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RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND CENTRAL EUROPE: THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

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# RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND CENTRAL EUROPE: THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS

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F. Stephen Larrabee

Nine November 2009, marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, effectively marking the end of the Cold War. It opened the way to the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of a new security order in Europe.

On the whole, the process of knitting Europe back together has been a remarkable success. As a result of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the former communist states of Eastern Europe have been integrated into Euro-Atlantic institutions and today enjoy a degree of economic prosperity, political stability, and external security that exceeds anything most of them have ever experienced in their histories. While many still face important economic and political challenges, their futures are reasonably secure.

The collapse of the Berlin Wall, however, unleashed an incomplete process of integration and political transformation and left a band of states on Russia's Western periphery without a clear political future or clear foreign policy attachment. This band of states includes Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Belarus. The political future and foreign policy orientation of these countries is uncertain and is, in effect, up for grabs.

At the same time, a series of developments are creating new challenges and uncertainties that threaten the stability of the Eastern part of the European continent and could have implications for European security. These include the emergence of a more confident and assertive Russia, the impact of the global economic crisis, the growing disillusionment with the European Union's enlargement among large parts of the European population, and the uncertainty regarding the direction and steadfastness of U.S. policy.

This article focuses on the changing security dynamics in Central Europe and the Western periphery of the post-Soviet space. The first section examines Russia's

resurgence and the challenges it poses. The second section focuses on Ukraine's transition, while the third section discusses the impact of Russia's resurgence on Central and Eastern Europe. The fourth section examines the increasing cooperation between Russia and Germany. The fifth section analyzes the changing context of NATO enlargement. The final section discusses the implications of these trends for U.S. policy.

## RUSSIA'S RESURGENCE

The security dynamics in Central Europe and the Western periphery of the post-Soviet space are in flux today. Several trends are underway that could have major implications for the broader European security order that emerged in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Perhaps the most important is the emergence of Russia as a more confident and assertive actor both globally and regionally.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was a traumatic shock and left Russia weak and frustrated. Accustomed to being a superpower—and being treated as

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one—Russian leaders found it difficult to accept that Russia's influence in world affairs had sharply declined and that the country's voice in foreign policy no longer counted for much. Most Russians put the blame squarely on Boris Yeltsin's shoulders. Whereas Yeltsin's tenure as president of Russia is regarded relatively positively in the West as a time of incipient democratic reform and openness both internally and externally, in Russia it is remembered with bitterness and disenchantment. Russians see it as a time of economic decline, political chaos, and foreign policy weakness.

For a decade, Russia's weakness prevented Moscow from exerting much influence in global and regional affairs, and Western policy makers became accustomed to having a free ride. Russia objected to many Western policies—NATO enlargement, Kosovo, etc.—but it was powerless to do much about them. The predominant Western assumption was that with time Russia would “come around” and see the advantage of closer cooperation with the West.

Many of these assumptions, however, proved to be wrong. Russia has recovered more rapidly than many observers expected. Much of the credit belongs to Vladimir Putin. Putin came to power determined to rebuild the power of the

Russian state and reassert Russian power and influence abroad, particularly in the post-Soviet space. Aided by a significant rise in energy prices in the first years of his rule, he largely succeeded. During his presidency, the Russian economy significantly recovered, and Russia's influence abroad visibly increased.

Indeed, there was a close connection between Putin's domestic and foreign policy. In Putin's conception, restoring Russia's power and influence abroad required rebuilding the power of the Russian state at home, particularly halting the erosion of power from the "center" to the periphery that had occurred under Yeltsin, and regaining state control over the "commanding heights" (i.e. key strategic industries, particularly energy) of the economy. This in turn required reducing the independence and power of the oligarchs—who had exploited the free-wheeling economic climate and lack of strong state control under Yeltsin to amass great wealth—either through co-option, intimidation, or exile. It also meant exerting greater central control over the unruly media, and making it a more compliant tool and supporter of government policy.

The extent of Russia's political and economic recovery, however, is not the only significant aspect; its nature and goals were also extremely important. Russia today has become, in effect, a revisionist power; it seeks to reestablish its influence in the post-Soviet space and wants to change the post-Cold War security order in Europe. Russia feels that order was imposed upon it by the West at a time when Russia was weak. This security order does not, in the Russian view, sufficiently take into consideration Russia's recently changed status and interests.

This was the essence of Putin's message in his famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007.<sup>1</sup> In his speech, Putin made clear—in strident language reminiscent of the Cold War—that Russia was back and that it did not need, nor intend to take, lessons from the West about how to behave in the international arena. This statement was especially directed at the United States, which Putin claimed was ignoring and trampling all over international law. Russia had its own national interests, he stressed, and these interests would dictate Russian policy.

Russia's decision to suspend its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty should be seen against this broader background. In the Russian view, the treaty is outdated. It was a product of the Cold War, and many of its provisions, particularly the flank restrictions on Russian forces, do not reflect Russian interests at a time when Russia faces growing instability on its southern flank in the Caucasus. Russia is therefore prepared to let the treaty lapse or renegotiate it on more favorable terms.

The Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008 should also be seen in this context. The exact causes that precipitated the invasion on the night of 8 August

2008 remain murky and may never be entirely known. But the available evidence clearly suggests that the invasion was planned well in advance and that the Russians sought to provoke President Saakashvili into taking action that could then serve as a pretext for an invasion that had been carefully prepared for over several months, if not longer.<sup>2</sup>

This is not to put all the blame on Russia. Western policy—particularly the decision to support Kosovo's independence and the assurance given to Ukraine and Georgia that they would one day become NATO members—contributed to the final outcome.

The invasion, however, did not represent an attempt to challenge the global balance of power. Like the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, it was essentially a defensive action aimed at halting the erosion of Moscow's crumbling authority in an area which Moscow believed was in its (self-proclaimed) sphere of influence.

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Russian military action demonstrated that the countries in the post-Soviet space could not count on the United States or NATO to protect them.

While the invasion was designed first and foremost to punish and politically weaken President Saakashvili, it was also designed to make clear that Russia was ready to defend its interests in the post-Soviet space, with force if necessary.

Although the United States had no formal treaty commitment to defend Georgia, the Russian military action demonstrated that the countries in the post-Soviet space could not count on the United States or NATO to protect them. Just as the United States was not willing to risk a war with the Soviet Union when it invaded Hungary, Washington was not prepared to risk a military confrontation with Moscow over Georgia. The same held for NATO's European members.

The invasion was thus a sharp reminder that admitting new members from the post-Soviet area entailed serious risks and that NATO could be called upon to militarily defend these potential new members. The overall impact of the invasion was to force the United States and its allies to rethink the process of further enlargement of NATO into these countries. While the door to Georgian and Ukrainian memberships remains open, as a practical matter further enlargement of the alliance has been put on hold for the foreseeable future.

From the Russian point of view, the invasion can be seen as a success. It demonstrated Russia's resolve to defend its interests in the post-Soviet space; it highlighted American powerlessness in the face of determined Russian readiness to defend those interests; it tarnished Saakashvili's image, both at home and in

Europe; and it slowed the process of NATO enlargement into the post-Soviet space, possibly derailing it permanently.

However, the Russian invasion does not herald a new period of aggressive Russian expansion. Moscow's goals are limited and largely defensive. Russia wants the West to accept, *de facto* if not *de jure*, that the post-Soviet space is part of a Russian sphere of influence and that Russia has, as President Medvedev emphasized shortly after the invasion, "privileged interests" in certain regions.<sup>3</sup> However, the United States has consistently opposed the concept of dividing the world into spheres of influence since the end of the Cold War. The U.S. goal has been to create a "Europe whole and free"—to erase old dividing lines, not create new ones. Thus, as I have argued elsewhere, the West—the United States in particular—can hardly accept the Russian effort to gain formal acceptance of Russia's "privileged interests" (and by extension, special rights) in the post-Soviet space without repudiating the very goals and values that have animated its policy throughout the postwar period, and especially since the collapse of the Berlin Wall.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's attempt to gain Western acceptance of spheres of influence is of concern because it coincides with other developments that seem designed to enable Russia to exert pressure on the states in the post-Soviet space and in extremis, even intervene militarily. In his August 2008 interview setting out the basic guidelines for future Russian policy—which has euphemistically been termed the "Medvedev Doctrine"—Medvedev noted that protecting the rights and dignity of Russian citizens, "wherever they may be," would be one an "unquestionable priority" of Russian foreign policy.<sup>5</sup> In line with this, the Duma amended legislation in August 2009 to permit Russian forces to intervene abroad in defense of Russian citizens.

This principle has raised concerns in many countries in the post-Soviet space as well as in the Baltic States because it provides the legal justification under Russian law for military intervention in countries that have Russian minorities within their territories. In the early 1990s, when fighting broke out between Georgia and the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia unilaterally sent "peacekeeping forces" to and granted Russian citizenship to local residents of the two areas, which were part of Georgia under international law. Russia then used the fact that many residents of South Ossetia were "Russian citizens" (though not ethnic Russians in most cases) to justify its invasion of Georgia under the guise that it was protecting Russian citizens.

## WHITHER UKRAINE?

It is Ukraine, not Georgia, though, that is the real driving force behind Russian policy toward the western periphery of the post-Soviet space. Strategically, Georgia's integration into NATO would not add much to Western military strength. Its mili-



tary is small—barely 33,000 men—most of whom are poorly equipped. Georgia is an irritant but not a serious strategic threat. Indeed, Russian policy toward Georgia seems to have been driven almost as much by a deep-seated personal animosity toward Saakashvili on Putin's part—a desire to teach a painful lesson to a rebellious upstart who had contemptuously thumbed his nose at the Kremlin and to remind him who was boss—as it was by broader strategic considerations.

Ukraine is an entirely different matter. Its integration into Western structures would shift the strategic balance in Europe, ending any residual Russian hope of creating a “Slavic Union”—composed of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus—and restoring Soviet hegemony in the post-Soviet space. As Zbigniew Brzezinski noted some years ago, without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. If, however, it could reestablish control over Ukraine with its 52 million people, rich agricultural base, and access to the Black Sea, Russia would automatically regain the possibility of becoming a powerful imperial state.<sup>6</sup> Hence, from Moscow's

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point of view, the outbreak of the Orange revolution in Ukraine was a much more serious threat to Russian interests than the Rose Revolution in Georgia.

