

New Actors, Old Obstacles

SECURITY COOPERATION IN EURASIA

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The main obstacle to developing an appropriate security architecture for post-Soviet Eurasia are the number of perceptual and conceptual gaps that exist among the actors involved. Major states and regional organizations have had inconsistent and conflicting foreign policy stances. Formerly peripheral states seek patrons but also influence in shaping their own security environment. New approaches are needed to establish a security architecture for the region that takes into consideration the interests of all actors and also positions the region in a broader European-Eurasian security framework.

The Changing Role of Major Actors

We are constantly witnessing changing coalitions, partners, and agendas in the region. Even Russia has been constantly changing its priorities. Russia has traditionally viewed post-Soviet Eurasia as its “sphere of privileged interests,” vital for reestablishing itself as a regional power. Due to a new list of Russian priorities, however, the region is losing its importance. It was a real surprise, for instance, when President Dmitry Medvedev, during his latest traditional meeting with diplomats (July 2010) in Moscow did not mention Russia’s interaction with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as a foreign policy priority.

Medvedev instead insisted that Russia’s focus is on sources of innovative technologies and knowledge, which are in the West. The president asked Russian diplomats to be active in developing partnerships with leading technologically and economically developed countries. Obviously, the states of the CIS do not meet these criteria. However, as a partner in energy and security, as well as a direct neighbor, Russia still has an interest in promoting stability and predictability in the region. In essence, Russia pursues two main regional goals: keeping its allies and partners close (to secure access to natural resources and pipelines) and continuing military cooperation within the CIS (through the Collective Security Treaty Organization). This implies the expansion of Russia’s military presence and influence in the region but the exclusion of the region as a partner for modernization.

As many observers have noted, post-Soviet Eurasia is an area of peripheral interest to the United States in its global fight against terrorism and pursuit of energy security. Nonetheless, there are two main driving factors making this region “vulnerable” for the current U.S. administration. Objectively, the region has significance (for derivative reasons) because of the importance of China and Russia; subjectively, U.S. policy in the region has been “personalized” by President Barack Obama’s promises during the election campaign to withdraw forces from Iraq and complete his country’s mission in Afghanistan. Obama has made himself hostage to success in these efforts.

The EU has never developed a coherent policy toward the region. In contrast to the United States, however, the EU does have clear, direct, and immediate strategic interests in the region. Some states are on its doorstep and Central Asian countries (and Azerbaijan) are a major source of alternative (i.e., non-Russian) energy. A greater European footprint in the region – including a military presence via NATO – is thus logical. In the medium-term, however, one can expect the EU to be ever more active in the region through its various aid and development programs.

Finally, China has long-term interests in the region that it believes it can secure through economic policies. It has been actively investing in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. China is currently conducting the most coherent and deliberate policy in the region as it seeks to consolidate its presence in the “neighborhood.”

The Rise of the Periphery?

Meanwhile, many formerly “peripheral” Eurasian states are creating their own security and development strategies. States like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Uzbekistan have lost their “passive” roles and are increasingly conducting their own rational, flexible, and pragmatic foreign and security policies. Effectively having reinvented themselves, such actors now help to frame the new context within which security co-operation in the region will evolve over the next decade. To mention but one example, during the August 2010 visit of acting Moldovan President Mihai Ghimpu to Georgia, he and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili declared the necessity of reinvigorating the regional organization GUAM (Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova).

This new context presents opportunities and challenges for the major regional powers, specifically in two distinct areas:

a) Intensification of multilateral negotiations and institutions

The increasing importance of formerly “peripheral” states in the global economy is evident in the level of involvement of some of these states in regional integration processes (such as the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan customs union, the Nabucco pipeline, and railroad lines from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to, respectively, Iran and China). One can also expect countries like Turkey, India, Iran, and Pakistan to increase in regional importance and to even become members of existing institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Such enlargement would benefit “smaller” states by decreasing their reliance on traditional major powers.

b) Bilateral aid and development programs

As “smaller” states have become more influential in defining and operating their own cooperation programs, key players have become more influenced by the security concerns of these states. In return for their cooperation, these states expect major powers to assume concrete obligations for maintaining stability and order in the region, including more programs aiming to reestablish robust socioeconomic systems (health care, education, and agricultural development). Whoever makes the best offer wins. Since the two “biggest” players (Russia and the United States) have limited resources to carry out such programs, “Europeanization” or increasing the role of multilateral institutions might be considered an alternative (the latter taking into account the strong position of China, as well as the active role of “new” players, India, Iran, and Turkey).

