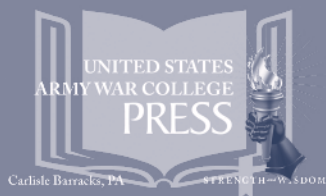


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WHAT NEXT FOR RUSSIA'S FRONT-LINE STATES?

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February 2019

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FOREWORD

The Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) considers that this Letort Paper provides a useful assessment of the continuities and changes in the foreign policy posture of Russia's front-line states following Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014. As a British scholar on Russia, Keir Giles explains that Moscow already voiced its opposition when the Baltic States accessed the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004, and the color revolutions presented a democratization model on Russia's doorstep. However, at that time, Russia did not possess the confidence or the capability to counter what it perceived as Western expansionism by using direct military action.

The Russia-Georgia armed conflict in August 2008 demonstrated that this was no longer the case. Discussions on the long-term prospect for NATO membership as it had been offered to Georgia and Ukraine at the Bucharest Summit a few months earlier were halted. Nonetheless, 2014 marked a new political watershed: Russia's traditional allies are now also concerned with Moscow's intentions, just as Western-leaning states in Central Europe and the Baltic have always been.

This Letort Paper provides a valuable contribution by focusing on how former Soviet states have adapted their foreign policy toward Russia since 2014 rather than the other way round. Significantly, Mr. Giles encourages the reader to avoid treating these countries as regional blocs, and instead to treat them as

individual states, each with a specific combination of risks and benefits arising from their relationship with Russia. The policy recommendations for the United States included at the end of each country's profile reflect this awareness.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute and
U.S. Army War College Press

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEIR GILES is the Director of the Conflict Studies Research Centre (CSRC), a group of deep subject matter experts on Eurasian security formerly attached to the United Kingdom (UK) Ministry of Defence. Now operating in the private sector, CSRC provides in-depth analysis on a wide range of security issues affecting Russia and its relations with overseas partners. After beginning his career working with paramilitary aviation groups in Russia and Ukraine immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, Mr. Giles joined the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Monitoring Service (BBCM) to report on political and military affairs in the former Soviet space. While still working for the BBCM, Mr. Giles also worked for CSRC at the UK Defence Academy where he wrote and briefed for UK and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) government agencies on a wide range of Russian defense and security issues. Mr. Giles is a senior consulting fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London, UK, as well as a regular contributor to research projects on Russian security issues in the UK and other European countries. Mr. Giles's work has appeared in a wide range of academic and military publications across Europe and in the United States.

SUMMARY

This Letort Paper examines in what ways Russia's front-line states have changed or, alternatively, maintained their foreign policy posture in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In general, they have either made concessions or strengthened defenses against Russia's new capabilities demonstrated in Ukraine and Syria. Laying out the risks and assets that each of these countries derive from their relationship with Moscow helps explain what may have justified one calculation over another. This analysis excludes Ukraine (which is already suffering the consequences of Russia's readiness to use military power to counter perceived strategic threats) and the Baltic States (which have already entered Western-led alliances).

Belarus

President Lukashenka will continue his efforts to leave sufficient freedom of maneuver for his country by striking an uneasy balance between reducing dependence on Russia and building ties with the West. The risk of a Russian reaction, which it is his priority to avoid at all costs, will remain constant.

Moldova

Despite signing a European Union (EU) Association Agreement (AA), Moldova's economy still remains highly dependent on Russia. This gives Moscow the opportunity to exercise economic pressure and interfere in local elections. Given that pro-European reforms are stalled, it is expected that pro-Russian parties will replace the current pro-EU governmental coalition in

the next parliamentary elections this month. No viable settlement for the conflict in Transnistria seems to loom large.

Central Asia

There is a fundamental paradox in Central Asian foreign policy. On the one hand, since 2014 to 2015, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have sought to distance themselves from Russia and to establish closer ties with the West and China. On the other, the West's relative inaction during the Ukraine crisis signaled that Euro-Atlantic alliances are unlikely to assist in security crises in Central Asia, but also that Western security interests in the region are weak. In particular, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (i.e., the richest hydrocarbon-exporting Central Asian countries) will remain wary of Moscow's intentions while maintaining good relations for regime support and shared values. Being more dependent on Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (the poorest countries in the region) share the view that a U.S. presence is necessary to balance Russia and China, yet they recognize that it is in their best interests to stay aligned with Moscow. In general, the region's authoritarian leaders fear popular revolts and seek to safeguard the political status quo, which is why they do not welcome the sort of change promoted by Western value-based agendas. Nevertheless, the damage to the Russian economy caused by falling oil prices, together with Western sanctions and counter-sanctions, have reduced the appeal of closer economic involvement with Russia. Ultimately, China's projects will dwarf Russia's existing economic ties to the region.

Armenia

The country's foreign policy is first and foremost defined by the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Russia's actions in Ukraine served as a confirmation that the capital of Armenia, Yerevan's, decision to withdraw from the AA with the EU in September 2013 to join the Eurasian Economic Union was wise. Dependent on Russia for its security and most of its energy supplies, Armenia is not in a position to resist Moscow, and the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in November 2017 should be viewed with this caveat in mind. At the same time, there is a growing realization that acquiescing to Russian demands has not won Yerevan any preferential treatment from Moscow. For example, Russia has continued to supply weapons to both sides in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. This has led to re-engagement with other partners.

Azerbaijan

The Ukraine crisis has opened a new dilemma for the country's foreign policy. On the one hand, the government in Baku fears regime change by popular protest, but on the other, Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine are a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, which echoes Azerbaijan's stance in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Overall, Azerbaijan has never shown interest in integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures. Nonetheless, while Azerbaijan does not want to provoke Russia, it has no intention of joining any Russia-led integration projects. Turkey will remain Azerbaijan's closest ally

in its neighborhood, but a good working relationship has been established with countries such as Israel.

Georgia

Russia's support for separatist elements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria was a challenge for Georgia long before the 2008 war, but Georgia's experience with the direct Russian military intervention in 2008 served as a precursor to that of Ukraine 6 years later. Since then, in general, Georgia's pro-Western geopolitical orientation and its overt opposition to Russia have remained unwavering. A preferential trade AA was signed with the EU in 2014, and Georgia was granted visa-free travel to Schengen Area member states in March 2017. Yet, the Georgian Dream party, which succeeded Saakashvili's rule, chose to be less confrontational than its predecessor, which had presided over the loss of 20 percent of Georgian territory in 2008.

The policy recommendations provided in this Letort Paper aim to assist the U.S. Government in general, and the U.S. Army in particular, in maximizing prospects for a new alignment of former Soviet states and minimizing the risk of a repetition of Russian actions in Ukraine elsewhere.

WHAT NEXT FOR RUSSIA'S FRONT-LINE STATES?

INTRODUCTION

Russian armed intervention in Ukraine in 2014 prompted a radical reassessment by the United States and its allies of their relationship with Moscow. However, it also caused other states around Russia's periphery to give serious consideration to how they could avoid suffering the same fate as Ukraine. This Letort Paper presents a tour d'horizon of Russia's neighborhood, assessing whether and how states of the former Soviet Union have adjusted their foreign policy posture in light of Russia's latest demonstration that it is willing to use military force to resolve perceived strategic challenges.

Russia's neighbors have never lost sight of the basic fact governing their relations with Moscow: Russia sees its near abroad as its domain, and considers that the West has no business in parts of the world where Russia has traditionally held sway. When the Baltic States joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 2004, Russian opposition was just as strenuous and vociferous as later when it appeared that Georgia and Ukraine had a real, if distant, prospect of doing the same. The difference was that Russia in 2004 was a different country than today, one that was much less capable of taking direct action to oppose the West and defending its perceived security interests. In order for U.S. policymakers to understand this perception, it can be helpful to consider NATO accession by Russia's neighbors as the equivalent of Canada joining the Warsaw Pact in 1985.

Given the more recent perception in Moscow of the European Union (EU) as a threat alongside NATO—just in different ways—the prospect of the European Union (EU) Association Agreement (AA) for Ukraine in 2014 constituted just as much a loss of territory to the West as NATO accession would have been. Russia’s forceful reaction stemmed from an apparent conviction that if the West takes all the countries along Russia’s borders, it will then proceed to Moscow. This conviction derives from Russian mirroring when assessing Western intentions. Moscow thinks that the West would follow a policy of aggressive expansionism, because that is what Russia would do if presented with the same opportunity.

In 2014, unlike in 2004, Russia possessed both the confidence and the capability to strike back against this perceived Western expansionism. In successfully ending any conversation about NATO membership for Georgia, the armed conflict there in 2008 demonstrated that counterstrikes of this kind could be successful, as well as making a powerful statement of Russia’s red lines. Six years later, the situation in Ukraine was seen as an even more direct threat to Russian interests. After President Viktor Yanukovich failed to toe the Western line, the Moscow narrative runs, the West incited an armed uprising in order to force regime change and have its way.

After 2014, it has not just been Western-leaning states in Central Europe and the Baltic that have been alarmed at Russian intentions—they always have been—but Russia’s traditional allies have also been concerned. Ukraine was in some respects supposed to be a dependable partner of Russia, so other partners—in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and especially Belarus—are now evaluating their relationships.

Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine sent a message to three distinct groups of nations. To the West: do not mess with us or in our backyard. To the near abroad: do not stray too far, because this may happen to you too. To any other country in any kind of proximity to Russian borders: you could be next.

The result is the likelihood that the nations in between have modified their behavior to avert Russian retribution. This modification could potentially have taken the form of seeking accommodation with Russia by making concessions, or alternatively strengthening defenses against the new capabilities demonstrated by Russia in Ukraine and now Syria. In both cases, the question at the front of the mind of each state within Russia's self-declared sphere of privileged interest must now be: what is the tipping point that would cause Russia to deploy these capabilities again?