Ukraine's Orange Revolution initially inspired hope, both in Ukraine and in the West, that Ukraine had turned an important corner and unequivocally embarked on a course of democratic reform and Western integration. Ukraine's transition, however, has proven more difficult than expected. Personal rivalries and internal bickering, especially between President Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, the two main leaders of the Orange Revolution, have inhibited the implementation of a coherent reform program and closer integration of Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic structures.

This rift among the leaders of the Orange Revolution surfaced almost immediately after Yushchenko's election as president in December 2004 and has continued unabated since then. Tymoshenko's tenure as prime minister lasted only eight months before she was removed by Yushchenko in September 2005. The second attempt to form an Orange coalition after the parliamentary elections in March 2006 took four months and collapsed after a few short weeks. That resulted in a coalition headed by former Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych, leader of the Party of Regions, and Yushchenko's defeated rival in the heated presidential election of December 2004.<sup>7</sup>

Since then, there have been several other attempts to form an Orange coalition;

none have lasted long. All have faltered or collapsed as a result of internal bickering and personal animosities. These internal differences between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko became increasingly bitter with the approach of the 2010 presidential elections and as it became clearer that Tymoshenko intended to challenge Yushchenko in the election. Yushchenko had little chance of being re-elected president. His support steadily declined in his last two years in office and pre-election polls showed that he had little chance of making it into the final run-off. His main goal—one he pursued with single-minded determination in the election campaign—was to prevent Tymoshenko from becoming president.

Yushchenko's strong attacks on Tymoshenko may well have cost her the presidency. Yanukovych won the final run off on February 7, 2010 by only 3.48 percent of the vote.<sup>8</sup> Had Yushchenko concentrated his attacks on Yanukovych, his former adversary, rather than attacking Tymoshenko, his former ally, Tymoshenko might have picked up enough votes to win the election. Yanukovych did well in eastern and southern Ukraine, his traditional strongholds, but also made important gains in central Ukraine, cutting into Tymoshenko's support there.

In contrast to the 2004 presidential election, where President Putin openly expressed his support for Yanukovych, and Russian political advisors actively worked behind the scenes to promote Yanukovych's candidacy, Russia did not actively try to influence the outcome of the 2010 election. However, Moscow has good reason to be content with the outcome. Yanukovych made an improvement of ties with Russia an important plank in his campaign and he is strongly opposed to Ukrainian membership of NATO. He also supported the Russian invasion of Georgia as well as Moscow's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, moves which both Yushchenko and Tymoshenko criticized.

Yanukovych's election, however, is not likely to result in a radical shift in Ukrainian policy. With 172 seats out of 450, Yanukovych's Party of Regions lacks a majority in the Verhovna Rada (parliament). Thus Yanukovych will be forced to share power and make compromises if he wants to get support for his political agenda. Moreover, the powers of the president have been significantly weakened by legislative changes introduced during Yushchenko's tenure, some of them ironically made with Tymoshenko's support. Consequently the president has much less power to shape the Ukrainian political agenda today than when Yushchenko first took office. Thus, like Yushchenko, Yanukovych will face important constraints on his ability to wield power.

Relations with Russia are likely to be smoother under Yanukovych than they were under Yushchenko. At the same time, Yanukovych is not likely to be a Russian puppet. The Party of Regions is a pluralistic party composed of a number of factions and many of the powerful oligarchs in the party favor maintaining



strong economic and political ties with Europe. Thus rather than simply kow-towing to Moscow, Yanukovych is likely to conduct a “multi-vector” policy similar to that pursued by former president Leonid Kuchma and seek to balance policy toward Russia with good ties with the West. Moreover, several issues could become sources of strain in relations with Moscow.

## **Energy**

Ukraine is heavily dependent on Russia for energy, especially natural gas. Ukraine imports nearly 80 percent of its natural gas from Russia. On several occasions Russia has sought to cut off the supply of gas in order to punish Ukraine or press it to accept Russia’s terms. The first attempt led to the Russian-Ukrainian “gas war” in January 2006. The decision, however, backfired, damaging Moscow’s reputation in Europe as a reliable supplier. A dispute erupted again in January 2009 when Russia halted all gas supplies to Ukraine, charging that Kiev was stealing Russian gas, which left many European customers without heat for several weeks. In 2009, however, Moscow sought to avoid a repeat of the 2006 dispute which had badly tarnished its reputation in Europe as a reliable supplier and quickly settled the dispute.

Both disputes underscored an important point obscured by the frequent flurry of charges and countercharges: energy interdependence is a two-way street. Much of Russian gas sold to Europe is transported via pipelines that traverse Ukraine. This gives Ukraine a degree of counter-leverage. Ukraine can siphon off some of the gas, disrupting the flow of gas to customers in Europe as it did in January 2006, thereby preventing Russia from fulfilling its commitments and damaging Russia’s reputation as a reliable supplier. This reduces the incentive for Russia to use energy as a foreign policy weapon and cut off gas to Ukraine—at least for the next few years until the Baltic pipeline (Nord Stream), which directly links Russia and Germany and bypasses Ukraine, is completed.

