

CONNECTIONS

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Strategic Implications of the War in Ukraine for the Post-Soviet Space: A View from Central Asia

Farkhod Tolipov *

Introduction

The ongoing war in Ukraine is shaking the foundation of the already fragile Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). After the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia and the splitting of Pridnestrovye from Moldova, Russia's annexation of Crimea and keeping Ukraine in a lasting crisis by tactics that "take on attrition," Russia not only has fallen under international economic sanctions but also aroused suspicions about its neo-imperial syndrome among post-Soviet friends on Russia's perimeter. Not only has the international community condemned Russia's actions in Ukraine, but the intra-Commonwealth community has also been painfully strained by these actions.

Paradoxically and ironically, such dramatic events are unfolding simultaneously with seemingly integrationist undertakings regarding the assemblage of the Euro-Asian Economic Union (EAEU). Both the war in Ukraine and creation of the EAEU have revealed the invalidity of the CIS and displayed the start of a new stage of restructuring and reformatting of what has been known as the post-Soviet space. How this space will be re-configured will have global geopolitical implications, as these processes are taking place on one sixth of the Earth – the vast geographical area that Tsarist Russia and the Soviets once proudly ascribed to themselves.

Actually, the crisis of the CIS began right after its inception in 1991 when, in parallel, the then newly independent five Central Asian states decided to establish their own Commonwealth – CAC. Since then, different smaller commonwealths have coexisted alongside the CIS in the post-Soviet space, steadily undermining the construction of the CIS itself. The longer the war in Ukraine protracts, the more will Russia alienate Ukrainians and the more any integration around and with Russia will replicate the feigned CIS. Lately, Central Asia has been taking an unclear lesson from this geopolitical situation and is making an ambiguous strategic choice.

This paper is devoted to the analysis of these aforementioned three focal points: the implications of the war in Ukraine for the CIS, Russia's fault and the Central Asian countries' reaction.

Crisis in Ukraine and Turbulence in the CIS

In analyzing the ongoing events in Ukraine, two significant facts must be recalled, namely: first, when war began in Ukraine in 2014, this state held the chairmanship of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); second, moreover, Ukraine was a co-

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founder of the CIS in 1991 alongside the Russian Federation and Belarus. It must also be mentioned that the question of Ukraine was the main reason for the disruption of the new Union Treaty process, which lasted from September until December 1991 in Novo-Ogarevo, on the outskirts of Moscow. The fact is that Ukraine did not take part in the process and refrained from joining it. That is the reason Boris Yeltsin's statement that the new Union could not be built without Ukraine, which justified a decision on the dismantlement of the USSR, is telling in and of itself. Paradoxically, the state that did not join the would-be renewed Union suddenly became one of the three founders of the even more vague union – the CIS.

As long as Ukraine remained an indispensable part of the CIS, the issue of its territorial integrity was not challenged and the Russian population in the east of the country did not even think about Novorossia and secession. For almost a quarter of a century, Crimea was believed to be part of the Ukrainian territory. From this perspective, it can be assumed that Kiev's reinforced and explicit pro-European intention was the main geopolitical catalyst of the subsequent tragic course of events. However, Moscow's rhetoric on Ukraine and attempt at self-justification regarding its annexation of Crimea have experienced amazing metamorphoses: from the slogan "We never expose (or hand over) our people [Russians]" to the statement that gifting Crimea to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954 was a mistake, and from reference to the referendum and will of the Crimean people "democratically" expressed in March 2014 on rejoining Russia to mentioning the threat from NATO of entering the Black Sea and targeting Sevastopol, and finally to Russia's historical sacralization of Crimea. Such a mixture of tricky arguments cannot but display the degree of (geo)political confusion to which Russia's leadership is prone.

Recently, the leader of the Crimean Tatars, Mustafa Jemilev, commenting on Putin's claim that Crimea is a sacral place for Russia as the location of Prince Vladimir of Kiev's baptizing, pointed out that on the basis of such a vision one could reference that Tatar Khan Devlet I Giray seized Moscow in 1571 and, therefore, the Tatars may have considered Moscow to be a sacral place as well. Yet Tatars, of course, do not. Jemilev argued that strong primitivism could be observed in Russia's politics.¹

Meanwhile, the outbreak of Ukraine's second "Color Revolution" in February 2014 shook not only Ukraine itself but also the foundations of the CIS. The drastic split of Ukraine as a state and a nation amounted to a moment of truth for the entire post-Soviet structure. The rise of anti-Russian nationalism in Ukraine along with Russia's response to annex Crimea revealed not only a persistent Russian neo-imperial stance in the post-Soviet space but also triggered geopolitical concerns among former Soviet countries, including in Central Asia.