This Letort Paper reviews these changes in behavior or foreign policy stance by the states of the former Soviet Union. The assessment begins with Belarus, in light of its current status as the most likely next target for Russian intervention. It then proceeds to consider Moldova and the states of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It does not include those neighbors of Russia that are members either of NATO, the EU, or both since these states have already made their strategic choice, and their alignment with the West is clear. It also does not include Ukraine itself, since Ukraine is already suffering the consequences of Russia perceiving that it was making a similar choice. Each country or regional section concludes with a set of policy recommendations for the United States, including specifically the U.S. Army, to minimize the risk of and maximize the opportunities for the new alignment of each of these states.

BELARUS

Of all Russia's non-NATO neighbors, Belarus presents the most likely candidate to be subjected to the same treatment as Ukraine. Just like Ukraine, Belarus's future lies in the balance between the West and the East; and just like Ukraine, if Minsk chooses the West, this will be seen as an immediate and severe security challenge to Russia, which would then necessitate intervention. There is no doubt that the prospect of losing Belarus to the West would be perceived as immediately threatening to Russia, as was the case with Ukraine. There are significant differences between the two countries, but they fill the same role in Russian perceptions as part of the Slavic heartland and well inside Moscow's desired defensive perimeter.

After a considerable period of simmering where only interested Moscow- and Minsk-watchers were aware that Belarus constitutes a potential flashpoint in Eastern Europe, since 2017, the country's difficulties in its relationship with Russia have come very much to the fore. President Alexandr Lukashenka's increasing difficulty in managing his balancing act and maintaining his country as an independent state rather than a province of Russia could well lead to a tipping point where Russia feels it needs to take decisive action to safeguard its interests.¹

Lukashenka has built on his consistent position that Belarus is a neutral power by setting up Minsk as the site for negotiations on the Ukraine crisis and demonstrating political distance from Moscow on controversial issues—most notably Russia's conflicts with Georgia, Ukraine, and Turkey. Small initial steps in the direction of political liberalization at home have combined with this ostensible neutrality in foreign

policy to make Belarus a more acceptable prospect for the EU and the United States. Emerging from international isolation is crucial for Belarus's long-term development and for mitigating reliance on the sinking Russian economy. Outreach from Minsk and shows of liberalization, such as the release of political prisoners, have been addressed with sanctions relief by the EU—which has been criticized because of concerns that persist over Belarus's human rights record. While waiting for responses from the EU, Belarus has also been encouraging Chinese investment and defense procurement cooperation. Lukashenka is forced by circumstance to constantly seek new opportunities for freedom of movement. His embrace after 2014 of Belarusian national culture, which he had previously spurned, bolsters his image as the defender of an independent Belarusian state, and one prepared to emphasize the country's differences from Russia.²

However, since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Belarus's delicate position has been repeatedly threatened, as Moscow has persistently tried to assert control at the same time as Minsk seeks to diminish its dependence on Russia and seek friends elsewhere.³ With relations between the two countries deteriorating, Russia has taken a number of unfriendly steps. These include rebuilding border controls with Belarus (foreigners from a number of countries are now banned from crossing the border by road).⁴ In doing so, Russia demonstrates that it cares little for Belarus's notional status as a co-member of the so-called "Union State" of Russia and Belarus, as well as of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), of which both countries are founding members.⁵

Belarus looks at both Russia's and NATO's military preparations with alarm. Unlike Russia, whose

claims of being “encircled” by NATO are based on fantasy, for Belarus, this is already a fact. The landlocked country is already surrounded by military buildup and conflict on all sides; this includes substantial U.S. Army forward presence in Poland from early 2017. Acutely conscious of the history of the area now known as Belarus, which constituted the traditional battleground for larger powers from the East and the West with devastating consequences for the region itself, the primary concern of Belarusian officials is to avoid any repetition of this scenario in a conflict between Russia and NATO.⁶

Outreach

Belarus has persistently sought opportunities to establish or maintain relations with Western states and organizations. The level of outreach has varied from semi-clandestine, cross-border contacts with immediate neighbors at times of increased Russian pressure to a broad campaign of rapprochement during more relaxed periods. A new development since 2014 has been a heightened sense of urgency in establishing relationships to counterbalance Russian influence and the risk of Russian assertive action.

Defense relations with the United States and other NATO nations appear to be moving ahead rapidly. During a surprise 3-day visit in March 2016, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Michael Carpenter met senior Belarusian defense officials and President Lukashenka.⁷ Offering an exchange of defense attachés, Carpenter reportedly said that the main focus of U.S. policy toward Belarus was now “steadfast support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity.” Defense attachés from the United States and

the United Kingdom (UK) were subsequently accredited after a long absence, and a framework agreement on defense cooperation with the UK is planned for signature to match one already signed with the United States. This too risks triggering a firm Russian reaction.

But both the EU and NATO are constrained in how far they can respond to Belarusian overtures. The EU tends to view Belarus through the prism of human rights violations, limiting the scope for cooperation in other areas.⁸ Meanwhile, in NATO, Turkey continues to block work with “partner nations” including Belarus—conveniently for Russia.

Bilateral relations can also be complicated, in particular with immediate neighbors. The status of minorities is a continuing irritant in relations with Poland. Cross-border talks with Lithuania, which had been developing well, were derailed by controversy over Belarus developing a nuclear power plant on the Lithuanian border only 50 kilometers from the capital, Vilnius. This deterioration accelerated in March 2017, when President Lukashenka alleged that “armed militants” who trained in camps in Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, and with funds supplied by Warsaw and Vilnius, were attempting to destabilize the internal situation in Belarus.⁹ Belarusian analysts say this implausible scenario is an indication of how Lukashenka may be influenced by disinformation from his security services, which are among the most Russia-friendly elements of the Belarusian administration.¹⁰

Lukashenka also faces the problem of Belarus fatigue in the West. Decades of tacking between Russia-friendly and EU-friendly policy statements and repeated promises of liberalization followed by renewed suppression of dissent and accommodation with Moscow have left Western officials suspicious

of any new attempt at rapprochement. At the same time, Belarus's delicate balance means that fears of imminent Russian hostile action also surface regularly.¹¹ Repeated false alarms of likely Russian intervention also dull Western sensitivities to the very real danger that Russia could take assertive action, despite Lukashenka's past success in avoiding pushing Moscow too far.

The most recent false alarm came in late March 2017. March 25 is the anniversary of a short-lived independent Belarusian state in 1918, and it is traditionally a day for rallies organized by opposition groups. This year, it also followed a series of smaller protests about a controversial new law penalizing so-called "social parasites" who do not work a certain number of days each year. Demonstrations were permitted in a number of provincial towns, but not in the capital; however, mass rallies went ahead regardless.

There were two additional factors that may have made these street protests particularly alarming for Belarus. First, Russian state media had been steadily promoting the narrative of a possible color revolution or regime change through popular unrest in Belarus, stoked by U.S. interference and funding.¹² Second, at that time, portions of Russia's 98th Airborne Assault Division were already arriving in eastern Belarus for a separate joint exercise.

The response by the authorities was firm, but not dramatic by local standards. Just over 700 people were arrested, with most released the same day without charges or still awaiting trial. The following day, more arrests were made at rallies in support of those detained the day before. Some demonstrators—and apparently a number of bystanders who were in the wrong place at the wrong time—were given heavy

finer or short prison sentences. Nevertheless, this response may have been enough to deprive Russia of any immediate excuses for interfering by demonstrating that Lukashenka and his security forces had the situation well in hand.

Defense Cooperation with Russia

In the event of crisis with Russia, the position of Belarus's armed forces would be critical. Assessments by Western analysts of where the loyalties of the Belarusian military lie vary widely. It has been suggested that the divisions in the Belarusian authorities as a whole, for example between the West-leaning Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the solidly Russia-friendly security services, are replicated within the armed forces. According to this argument, the perception of the two countries' armed forces as closely integrated is misleading, despite the fact that a so-called "Union State" of Russia and Belarus has been in existence for 20 years. Even though the great majority of Belarusian officers are Russian speaking and many of them have been trained and educated in Russia, there is sufficient consciousness of national identity and resentment at heavy-handed treatment by Russia that substantial resistance to Russian initiatives could be expected. On the other hand, the consistent official view from Poland and Lithuania in particular is that the Belarusian armed forces should be seen as simply an extension of their Russian counterparts. In this view, integration is complete, and no independent thought or action, let alone resistance to Russian military movements, should be expected.¹³

Belarus does visibly resist Russian attempts to control the provision of its military security. When

Belarus needed to purchase modern fighter aircraft to upgrade its aging air force, Moscow announced instead that Belarus would be hosting a Russian airbase to provide for joint defense. Lukashenka faced down pressure from Russia and successfully insisted on the aircraft purchase instead. Standing firm in this way challenged Russia's perception of the country as an extension of its own territory. However, the stand-off over air basing was just part of a consistent pattern of Russia announcing "joint" defense initiatives which were not endorsed by Minsk. In 2016, Russia announced the creation of a "joint military organization of the Union State," including notional unification of the two countries' armed forces. This statement too was made unilaterally by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu, with no comment from Belarus. As with other manifestations of the "Union State," this appears to be a Russian idea that could remain largely on paper without Belarusian cooperation.

Other examples include Russia repeatedly stating that it intends to deploy missile systems on Belarusian territory. These statements come as a more or less routine response to a wide range of U.S. and NATO initiatives that Russia disapproves of, most recently the basing of ballistic missile defense capabilities in Redzikowo, Poland.¹⁴ Yet again, despite Russia commonly presenting this move as a joint initiative, it is firmly resisted by Belarus.¹⁵

The existence of a joint air defense system with Belarus may present a more serious complicating factor in the event of confrontation, depending on the extent to which it is implemented.¹⁶ The location of Russian air defense systems and how much their operations are integrated with Belarusian systems could significantly influence the freedom of movement

of U.S. and NATO air assets across a wide range of Alliance territory. If Belarus should decide or be persuaded to host advanced Russian air defense systems, their range into NATO airspace would be greatly extended by adding a substantial forward basing area in addition to Kaliningrad. But even before that, if Russia were to exercise what it sees as its right to defend Belarusian airspace with or without moving ground-based air defenses forward, Russia's own air defense zone would be pushed forward by hundreds of kilometers, adding to the Kaliningrad effect by further deepening the isolation of the Baltic States from the NATO "mainland."