The danger of a new crisis erupting cannot be entirely excluded. Ukraine has been hard hit by the global recession and is badly strapped for cash. Loans by the IMF helped Ukraine stay afloat and meet its financial obligations during much of 2009, but at the end of December, the IMF rejected Ukraine’s plea for a \$2 billion emergency loan. While Ukraine can draw on other funds to pay its January bill, without fresh funds Kiev could have difficulty finding the cash to pay further gas bills to Russia’s Gazprom. Yanukovych has indicated that he would consider transferring ownership of Ukraine’s gas transit system to Russia. However, such a move would increase Russian influence over the Ukrainian economy and would likely meet stiff political opposition, especially from Tymoshenko, whose bloc controls 153 out of 450 seats in the Rada.

## **The Black Sea Fleet**

The Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) stationed in Sevastopol (Crimea) poses a second potential source of friction. The Black Sea Fleet was granted port facilities under a 1997 accord between Russia and Ukraine; however, the accord expires in 2017. In October 2006, Putin, then president, expressed a desire to have the accord extended. Yushchenko and other top Ukrainian officials firmly rejected the idea of an extension of the accord. However, Yanukovich has indicated that the fleet might be allowed to remain in Sevastopol beyond the 2017 deadline.

Russia's use of warships from the Black Sea Fleet to blockade the coast of Georgia in August 2008 again focused attention on the status of the fleet. After the end of the conflict, Ukraine threatened to refuse to allow the fleet to return to Sevastopol; however, Russian commanders insisted that Ukraine had no legal right to prevent the ships' return to Sevastopol. The incident underscored the fact that Ukraine has very little control over the fleet's activities. Since then, Ukraine has demanded notification procedures for ships departing and returning from port in an attempt to gain more control over the BSF's operations. Russia, however, has been unwilling to provide that information.

The problem is compounded by the fact that the local population in Crimea strongly favors keeping the Russian fleet in Sevastopol. A poll taken in December 2008 showed that 69.9 percent of the Crimean population favored extending the lease beyond 2017, while only 8.3 percent favored its departure by 2017 or earlier.<sup>9</sup> There is also an important economic consideration: the fleet provides employment for 20 percent of Sevastopol's population and its departure would have serious repercussions for the local economy. Hence the Ukrainian government has to carefully manage the Black Sea Fleet issue, especially in light of the separatist pressures that exist in Crimea. A strong push for the departure of the fleet could not only cause friction with Moscow but could also inflame local passions, strengthening separatist sentiment in Crimea.

## **Sevastopol**

A third and related issue is the status of Sevastopol. The Crimean port has played an important role in Russian history, and many Russians continue to regard it as a Russian city despite the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954. Although Putin has stated that Russia recognizes Ukraine's borders as agreed in the 1997 state treaty, several Russian officials—particularly Yuri Lushkov, mayor of Moscow who is also a senator in the Federation Council (the upper house of the Russian parliament), and Konstantin Zatulin, head of the Institute of the CIS countries—have been banned from Ukraine for persistently calling into question Ukrainian sovereignty over Sevastopol. Any attempt by Moscow to call into question

Ukrainian sovereignty over Sevastopol could spark a serious crisis between Russia and Ukraine.

## **Crimea**

The autonomous region of Crimea provides a fourth point of potential friction and Russian leverage. With 58 percent of the peninsula's population consisting of ethnic Russians, Crimea is the only area of Ukraine in which Russians constitute a significant majority. In 1954 Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea to Ukraine as a gift commemorating the 300th anniversary of the unification of Ukraine and Russia. The gesture was mainly symbolic, since at that time Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union and few could imagine an independent Ukraine.

Separatist sentiment, although diminished, continues to exist in Crimea, and provides Moscow with a potential tool to exert pressure on Kiev. An outright Russian military invasion of Ukraine is unlikely; nonetheless, Ukrainian officials worry that small scale clashes provoked by Russian nationalists in Crimea could be used as a pretext for Russian intervention under the guise of protecting ethnic Russians in Crimea.

## **NATO & EU**

Ukrainian membership of NATO is a potential source of tension in Ukraine's relations with Russia. However, the NATO membership issue is likely to be less of visceral point of contention than it has been in the past. Yanukovich is opposed to Ukrainian membership in NATO and is not likely to push the issue. Thus for the next few years, if not longer, the issue of Ukrainian membership in NATO is likely to be put on the back burner. The door to eventual Ukrainian membership will probably be kept open in principal, but there is likely to be little serious Western political pressure to admit Ukraine.

Ukraine's prospects for achieving membership to the EU in the next decade are even slimmer. Since the French and Dutch referenda on 29 May 2005 and 1 June 2005, public opposition in Europe to further enlargement has intensified. Romania and Bulgaria were admitted in January 2007, but there is a general consensus within the EU that the EU needs to deepen before it can consider further enlargement. Ukraine has sought a commitment from the EU that it would be considered as a candidate for membership, but has been repeatedly told that consideration of such a status was premature and that Ukraine should concentrate instead on accelerating social and economic reforms domestically.

