Promises and Perils of Regional Organizations in Southeastern Europe: Lessons Learned from SEDM and SEEBRIG

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Abstract- Regional organizations are one of the most important demonstrations of the high level economic and political cooperation between states. Today, in the international arena, there are numerous regional organizations shaped by the regional conditions and the regionalist perceptions of the founder states. This study explores the lessons learned from the experiences of Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) Process and its operational/military body, namely Southeastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG). It analyzes the challenges and limits which those initiatives face and explores the motivations for the current attempts in different problematic areas. For this aim, firstly a conceptual framework for the integration projects and regional organizations are provided. Then, a brief examination on SEDM and SEEBRIG and their historical performance is depicted. A number of lessons learned that can be drawn from the unique and common experiences of the SEDM Process and SEEBRIG as a multinational/regional military body is represented afterward. Main issues are then examined under the bullets of the concept of military operation, clear and functional mandate, international credibility, the degree of both commitment and cohesiveness among members, the institutional identity, and organizational structure.

Keywords- Regionalization; Regional Organizations; Southeastern Europe, SEDM, SEEBRIG.

1. Introduction

In 21st Century, under the influence of globalization, international organizations' importance and functions are growing of day by day. Especially coming into prominence of regional organizations. The effectiveness European Union (EU) and similar organizations have been increased in international relations. The increasing effectiveness of international organizations has accelerated the emergence of regional integrations.

Balkan countries took steps towards political and economic union after gaining their independence with a view towards gaining recognition in Europe and developing future policies. This region was called South-Eastern Europe (SEE) and steps were taken to implement European projects to achieve objectives. Initial regional and multiparty collaborations were consolidated under the South-Eastern Europe Defence Ministerial Process. This study investigates the cooperation efforts between former Yugoslavian

countries to establish independence and gain recognition on an international level. The political, economic and security aspects of the SEDM and SEEBRIG worth to investigate. However, the applicability of economic and social cooperation in South-East Europe is problematic. The support of international players, as well as the nations involved in such regional organizations, are also important.

Since the end of the Cold War, regional institutions' role increased in world politics. From the 1990s onwards dissolution of ex-power blocks and changes in political orientations which were the features of Cold War. The rising of regional organizations became a significant dimension of global affairs since then (Lake and Morgan, 1997:1). From that now on, a set of efforts aimed at the cooperation among the newly independent states is witnessed. Driven by the practical needs of national security and economic development of those countries, not only ex-leaders in those countries but also mainly US-oriented initiatives deemed the creation of regional organizations as necessary for coping with the demise of the centralized communist state.

In the same context, all the balances in the Balkans changed dramatically after the Yugoslavia's fall. The instability that is brought by this milestone risked the local, regional, and international peace. Thus, the Balkans experienced several internal wars and ethnic cleansing. Peace and stability could have been provided only after the intervention of external powers, such as US and NATO. The experiences gained from the post-Soviet and post-Yugoslavian countries with regional organizations drew attention from the *academia* because they provided a natural laboratory for studying the causes and effects of regional integration and disintegration and also their support to regional peace and stabilization. With the independence of Montenegro (2006) and Kosovo (2008), the borders of those new states in the Balkans have almost become definite. Economic integration, diplomatic and political interaction, security for every country in the region are accompanied by the principles of regional identity along with keeping of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social features in the region.

However, there can be observed not only promises but also perils of that kind of organizations. What are the driving forces behind the creation and endurance of regional organizations within the post-Soviet space and also in the Balkans? What can be learned from these experiences about the future of regional initiatives and beyond? This study will attempt to explore these questions along with the challenges and limits they face. The case which will be explored is the Southeastern Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) Process and its operational/military body, Southeastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG).

In the first section, a conceptual framework for the integration projects is provided. Then, a brief examination of SEDM and SEEBRIG and their performance is depicted. Section three presents a number of lessons that can be drawn from the unique and common experiences of the SEDM Process and SEEBRIG as a multinational/regional military body.

Main conclusions that are reached are that both SEDM and SEEBRIG proved to have certain challenges and limits in functional scope, institutional set-up, membership, commitment and organizational identity. The underlying causes explaining these perils are that they stem from respective states' dissimilar or disoriented expectations from this process, various political/military considerations, and concerns with the establishment of new regional orders/initiatives. The bottom line shall be that as long as there is a lack of

decisive political intention and a clear political framework, its military achievements has to stay limited.