Russia continues to aspire to take over portions of Belarus's capability for self-defense. A key argument against acquiescing to this security outsourcing is Belarus's wish not to involve itself in confrontation. Hosting Russian airbases, air defense systems, or more ground troops would undermine Belarus's aspirations for neutrality by presenting both a potential source of hostile activity against Western neighbors and a target for countermeasures.

However, there are now indications that the possibility of a Russian military operation against Belarus is being taken seriously. While major Russian military units are being relocated closer to the Belarusian border, Belarus has notably started to make military preparations that appear more relevant for conflict with Russia.¹⁷ Lukashenka noted in 2015 that the Belarusian Army needed to be capable of "being thrown from Brest to Vitebsk in half a night," in other words, from the Polish border to the other end of the country opposite Russia.¹⁸

Outlook

Hosting a reported 160,000 people displaced by the conflict in Ukraine, Belarus is already suffering the consequences of Russian intervention there. Lukashenka's primary focus must be avoiding similar action against Belarus. Because of simple geography, falling out of favor with Russia will always have far more serious consequences for Belarus than disappointing the West. Meanwhile, Russia will be watching with concern Belarus's improving relations with the West for any sign that this means loosening ties with Russia. Bilateral talks between Lukashenka and Putin shortly after the March 2017 demonstrations, although ostensibly resolving a gas dispute, gave the impression of a normalization in relations.¹⁹ However, this may be only temporary.

Further steps toward the normalization of relations between the United States, the EU, NATO countries, and Belarus will need to be handled with caution if they are not to provoke a dangerous reaction from Russia. Russia will seek means of deterring what it sees as U.S. encroachment, but judging the point at which it will act will be challenging. In Ukraine, it took the departure from power of President Viktor Yanukovich to trigger the Russian response. However, it is possible that, emboldened by success in Ukraine and Syria, Russia might feel capable of intervening at an earlier and less dramatic stage than in the case of Belarus.

Much has been written in media commentary about the so-called "Suwałki gap," the narrow strip along the Polish-Lithuanian border that separates Russia's Kaliningrad exclave from Belarus. However, many of the scenarios of Russian military adventurism

in this area assume a compliant Belarus and a Belarusian military functioning as merely an extension of the Russian armed forces. The real situation is greatly more nuanced than this—Belarus may not wish to go to war with Russia, but equally it is showing no inclination to go to war **for** Russia.

As with a number of other scenarios, the power of action in this region lies in its potential for destabilizing NATO and for demonstrating Alliance helplessness. It is claimed in Russia that if Poland in 1939 had acquiesced to German demands for a land corridor to Danzig, World War II could have been avoided. No matter how remote this may be from the truth, it should be seen as a potential rationale and justification for if Russia would demand—or establish by subterfuge or “humanitarian convoys”—a land corridor to Kaliningrad. This would only happen if Russia were confident that it could predict or manage the NATO response, or the lack thereof.

A Russian intervention along the lines of Ukraine is considered plausible if Russia considers it necessary to ensure Belarusian obedience, including by removing Lukashenka and replacing him with another figure more acceptable to Moscow. However, Russia would have little interest in destabilizing Belarus, with consequent expensive unrest on the Russian border, if more subtle ways of reining in the country’s independence could be found. In fact, the current president may be the least worst option for Russia. After decades of persecution by the Belarusian authorities, the political opposition in Belarus is small and marginalized—but it is entirely pro-Western, and there is no recognized figure within the country who would make a credible pro-Russian replacement for Lukashenka.

Nevertheless, according to a Finnish study, “[T]he time may be ripe . . . to start thinking about the previously unthinkable, be it economic collapse in Belarus, radical internal transformations or an externally-triggered crisis.”²⁰

Policy Recommendations

President Lukashenka’s position is not easy. Maintaining a degree of freedom of movement for his country by attempting to reduce dependence on Russia and build ties with the West runs the constant risk of a damaging Russian reaction. Any tightening of domestic control may buy more time by heading off Russian accusations of dangerous instability, but the likely cost is a setback in Belarus’s outreach efforts to the EU and its neighbors. In any case, Belarus will still sooner or later be faced with a decisive choice between the East or the West; and the United States, the EU, and NATO need to be fully prepared for that moment.

In this context, the following are specific policy recommendations for the United States:

- The United States should respond positively to outreach initiatives from Belarus, especially invitations to observe exercises. It should encourage NATO allies to do the same.
- Direct bilateral ties should continue to be developed to the maximum extent possible while remaining sensitive to damaging Russian backlash. This should include not only diplomatic representation, but also direct defense cooperation and military-to-military engagement. Both formal and informal measures are important.
- For the U.S. Army, this engagement should include initiatives on a local, cross-border level

to establish direct contact between U.S. units that are forward deployed in Poland (and potentially Lithuania in the future) and their Belarusian counterparts. Any opportunities for establishing confidence-building measures or direct lines of communication should be taken.

- Contact with Belarus should include, as a priority, discussions of crisis management options in the event of a more serious confrontation between Russia and Belarus, the United States, or a neighboring country of Belarus, or among all three.
- Intelligence and analysis efforts should be devoted to tracking and understanding the likely reactions of the Belarusian military and security structures to a confrontation with Russia, both on a national and local level.

MOLDOVA

Moldova's process of developing relations with the EU—and the consequent worsening of relations with Russia—has been ongoing since 2009. Russian action against Ukraine did not cause any evident shift in Moldova's overall foreign policy direction, but it did accelerate these processes already under way.

As part of the response to events in Ukraine in early 2014, Western partners became increasingly interested in stepping up the pace of the European integration of Moldova. The pro-European government coalition in Moldova capitalized on this increased interest, hoping to ensure that the Ukraine crisis did not spill over to its eastern neighbor. By April 2014, Moldova was granted a visa-free regime with the EU, and in June,

it signed the EU-Moldova Association Agreement that also included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement. At the same time, the government in Chisinau hosted more high-level EU and U.S. delegation visits in 2014 than in any previous year. These visits resulted in significant financial assistance to Moldova for the promotion of economic reforms and enhancement of border security.

Moldova also became more involved in defense cooperation with NATO and directly with the United States, leading to the granting of non-NATO ally status in December 2014.²¹ Concurrently, in March 2014, Moldova's Anti-Mafia National Movement, with broad domestic support, declared that the country should follow Ukraine's example and withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as well as introduce a visa regime for Russian nationals.²² An online poll conducted from March to April 2014 showed that 66 percent of citizens supported leaving the CIS.²³ The country also joined EU sanctions against Ukrainian and Russian officials in March 2014.²⁴ This increased cooperation with Western partners has led to an inevitable worsening in relations with Russia.

Mixed Support for Ukraine

The Moldovan Government reiterated its continuing support for Ukraine's territorial integrity throughout 2014.²⁵ Declared support for overall regional stability also led to a broad, renewed interest in finding a viable solution for the Transnistrian conflict, despite Russia using the separatist region as an additional means of destabilizing Ukraine. This robust Moldovan narrative on Ukraine only changed in November 2016 with the election of pro-Russian Igor Dodon as

President, who then publicly discounted Ukrainian territorial integrity by declaring that Crimea belongs to Russia.²⁶ Dodon's statement eventually led to a diplomatic freeze between Chisinau and Kiev.

Dodon has already visited the Kremlin several times during his presidency in an apparent search for legitimacy through appearances next to Vladimir Putin. At the same time, his original anti-EU stance is gradually changing toward a more pragmatic approach, after being elected by a constituency to which he has promised integration in the Russia-backed EEU instead. In an extensive interview with the Russian news agency Interfax in November 2016, he explained that he sought a "strategic partnership" with Moscow, taking into account Moldova's strong economic dependence on Russia. At the same time, he stressed that he would not abolish the EU-Moldova Association Agreement, since Moldova needs good relations with both the East and the West.²⁷

Domestic Challenges

As a result of the previous pro-European orientation, Moldovan relations with Russia gradually deteriorated throughout 2014. The Russian authorities imposed new bans on products originating from Moldova, restricting Moldovan exports to Russian markets for critical branches of the Moldovan economy. In April 2014, Russia added an embargo on meat products originating in Moldova to a September 2013 ban on Moldovan wines, and later bans on fruit and vegetables.²⁸ Concurrently, Russia selectively lifted the ban on wine imports from Gagauzian and Transnistrian producers.²⁹ By giving preferential treatment to these regions, Russia antagonized the Moldovan population

still further. Moreover, it openly defied the Moldovan Government by interfering in the domestic affairs of these regions, explicitly supporting candidates in Transnistrian and Gagauzian local elections. This combination of economic pressure and interference in local elections is thought to have induced the Moldovan authorities to temper their public condemnation of further Russian aggression in Ukraine.

November 2014 Elections

While the Ukraine crisis was unfolding, Moldova prepared for the parliamentary elections to be held in November 2014. Already existing social divisions were exploited by political parties taking advantage of the new regional instability. The Socialists capitalized on Ukrainian events by warning of a potential “Moldova-Maidan scenario,” replicating events in Kiev after the elections. By contrast, the Liberal Party, also referring to events in Ukraine, pleaded for Moldova to abandon its neutral status and accept NATO troops on its territory, arguing “the security and freedoms of Moldovan citizens can be ensured only by NATO.”³⁰ According to one public opinion poll in November 2013, less than 10 percent of citizens named “war in the region” as one of the three problems that worried them the most; by November 2014, this number exceeded 30 percent. The election results reconfirmed Moldova’s European orientation, with a pro-EU coalition winning with a much-reduced mandate.

