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WHITHER THE EURO-ATLANTIC SPACE?

REDEFINING EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY IN A POST-POST-COLD WAR ERA

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Abstract: The Ukraine conflict has exposed the fragility of both Ukrainian sovereignty and, more broadly, of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture as a whole. Western powers' collective inability to effectively counter Russian aggression in Ukraine and along its periphery is a blow to the efficacy of the European post-Cold War era. Western retrenchment, meanwhile, only serves to effectively countenance Russian demands for spheres of influence and leaves Ukraine, as well as other periphery states such as Georgia and Moldova, isolated and vulnerable to Russian coercion. This strategy ultimately only undermines interstate norms and serves Russian neo-imperial designs. To restore the integrity of the Euro-Atlantic system, Western powers must play a more proactive role in defending periphery states' sovereignty and revitalize predictable, realistic pathways for expansion into Euro-Atlantic structures.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, NATO, Euro-Atlantic.

There is some geopolitical irony in the circumstances that surround the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As Ukrainian sovereignty was supposedly enshrined – if perhaps not guaranteed – in the now infamous 1994 Budapest Memorandum (Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances, 1994), the post-Cold War Euro-Atlantic space was codified through the structural latticework in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) summit declaration, also in Budapest in 1994 (CSCE, 1994). And today, amid the throes of a multifaceted assault on Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia, so too are the norms that govern interstate relations in the Euro-Atlantic space deeply, if not irrevocably, undermined.

This is no historical coincidence; though Ukraine is neither a member of the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its basic political and territorial sovereignty is a de facto pillar of the framework governing the maintenance of a rules-based Euro-Atlantic order. Conversely, current Russian military intervention in Ukraine not only

serves to undermine and defeat Ukrainian sovereignty, but also constitutes a major blow to the efficacy of the Euro-Atlantic system. Similarly, Russian military, political, diplomatic, or economic aggression against other states on its periphery are further attacks – of admittedly varying intensity and seriousness – on the Euro-Atlantic system.

The immediate implications of Russian geopolitical boldness are already stark: extensive Ukrainian territory appears to be either under total (Crimea) or effective (Donetsk and Luhansk regions) control of Russian forces or its proxies. However, the downstream effects of the situation have a far broader reach. The Euro-Atlantic security architecture, which found its most immediately recognizable form from the 1994 Budapest summit, appears unenforceable to all but only the weakest and most vulnerable violators – such as the NATO operations against Slobodan Milosevic’s Serbian regime in 1999.

What does this mean for Euro-Atlantic security? In the absence of a system that effectively challenges violators, it can be argued that there is essentially no system at all. The conduct of international relations, of course, is not an inflexible practice; rules are often reinterpreted according to needs and perceived interests. However, consistent and notorious violations of interstate norms demand a reexamination of existing structures and consideration of what comes next in their virtual absence. In the wake of Russian actions in Ukraine, the integrity of the Euro-Atlantic system has waned with the West’s strategic acquiescence to Russian claims of spheres of influence to be respected.

The conflict in Ukraine has rapidly transmogrified from what at first appeared to be a limited intervention into Crimea, a recognized bastion of pro-Russian sentiment in Ukraine (Cecire, 2014a), into a hotly-contested “hybrid” war in eastern Ukraine between Moscow-backed proxies and Ukrainian forces loyal to the Kiev government, which includes a mixture of regular government forces and allied, if oftentimes effectively autonomous, pro-Kiev militias (Taylor, 2014).

This transformation since the beginning of the conflict in late February 2014 has not been ignored by the international community. It has been vociferously denounced and led to several rounds of escalating sanctions by both the US and the EU (*BBC News*, 2014). However, while there is evidence that these sanctions are having an effect on the Russian economy, they do not appear to be serving to arrest or appreciably blunt Russian military activities in Ukraine. On the contrary, Russian activity appears to have gradually increased throughout 2014. Meanwhile, more assertive instruments of challenging Russian aggression in Ukraine have yet to be employed – direct military advisory, providing lethal military equipment, or other more forceful options remain unused. Though Ukraine does receive various forms of assistance from the West, these reported assistance packages typically have limited military value at best and, also importantly, could be seen as telegraphing strategic ambivalence and disunity by the Western powers.

But regardless of Western intentions, Ukraine increasingly appears to be at the mercy of Russian forces. Without a more forceful Western role, it will be unlikely, if not impossible, for the Kiev government to achieve a military victory over Russian proxies on its territory and reassert full control within its borders.

EMERGING REALIGNMENTS

The official Western position, summarized broadly, may be best described as retrenchment in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. In general terms, the US and much of Europe has collectively agreed to concentrate on territorial defense against the possibility of further Russian incursions into Europe. This notion is most fully manifest in the multilateral declaration following September 2014 annual NATO summit in Wales (NATO, 2014). The declaration offers insight into the resettling Euro-Atlantic security rubric in the face of Russian actions in Ukraine. While the Alliance offered unequivocal condemnation of Russian aggression and offered some measure of support for Ukraine and other embattled states on the Russian periphery, the statement – as well as NATO actions – make clear the distinction between NATO member states and Western-leaning, non-member countries such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova.