2. Conceptual Framework: Integration Projects and Regional Organizations

Current studies lack a certain consensus regarding the term of regional institution/organization. Both terms are generally used interchangeably. (Bures, 2006: 83). Boutros-Ghali defines subject organizations as "treaty-based organizations" stating "whether created before or after the founding of the United Nations, regional organizations for mutual security and defense." According to him, those organizations behave for general regional development and/or cooperation on a certain economic issue. Those groups are created to cope with a significant and determined political, economic or social concern. (Ghali, 1992).

However, regionalism is preferred to be defined as a process of institutionalization of interstate relations initiated by the governments within a geographic region where both coordination and cooperation occur as a result of inter-governmental bargaining (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2012). The neo-liberal institutionalist theoretical approach has become a theoretical leader in the *academia* of inter-governmental cooperation. A key condition for the establishment and survival of a regional organization, according to this perspective, is the actors' belief that cooperation with produce respectively better results in the long run when compared to their unilateral actions. It is also put that a regional organization will assist the states in lowering transaction costs accompanying their efforts at cooperation by regularizing and monitoring interactions and facilitating the flows of information (Simmons and Martin, 2002).

However, the neo-liberal explanations have been rightfully criticized for conceptualizing inter-state organizations basically as welfare providing institutions (Gruber, 2000). The neo-liberal approaches in regional institutions/organizations often expect that various cooperative arrangements will guarantee the long-term utility effects for participating states. Regional unions and/or initiatives/organizations are supposed to improve the states' long-term national welfare through the optimization of interstate commerce, simplification of travel, or facilitation of the movement of labor. The failure to observe these gains is interpreted as the regional organizations' lack of success (Omelicheva and Zubytska, 2012). However, countries' motivation for regional and sub-regional

cooperation, including shared economic, political, environmental, and social concerns, overlapping populations, and in some cases, the similarities of cultures, language, and developmental practices, there is not a single regional project who has lived up to its full potential (Olcott, et al, 2004).

It is little doubt that the long-term impact of policies deriving from regional cooperation is not neglected by the state elites. However, as the abundant evidence on political events demonstrates, their short-term interests in securing their positions in the government will always be of paramount importance. It would be argued that the democratically elected leaders will be more willing to the interests of core constituencies supplying them with sponsorship and electoral support. On the other hand, the authoritarian leadership will cater to those interests which are instrumental for maintaining their power (Gruber, 2000: 57). By taking regional organizations as instruments of political elites to maximize their term in office and personal political influence, one gains another analytical perspective to explain the continued existence of multiple regional organizations in the given region. That type of explanation points to the fact that political will and interests of those countries' leadership have been one of the determining factors of regional cooperation (Hurrell, 1995: 220). Support for regional initiatives has often been predicated on the assessment of the extent to which regional projects could contribute to the achievements of regional elite's pure personal aims (Roeder, 1997: 20). It should also be noted hereby that in the southeastern Europe sphere, the political, economic, and military dominance of US has been another important determinant of integration processes and the regional organization (Kubicek, 1997: 639) which would also pave the way for those countries' membership and integration to NATO.

3. SEDM and SEEBRIG as Regional Players: Background

3.1. SEDM:

As a result of the events of the last ten years and followed by missions that are led by NATO which aimed to construct as well as to keep peace and security, Southeastern Europe Europe Defence Ministerial (SEDM) was put in action in 1996 with the first meeting of Ministers of Defence held in Albania. An idea for a need of a robust regional cooperation process in this region emerged in the international society followed by that consequence. SEDM's participating nations include USA, Albania, Bosnia-

Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine and Greece. Georgia and Moldovia are observer nations. SEDM is a defined in its official writing as a "process". In that term, it is represented as a process of cooperation among the Ministries of Defence of Southeastern European participating and observer countries.

The actions taken within the scope of SEDM process are created with the consideration in a way to strengthen, and to enrich the political and military cooperation and to develop a stable environment and security in South Eastern Europe. The purpose is to promote regional cooperation and create neighborly interactions as well as to strengthen regional defense capacities. Besides, cooperation through collective efforts and making links between Euro-Atlantic institutions/organizations are also among the goals. Among SEDM organs, the most significant prominence is South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) established with the MPFSEE Agreement.

It should be underlined that this initiative was energized and motivated by the US. Under the firm support of US in the backward, main players was Turkey and Greece which were the two already members of NATO. It could easily be predicted that the end state was to enlarge NATO in Balkans and make those states a member of NATO. Today, this end state is almost accomplished with an exception of Macedonia and Montenegro waiting for full membership.