Escalations in the Transnistrian Conflict

Early events in Ukraine had a significant impact on subsequent developments in the separatist region of Transnistria. On March 18, 2014, only a few days after

the Crimea referendum, the Transnistrian authorities sent an official request to Sergei Naryshkin, Chairman of the Russian State Duma, asking for consideration of annexation of Transnistria to the Russian Federation.³¹ This request was later repeated multiple times. The Moldovan authorities have declined to take the Transnistrian gesture seriously, claiming it is “purely symbolic and without practical value.” Prime Minister Iurie Leancă declared that this was not the first time Tiraspol had undertaken actions of this kind, and therefore, it was not a reason for serious concern.³²

In contrast, the gesture caused alarm in Ukraine, NATO, and the EU, sparking renewed interest in resolving the conflict. Ukraine imposed an economic blockade in Transnistria by obstructing the transportation of goods for the Russian military.³³ It also interdicted the transit to and from Transnistria of Tiraspol officials and Russian peacekeeping troops via Ukrainian territory, an action that has not been replicated by Moldovan authorities.³⁴ In 2015, Ukraine took further actions, such as blocking the import of excisable products across the Transnistrian border, following the territory’s declared wish to join Russia.³⁵ This blockade has affected 70 percent of Transnistrian enterprises.

Moldova does not appear to have capitalized on the window of opportunity created by Western partners in the first half of 2014 to find a viable settlement for the 2-decade-old, frozen conflict in Transnistria. Meanwhile, the authorities in Tiraspol have continued to take bolder steps with Russian support. In April 2014, they boycotted the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) negotiations under the “5+2” format to be held in Vienna, Austria.³⁶ In January 2017, partly as a result of the inactivity of the

Moldovan authorities, Tiraspol opened a permanent representation in Moscow, an action subsequently declared illegal by Moldova.³⁷ Partly as a result, Moldova and Ukraine have stated their intention to deepen bilateral cooperation.³⁸

Public Opinion

Understandably, considering the proximity of the events in Ukraine, Moldovans have watched developments in 2014 closely. Despite the strong effects of Russian media propaganda, especially felt prior to the November 2016 elections, Moldovan attitudes toward the Russian intervention in Ukraine appear split according to preexisting views about the geopolitical orientation of the country.³⁹ One-third of citizens would like to join the EU, another third would like to see Moldova a member of the EEU, and the rest do not express an opinion. Unsurprisingly, citizens who view Moldova as having a European future have predominantly condemned Russian intervention in Ukraine and expressed support for Ukrainian territorial integrity. Moreover, the Moldovan diaspora abroad has also taken Ukraine's side and condemned Russian aggression, including by way of a public declaration by 80 diaspora associations across 27 countries. These views have also urged the international community to assist Moldova in preventing potential spillover of the conflict onto its territory.⁴⁰ In Transnistria, by contrast, there is no clear understanding of the views of citizens toward the war in Ukraine, since no polls have been made public.

Despite these evidently strongly held views, there have been very few public demonstrations against the Russian Government in Chisinau. One of the

few events organized was an early student protest in April 2014 with slogans such as “Here is not Crimea,” “Putin—aggressor,” and “Russian Army get out!”⁴¹ By contrast, the pro-Russian segment of society, primarily the elderly and Russian speakers, have taken a passive approach toward unfolding events and appear to avoid being publicly outspoken about their views.

Outlook and Policy Recommendations

In November 2018, Moldova will hold parliamentary elections where it is expected that pro-Russian parties will gain significant electoral support to form a new government. As pro-European reforms are currently stalled with consequences felt by society at large, the current pro-EU governmental coalition is expected to lose its parliamentary majority.

Considering the mounting societal support for pro-Russian political forces, the following policy options would assist the United States in containing Russian influence and facilitating the preservation of Moldova’s European orientation:

- Offering support to new pro-European parties emerging on the political scene, within overall democracy promotion programs;
- Continuing civil aid and outreach programs aimed at the Moldovan population;
- Facilitating imports to the United States of products banned from Russia but vital for the Moldovan economy;
- Stepping up support for the settlement of the Transnistrian conflict; and,
- For the U.S. Army specifically, fostering and continuing direct military-to-military contacts with the Moldovan armed forces and

encouraging this within the context of ongoing training missions within western Ukraine.

CENTRAL ASIA

For all of Central Asia's growing importance, it is a hard area to grasp analytically. To nonspecialists, it is likely to be something of a *terra incognita*, an unknown region, whose landmarks impart a sense of unfamiliarity, even unease, to those coming from the outside to try and understand it. Yet, at the same time, even for specialists, its reality is elusive and debates abound as to the nature of its domestic politics in both individual states and across the region.⁴²

Since emerging from independence in the early 1990s, the Central Asian countries' geopolitical relations with external powers have fluctuated considerably. Bilateral relations with Russia and the United States have waxed and waned, but Central Asia is now firmly situated in the economic, political, and security orbit of Russia and China, with diminishing ties to Euro-Atlantic structures.

Owing to Central Asia's interdependency with Russia and the latter's consistent desire to increase its leverage in the region, Russia is likely to remain the most influential external actor over the security landscape. The wealthier hydrocarbon-exporting Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, will lean toward Russia for regime support and shared values, but they will remain wary of too much proximity with their unpredictable northern neighbor.⁴³ Moscow may continue to play on the vulnerability of the poorer states, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, providing military assistance to entrench its relevance for the region. Meanwhile, Central Asia's

key economic partner, China, is unlikely in the short term to challenge Russia's military dominance in the region, although this dynamic could change if the security of China's commercial interests in the region is challenged.⁴⁴

Mixed Feelings on Russia

Russia's ambitions for its position in Central Asia since independence have been much grander than its ability to impose its influence. Russia's perceived role as the security guarantor for the region, particularly with regard to the overspill of insecurity from Afghanistan following the withdrawal of NATO in 2014, has been tested and found insufficient.⁴⁵ Russia's refusal to assist during an outbreak of violence between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 illustrated how Russia was not able to project power and intervene during internal conflict. The annexation of Crimea and attacks on eastern Ukraine from 2014 onwards merely continued a process of erosion of Central Asian states' trust in Moscow.

However, regional Central Asian foreign policy shows a paradoxical trend. On the one hand, the five countries seek distance from Russia, particularly since 2014 to 2015, looking for closer ties with the West or China. Yet, on the other hand, they remain aware that the West's relative inaction during the Ukraine crisis demonstrated that Euro-Atlantic security alliances are unlikely to assist in security crises in Central Asia, and furthermore that Western security interests in the region have substantially diminished.

Domestic factors are also key. Central Asia is facing a wide range of difficulties, including severe budgetary pressures, stalling economic growth, deteriorating

socio-economic conditions, and rising public disaffection. Rule of law is absent, and corruption is widespread. The prospects for internal and interregional conflicts are higher at the time of this writing than they have been for a quarter of a century. The region's authoritarian leaders fear popular revolts and seek to safeguard the political status quo. By contrast, the values-based agenda promoted by the West represents a risky and unwelcome change for regional strongmen who rely on informal networks rather than institutions. In spite of diminishing trust in Moscow, Russia's illiberal approach is regarded by Central Asian leaders as the most attractive governance model to weather the current storm. Putin's re-election in the 2018 Russian presidential elections will only have reinforced this impression.

Central Asia after Ukraine

The Ukraine crisis provoked conflicting reactions from the Central Asian governments. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan initially refrained from supporting Russia's position, partially in order to maintain positive relations with the West, but later aligned their positions closer to Russia's. Tajikistan's reaction to the crisis was muted; neither the Ministry of Foreign Affairs nor high-level officials spoke publicly about Ukraine or stated the country's position.⁴⁶ Traditionally more neutral, Turkmenistan also did not take a stand on the Ukraine crisis, and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs only released a statement concerning Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. In the majority of the countries besides Kyrgyzstan, the largely state-controlled media soft-pedaled events in Ukraine, giving more airtime to Russia's view on

events, shown through the largely Russia-dominated popular media in the region.

Nevertheless, the alarming precedent of a more aggressive and volatile Russian foreign policy in the region, and in particular Russia's assertion of a right to defend Russian minorities abroad, provoked particular concern in Kazakhstan—home to the second largest ethnic Russian population outside Russia after Ukraine (23 percent of Kazakhstan's population) and shares an 8,000-kilometer border with Russia.

"Maidan Contagion"

More importantly however, the ousting of President Yanukovich raised concern that similar "Maidan" revolutions could occur in Central Asia. The Georgian (2003) and Ukrainian (2004) "color" revolutions had already unnerved the Central Asian governments, but the overthrow of Yanukovich cemented the regional governments' anxiety regarding their sustainability of power. One result was a further tightening of the civic space in the region to mitigate the risk of Maidan contagion, particularly in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In 2015, both of these countries introduced new legislation analogous to that adopted in Russia in 2012 that forced foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as foreign agents.⁴⁷

These steps move the governments further away from values-based Western agendas and potential alignment with Western governments under traditionally acceptable relationships. In the Western view, they also risk undermining security further in the long run.⁴⁸

General Trends and Projections

Russia – Forging Military Dependencies to Secure Geopolitical Loyalty

Russia is the principal supplier of military equipment to Central Asia, and Kremlin rhetoric suggests an increased emphasis on a military approach toward security in Central Asia. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, Russia has significantly increased its export of major weapons to Kazakhstan (a recipient of 0.7 percent of the world's major weapons) and supplies 76 percent of Kazakhstan's total arms imports.⁴⁹

Russia also conducts military exercises with Central Asia, both bilaterally and increasingly through the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Institutions such as the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), effectively led by China, are seen as being ineffective in formal terms, but playing an influential role in supporting nondemocratic governments in the region through legal agreements, such as multilateral counterterrorism mechanisms.⁵⁰ In October 2015, in response to the perceived but often exaggerated security threat from Afghanistan, Russia signed various agreements on combating international terrorism and announced base extension agreements with Tajikistan until 2042 and with Kyrgyzstan until 2032.⁵¹ Russia also increased the number of military drills and joint exercises with Central Asian forces.