This has essentially cleaved Europe according to spheres of influence between NATO member states on one side – along with non-member countries geographically removed from Russian borders – and Russia and its ever-expanding periphery on the other. This is tantamount to a de facto acknowledgement of the very geopolitical demands that Moscow has consistently espoused and Western leaders have verbally rejected. Although likely unintentional, the NATO declaration appears to effectively surrender – in practice, if not rhetorically – the long-held notion that former Soviet states can and do have the opportunity to choose their foreign policy orientation free of external coercion. This would seem to contradict the “Europe whole and free” formulation that has buttressed the foundation of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture as well as the post-1989 global order itself (Horelick, 1989).

At the same time, the NATO summit declaration obscures deep divisions that have rent the Alliance and the West over Russia. Despite the incontrovertibility of ongoing Russian military participation in Ukraine (Vandiver, 2014), varying threat perceptions have prevented a consistently coordinated Western response to Russian actions. Even recent EU sanctions against Russia, which have been widely considered to be increasingly strong, have been described as “watered down” based on dissension among key EU member states (Kuznetsov and Gergely, 2014).

Though perceptions among European states cannot be strictly defined, three rough categories can be observed. The first category are certain states, primarily Eastern

European, such as Poland and the Baltic states, that have lobbied for a stronger EU and NATO responses to Russia – partially out of concern for their own security. A second category are the “skeptical” states, including Germany, France, and Italy, that condemn Russian actions in Ukraine but see the issue as highly localized and are eager to return to the *status quo ante*. Finally, the third category of states, most strongly represented by Viktor Orban’s Hungary, appear sympathetic to Russian actions (Orenstein, 2014). These divisions are likely encouraged by Moscow to prevent the formation of a unified Western front.

Formulating a strong, unified response to the Russian abrogation of interstate norms is further complicated by the realities of other strategic challenges. For one, the EU, and indeed much of the Western world, has yet to fully recover from the damaging effects of the 2008 global financial crisis, rendering the prospect of confronting Russia – a major European trade partner and energy supplier – particularly difficult just as withdrawals from Afghanistan were once expected to yield a small “peace dividend” for a number of NATO states. For the US, the latter point is especially salient given the budgetary pressures leveled by the 2011 Budget Control Act (“sequestration”). These considerations are accentuated by other emerging contingencies. The rapid offensive by the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)¹ in Iraq – not to mention the still-raging Syrian civil war – has in some ways pushed the Russian threat to a secondary status. Outgoing NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has even claimed that ISIS represents a greater threat to Europe than Russia (Tignor, 2014). This claim, however, appears dubious. While concerns about the reverse flow of European foreign fighters are legitimate, that remains more of a hypothetical threat than a clear and present danger to European security. By comparison, there is a conceivably existential Russian threat to not only Ukrainian statehood, but also that of the Baltic states – and with it, the interlocking Euro-Atlantic alliance system that secures European peace.

The response by Euro-Atlantic structures, and the member states themselves, has essentially reinforced Russian claims to a privileged sphere of interest. Non-NATO countries on the Russian periphery, Ukraine as well as Georgia and Moldova, may be offered varying degrees of Western support, but not at the risk of being drawn into any kind of direct conflict with Russia. In this sense, the fates of Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova are ultimately tethered to Russian forbearance – or on these states’ independent ability to stave off Russian encroachment through alternative military or diplomatic means.

¹ The group is also known as the “Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant” (ISIL) or, more recently, as just the “Islamic State.” The use of “ISIS” for the author’s sake of personal consistency rather than an expression of a preference for any particular term.

CHOICES TO MAKE

The absence of more robust Western backing to stem Russian aggression puts Western-leaning non-NATO states in a precarious position. In particular, Ukraine is faced with the prospect of either extensive, permanent dismemberment should it maintain its Euro-Atlantic orientation or, alternately, far more limited territorial sacrifices (likely only Crimea) in exchange for subservience to Moscow. Georgia and Moldova face similar, if less immediately urgent, conundrums in their dealings with the West and Moscow. None of these states have the independent military capacity to withstand a concerted Russian hybrid warfare operation, much less a full-scale invasion, without extensive Western support.

This leaves these states uniquely vulnerable to Russian pressure. With more robust Western support essentially off the table, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova may be gradually forced to concede to Russian demands even if they would prefer resistance. Recent events in Ukraine underline this idea: Ukrainian pleas for advanced Western weaponry and training have reportedly not been fulfilled, justifying the Ukrainian government's ceasefire, brokered by Russian President Vladimir Putin, with Russian-backed proxies in the east.² For their part, Georgia and Moldova have expressed solidarity with Ukraine, but have been wary of appearing provocative, mindful of their isolation from the Western security blanket.