Russia has been unable to enlist definite and resolute support for its actions in Ukraine from the CIS states for at least three reasons: first, Moscow could not properly justify the annexation of Crimea and provide persuasive claims on the basis of interna-

¹ See <http://rus.err.ee/v/radio4/f986ab07-3151-4dc2-8766-d6e03c1d91ba> (accessed 22 March 2015).

tional law; second, Russia preferred to use hard power in dealing with the Ukrainian challenge instead of the widely-popularized soft power policy directed to its so-called “near abroad” that Russia itself has recently announced; and third, Russia demonstrated a Cold War, anti-Western pattern of international behavior and thereby increased the implicit pressure on other former Soviet republics cooperating with the West.

For Ukraine, the CIS has since its inception remained a mere convenient framework for multilateral engagement with Russia and other member states because it is a very loose and weak organization. But when six CIS countries established the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002, Ukraine again remained aloof, as this quasi-alliance was a stronger integration framework than the CIS. Ukraine has also resisted membership in the Russia-initiated Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Despite its role as a co-founder of the CIS, since 1991 Kiev has remained reluctant towards deeper integration with Russia. Ironically, Ukraine took on the CIS chairmanship in January 2014, with the now-overthrown President Yanukovich as chairman.

It should be noted that in such a context, separatism can increasingly become a tendency in some areas of the post-Soviet independent states inhabited by sizable Russian-speaking communities and that fanning these processes has become a brand of Russia’s foreign policy. The secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia in 2008 has so far not led to these two splinter provinces of Georgia joining the Russian Federation, but the secession of Crimea has. Russia has now acquired an additional unfriendly, not to say hostile, neighbor (after Georgia and Moldova). After Crimea’s separation, Ukraine’s European drift will likely take a new and bolder impetus.

Russia’s Fault

Yet in 2003, when then President of Georgia Eduard Shevardnadze decided to close the Russian base in Abkhazia, Russian MP Gennadiy Raykov stated that “Russian peacekeepers are the outpost of peace in the region of Georgian-Abkhazian opposition.” He argued that the “President of Georgia must understand that if the peacekeepers’ mandate is not prolonged he will get a war with Abkhazia,”² and the war between Georgia and Abkhazia really took place.

In the midst of the war in Ukraine, Russian general Leonid Ivashov, while talking about Kyrgyzstan’s entering the EAEU, stated: “We must look closely at what happened with Ukraine, when she tried to move away from Russia and to climb to Europe. Ukraine is ceasing to exist. But Kyrgyzstan is smaller than Ukraine...”³ This is just one of the examples of how today Russia makes cunning efforts in one country to get its loyalty. By and large, with all its action in the post-Soviet space, Russia is creating an impression that it is preoccupied with its own version of the Monroe Doctrine. Indeed,

² “The Departure of Russian Peacekeepers Increases the Risk of Civil War,” *Vesti.Ru*, 14 January 2003, available at <http://buy.auto.vesti.ru/doc.html?id=18604&cid=5> (in Russian).

³ General Ivashov’s Truths, interview to the *Evening Bishkek* newspaper, 24 April 2015, available at http://members.vb.kg/2015/04/24/gost/1_print.html.

Russia as a great power cannot but construct its foreign policy as a power performance. This is normal for a great power. The question is how it utilizes this asset.

The publication, *Russia Direct*, recently noticed that Russia's approach towards political developments in Ukraine in 2013-2014 led to increased negative attitudes in other countries even before the start of fighting in the eastern part of the country. There is hardly any reason to think that the situation improved since then. Further, *Russia Direct* pointed out that "Moreover, the Russian leadership's changed rhetoric, implying that it intends to restore the 'unity of historic Russia' shortly after Crimea was incorporated as part of Russia, also created tensions in relations with some neighboring countries. Russia's soft power was greatly undermined."⁴

Almost a century ago, Russia as a great power was able to unite the former Soviet peoples. In 1991, Russia was able to destroy overnight the state which it once created and disunite those peoples. Is Russia today really a great power, capable of reuniting them? Here, it is important to stress that keeping peoples and countries in the sphere of influence and reunifying them are different tasks requiring different strategies. While the former task is based more on geopolitical tools than normative ones, the latter demands more normative than geopolitical assets.⁵ Soft (normative) power creates attraction; hard (geopolitical) power creates counteraction of the target countries.

