadays mental map of Europe is more tenuous. It is also far less clear whether the Wider Black Sea region shares the sense of common aspirations for their nations. The countries of the region differ in their democratization records and security perceptions.
2. The second obstacle lies in the weakness of the West in the sense of uncertainty over embracing these countries and the region as a whole. At this stage the appetite of many of nations of the region for more engagement and closer ties with Europe is not reciprocated in the capitals of Europe.
3. The third difficulty deals with Russia. Clearly there are fears in the European capitals that a strategy to anchor the countries of the wider Black Sea region to the West could provoke an unwanted confrontation with Moscow. On the other hand there are concerns in some of the Black Sea countries, including Armenia, that deeper and more ambitious engagement in such a possible strategy would unease strategic partnership relations with Russia.

The fact remains that the major stakeholders of the region lack clear set of objectives and largely shared understanding of the wider Black Sea, there is no formulated and generally shared long-term political or political-military policy framework for securing the stability of the region in the face of existing frozen conflicts, dividing lines between the countries, differing perceptions of the economic and security challenges, shortage of well-developed regional institutions, lack of common identity and aspirations, civilizational and cultural discrepancies etc. Yet, the prospect of common economic future, security concerns and the ensuing political integration in the European family makes the stakeholders more interested in a quick internal political stabilization, pacification of inter-state and ethnic tensions and resolutions of the conflicts in the region, and making the development of the region more predictable.

Mainly, thanks to the GMF of the United States, NATO and other international institutions and organizations there has been a new intellectual wave discussing the Wider Black Sea over the course of the last few years. While Armenian political and experts' community and media has not pioneered the debate over the Wider Black Sea, obviously because of known reasons, however, there have been occasional opportunities to discuss it either within BSEC activities and programs or during a few donor-funded international conferences, including the one with NATO PDD support that happened two years ago.

As an idea in progress, the debate over Wider Black Sea is being largely influenced by major developments in both international and regional security landscape and as well as significant changes within the Black Sea countries themselves. Hence, several international and local events in the last few years make the organizing of a proposed highly representative international conference on this topic a necessity. Amongst those events we could enumerate the NATO Summit in 2006; the last developments between USA and Russia and the G8 summit; EU New Neighborhood Policy and signed Action Plans with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine; NATO IPAP-s with Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Moldova during 2004-2006; parliamentary elections in Armenia and Turkey; the Russian-Georgian tensions and other events locally which have had or are having wider regional implications.

The proposed international conference aims at:

- Enhancing the ongoing, if only originating, debate on the concept of the Wider Black Sea region in the light of mentioned developments by involving the international and regional academic and political (current and retired eminent politicians and world-known experts are to be invited to this conference) circles in it;
- bringing together differing evaluations, views and perspectives on the Wider Black Sea by the countries, organizations, regional and world powers to pave a way for discussing international and regional security perspectives in the light of a possible political-military strategy towards the Wider Black Sea;
- involving major international organizations in the conference thus underlining the organizational/institutional perspectives of the Wider Black Sea region, by eventually drafting policy recommendations for security organizations, BSEC and other regional initiatives;
- making policy recommendations (by publishing the proceedings of the conference) for the politicians in and outside of the region with the perspective of influencing the decision-making processes in the future;
- raising public awareness of different aspects of the idea of the Wider Black Sea region in Armenia where mixed perceptions are still prevailing;
- discussing the compatibility of Armenia's Foreign policy and security strategy with the concept of the Wider Black Sea region and the NATO strategy as stated in Riga in 2006;

The program of this highly representative international conference will consist of the five following sections (presented in details in the draft program part of the proposal application).

1. The Wider Black Sea region can emerge as a zone of strategic connective tissue, a conduit of security, energy diversification, trade and political and economic freedom linking Europe with the Caspian basin, Central Asia and the broader Middle East or it might devolve into a zone of confrontation, with unresolved conflicts, a broad range of other trans-national threats and dysfunctional energy markets. This section will cover issues related to the notion of the Wider Black Sea region discussing the security, political and economic heritage in the region in three different sessions.
2. Both the EU and NATO are Black Sea littoral geopolitical entities. Therefore, those two organizations with their respective policies and Action Plans within a number of policy programs have a vital interest in preserving the stable development of the region. Though there is a need to evaluate the specific political goals of the engagement of the Black Sea countries in those organizations, the key question remains whether the notion of the wider Black Sea can serve as a self-sufficient entity or if it is a station on the way to EU and NATO integration. The section will scrutinize the perspectives of NATO, EU, USA, Russia, Turkey and other country representatives about the perception and perspectives of Wider Black Sea region. The section will also discuss the perspectives of the possible third wave of Euroatlantic enlargement and its compatibility with the concept of the Wider Black Sea. The next focal point of discussion of this section will be whether there could emerge a shared strategy towards the wider Black Sea region.
3. Many frozen conflicts vis-à-vis differing security perspectives and tense relations between different states still hinder the desired progress of integration processes in the Wider Black Sea region. The third section will discuss the evaluation and perspectives of settlement of the existing conflicts in the lights of the Wider Black Sea.
4. The fourth section will evaluate and discuss the perspectives of different regional organizations and initiatives in the lights of the Wider Black Sea and whether the emergence of such regional organizations or international regimes signal the decay of the idea of "post-Soviet space". A particular focus will be made on GUAM, CSTO, BSEC, Community of Democratic Choice, 3+3 initiative.
5. The Armenian National Security Strategy was confirmed in February 2007, a few months after the NATO Riga Summit where the new NATO policy document was confirmed. In the past two years the NATO IPAP and EU New Neighbourhood Policy documents were signed with Armenia as well. The last section of the conference will draw on the official stance of Yerevan towards the Wider Black Sea and discuss the compatibility of Armenia's foreign policy and security strategies with the notion of the Wider Black Sea and the NATO and EU policies in the region.