Combined with the lack of strong support within the alliance for offering Ukraine NATO membership, the EU's hesitation to provide a perspective on membership leaves Ukraine stranded in a kind of political no-man's-land without

a firm institutional anchor to the West. Under these conditions, it will be hard for pro-Western Ukrainian politicians to get support from the Ukrainian population for painful political and economic reforms needed to modernize the country and strengthen its independence.

In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Georgia, there was speculation that Moscow might intensify pressure on Ukraine, possibly using the Crimean issue as a pretext. However, the likelihood of a Russian military intervention in Ukraine is low. Rather, the real danger is that Ukraine will not be able to summon the political will and unity to address its key economic and political problems in an effective and concerted manner, leaving it increasingly vulnerable to outside manipulation and pressure.

Ukraine's biggest weakness—and Moscow's strongest card—are the internal divisions within Ukraine. These show little sign of abating in the near future.

If the presidential elections result, as is likely, in continued gridlock and internal bickering rather than much needed domestic reform, then "Ukraine fatigue," already strong in large parts of the West, will likely grow. That would make Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions more problematic and its ability to resist Russian pressure more difficult.

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#### GROWING UNEASE ON THE EASTERN FRONT

Ukraine's increasing internal weakness and vulnerability is of particular concern to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, because a reorientation of Ukrainian policy back toward Russia would deprive these countries of an important buffer. That would increase the prospect that they would be subject to increasing pressure, especially economically, from Moscow. The end of the Cold War and the integration of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO and the EU resulted in a dramatic reduction in Russian influence in Eastern Europe. With the entry of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe into NATO, Russia lost an important means of leverage over its former satellites. Indeed, for a long while Russia had no Eastern European policy except trying to prevent the entry of these countries into NATO, a policy which visibly failed.

This period of neglect and indifference, however, has ended. In the last few years, the Russian leadership has embarked on a systematic effort to restore Russian influence in Eastern Europe and along Moscow's Western periphery. Rather than relying on military power, as the Soviet leadership did, the current

Russian leadership has sought to use economic instruments—above all, Russia's energy exports—to expand Russia's power and influence.

In a blatant attempt to use energy as a political weapon, in July 2008, without warning, the Russian oil pipeline monopoly Transneft cut oil deliveries to the Czech Republic by 40 percent. The cuts occurred one day after the Czech government signed an accord with the United States allowing Washington to base part of its missile defense system in the Czech Republic.<sup>10</sup> While Transneft cited "technical and commercial reasons" for the cut off, few Czech officials found the explanation very credible.

Russia has also attempted to gain control of gas and oil pipelines elsewhere in Eastern Europe. At the end of March 2009, the Kremlin-controlled Surgut Neftegaz became the largest shareholder in the MOL Hungarian Oil and Gas Company.<sup>11</sup> MOL owns the most efficient refineries in Central Europe and is the dominant stakeholder in Croatia's gas and oil company, INA. It is also a partner in the EU-backed Nabucco pipeline project, which is intended to transport Caspian gas from Turkey up through Bulgaria, Romania, Austria, and Hungary. Thus, control of MOL would give Russia an important means of influencing the European energy market, including the fate of Nabucco.

Moscow has sought to undercut Nabucco by proposing the construction of the South Stream pipeline, which would run along a route to Europe similar to Nabucco's and would target the same group of countries. The South Stream pipeline is meant to control supply of gas to Southeastern Europe, locking in the customers on whom the bankers behind Nabucco are counting to finance the EU-backed project.

Russia's more assertive policy and efforts to exploit its economic leverage have contributed to a palpable rise of unease in Central and Eastern Europe. This unease was reflected in an open letter to President Obama in the fall of 2009 signed by a distinguished group of Central and East European intellectuals and former officials. They included the former president of Poland and the Czech Republic, Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel.<sup>12</sup> The letter, while respectful and politely phrased, expressed concern about a number of trends which the authors argued threatened to undermine transatlantic solidarity and ties to Central and Eastern Europe.

This unease has its roots in three closely related factors. The first is Russia's new-found assertiveness and self-confidence. Having lived under Russian and Soviet domination for long periods of time, Central and Eastern Europeans are acutely sensitive to shifts in Russian power. They worry that Moscow's intimidation tactics and use of energy as a political weapon could result in a gradual erosion of their independence.

The concerns about Russia are reinforced by what many Eastern Europeans

see as NATO's increasing weakness. The letter to Obama warned that in a number of countries in Eastern Europe NATO was seen as less and less relevant.<sup>13</sup> An increasing number of East Europeans questioned whether in a future crisis NATO would be willing and able to come to their defense. To many Central- and Eastern-Europeans, NATO's failure to respond with anything more than words in the Georgian crisis in August 2008 was worrying.

A third reason for the growing unease is uncertainty about the general directions and goals of U.S. policy toward Europe, especially Russia. The East European unease is driven not so much by fears of a "new Yalta" as of benign neglect.<sup>14</sup> The Eastern-Europeans understand that the United States wants—and needs—good relations with Russia. They worry though that with the enlargement of the EU and NATO, Washington has "checked the East European box" and that Eastern Europe will drop off the U.S. policy radar screen.