Russia – Weak Economic Player in Central Asia

Since 2014, Moscow has sought to use economic cooperation to strengthen ties between Central Asian states and Russia, pushing all countries to demonstrate loyalty by joining the EEU, especially following Ukraine's departure from the organization. Nevertheless, the damage to the Russian economy caused by falling oil prices, together with Western sanctions and countersanctions, have reduced the appeal of closer economic involvement with Russia.⁵² Furthermore, initial assessments of the EEU suggest that its domination by Russia is reflected in a counterintuitive decrease in regional trade.⁵³ Tajikistan has expressed tepid interest in joining the EEU owing to uncertainty about its impact on the domestic economy, but also because it is concerned about damaging economic and diplomatic relationships with non-EEU actors, such as Qatar and Iran. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are unlikely to join the union.

Although Russia enjoys some debt leverage over the weaker Central Asian countries, China's One Belt, One Road multi-million dollar project in Central Asia will ultimately dwarf Russia's existing economic ties to the region.

U.S. Foreign Policy in Central Asia

The United States assisted Central Asia's geopolitical orientation to the West in the 1990s, helping the countries attain and defend their sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence.⁵⁴ This included supporting the creation of democratic governance, free-market economies, and regional economic integration. After the terrorist attacks in the United States

on September 11, 2001, Central Asia moved to a position of high priority in U.S. strategy due to the region's ability to support large-scale U.S. military operations in Afghanistan. During these years, the United States appeared to be gaining a longer-term foothold in the region, while Russia's position was weakening. Meanwhile, Moscow holds a mixed view on the role of the United States in the region. It resents U.S. military collaboration with the regional governments, but at the same time, it is concerned that the region is vulnerable to attacks from extremist Islamic groups.

Under President Barack Obama's administration, which oversaw the withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan, the United States paid less attention to Central Asia as the U.S. foreign policy focus moved to other regions, in particular the Middle East and Asia. Fading U.S. attention unnerved Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, countries which are keen to see Western involvement in the region to hedge against the competing interests of Central Asia's key economic, political, and security partners, Russia and China.

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have attempted to maintain U.S. focus on Central Asia through various diplomatic initiatives, the latest being the "five plus one dialogue" (five Central Asian states plus the United States). Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's visit to the region in November 2015 gave Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan optimism for the return of the United States to the region, but this was short-lived. Countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are more dependent on Russia, share the view that a U.S. presence is necessary in Central Asia to balance Russia and China, but they also recognize that their best interests lie in keeping aligned with Russia.

The election of U.S. President Donald Trump has reinforced concerns among Central Asian governments that the region will remain on the periphery of U.S. foreign policy. Besides the phasing out of International Security Assistance Force combat operations in Afghanistan, the United States lacks “compelling interests” in Central Asia, in contrast to those in China, Iran, and Russia.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the United States does not share values with Central Asia or envisage new economic investment incentives in the region owing to low oil prices and challenging regional business environments. Although the United States has stepped up its training of elite military units in the region, overall, U.S. military aid programs in Central Asia have decreased.⁵⁶ However, the regional governments will push for the United States to continue to provide military assistance as well as economic aid through multilateral international financial institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

It has been suggested that President Trump’s narrow focus on “Islamic terrorism” could align with Central Asian governments’ exploitation of the global fight against terrorism for domestic purposes to override previous U.S. concerns over human rights and corruption, which had undermined counterterrorism and security cooperation with Central Asia.⁵⁷ In addition to counterterrorism, Central Asian governments are likely to accept U.S. assistance in improving border security and enhancing their counternarcotic and possibly counter human-trafficking capabilities.

Tajikistan

After the Ukraine crisis, Tajikistan was the most reluctant Central Asian country to take a position,

staying largely silent. This muted reaction can be explained by the fact that Tajikistan is the poorest of all former Soviet states and is beholden to Russia for both economic and security support. Tajikistan's relations with the West have always been superficial. After joining the Partnership for Peace (PfP) in 1999, Tajik cooperation with NATO failed to evolve, and NATO closed its office in Dushanbe in 2016. Recent U.S. polls suggest that 34 percent of the Tajik population regard NATO as a threat.⁵⁸

Since the Ukraine crisis, Russia has put Tajikistan under a lot of pressure to join the EEU, but President Emomali Rahmon has resisted, owing partly to considerable controversy domestically, attempting to seek legal protections for Tajik migrant laborers in Russia, and greater admission quotas for Tajik students in Russian universities. In 2014, remittances from migrant laborers were worth more than half of Tajikistan's gross domestic product (GDP).⁵⁹

Tajikistan relies on Moscow for its security. Russia's largest military contingent abroad is the 201st Military Base in Dushanbe, with 7,000 troops who are expected to remain in the country until 2042.⁶⁰ An agreement was signed in February 2017 during a visit by Putin to Tajikistan to strengthen the Tajik-Afghan border with the help of the 201st Russian Military Base. In the future, Tajikistan is likely to strengthen partner relations and strategic cooperation with Russia, as it meets the country's vital interests: Moscow and Dushanbe have an impressive array of shared legal and regulatory bodies that govern their interactions in almost all spheres of activity.⁶¹

Kyrgyzstan

In contrast to other Central Asian countries, in early March 2014, Kyrgyzstan initially recognized the legitimacy of the Ukrainian transitional government and questioned the legitimacy of President Yanukovich.⁶² Once the Russia-Ukraine tensions escalated, Bishkek quickly retreated from this position and refrained from commenting. The government never criticized Russia and ultimately recognized the Crimean referendum to join Russia.

During the first decade of the 21st century, Kyrgyzstan was the object of competition of three integration projects: America's New Silk Road, China's Silk Road Economic Belt, and the EEU. However, while the West has largely abandoned its ambitions, China and Russia continue to deepen their ties. As one of the weaker Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan is vulnerable to Russian leverage, including considerable pressure to join the EEU. During President Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan in February 2017, he highlighted the success of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the union, noting that remittances from Kyrgyz laborers grew by about 18.5 percent over 9 months in 2016 to US\$1.3 billion (approximately one-third of Kyrgyzstan's GDP).⁶³

Russia maintains military installations in Kyrgyzstan, including the Kant Air Base near Bishkek and a naval test site at Lake Issyk Kul in the Tien Shan Mountains. In 2014, further Russian pressure and financial incentives caused the Kyrgyz parliament to vote for the closure of the U.S. airbase at Manas Airport in Bishkek, a key U.S. facility in Central Asia since 2011 that hosted approximately 1,500 soldiers and had been used as a staging post for flying personnel and equipment in and out of Afghanistan.

Since the annexation of Crimea, Russia has been attempting, with limited success, to leverage soft power in Kyrgyzstan through mass media and education.⁶⁴ Russian television is very influential in Kyrgyzstan, as it is throughout Central Asia, and has assisted in spreading Russia's views on the West and also on the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Uzbekistan

Former President Islam Karimov, who ruled from the end of the Soviet period until his demise in September 2016, sought to reduce Russia's political and economic dominance over his country and the region in line with the broad principles of Uzbek foreign policy. On a number of occasions, he warned against renewed "great power chauvinism" and denounced military cooperation within the Moscow-led alliances of the CIS and CSTO.

Following Russia's incursions into Ukraine, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry issued a statement declaring that Russia's deployments in Crimea "cannot but cause deep anxiety and concern in Uzbekistan." Karimov was a vocal critic of Russia's aggressive comeback in Central Asia, expressing concern over Moscow's political and military leverage over Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Trying to diversify its alliances, Uzbekistan has developed its partnership with China and other regional powers, such as South Korea, Japan, and the Gulf States.⁶⁵

Uzbekistan's new foreign policy trajectory under the mandate of Uzbekistan's new President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has yet to take definitive form. Uzbekistan is unlikely to enter alliances that would undermine its military-political sovereignty, including hosting

foreign military bases, participation in military blocs, and joint action between Uzbek and foreign troops outside of Uzbekistan.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Russia remains Uzbekistan's second most important trading partner (China surpassed Russia in 2015) and enjoys some leverage over Uzbekistan owing to the high number of Uzbek migrant workers in Russia. As a place of employment for approximately four million Uzbek migrant workers and, as a result, the Uzbek Government is particularly sensitive over how the return of these immigrants could be a catalyst for unrest.

Uzbekistan has broadly welcomed China's increasing economic presence in Central Asia as a balance to Russian interests. China's interests in the region align closely with those of the Uzbek elite, emphasizing the importance of maintaining a stable security environment, not interfering in the internal affairs of other states, and combating the "three evils" of separatism, terrorism, and extremism.

In the 1990s, Uzbekistan joined NATO's PfP and supported the Alliance's expansion to include the Baltic States. Despite criticism of the regime's human rights record, the country became the main U.S. ally in the region. However, Uzbekistan's relations with the West collapsed following Tashkent's violent suppression of demonstrators in Andijan in May 2005. The West's critical response and the imposition of an arms embargo led to a volte-face in Uzbekistan's diplomatic relations. Uzbekistan accused the United States and Kyrgyzstan of providing financing to the demonstrators, demanded U.S. forces quit the Karshi-Khanabad base, and closed a number of U.S. NGOs based in the country. Over a decade later, the Uzbek elite is now anxious to maintain positive relations with the West to secure international legitimacy for the new president

and as a potential source of much-needed investment and security assistance.