So far, the countries on Russia's perimeter are just beholding like spectators how Ukraine is torn to pieces. Their ill-concealed anxieties have so far remained behind some modest statements, which Moscow has issued without any visible sign of attention and understanding. Many analysts have pointed out that Russia does not have a clear-cut strategy in Central Asia, and this is true. But this issue is not a linear one, since the reverse question—that of whether Central Asian countries have a clear-cut strategy with respect to Russia—is also relevant. For Central Asian countries, Russia remains a geopolitical puzzle, and vice versa; for Russia, Central Asia remains a geopolitical puzzle. It is not accidental that over almost a quarter century since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States and the European Union, as well as the Central Asian and Caucasus countries, have been preoccupied with the idea of containment of Moscow's would-be neo-imperial ambitions. This is why, when it comes to pipelines or the transportation of energy resources from Central Asia to Europe through the Caucasus, or the construction of highways and railroads connecting Europe and China through Central Asia and the Caucasus (like TRACECA), the concept of bypassing Russia has been frequently articulated in the international agenda.

The GUAM/GUUAM organization is also worth mentioning in this regard; it was initially created in 1994 by Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Uzbekistan (the only country from Central Asia), later joined it. In 1998, however, Uzbekistan sus-

⁴ Alexey Dolinskiy, "Hard thinking about Russian soft power: What to do next?" *Russia Direct*, 10 April 2015, available at <http://www.russia-direct.org/analysis/hard-thinking-about-russian-soft-power-what-do-next>.

⁵ Farkhod Tolipov, "'Power Being' and 'Power Projection' of Russia in Central Asia," in *Two Decades of Re-Emerging Russia: Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Sanjay Deshpande (New Delhi: KW Publishers, 2015), 93–104.

pended its membership for political reasons. Despite some political confusion related to this fact, GUUAM still remains an attractive forum *per se* to take a new impetus. Three dimensions of the GUUAM—post-imperial, economic, and geopolitical—have made this organization quite unique among other post-Soviet groupings.⁶ From this point of view, GUUAM indicated a nascent strategic partnership between the member states of this group, so long as the latter symbolized a regional undertaking of a certain group of states without Russia.

Ukraine was supposed to be the leader of the GUUAM. Its aspiration of association with the EU and would-be membership in NATO ascribed this state a special geopolitical weight in the context of overall post-Soviet transformations. Some years ago, the former president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko, argued that within the framework of GUAM a single space should be created for the extraction and transit of energy resources. The main segment in this system, he stated, should be the “oil pipeline Odessa-Brody, which we are to stretch towards Poland and will become an alternative to the Russian energy supply to Europe.”⁷

It was not by accident that the declaration signed by member states on 23 May 2006 declared the creation of the “Organization for Democracy and Economic Development – GUAM.” Interestingly, this is the only organization among many within the post-Soviet space that does not include Russia, and also the only one that articulates democracy in its name.

By and large, two essential questions now remain at the center of most of discussions concerning the essence, the form, and the character of political transformations of the former Soviet republics and their international relations. These two questions are related to their attitude towards Russia and the fate of democracy. The previous status quo, which has existed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, implied the domination of Russia and the persistence of autocratic regimes as a legacy of the Soviet past. Today, such a status quo is being questioned, as the transition period is coming to an end and the post-Soviet space is being reformatted and restructured.

While states on Russia’s perimeter have been engaged in geopolitical tricks under the vague concept of bypassing Russia, the latter has traditionally been engaged in what is called the “collection of lands” – the strategy that is facing essential risks in the context of events in Ukraine. This permanent feature of Moscow’s geopolitics needs to be reexamined. As John Mearsheimer rightly mentions,

Putin’s actions should be easy to comprehend. A huge expanse of flat land that Napoleonic France, imperial Germany, and Nazi Germany all crossed to strike at Russia itself, Ukraine serves as a buffer state of enormous strategic importance to Russia. No Russian leader would tolerate a military alliance that was Moscow’s mortal enemy until recently moving into Ukraine. Nor would any Russian leader stand idly by while the West helped install a government there that was determined to integrate Ukraine into the West [...]