To some extent, U.S. policy is a victim of its own success. The United States played a critical role in stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe through its support for their membership in NATO and the EU. But Central and Eastern Europeans worry that the economic prosperity and political stability this support has engendered is not as firmly rooted as many Americans think and that without continued U.S. attention and leadership, many of the old ghosts of the past could reemerge.

This unease is strongest in Poland and the Baltic states, in part for historical and geographic reasons, but also because these countries feel the most vulnerable to Russian pressure, economic as well as political. Despite their integration into the EU, they are still heavily dependent on Russia for energy, especially natural gas, and they were among the most strongly affected by the Russian cut-off of gas to Ukraine in January 2006.

Not surprisingly, these countries have been among the strongest advocates of strengthening NATO and the most worried by what they see as growing signs of the alliance's weakness. This is particularly true in Poland. Indeed, the Polish willingness to have U.S. interceptors stationed on Polish soil under the Bush missile defense plan—subsequently cancelled by Obama in September 2009—reflected a desire to strengthen bilateral security ties with the United States. This was in part because many Poles today are less sure that Poland can rely on NATO to protect

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The Obama administration's (mis)handling of the decision to cancel the Bush missile defense plan has reinforced these concerns. From a strategic point of view, the decision to scrap the plan was right: the Obama system is technically superior, can be deployed sooner, and covers southern Europe and Turkey, which the Bush system did not. The rollout and public presentation were poorly prepared, however, and showed a lack of sensitivity to the feelings of two important allied governments that had expended considerable political capital in support of deploying the systems. Polish and Czech leaders were informed of the decision only at the last second—almost as an afterthought—leaving them feeling like dispensable pawns after having taken significant political risks to further U.S. interests.

Vice President Biden's swing through Eastern Europe in October 2009 helped to defuse some of this anxiety and provided a degree of much-needed assurance that East European interests would not be sacrificed as Washington sought to improve relations with Moscow. But the underlying concerns remain, especially as the United States becomes more heavily focused on areas outside Europe and Russian calls for a new security order in Europe intensify. Thus the United States will need to strike a fine balance between resetting relations with Russia while at the same time providing reassurance to its East European allies that their interests will not be neglected as the dialogue with Moscow proceeds.

#### THE BERLIN-MOSCOW TANGO

Russia's emergence as a more assertive and confident economic and political actor has coincided with another important regional trend: the intensification of economic and political ties between Germany and Russia, particularly in the energy field. This new dynamic represents an important shift in German policy and in the Russian-German relationship more broadly.

In the initial period after the end of the Cold War, Germany pursued an active *Ostpolitik* designed to stabilize Central and Eastern Europe and prevent a spillover of East European economic and social unrest into Germany. Berlin became the leading trading partner and investor in most of Eastern Europe. Under Chancellor Helmut Kohl, Germany also became the leading proponent of NATO enlargement to Central Europe. Kohl was particularly concerned to ensure that Poland was integrated into NATO and the EU. With Poland's integration into both, Germany was no longer a frontline state, easing one of its most important security concerns.

German policy, however, underwent a visible shift under Kohl's successor Gerhard Schröder, who gave pride of place to intensifying relations with Russia, particularly in the economic realm. Schröder downplayed Russia's backsliding on democratic reform and was extremely careful not to criticize Putin openly, with

whom he maintained close personal ties. In effect, under Schroeder, Germany adopted a “Russia first” policy. Relations with Eastern Europe were downgraded and not allowed to disturb the primary objective, which was to intensify economic ties to Russia.

This shift was reflected in particular in German policy toward the Baltic states. During the first round of NATO enlargement, Germany had been the leading advocate in Europe for the integration of Central Europe, especially Poland, into NATO. Once this objective had been achieved, however, Germany showed far less enthusiasm for further enlargement, particularly the admission of the Baltic states into NATO—largely out of concern that such a move would provoke a strong negative reaction in Moscow.

Schroeder’s decision to approve the construction of a gas pipeline (Nord Stream) beneath the Baltic Sea, which directly connects Russia and Germany and bypasses Ukraine, in the closing days of his tenure as chancellor, provoked a particularly strong reaction in Poland and the Baltic states because the project could increase the vulnerability of these countries to Russian economic pressure. Radek Sikorski, then-Polish Defense Minister, currently Polish Foreign Minister, went so far as to publicly compare the pipeline decision to the infamous 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which resulted in the carving up of Poland and served as a prelude to World War II.

East Europeans had hoped that Schroeder’s successor Angela Merkel, who was from the former East Germany, would adopt a tougher policy toward Russia. These hopes, however, have been disappointed. The change has largely been one of tone and style, rather than substance. While Merkel has been willing to speak out more forcefully about human rights abuses in Russia and meet with Russian dissidents—something Schroeder never did—she has continued to give priority to expanding economic ties to Russia and has refused to cancel the Baltic pipeline.

There is a strong political consensus in support of Germany’s Russia policy within German politics, with few differences between the major parties. Thus German policy toward Russia is not likely to change substantially now that the FDP has replaced the SPD as Merkel’s coalition partner.