Kazakhstan

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan has tried to act as bridge between Europe and Asia, maintaining ties with Moscow but also subscribing to a multi-vector foreign policy strategy. Russia is wary of Astana's links and debts to China, whose advance into Kazakhstan threatens to tip the balance of power in Central Asia. Kazakhstan is a member of both NATO's PfP program and the Russian-led CSTO, and its membership in the EEU should be viewed within this complex matrix. President Nazarbayev's positive relations with Moscow and the West are an expression of his country's identity as a crossroads between continents and cultures.

Astana has positioned itself as a mediator for the Iran and P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States; plus Germany) negotiations regarding the nuclear issue; for Russia-Turkey talks; and, more recently, for several rounds of peace talks for the Syria conflict. Although the Syrian peace talks in Astana have not been successful, hosting high-profile events aids Kazakhstan's international image and lends it gravitas in its standing in relation to Russia.⁶⁷ Russia is also grateful to Kazakhstan for its "geopolitical loyalty" in supporting Russian efforts at the United Nations (UN) (Kazakhstan became a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council on January 1, 2017).

Although Russia sees Kazakhstan as a natural part of a Russia-led Eurasian economic and security system, events in Ukraine altered how Kazakhstan views

Russian intentions in the former Soviet space. At the onset of the Ukraine crisis, Kazakhstan expressed concerns about Ukraine's territorial integrity and voiced veiled criticism of Russia's use of force in Ukraine. However, this view was soon replaced by an official "understanding" of Russia's position (with Kazakhstan recognizing the legitimacy of the Crimean referendum, before back-pedaling again). The articulation of Kazakhstan's independent foreign policy identity has become more pronounced since the annexation of Crimea due to fears that Russia could use a Ukraine- or Georgia-style pretext to intervene militarily in order to "protect" ethnic Russians in northern Kazakhstan. The removal of Yanukovich was also the first time a regime change in the former Soviet Union involved the participation of an organized right-wing nationalist opposition. This raised concerns in Kazakhstan about threats to the regime from their own growing nationalistic movement.⁶⁸

The likelihood of Russia taking expansionist steps in northern Kazakhstan and provoking ethnic unrest is low, particularly given the impact that it may have on Chinese interests in the region. However, there is persistent unease in Kazakhstan owing to uncertainty regarding Russia's regional intentions. Putin stoked such concerns in October 2014 when he remarked that the Kazakh state did not exist prior to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991.⁶⁹ In response to Russia's assertiveness, Kazakhstan has been closely monitoring societal developments and introducing subtle policy changes to balance interethnic relations on its northern border.

Turkmenistan

In character with the country's position of neutrality, Turkmenistan remained silent on Russia's annexation of Crimea. However, in keeping with Turkmenistan's foreign policy being a function of the country's gas exports, in October 2015, President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov expressed formal support for the sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence of Ukraine (a key export destination for Turkmen gas) during a meeting with Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko.⁷⁰

Turkmenistan is anxious with regard to Russia's expansionist policies and aware that China, its main gas client, cannot serve as an effective counterweight. Turkmenistan was also hit by Russia's unexpected and unilateral decrease in its gas imports in 2009. Consequently, Ashgabat will continue to attempt to increase its cooperation with the West in order to diversify its customers and routes. In spite of shared U.S.-Turkmenistan enthusiasm for the Turkmenistan to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) pipeline, the feasibility of the project is still in doubt, owing to security and financial issues.

Security along the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan border is of increasing concern to the Turkmen leadership and is forcing Turkmenistan to examine its position of neutrality.⁷¹ Turkmenistan has reportedly allowed Russian and Uzbek military personnel to assist in strengthening the border.⁷² In 2015, Turkmenistan approached the United States for military aid to assist the country in addressing instability on its border with Afghanistan.⁷³ Security concerns on the southern border are likely to persist, and in the context of continuing economic difficulties, the Turkmen

Government will continue to seek military assistance from the United States, and possibly Russia as well.

Policy Recommendations—Central Asia

Specific policy on the states of Central Asia must necessarily be determined by the overall U.S. strategic aims for the region. At the time of this writing, these aims appear to be in flux and not formulated in a manner which is accessible and comprehensible for outside observers (and consequently, it has to be assumed, for the states of the region as well).

But whatever eventual policy priorities are set, continued close monitoring of the relative strength of foreign influence from Russia and China in the region, and gauging their appetite for risk in security and economic terms respectively, is essential. One of the most effective ways of continuing this monitoring will be preservation of a strong corps of defense attachés to augment U.S. diplomatic representation in the region. Cuts or restrictions to diplomatic presence or defense engagement would be highly damaging to situational awareness.

If Russia wishes to legitimize assertive action in Central Asia, one method of doing so would be to use the CSTO. For this reason and others, the United States should continue to handle the CSTO with caution.

The CSTO up to this point has had mostly symbolic value as a notional counterweight to NATO and a body initiated by Moscow to counter potential NATO and U.S. influence in the former Soviet space. However, the period since 2014 has seen a renewed impetus on the CSTO to grow into a full-fledged military-political alliance capable of performing its declared responsibilities and tasks.⁷⁴ In this context, it

must be remembered that the CSTO's political will and military capacity remain essentially Russia's.⁷⁵ Consequently, the uses to which it will be put will serve Russian objectives, if necessary, against the interests of other members. This is analogous to the Warsaw Pact, which was unusual among military alliances in that it only ever invaded itself.

Furthermore, it is still the case that engagement with the CSTO, whether through NATO or directly, should be avoided because it would provide the organization with the validation and legitimation it seeks.

CAUCASUS

In the Caucasus, fallout from the Ukrainian conflict will almost certainly strengthen the most uncooperative and belligerent dimensions of Russian policy. Hopes to promote a more cooperative relationship between Russia and NATO as a foundation for benign enlargement have been shattered. . . . The Caucasus remains a shatterbelt, where Russian interests are defined in such a way as to make them incompatible with the vision of the region's fixture that is dominant in the West. The Ukrainian conflict seems to be exaggerating the degree of incompatibility.⁷⁶

Not all foreign policy developments in the South Caucasus should be ascribed to the effects of Ukraine. Many trends there are long-term and do not reflect contradictions between the West and Russia. Most prominent among these, of course, is the suspended conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Russia is content to exploit disputes such as this as pressure points in order to work toward short- or long-term objectives, and to maintain a military presence in the region wherever possible.⁷⁷

In terms of balance between Russia and the EU, the South Caucasus states could hypothetically benefit through participation in both integration projects: the EU's AAs and the Russia-led EEU. However, just as it is in Ukraine, the EU's agenda in the South Caucasus is also a threat to Russian interests. The crisis in Ukraine could quite possibly have taken place in the Caucasus instead.

Russia follows a tri-polar policy in the South Caucasus, making significant distinctions in its approach to each of the regional actors, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno Karabakh. Its political, economic, and military leverage is strong and influences fundamental decisions of its partners and non-partners in the region. By contrast, it is now broadly recognized that European and North American partners, insofar as they cannot act as promptly or directly in the region as can Russia, are consequently less powerful and reliable actors in the Caucasus.

Armenia

Armenia's foreign policy is first and foremost defined by the Nagorno Karabakh conflict.⁷⁸ Depending on Russia for its security and most of its energy supplies, Yerevan is not in a position to resist Moscow's drive to keep the EU out of the South Caucasus. For Armenia, Russia's actions in Ukraine served as a confirmation that Yerevan's decision to withdraw from the AA with the EU in September 2013 to join the EEU was the right course of action. In the months following the Crimea annexation, Yerevan carefully stuck to a pro-Moscow line. In March 2014, Armenia was 1 of only 11 countries that voted against UN General Assembly Resolution 68-262, which affirmed

the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Some analysts argue that despite the different context, this decision stemmed from Armenia's support for Karabakh's right to self-determination.⁷⁹

Membership in the EEU has failed to bring promised economic benefits to Armenia. In fact, the volume of its bilateral trade with Russia fell by 11 percent in 2015 but, despite some growth in 2016, has still not recovered to 2014 levels.⁸⁰ In addition, remittances from Russia dropped sharply for three consecutive years as a consequence of Russia's economic slump due to the fall in the price of oil.⁸¹ As remittances constitute between 15 and 20 percent of Armenia's GDP every year, this has had an impact on a large section of the population.

However, the outbreak of violence in Karabakh in April 2016 encouraged the Armenian leadership to reassess their policy. The fact that Azerbaijan managed to retake a sliver of territory was considered a major humiliation for Armenia. The authorities in Yerevan felt the backlash from over 2 decades of nationalist and militarist rhetoric targeted at its population; the military defeat led to public outrage that resulted in a wave of dismissals from the General Staff.⁸² There is a growing realization among the population that pervasive corruption and lack of reform in the name of security have weakened the country instead of strengthening it. It has also become clear to Armenian policymakers, as well as the general public, that acquiescing to Russian demands has not won Yerevan any preferential treatment from Moscow. Russia, despite being one of the Minsk Group co-chairs leading the mediation of the conflict in Karabakh, has continued to supply weapons to both sides. The CSTO, of which Armenia is a member, did not intervene during the

clashes. What is more, its fellow members refused to condemn Azerbaijan (a nonmember) for initiating the violence.

Consequently, there are signs that the Armenian leadership has realized it needs more room to maneuver in foreign policy. While good relations with Russia are crucial, Yerevan needs to establish them from as strong a position as possible. This has led to re-engagement with other partners (e.g., with Iran). Following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, work on a joint project with Iran of a hydropower plant on the Arax River can proceed. A deal has been signed on increasing gas imports from Iran, and there are plans to establish a free economic zone in Meghri.⁸³ The Armenian tourism sector also attracts an increasing number of Iranian tourists due to the deteriorating situation in Turkey, encouraged by Yerevan's decision in August 2016 to scrap visas for Iranian tourists.⁸⁴

France is another country with long-standing links to Armenia, mainly due to its large Armenian diaspora. The French company Veolia won a €800 million tender for the expansion of Armenia's water network in November 2016.⁸⁵ Like the other two South Caucasus states, Armenia is also trying to attract Chinese investment. Bilateral trade has increased significantly since 2011, and an agreement on military cooperation was signed in 2012. However, at the moment, China's involvement in the Caucasus is minuscule compared to its activities elsewhere, and it is not sufficiently invested in the region to cause concern to Russia.