3.2. Military Realm: SEEBRIG[†]

SEDM has a military/operational body constituted by the troop contributions of seven member nations. It works under the umbrella of SEDM. It was established in 1998 in order to develop cooperation and open the dialog channels between the founder nations. It is also presented as a declaration to support to regional security and stability, and to generate good neighborly relations within the region." It should be noted that it was firmly supported by the US. Its constituting document is Agreement on Multinational Peace Force South-Eastern Europe (MPFSEE) which was signed by the Ministers of Defense of the seven participating countries in Skopje/Macedonia. In accordance with MPFSEE Agreement, the South-Eastern Europe

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[†] Information in this part is mainly provided from SEEBRIG's official web page as well as telephone interviews generated by the author with some officers from different member nations who are posted in SEEBRIG HQs. Subject interviews are realized between November-December 2015.

Brigade (SEEBRIG) was activated by seven participating Nations in1999 in Plovdiv/Bulgaria. The current structure of SEEBRIG is a brigade-sized force of about 4000 personnel.

There has been a clear and substantial increase in involvement by regional organizations in both mediation and peacekeeping operations (Diehl and Cho, 2011). Indeed, the role of regional organizations as peacekeepers is not a novel one (Paliwal, 2010: 186). However, in order to establish an effective PSO, a regional organization shall obtain an understandable mandate, international legitimacy and adequate military capacity for enforcing peace. It is also vital that there should be cohesiveness within the organization in order to ensure commitment toward the mission, facing the requirements of organization for military ops (Baba and Slotter, 2014: 5). The ability of regional organizations to play significant roles in conflict management is largely conditioned on the authority provided to them by their members (Boehmer et al, 2005). However, SEEBRIG has some certain limits from above mentioned aspects.

According to the constituting Agreement, the aim of MPFSEE and the reason for its establishment is to make contributions to the regional security, stability and to develop relationships among the countries in SEE region within the scope of SEDM process. It acts in parallel with NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme. In compliance with the MPFSEE Agreement, the Brigade is designed to be open to being declared to UN and OSCE. It would be available, of course within the limits of its capacities, for deployment in conflict areas and in several PSO, like peace-keeping, peace-making, peace-building and humanitarian operations. It would also take part in UN and/or OSCE ops. It could also take duties in coalition type missions.

Brigade (SEEBRIG) is located in member countries on a four-year rotational basis. Currently, it is located in Larissa/Greece. However, not all units allocated to the SEEBRIG is in Greece with the HQs as it is the case for the other host countries. For the very moment, only 38 officers including the SEEBRIG Commander (a brigadier general) are posted in Greece as the "core" element of Brigade's HQs. All the other forces (personnel and units) are stationed at their national locations. It is due to the fact that, according to the MPFSEE Agreement, the troops which are affiliated to SEEBRIG by the respective nations remains at their home locations. They are gathered under a task force principle for exercises and operations purposes and/or requirements upon the decisions of the participating Nations under certain circumstances. In that case, a suitable joint direction and coordination are produced and distributed by Political and Military Steering Committee (PMSC). It is helpful to note that SEEBRIG has never "gathered" in that term its16-year-lifetime. As it will be discussed below, it has never formed up with its all bodies and units. Consequently, it would not be wrong to claim that it has never been a brigade in its military terms.

4. Some Parameters for the Performance of SEDM&SEEBRIG

Table 1 depicts SEEBRIG's position as the sole military and active body of SEDM Process with respect to Concept of Military Operation, Clear and Functional Mandate, International Credibility, Cohesiveness and Commitment among the Member States, The Institutional Identity, and Suitable Organizational Structure.

5. Discussion

Official web page of SEEBRIG presents itself as a success story. For instance, it reads that "SEDM Process has been a success for more than years and has become an integral part of security policy and regional cooperation. Since its establishment in 1999, in the framework of the process, SEEBRIG proved to be an effective and important tool for promoting regional security, stability, and cooperation among the nations." Moreover, in his speech during the handover take over the ceremony, SEEBRIG Commander Brigadier General Neyko Nenov on 01 July 2005 states that "SEEBRIG is the longest-standing regional defense and security initiative in Southeastern Europe. It has brought together Armed Forces representatives from Ministerial to unit level to work towards common security goals. That is a significant accomplishment and one that could be used in the future as a tested model to bolster cooperation in other regions." (http://www.seebrig.org/ seebrig-speeches/item/203-1-

brig-gen-giovanni-sulis-announ cement-at-the-take-over-ceremony-25-july-2003.html).