The deepening ties between Moscow and Berlin are driven by strong economic interests, especially energy. Germany is Russia’s largest market for gas. Twenty percent of Russia’s natural gas exports and ten percent of its oil exports go to Germany.<sup>15</sup> Today, Germany imports nearly forty percent of its natural gas and twenty percent of its oil from Russia. Given Germany’s expanding energy needs, it will be impossible to meet these needs in the near and medium term without Russian gas. Indeed, Germany’s biggest concern is not that Russia may turn off the gas spigot, as it did to Ukraine in January 2006, but that Russia may not have

the production capacity to meet Europe's need for gas over the long term and that Germany could face serious shortfalls of Russian gas in the future.

Germany's deepening relationship with Moscow has made Germany more hesitant to take or support actions that would antagonize Russia and damage Berlin's expanding web of economic ties with Moscow. Chancellor Merkel was relatively slow in condemning the Russian invasion of Georgia, and when she did her position was milder than many in Washington would have liked. She was also one of the strongest opponents of giving Georgia and Ukraine Membership Action Plans (MAP) at the Bucharest summit in April 2008. Within NATO, Germany has consistently opposed actions such as conducting contingency planning and military

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exercises on the grounds they could be viewed as "provocative" by Moscow and strain NATO-Russian relations.

The growing warmth between Berlin and Moscow has made some Central and Eastern Europeans nervous, especially the Poles. In private some Eastern Europeans worry that the intensification of cooperation between Berlin and Moscow could lead to a "new Rapallo"—i.e., that Russia and Germany could begin to collaborate behind the back of Eastern Europe and the West, as they did in the interwar period.

Such fears, however, are exaggerated. They overlook the important differences between the situation in the interwar period and the political context today. The Treaty of Rapallo was a product of a special set of historical circumstances. During this period, Russia and Germany were both international pariahs and needed each other. The political context today is quite different. Germany is now tightly integrated into the West through a multitude of ties and organic links. While it has a strong economic and political interest in expanding ties to Russia, Germany is not likely to abandon the freedom and security that memberships in the EU and NATO provide for an alliance with Moscow.

Still, the growing intensification of ties between Germany and Russia presents problems, above all for the Central and Eastern Europeans. Germany has strong economic and political interests in maintaining stable relations with Russia. Thus, Berlin is going to react cautiously to proposals that could lead to a deterioration of relations with Moscow. This will make the pursuit of a coherent transatlantic policy toward Russia much more difficult in the future.

## THE CHANGING CONTEXT OF NATO ENLARGEMENT

The outbreak of the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine raised the question anew of what role NATO could or should play in projecting stability to the countries in the post-Soviet space, particularly Georgia and Ukraine. As in the 1990s, a lively debate has ensued among Western scholars and specialists. To a large extent, the arguments in the debate about NATO expansion into the post-Soviet space have mimicked those of the earlier debates during the first and second rounds of NATO enlargement. Proponents have seen NATO enlargement as a means of projecting stability further eastward; opponents worry about the impact on relations with Moscow.

NATO played an important role in stabilizing Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>16</sup> There can be little doubt that the region would be noticeably less prosperous and stable if NATO's eastern expansion had not occurred. NATO enlargement also gave the EU's process of enlargement important impetus; without NATO enlargement the integration of Central and Eastern Europe into the EU might not have occurred, or at least not as rapidly as it did.

The political context for NATO enlargement today, however, is quite different from the one that existed at the time of the first and second rounds of enlargement. First, Russia is stronger today. At the time of the first enlargement debate Russia was weak. Today, Russia, buoyed by nearly a decade of rising energy prices, is in a more confident mood. In addition, Russia has greater leverage, particularly economic leverage, in the post-Soviet space than it had in Central Europe.

Second, the qualifications of the aspirants for NATO membership along the western periphery of the post-Soviet space are much weaker than the qualifications of the aspirants from Central Europe were when they joined NATO in 1997. In addition, many members of NATO are not entirely convinced that Georgia and Ukraine are really part of Europe.

Third, in the 1990s Germany took the lead in forging a European consensus behind NATO enlargement to Central Europe. Indeed, NATO enlargement to Central Europe was largely a US-German project. Today there is no major European ally ready and willing to play the role that Germany played in the initial round of enlargement, least of all Germany. Germany has gone from being the leading advocate of NATO enlargement to being one of the strongest opponents of NATO's expansion into the post-Soviet space.

The strategic focus of the United States has also changed. In the 1990s, the attention of the United States was still heavily focused on Europe. Today, US strategic attention is concentrated on areas beyond Europe's borders—Iraq, Iran, China, North Korea, etc. Thus NATO enlargement, while still important, is less central to Washington's foreign policy agenda than it was a decade ago.

This does not mean that countries like Ukraine and Georgia can never become

members of NATO. But it does help explain why any expansion of NATO into the post-Soviet space is going to be a much more difficult task than the previous two rounds of enlargement, and why it cannot—and should not—be rushed.