The reconnection with the EU after Armenia's withdrawal from the AA is also part of this drive. A new deal with the EU, the so-called Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), billed

as a “solid basis for the continuation of social and economic reforms,” was signed in November 2017.⁸⁶ From Yerevan’s point of view, the main purpose of the CEPA is to keep lines of communication open, much as Armenia’s continuing participation in the PfP program does with NATO.

It is unlikely that this agreement will lead to deep engagement with Brussels. Such involvement would risk provoking Moscow, which Yerevan is not willing to do. Armenia’s inclination toward and dependence on Russia is long standing and unlikely to change soon. The Armenian political elite includes many figures with strong Russian connections; this is true for both the Republican Party and the Prosperous Armenia Party (the two main political parties in Armenia).⁸⁷ A cabinet reshuffle in September 2016 brought no significant changes; on the contrary, the appointment of Karen Karapetyan, formerly the head of Gazprom’s Armenian subsidiary, as prime minister was widely seen as a nod to Russian interests. Furthermore, the government in Yerevan is not interested in pursuing the political reforms necessary for closer engagement with the EU, as they would go against deep-seated, vested interests, which are often enmeshed with Russia.

Even if the Armenian political establishment were inclined to steer its foreign policy away from Russia, their ability to do so is limited. Russia has a military base on the outskirts of Gyumri, Armenia’s second largest city, housing approximately 3,000 troops. In addition, Russia owns key state assets in Armenia, many of them acquired in return for debt cancelation in the early 2000s. Gazprom operates the country’s gas distribution network, including the Iranian-Armenian gas pipeline, and would be well placed to obstruct

implementation of any decision by Yerevan to import most of its gas from Iran. Russia is responsible for 80 percent of Armenia's gas supplies and can increase tariffs at will, as it did in 2013. Russia is also the sole supplier of fuel to Metsamor, an Armenian nuclear power plant responsible for 30 percent of the country's electricity generation. A Russia-based Armenian entrepreneur owns the electricity distribution network, and Armenia's railway network is owned by Russian Railways.⁸⁸ But most importantly, from Yerevan's point of view, Russia is Armenia's main weapons supplier, with a generous credit line allowing Yerevan to purchase armaments it could not otherwise afford.

Armenia's leadership is likely to try to continue its current policy for as long as possible. Popular discontent has manifested itself repeatedly since 2014, although it has not coalesced into a formal political movement.⁸⁹ The government has failed to address the roots of popular discontent, namely corruption and unemployment, since to do so would mean to fatally undermine the country's political establishment. Therefore, the leadership is likely to fall back on its standard solution of rallying people around the Karabakh issue by keeping the conflict simmering. However, the dynamic in Azerbaijan, on the other side of the Karabakh line of contact, is similar, and the situation on the ground has become more unstable since the outbreak of violence in April 2016.⁹⁰ This could lead to a renewal of fighting.

If both parties to the Karabakh conflict were able to achieve a resolution, this would open up a wide range of new policy avenues for Yerevan and at the same time greatly decrease Moscow's influence. However, the Armenian Government is not yet under sufficient pressure—either internal or external—to support a compromise solution.

Azerbaijan

Similar to Armenia, Azerbaijan's foreign policy is guided by two key considerations—regime preservation and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.⁹¹ The Ukraine crisis has presented Azerbaijan with a diplomatic challenge. On the one hand, the government in Baku is no fan of regime change by popular protest; but, on the other hand, Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Donetsk and Luhansk are a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, a principle close to Azerbaijan's heart because of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict.⁹² This means Baku needs to balance sustaining its stated position on Karabakh with not unnecessarily provoking Russia.

Policy-wise, however, the events in Ukraine only reinforced two lessons from the Georgia-Russia war of 2008. First, Russia is not averse to using force to maintain influence over its neighborhood. Second, the United States and the EU are not willing to intervene militarily to protect an Eastern Partnership state. In addition, the Euromaidan protests in Kiev confirmed Baku's view that civil society should be kept on a tight leash. Steadily sliding deeper into authoritarianism for over 2 decades, the regime intensified its crackdown on civil society and dropped all pretense of tolerating external oversight of its political standards.⁹³ This has attracted international criticism, but only the cases of high-profile political prisoners, such as prominent human rights activist Leila Yunus, have mobilized sufficient pressure for their release. Baku has therefore learned that, as long as it does not cross a certain threshold of sensitivity, its crackdown on civil society will have no international consequences.

These trends have contributed to a pronounced cooling of relations between Azerbaijan and the United States and the EU. But Azerbaijan has never shown interest in integration into Euro-Atlantic structures and meeting the conditions for this integration. For the government, links with the United States and the EU are a pragmatic way of balancing Russia's influence. Baku is keen to retain a southern energy export route to Europe as a way of giving the EU and United States a stake in Azerbaijan's independence and increasing their interest and involvement in the Karabakh peace process. Given uncertainty over the former and a perceived deficit of the latter, the Azerbaijani Government sees little incentive to develop relations beyond energy trade, which appears to be satisfactory for Brussels and Washington. Energy links are set to continue unencumbered by political conditionality, and Azerbaijan's suspension from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative in March 2017 is unlikely to have any impact on the financing and execution of the Southern Gas Corridor project.⁹⁴

Azerbaijan's policy toward Russia is based on the calculation that Russia's main concern in its neighborhood is to keep the EU and NATO out. Since, unlike Georgia, Azerbaijan has no intention of having close relations with either, the government in Baku hopes this will dissuade Moscow from making any effort to bring Baku more firmly into Russia's orbit. However, while Azerbaijan does not want to provoke Russia, it has no intention of joining any Russia-led integration projects, whether they be the CSTO or the EEU.⁹⁵ Azerbaijan's position with regard to Russia is thus more confident than Armenia's; in fact, Russia possesses fewer direct levers of influence. After the deal for renewing the lease for the Gabala radar station fell

through in 2012, there are no Russian military installations on Azerbaijani soil. In addition, the country's energy export network is not controlled by Russia, and its economic assets are in the hands of local clans.

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan keeps a careful eye on Russia's activities. The two are rival energy exporters, and Russia does possess means of influencing Azerbaijan externally. The most obvious method is Moscow's role as one of the co-chairs of the Minsk Group, which mediates in the Karabakh conflict. While none of the parties to the conflict see Russia as an honest broker, Baku is especially wary of Russia's longstanding alliance with Armenia. Russia is Azerbaijan's main supplier of weapons, while also maintaining "arms sales parity" between Baku and Yerevan.

Moscow also has other tools to influence Azerbaijan's domestic politics. The candidacy of Rustam Ibragimbekov, a dual Russian-Azerbaijani national, in the 2013 presidential election made the government in Baku realize that its diaspora can be used as a political tool by Moscow. In addition, Baku allowed *Sputnik*, the Kremlin's propaganda channel, to operate in Azerbaijan starting in May 2015, because not granting permission would have created difficulties with Moscow. Its coverage has mostly followed the official Baku line so far, but the channel could prove dangerous in Azerbaijan's otherwise tightly controlled media environment.

Azerbaijan's approach to its other neighbors shows varying degrees of warmth. The JCPOA nuclear deal could present new opportunities for economic cooperation and energy linkages with Iran, but low energy prices make investments in long-term infrastructure unlikely in the near future. In other spheres, Azerbaijan's relations with Iran are tense. Iran has close

connections to Armenia, and Baku is also suspicious of Tehran's potential to use religion to influence Azerbaijani politics.⁹⁶ Due to its fear of politicized religion, Baku also closely watches events in Syria. The Islamic States in Iraq and Syria proved a convenient outlet for religious insurgents, but Baku is increasingly worried about what their eventual return would mean for regime security.

Relations with Georgia are cordial, but Turkey remains Azerbaijan's closest ally in its neighborhood, staunchly supporting Baku's position on Karabakh. Baku has reinforced this relationship through investments in Turkey's energy infrastructure. However, President Erdoğan's increasing unpredictability may present Baku with diplomatic challenges in the future—as happened during Ankara's rapid falling out and equally sudden reconciliation with Moscow in 2017.

Further afield, Azerbaijan has established a good working relationship with Israel. For Baku, the main advantages to this are the ability to purchase military equipment, at least slightly decreasing dependence on Russia.⁹⁷ In addition, friendly relations with Israel give the Azerbaijani Government access to the pro-Israeli lobby network in the United States; this is valuable in Baku's eyes as a possible counterbalance to the influence of the Armenian diaspora.

Like the other South Caucasus states, Azerbaijan has made overtures to China. The construction of the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline is partly financed by the China-backed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and China's Sinopec is partnering with the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic (SOCAR) on the construction of a petrochemical plant in Garadagh.⁹⁸ However, the links are likely to remain

minor; China has already secured access to Central Asian gas resources, compared to which Azerbaijani reserves are not significant.

Azerbaijan is set to continue this multi-vector approach to foreign policy. The main risk for the government is the interplay between popular dissatisfaction and the Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan has long ignored the need for a diversified economy, and consequently the oil price slump has hit the population hard. Faced with popular discontent, Baku is likely to fall back on its standard solution of focusing citizens' attention on the Karabakh conflict. Locked into an arms race with Armenia and emboldened by its small gains in the April 2016 clashes, Azerbaijan may be tempted to try its luck again. However, should it fail, it may face domestic unrest on a larger scale than the localized social protests seen so far. Targeted international effort can help prevent any such escalation of the Karabakh conflict, although resolution in the near future is unlikely.