This dynamic may serve as an incentive for Moscow to more comprehensively extend its dominion over the states on its periphery, confident in the unlikelihood of Western opposition more appreciable than statements and sanctions. For their part, domestic political trends in these states will likely reflect this reality; Euro-Atlantic conditioned reforms may slow or be gradually abandoned, "Eurasianism" would grow as an internal political force, and geopolitical accommodationism towards Russia could be seen as a necessary evil to ensure the preservation of some measure of independence (Cecire, 2014b). Further afield, Western parochialism may have the effect of confirming the foreign policy orientations of "multivector" autocracies such as Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia.

Such developments would seem to make fears of returning Russian power something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Western retrenchment as a reaction to Russian aggression without providing the tools or support to pro-West states outside of NATO effectively, if unintentionally, endorses Russian claims to spheres of influence, in turn forcing periphery states to gradually accommodate to Russia to ensure their survival.

² See MacAskill, 2014. Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko claims that an external country is providing Ukraine with advanced weaponry. However, this has yet to be confirmed and, if true, appears likely to be the enterprise of a single state rather than a collective Western decision.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It can be argued that the prevailing response to Russian actions on its periphery – retrenchment – will only embolden and empower Moscow’s aggressive agenda. The clearest course correction would be to extend more concrete support to periphery states, but extensive disunity within the Western community makes this unlikely as a multilateral, Euro-Atlantic initiative. Instead, individual states – or informal collections of like-minded Western states – could provide support for periphery states without abandoning Euro-Atlantic collective defense. Specifically, providing lethal and non-lethal military equipment – and the training to use them properly – could go a long way in enhancing local forces’ combat effectiveness and deterrence value. But ultimately, even such moves are largely tactical in nature and are likely insufficient on their own to reverse the strategic degradation of the Euro-Atlantic space.

Revitalizing the Euro-Atlantic space is a more ambitious project, on several orders of magnitude. While prescriptions for such an endeavor are beyond the scope of this paper, a brief comment is nonetheless in order. Returning the Euro-Atlantic space to vigor is an inherently complex agenda, but is rooted in at least one core element: expansion. The ability and willingness to expand is a precondition – though perhaps insufficient in itself – for the health of the Euro-Atlantic space; the responsibilities and the benefits of membership within NATO and/or the EU, to name two of the most important structures, codifies certain interstate norms, enshrines liberal democracy as the established form of government, and whenever possible cultivates adherence to a rules-based international order. This is not to say that NATO or EU members do not have internal disagreements – the Turkey-Greece conflict over Cyprus evinces otherwise – but these disagreements are moderated by a general understanding that dialogue, above all, is the means by which all parties are committed towards resolution. Expanding the Euro-Atlantic space is desirable not only because it advances “good” principles, but also because it can act a dissuading force against transnational coercion and disorder.

Of course, membership within Euro-Atlantic structures should not be expanded at all costs; on the contrary, the standards of liberal democracy among members is exactly what makes the Euro-Atlantic space what it is. But maintaining real, predictable, concrete pathways into the Euro-Atlantic space is a key to its strength – the perceived benefits of membership within one or more Euro-Atlantic structures is the chief incentive for the difficult and sometimes burdensome tasks of reform. This acts as a mechanism for bolstering support from elites, special interests, and the public to engage in reform processes they might otherwise be wary of undertaking. But in the absence of membership pathways, an imbalance is created between the reform burden and the perceived benefits. Local stakeholders, whether out of political calculation or genuine dismay, can use the vagaries of

Euro-Atlantic conditionality to rally opposition. In Georgia, which has enjoyed a dominant societal consensus in favor of Euro-Atlantic integration since the early 2000s,³ skepticism of NATO and the EU membership is increasing just as favorability towards Russia-backed “Eurasianism” increases (Cecire, 2014b). Restoring concrete, near- to medium-term prospects for Euro-Atlantic integration could help mitigate such shifts in elite and public opinion.

The Euro-Atlantic space remains a pillar of the international rules-based order, but its strength is waning in the face of largely unchecked Russian aggression. The sum of the Euro-Atlantic community’s response – retrenchment – is insufficient at best and self-defeating at worst if the Euro-Atlantic system is to survive in its recognizable post-1994 configuration. This has the added effect of leaving states on the Russian periphery, such as Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, ultimately to their own devices in the absence of clear Western support. The “new rules” of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture may have the consequence of spurring Russian accommodationism in these states while eroding whatever leverage the West has – or hoped to cultivate – further afield among the “multivector” autocracies.

If the West hopes to reverse these trends, the Euro-Atlantic space should be reinvigorated through expansion. Allowing for expansion is the vitalizing force of the Euro-Atlantic space and the only means of avoiding the establishment of the same spheres of influence which Moscow promotes and the Western community claims to deny.

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