The Russian invasion of Georgia underscored the dangers of extending an Article V (collective defense) security guarantee to countries in the post-Soviet space. None of the NATO members—including the United States—was ready to provide military support to Georgia and risk a military conflict with Russia. A failure by the alliance to carry out an Article V security commitment to a member under attack would have a devastating impact on the alliance's credibility. Better no commitment than a hollow commitment.

Public support for membership in the candidate country is also an important consideration. Opinion polls in Ukraine, for example, show that only about 22 to 25 percent of the population support Ukrainian membership.<sup>17</sup> It would be foolish—indeed highly dangerous—to bring a country into NATO when the majority of the country's population opposes membership even if Russia did not object. Public support for NATO membership could increase if the Ukrainian government undertook a serious campaign to educate the public about NATO, as was done in a number of Eastern European aspirants prior to their accessions to NATO. But such a campaign would take years before it had any perceptible effect on popular attitudes.

For all these reasons, the issue of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine—especially for the latter—is likely to be put on the back burner for the next few years. It will remain a long-term goal, but it is unlikely to be actively pushed. This may not be such a bad thing. It would allow Russia and NATO to focus on more urgent and pressing tasks. It would also give Georgia and Ukraine more time to improve their qualifications for membership and work on overcoming key weaknesses.

## THE WAY AHEAD

In the last decade, Russia has emerged as a more assertive actor on the European stage. While in most areas it is a status quo power, in Europe Russia is a revisionist power. In effect, Moscow wants to change the post-Cold War security order, which it feels was imposed upon it by the West at a time when it was weak. Now that it is strong, Russia would like to renegotiate the terms of the security order. In particular it seeks to establish a new security order based on spheres of influence that would recognize Russia's "privileged interests" in the post-Soviet space.


A security order based on spheres of interest is not in the US or broader Western interest; it would be a repudiation of the Paris Charter and Helsinki Final

Act. The Western goal should be to eradicate dividing lines, not create new ones. The principle that states should be free to decide their security orientation needs to remain a fundamental tenet of any new European security order.

In the coming period, Moscow is likely to push hard to reshape the current post-Cold War security order. The Russian draft treaty on European security released on 29 November 2009 points in that direction. One of its main aims appears to be to sidetrack and constrain NATO. This effort needs to be opposed. In an age when the security challenges are increasingly global and transnational, NATO still has an important role to play, particularly as a forum for discussion and coordination of transatlantic security policy.

At the same time, the U.S. policy makers need to recognize that the context for NATO enlargement today is quite different than the one that existed in the 1990s when NATO undertook its first eastward expansion. These differences mean that expanding NATO into the post-Soviet space is likely to be considerably more difficult and more controversial.

While the door should be kept open to Ukrainian and Georgian memberships, the reality is that there is no consensus within the alliance to admit either of the two states in the near future. Thus the issue of Ukrainian and Georgian membership is likely to be put on hold for the next few years. This may help to defuse some of the emotion and animosity that the issue has generated lately while keeping open the option of possible membership for both over the long run.

The United States also needs to give more consideration to how it can provide greater reassurance to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Better relations with Moscow should not be pursued at their expense or behind their back. But a reduction of tensions with Russia is in their interest. Indeed, they will be one of the primary beneficiaries from it. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Putin. Prepared Remarks, 43rd Munich Conference on Security (Munich, Germany, 12 February 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Svante E. Cornell, "Pipeline Power: The War in Georgia and the Future of the Caucasian Energy Corridor," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2009), 131-139. See also, Ronald D. Asmus, *A Little War That Shook The World* (New York: Palgrave, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> George Friedman, "Geopolitical Diary: The Medvedev Doctrine," *Stratfor* (2 September 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See F. Stephen Larrabee, "The United States and Security in the Black Sea Region," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (September 2009), 308.

<sup>5</sup> Friedman, "Geopolitical Diary: The Medvedev Doctrine," Op Cit.

<sup>6</sup> See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 46.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion of the impact of the rivalries and infighting during this period, see F.



Stephen Larrabee, "Ukraine at the Crossroads", *Washington Quarterly*, (Autumn 2007), 45-61; also F. Stephen Larrabee, "Ukraine and the West," *Survival*, 48, no. 1 (Spring 2006); for an assessment of more recent developments, see Steven Pifer, "Averting Crisis in Ukraine" (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Yanukovych received 48.95 percent of the vote versus 45.47 percent for Tymoshenko

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Pifer, "Averting Crisis in Ukraine," 28.

<sup>10</sup> Judy Dempsey, "Russia further cuts its oil deliveries to Czech Republic," *New York Times*, 30 July 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Socor, "The Strategic Implications of Russian Move Against Hungary's MOL," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 6, no. 77, 22 April 2009.

<sup>12</sup> An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe," *Radio Free Europe*, 16 July 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> F. Stephen Larrabee and Christopher Chivvis, "Biden's Task in Eastern Europe: Reassurance," *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 October 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis and Thomas Rid, "The Roots of Germany's Russia policy" *Survival*, Vol. 51, no. 2 (April-May 2009), 110.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>17</sup> See Andriy Bycenko, "Public Opinion on NATO and Ukrainian Accession to It," *National Security and Defence*, no. 9 (2006), 20-21.