⁶ Farkhod Tolipov, “GUAM as A Symbol of Post-Soviet Democratic Geopolitics,” *Central Asia and Caucasus* 3–4 (2008) (in Russian).

⁷ The Club of Three Letters: Moldova May Get out of GUAM, Source – Moscow News, 22 June 2007, available at www.centrasia.ru (in Russian).

Washington may not like Moscow's position, but it should understand the logic behind it. This is Geopolitics 101: great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory. After all, the United States does not tolerate distant great powers deploying military forces anywhere in the Western Hemisphere, much less on its borders. Imagine the outrage in Washington if China built an impressive military alliance and tried to include Canada and Mexico in it.⁸

This is true from the realist perspective. However, liberals might inquire more clearly as to whether there is a real threat from one great power (US) to another (Russian Federation) today.

Mearsheimer further argues that the West, by operating the liberal playbook, "unknowingly provoked a major crisis over Ukraine." At the same time, one could note that Russia, in turn, by operating the *Realpolitik* playbook, did the same.

Here it must be noted that most of the discussions on the Ukrainian tragedy are concentrated on great power rivalries, in terms of Moscow *versus* Washington or Russia *versus* NATO. Less, or almost no account, is taken of Ukraine's right to make its own choice. Mearsheimer makes a strong assertion on this matter: "Abstract rights such as self-determination are largely meaningless when powerful states get into brawls with weaker states. Did Cuba have the right to form a military alliance with the Soviet Union during the Cold War? The United States certainly did not think so, and the Russians think the same way about Ukraine joining the West. It is in Ukraine's interest to understand these facts of life and tread carefully when dealing with its more powerful neighbor."⁹ But that was the Cold War period. How about the post-Cold War era? By post-Cold War I mean not only the end of ideological competition between the US and the USSR and the crash of world communism, but also the end of the division of the world into two mega-spheres of influence, as well as the emergence of new centers of power shaping the new world order.

If we accept the thought that Ukraine can do nothing *vis-à-vis* Russia, then the same thought should be relevant towards other former Soviet republics, which are perhaps as vulnerable to Russian pressure as Ukraine. It would be advisable to differentiate between the concept of leaving the Russian sphere of influence and that of going closer to Europe. It was not the West that wanted to pull Ukraine away from Russia, but Ukraine itself that wanted to move towards Europe – and that had been its long-lasting, permanent goal since 1991. Interestingly, Russia itself was moving, albeit with some reversals, towards Europe.

When it comes to EAEU, it seems Moscow is undertaking convulsive efforts to realize an integration project, having forgotten the lessons of CIS, which in fact have failed. Any efforts of this kind have so far taken the form of what Roy Allison called "protectionist integration," i.e., a "form of collective political solidarity with Russia and China

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>.

⁹ *Ibid.*

against the international political processes or agenda which are perceived as a challenge to the incumbent regimes and their leaders.”¹⁰

Yet, as Anton Barbashin has pointed out, the idea of universally beneficial integration on equal terms has always been a façade. Long before the EAEU was launched, it was clear that gross economic disparities among the group’s members would work in Russia’s favor, with other countries getting secondary roles. Before the ruble’s collapse in December 2014, Russia accounted for 87 percent of the Union’s total GDP and 83 percent of its population. By comparison, the EU’s largest economy, Germany, represents about 15.8 percent of its GDP and just six percent of its population. Russia will apparently dominate the EAEU, representing about three-fourths of its total economic weight.¹¹

The situation within the EAEU is now exacerbating as consequences of sanctions imposed by the West upon Russia are already felt in other member countries. Nonetheless, “unlike Belarus and Kazakhstan, Russia stands ready to sacrifice economic prosperity and internal stability for a geopolitical cause.” Therefore, “the more Russia spirals into economic recession, the more its allies will look toward the West.”¹²

Central Asia in Perplexity

For Central Asia, the events in Ukraine can be interpreted as a “moment of truth.” Astana, Bishkek, and Tashkent initially issued official statements on the events in Ukraine in March 2014, speaking out for the country’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. They expressed concern about the course of events. Bishkek’s statement was more cautious and Dushanbe’s position was rather pro-Russian. These statements could be considered as a warning message addressed not only towards Ukraine by stressing the importance of a peaceful resolution to the crisis, but also towards Russia.