It is true that SEDM and SEEBRIG have undergone several changes in both their memberships and tasks over the years. In that context, Multinational Peace Force Agreement Southeastern Europe (MPFSEE) had five additional protocols each of which aimed to response several changes and challenges arising from either the environmental changes and/or member states will. However, it has to be mentioned hereby that the unique international operation to which SEEBRIG made contribution was to ISAF (Afghanistan) during its 17-years-life. In 2004, SEEBRIG HQs was deployed to Afghanistan under ISAF command. Except from this operation SEEBRIG did not participate any other international peacekeeping or disaster relief operation. It is surprising enough that SEEBRIG did not take any involvement in its own area of interest, which is the flood disaster in Serbia and in Bosnia-Herzegovina occurred in 2015, nor did there even happened any

Table 1. Parameters for the Performance of SEDM&SEEBRIG

Parameters	Remarks	SEEBRIG's Position
Concept of Military Operation	Basic for military aspects of an international military organization, deployment and missions.	MEDIUM (Mainly derived from NATO and UN standarts.)
Clear and Functional Mandate	A successful regional military force must have a clear and workable mandate for its efficiency and effectiveness.	LOW (Bureaucratic mill, slow decision making process.)
International Credibility	Requirement for international legitimacy, Iniative should be "in accordance with the UN Charter, international law and norms, and diplomatic conventions.	LOW (Low degree of cohesiveness and commitment among member/participating states. No active participation in international operations except from ISAF involvement in 2004.)
Cohesiveness and Commitment	High level of cohesiveness and commitment among its member states. Less variety in terms of individual interest and expectations of its members there is a higher possibility of a greater consensus	LOW (Political gaps, lack of political guidance)
The Institutional Identity	Organizations are to have identities and identity requirements. The identity of regional organizations differs from the notion of "regional identity" as it has been more widely studied in international relations.	LOW (Political and cultural dissimilarities and gaps.)
Suitable Organizational Structure	Requirement for an appropriate organizational structure. It has to be suitable for a peacekeeping operation where and when needed/decided to do so.	LOW (Mainly derived from NATO organizational structre, while never gathered under a regular basis.)

initiative to bring its involvement onto the table. This, of course, depicts the degree of overall commitment and cohesiveness of each state towards SEDM and SEEBRIG as well as the degree of organizational/institutional identity.

6. Conclusion

If there is not a clear and forceful identity among the organization, its relevance and efficiency would tend to decrease. Though it has been argued that organizations become more than the sum of their members in their lifetime, SEDM and SEEBRIG suffer certain lack in that regard.

It was the final negative phenomena which SEEBRIG faced that one of the member and troop contributing nations, Italy, have denunciated from the SEEBRIG's founding agreement MPFSEE on July 26, 2015. This event marks a significant turning point for both SEDM and SEEBRIG in the sense that, after 17 years in progress one of the important nations decides not be a member of this regional initiative. It can be estimated that, although not stated in this way by Italy itself, this decision is mainly because of Ital's belief that it no more adds value. Although Italy declared that it is still a full member of its parent organization -SEDM, nevertheless, Italy's withdrawal from SEEBRIG marks a novel and important point in its negative term. The naming problem of member countries is a very good example of those weaknesses. According to MPFSEE Agreement, there is a rule that in all written documents either the capital cities of nations (i.e. Ankara instead of Turkey) or a number from one to seven (i.e. Nation-7 instead of Turkey) has to be used. It can be predicted that it is because of the naming issue between Macedonia and Greece. Even this single case shows how powerful is the founding principles of SEDM and SEEBRIG.

In this context, the fact that decisions are taken by 17 nations' unanimity cause a slow decision-making process. However, there is no political integrity within the states of the region. One of the greatest reason is that the newly independent states could not create an integrity within the region. Such a political integrity and an effective organization with the international force that includes all states within the SEE region. Whilst globalization continues, regional organization members or regional integration members have responded to the question of what this fact expresses for our purposes; regional organization members have stated the importance of understanding the flow of this concept from the theoretical plane to the practical world. During globalization, it is necessary to describe an exactly opposite concept, which refers to atomization and regionalization by all means. These atomizing global agents are not witnessed as acting independently, but on the contrary, they are spotted as reactionary to globalization. In this framework, while going through all the economic and political aspects of SEDM, it was observed that, it is in complete accordance with the globalizing principles and does not have even a single different aspect, but cannot be regarded as free of regional influence.

As a result, reading along with this decision of Italy, SEDM and its operational body SEEBRIG teaches that over the years, SEDM seems to be only a forum rather than a regional organization. The limits in its organizational identity and member states' commitment to the organization are the fundamental reasons for this. Moreover, the mandate of organizations and the level of institutionalization has boundaries. SEDM is also structurally weak, often no more than a forum for annual or bi-annual meetings. Until now, SEDM and SEEBRIG have shown no willingness to take action and expanded its influence in the region. Having noted that, it can be seen as a laboratory for other regional institutions to learn lessons.

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