Too Many Security Frameworks?

The number of international institutions and organizations working on security and stability in the region has created overload and confusion. There have been no overarching factors or agendas that demand the greater coordinated involvement in the region of all these organizations. The EU is mainly interested in oil and gas. NATO’s priority is Afghanistan. The CSTO aims to create a unified special rapid-reaction force “capable of repelling any external threat.” The SCO has an interest in preventing the region from becoming an arena for geopolitical and ideological competition. The list of fragmented policies goes on.

Perceptual and conceptual gaps between these actors do not help to promote security cooperation in the region. Russia has proposed that the principle that security is indivisible should apply to the entire European and Eurasian space. However, current members of NATO, already enjoying amongst themselves the benefits afforded by the implementation of this principle, will hardly agree to extend this principle to Russia and other non-NATO members. No NATO member is willing to confront the myriad of claims of “threatened security” that would arise within a community spanning Europe and Eurasia.

Another gap refers to different perceptions of existing security institutions. NATO is becoming more of a political organization, but the image of NATO in Russia remains militaristic. The CSTO is supposedly a military organization, but in reality it is also more of a political one. The CSTO was criticized by some experts in Russia for being unwilling to interfere in the latest events in Kyrgyzstan, which was seen to reflect the organization’s ambiguous mission.

Russia’s foreign policy priorities under Medvedev appear to be moving in two different directions: preserving traditional ties with the countries of the CIS and deepening integration in the framework of the SCO, while simultaneously making Russia a full-fledged member of the developed world. On the one hand, Russia is less concerned than NATO and EU members with ideology and democratization in Eurasia, preferring to pay more attention to political stability and predictability in its neighborhood. At the same time, Russia sees the EU and the United States as its key economic partners and seeks to promote intensive, sustained, and long-term technological cooperation with them. Unfortunately, as evidenced in recent years by a variety of asymmetric dialogues, neither the EU nor the United States have displayed

little interest in putting economics at the center of their relationship with the Russian Federation. As a result, Russia pursues bilateral relations with individual European states, particularly Germany and Italy, as a substitute for EU-Russian relations and, furthermore, is ready to intensify its relationship with countries outside the West.

The Promise of a European-Eurasian Security Framework

Those close to President Medvedev share an understanding that Russia is not able to achieve its interests in Eurasia alone. It needs more than cooperation and partnership; it needs the active participation of other actors in and outside the region to make existing and potential projects and structures effective and reliable. There remains the question, however, of who that reliable and predictable partner will be. Russia's foreign policy doctrine does not specify that partnerships should be based on common values. Unlike many Western states, Russia does not seek to partner only with like-minded countries but to create broad coalitions with a diverse set of states and institutions. Such a multi-directional Russian foreign policy is a natural consequence of the country's position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. The fact that Russia has security interests that are not identical to those of the United States, NATO, or the EU is not an obstacle to security cooperation. Russian officials have demonstrated a willingness to pursue common gains, even if they seek at the same time the best possible deal through hard bargaining. Russia-NATO military cooperation occurs *de facto*, but it is time to find a way to "formalize" or institutionalize this cooperation. One possibility to consider is associated NATO membership for Russia.

Security institutions, like any others, can be a source of both systemic stability and systemic change. Eurasia needs both. All interested actors should discuss mechanisms to push both "smaller" states and "bigger" ones to contribute more to collective security. "Big" players should take seriously the fact that "small" states have independent and pragmatic foreign policies, driven by their own national interests. They are subjects (not objects) of regional policy. Russia, for its part, has to pay more attention to the soft security agenda. And the United States, together with its NATO partners, should reconsider the role of the OSCE as a major forum for the European and Eurasian space that can enhance prospects for all-inclusive security cooperation and further the notion of the indivisibility of security.

The current atmosphere is favorable for starting a new round of discussion and negotiations on a new European-Eurasian security framework. Many experts agree that a new security agreement should reflect "post-post" Cold War realities, namely the rising role of "smaller" countries. Western states will also continue to resist Russia's hard security emphasis, reflective of a realistic approach still popular in Russia, as the foundation for a new security architecture. However, we can see new possibilities emerging from Medvedev's security initiatives, which makes us relatively optimistic that a consensus will eventually be found.

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