However, after Crimea’s *de facto* secession and annexation to Russia, Astana and Bishkek slightly changed their positions, issuing statements cautiously expressing “understanding” and “recognition” of the *fait accompli*. But Tashkent’s position remained relatively firm. In the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Dushanbe summit in September 2014, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov stated that the clue for the resolution of the Ukrainian war can be found only through direct negotiations between Kiev and Moscow. Some observers evaluated such a statement as Tashkent’s favor to Moscow and Uzbekistan’s turning towards Russia. In fact, however, it was not a change in Karimov’s stance: yes, Uzbekistan still stands for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine, but believes that the two states—Ukraine and Russia—must engage in direct negotiations with each other.

¹⁰ Roy Allison, “Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia,” *Central Asian Survey* 27/2 (2008): 185–6.

¹¹ Anton Barbashin, “The Eurasian Illusion. The Myth of Russia’s Economic Union,” *Foreign Affairs*, 15 January 2015, <http://the-levant.com/the-urasian-illusion-the-myth-of-russias-economic-union/>.

¹² *Ibid.*

For Central Asians, who just recently became independent actors in the international system, the observation of the Ukrainian crisis revealed a strong divergence in the interpretation and application of international law on the part of great powers, regarding their own behavior as well as their attitude towards smaller states. Russian representatives repeatedly mentioned the Kosovo precedent to justify the annexation of Crimea. Hence, in the course of events Moscow not only retaliated against Kiev but also made a point of legitimizing that retaliation in exchanges with Washington. This is a problematic precedent for smaller countries in the post-Soviet space because it demonstrates the vague and ad-hoc nature of the international order in this part of the world.

From this perspective, one of the side effects of the Ukrainian drama is that, with all his recent statements related to the situation in Ukraine and the secession of Crimea, President Putin has in fact delegitimized the CIS. He stated that Ukraine's secession from the Soviet Union was illegal. However, this would be valid for all former USSR republics, including Russia – the USSR ultimately crumbled due to a coup d'état led by former Russian President Yeltsin. By extension, Putin's statement would imply that the CIS is illegitimate as well. It was symptomatic that the President of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, did not show up at the last CIS summit in October 2014; in his speech, President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov even accused him of ignoring the summit and assumed that Poroshenko was perhaps wavering between remaining a CIS member and withdrawing from it.¹³

Meanwhile, overall events in and related to Ukraine strongly affected public opinion in Central Asian countries. Many people in Central Asia judge events in Ukraine under the influence of the Russian media. As one analysis argues,

[a]fter the initial shock the crisis brought, Central Asian states have gradually come to the conclusion that they should continue dealing with Russia. Still, none of these states are prepared to be totally controlled by Russia, while all of them seek to balance Russia's influence by dealing with the West and China. There are strong indications that Beijing will take advantage of Central Asia's balancing act by promoting itself as a less aggressive partner than the West or Russia. This will prove to be a good strategy for installing itself as a hegemon in Central Asia in the coming years.¹⁴

In this regard, the countries of this region are perplexed by the age-old *modus operandi* dictating their balancing act and are in search for a new *modus vivendi*.

The situation was somewhat further exacerbated when Putin made a rash and ambiguous statement on 29 August 2014 that Kazakhs never had their own state in the past and that President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, accomplished a unique mission – that is, created the state of Kazakhstan. Such an incautious statement, albeit praising Nazarbayev, caused doubled resentment among Kazakhs as firstly, their pride

¹³ See <http://news.bigmir.net/world/851389-Na-sammite-SNG-v-Minske-osudili-otsutstvие-Poroshenko>.

¹⁴ Bayram Balci and Daniyar Kosnazarov, "The Ukraine Crisis's Central Asian Echoes," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 25 December 2014, available at <http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=57603>.

of their history was hurt and secondly, the statement triggered suspicions among them concerning possible replications of the Ukrainian scenario in the territory of Kazakhstan. Such suspicions actually first began to emerge on the eve of the crisis in Ukraine, when Russian politicians often expressed opinions that a nation such as “Ukraine” did not exist and that historically Ukraine never existed as a state.