Georgia

The August 2008 5-day war between Russia and Georgia is a clear antecedent of the war Moscow is currently prosecuting in Ukraine. Georgia, under a reformist leader with Westward ambition, was left dismembered and weakened by the conflict. In addition, it was left with greater anti-Russian resolve than ever.

With first-hand experience, Georgia did not need the Ukraine crisis to be reminded of the threat posed by Russia, to strengthen its defenses, to reform with the aim of acceptance by Europe, or to prepare its population for more confrontation to come.

Domestic Context

Georgia is ostensibly the most democratic of the post-Soviet countries with the exception of the Baltic States. It had its own color revolution in 2003, overthrown an incumbent party at the ballot box (Georgian dream for the United National Movement [UNM] in 2013), and saw a head of government promise to step down voluntarily and then actually do it (Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2014). Through these changes, two things have remained consistent: Georgia's pro-Western geopolitical orientation and its stance in overt opposition to Russia.

The pre-2008 mutual hostility between the two countries was clearly dangerous for the weaker power. Georgia had long been dissatisfied with Russia's support for its separatist elements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria. This support initially grew from rhetoric to economic pressure. Embargoes on traditionally favored exports to Russia, such as wine and mineral water (Russians have a taste for the salty mineral water and semi-sweet wine) hit the Georgian economy hard in key sectors, and the impact was enhanced by a fall in the flow of remittances from Russia.⁹⁹ In 2008, the confrontation between the two countries finally resulted in open warfare.

International Context

The history of relations between the United States and post-Soviet Georgia is one of consistent misunderstanding. Minded to support a young Western-educated leader in the form of Mikheil Saakashvili from 2003, and encouraged by the initial bout of radical reform, the George W. Bush administration failed to

notice that reform had begun to atrophy and Georgia's leader was becoming increasingly demagogic. Georgia had been flattered by the attention it was receiving from the United States, including an unprecedented American presidential visit. It also seemed to offer Bush a much needed foreign policy "win."¹⁰⁰ However, U.S. intentions and America's hitherto unqualified backing were misread by Saakashvili in August 2008, when he appeared to expect more substantial U.S. support for offensives into South Ossetian territory in an attempt to preempt Russian aggression.

Arguably, an overcorrection followed. If the Bush administration could have been accused of blind support for Saakashvili and Georgia, the Obama administration could credibly be said to have not paid it and the wider post-Soviet region sufficient attention at all—with disastrous consequences in terms of undeterred Russian expansionism and flouting of international agreements.

The War in Ukraine

The annexation of Crimea and outbreak of hostilities in Eastern Ukraine provoked predictable and reasonable reactions from Georgia. "We told you so" was the most common, generally followed by, "Why didn't we get this much support in 2008?" But beyond this, Georgian reaction at the popular and elite levels came out strongly in support of Ukraine. In the early days of the conflict, Georgia, in keeping with its disproportionately large contributions to peacekeeping and humanitarian operations elsewhere in the world, sent political and humanitarian aid to Ukraine while anti-Russian demonstrations gathered in Freedom Square singing the Ukrainian national anthem. Some

Georgians are still reported to be fighting for Kyiv in the east, in addition to numerous former government officials now serving in Ukraine—most notoriously, Mikheil Saakashvili as governor of the Odessa region, and most recently, former Foreign Minister Eka Tkeshelashvili as head of a new EU-funded anti-corruption initiative.

In planning for conflict with Ukraine, Russia copied what worked in Georgia and adjusted what did not. Distribution of fresh Russian passports (*pasportizatsiya*), the supposed *casus belli* of defending the rights of compatriots, and accusations of malign Western intentions were repeated in both conflicts. The most striking similarity between the two wars, however, has been their ceasefire plans. In both cases, Russia has used its own interpretation of internationally brokered agreements to cement an on-the-ground advantage.

Nevertheless, despite the Russian Aggression Prevention Act of 2014, which sought to bolster military support for non-NATO allies, no country or international organization has come forward with a convincing plan to countering Russian military adventurism. To Georgia, this resembles Western acquiescence in Russian supremacy in the shared neighborhood.

Georgian Moves

Georgia has made small adjustments to its Russia policy in the transition from the UNM to the Georgian Dream party (via an uncomfortable cohabitation). Saakashvili's successors, aware that their predecessor had presided over the loss of 20 percent of Georgian territory in 2008, were minded to be less confrontational.¹⁰¹ Initial concerns about Prime Minister

Bidzina Ivanishvili's past business connections in Russia appeared unfounded, and Georgia maintained its full support for Ukraine's sovereignty (and its aspirations for NATO and EU membership). However, anti-Russian rhetoric has been noticeably softened and more carefully worded by Georgian Dream leaders—especially in public.

Nevertheless, Russia's continuing occupation of Georgian territory provides constant reminders of the suspended conflict and a means for leverage or pressure. Examples include Russia persistently expanding the border of occupied South Ossetia, proposing a Treaty on Alliance and Integration to Abkhazia, or moving toward the absorption of local forces in the territories into the Russian Army.

Assessing Russian success in its Georgia policy depends upon an assessment of what Russia may consider to be success. If the intention is to weaken Georgia, prevent its membership in NATO and the EU, and discredit it through persistent smear campaigns against Saakashvili, then Russia has succeeded. If the intention was to force Georgia back into a Russian sphere of influence and into nominally multilateral organizations of its choosing, then Russian policy has certainly failed. A preferential trade AA was signed with the EU in 2014 (and came into force in 2016); and in March 2017, Georgians were granted visa-free travel to Schengen Area member states. Both Georgia's war with Russia in 2008 and Ukraine's in 2014 have reaffirmed the country's pro-Western foreign policy course and ensured the further marginalization of the already barely significant pro-Russia constituency.¹⁰²

Policy Recommendations – Caucasus

- Armenia specifically: Encourage the Armenian diaspora in the United States to focus their financial donations on development projects and insist on economic and governance reforms in return for their investment.
- Azerbaijan specifically: Continue to raise concerns over human rights violations and religious freedom in order to challenge the Azerbaijani perception that the West is unconcerned over how it treats its citizens.
- Armenia and Azerbaijan: Together with the other Minsk Group co-chairs, pressure Armenia and Azerbaijan to de-escalate tensions over Karabakh. Do not defer all initiative to Russia.
- Work with the international community to increase the provisions for monitoring the line of contact in Karabakh to deter ceasefire violations.
- Support initiatives that bring Armenians and Azerbaijanis together. These could focus specifically on peace-building but could also be broader. Involve the younger generation (e.g., secondary school students) as well (contact between the two populations has been prevented since the start of the war and many in the younger generations have never met anyone from the other side).
- Support the creation and provision of alternative sources of information on current events and the history of the Karabakh conflict; this includes supporting international broadcasters such as RFE/RL and Voice of America to continue providing services in Armenian and

Azerbaijani, as they are a valuable source of information for the local population.

- Offer training and mentoring opportunities. These should take the form of business/education/journalism professionals spending a designated period of time in the target country, offering advice relevant to the local conditions. In particular, support initiatives and projects that focus on critical thinking skills (at all levels).
- To help fight corruption, enforce anti-money laundering regulations at home to prevent the proceeds of corruption in the region from being reinvested in the United States. Encourage international partners to do the same.

CAUTION AND CLARITY REQUIRED

The variations outlined earlier in how countries in the former Soviet space have responded to the Ukraine crisis underscore the importance of treating them as individual states, rather than as members of blocs or regions. Each country has its own individual matrix of risks and benefits associated with its relationship with Russia. Consequently, each requires a highly unique and tailored approach by the West in general, and the United States in particular, in order to maximize advantage and minimize risk in negotiating the country's short-term future.

The current hostilities with Ukraine are unlikely to be the last example of open confrontation between Moscow and a former Soviet republic. For as long as the frontline states aspire to independence, unrestricted sovereignty, and determining their own future and foreign policy, this will constitute an unresolved

conflict with Russia's desires for a sphere of privileged interest that extends beyond its borders. In this respect, the current state of heightened fragility and sensitivity of international relations in the region is likely to continue until conclusively resolved in one direction or the other. This could take the form of an individual country's submission to domination by Moscow, or alternatively a sufficiently firm rebuff to Russia's ambition that the threat recedes for a significant period.

Throughout this time, the United States is faced with the challenge of pursuing its own interests in the region without upsetting the current delicate balance. Two examples in the last decade, of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014, illustrate how a failure to take into account the violence with which Russia will defend its perceived security interests has caused entirely innocent Western aims to precipitate armed conflict.

The South Caucasus and Central Asia present the United States with strategic choices. If it is considered important that the United States maintain influence and reach in these regions, then it is essential that this be properly resourced with all of the means of hard and soft power at the disposal of the United States, including diplomatic, economic, and military outreach. If, on the other hand, their strategic use has passed, then it must be recognized that there is little to oppose Russia's efforts at extending its influence through these regions. In either case, the least productive and most dangerous approach would be to make empty promises, supporting the aspirations of these states to avoid Russian domination with words and nothing more.

Moldova, and especially Belarus, present special cases. Each country has shown its desire to join the Western community of nations, and yet, each is subject to effective Russian pressure to avoid doing so. Belarus in particular presents an opportunity for significant strategic change in Eastern Europe. Peaceful realignment with the West seems unlikely, at least without a dangerous and damaging Russian backlash. However, Belarus's current status as an ostensibly neutral buffer between Russia and the West is far preferable to the alternative, a direct extension of Russian military power along NATO's eastern borders.

At the time of this writing, each of the countries under discussion will be waiting for a clearly formulated statement of U.S. policy toward the region. It is essential that once the policy has been stated, it is applied consistently and supported unequivocally in the face of inevitable Russian opposition.

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100. The road from the airport to the center of Tbilisi was renamed the George W. Bush highway. Georgia has been remarked to be the only country in the world that wished John McCain to beat Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential elections.

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