In the course of such a transformation process—and events in Ukraine just confirm this—CIS institutions including the CSTO have been considerably marginalized due to their diplomatic paralysis during the ongoing Ukrainian crisis. This put Central Asian countries directly at odds with Russia and undermined multilateral structures that could potentially mitigate such crises. It is notable in this regard that Uzbekistan’s decision to exit the CSTO and distance itself from other Russia-led multilateral structures, which has been criticized by some experts, suddenly proved to be a prudent strategy.

In the context of the Ukrainian drama, Central Asia today faces a twofold challenge: firstly, the challenge of continued partnership with NATO, resistance to which has become a key feature of Russia’s global posture in general and its policies during the Ukrainian crisis in particular; secondly, the challenge of rebooting a regional cooperation format, given the fundamental crisis of the CIS. Given the new circumstances, Tashkent could take the lead in reinvigorating the 25-year-old idea of regional integration.

Interestingly, Steven Cohen—a professor of Russian history of the New-York University—has pointed out that Putin’s Russia can be understood only in light of the national collapse caused by the dissolution of the USSR.¹⁵ This raises an existential question as to whether Russia as a great power can survive and develop only by surrounding itself with former satellites. The similar existential question addresses the ability and desire of former satellites, especially Central Asian ones, to develop independently of Russia’s domination.

Does Russia want to keep its exceptional sphere of influence by using the old-fashioned imperial geopolitical power game or does it want to realize a genuine democratic project of reunification of the former Soviet geographical space on the basis of new principles? While Russia still has not formulated its clear-cut strategy with respect to Central Asia, its geopolitical competitors such as the United States, European Union, Japan, and China already have. The lack or absence of an adequate Russian strategy toward Central Asia is perhaps the main reason for the visible disharmony between its huge power assets and its limited power projection. The war in Ukraine will serve as a litmus test for unveiling the essence of the Russian post-Soviet posture.

Conclusion

The conflict in Ukraine and Russia’s involvement in it has become a new test for all – Ukraine, Russia, UN, EU, NATO, OSCE, and CIS. It was a watershed that marked the end of the post-Cold War period for all these communities of nations. Since the conflict was triggered by Kiev’s motion towards Europe and NATO, one might raise the rhetori-

¹⁵ S. Koen, “The collapse of the Soviet Union interrupted Russia’s march towards democracy,” *www.centrasia.org*, 14 December 2006, Source – InoSMI, 13 December 2006 (in Russian).

cal question of why one part of the country wants to join European institutions and the other part resists such an option and prefers to reunite with Russia. In any case, even a partition of Ukraine of this kind would not prevent at least the pro-Western part of the country from joining the Western community – a scenario that Russia is also eager to resist. From this perspective, the current war seems meaningless and disadvantageous for Russia.

The Ukrainian theater has galvanized political circles and public opinion elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia: Europeans are concerned with Russia's resort to hard power policy in the international arena, and so are post-Soviets. This theater, alongside Russia's previous campaigns against Georgia and Moldova, has rearticulated the notion of a "sphere of influence" or "sphere of vital interests" in the era of globalization. On the one hand, from the *Realpolitik* perspective, one can understand and explain why Moscow is keen to pursue its own version of the Monroe Doctrine by securing the buffer zone covering the territories of its former Soviet satellites along its perimeter. Yet, on the other hand, the perspective of *Realpolitik* does not sufficiently address whether the latter countries wish to remain Russia's buffers zones, or whether they will attempt to change this status quo. As one analyst argues,

NATO now needs to explain to its partners around the world why partnerships are necessary, and what added value they can bring... [T]he recent Ukrainian crisis invokes the necessity of formulating a strategic vision for the future policy in the region based on the Alliance's holistic perspective, not just the views of individual member states. The Ukrainian crisis could stimulate relations between NATO and other regional countries, including member-states, the Caucasus countries, or even Moldova, which will search for additional mechanisms of cooperation... The whole framework of cooperation must be reconfigured. It should shift from sporadic to strategic.¹⁶

In this context, the same assumption is relevant when it comes to NATO's partnership with all other post-Soviet countries, including Central Asia – the region where the Alliance just recently got quite the unique experience, due to the ISAF operation in Afghanistan.

¹⁶ Hanna Shelest, "NATO and Ukraine: In or Out?" *Caucasus International* 4 (Winter 2014–2015): 65–66.

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