

THE NEW REGIONAL “GAME OF THRONES”

A real-life “Game of Thrones” is developing in the wider region surrounding the Black Sea and beyond, extending to the Middle East, Southeast Europe, and Mediterranean regions, through multileveled approaches to security and strategy. What ignited separatist movements in the regions of Ukraine in 2014 was just the starting point of a larger change that will eventually affect the balance of power and the future role of states in the area and neighborhood. Developments in the region have reached a pivotal point; one that requires a total change of objectives and strategies. A shift in the power balance between leading and peripheral states is therefore beginning to manifest itself. New alliances will be created and old ones will be reshaped or forgotten.

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This article explains the changing nature of the balance of power between states.¹ It looks at a new strategic reality generated through current and upcoming security challenges, and presents an analysis of strategic changes at different levels of policy-making.

A real-life “Game of Thrones” is unfolding in multiple dimensions at the level of geostrategic international affairs.² This game will render countries vulnerable or powerful, depending on how they perform.

Formations of alliances will occur based on a “new” set of interests. Here, interests coalesce among those strategically seeking security development and business investments, rather than targeting real resolutions of conflicts over existing or frozen issues in the areas concerned.

An evaluation of the ongoing events in the Black Sea and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as well as in Southeast Europe testifies as evidence towards ongoing changes in the engagement of states and the possibility of an alteration to the current balance of power.

Strategy versus Security

In an earlier article, this author remarked: “Emerging international threats and challenges may disrupt the balance of power between regional and international powers (...) observed across the Mediterranean and the Middle East.”³ This remark may be applied to analysis of the Black Sea region as well.

Ongoing events – from the Arab Spring to the ensuing civil war in Syria; from the fight against ISIL inside Iraq and Syria and its potential spillover to Lebanon to events in Crimea and southern Ukraine – all testify to the increasing insecurity in the neighborhood. The possibility of security interventions through a coalition of the “willing” is already taking place against ISIL at various levels, and it is estimated that more such interventions are to be seen in the wider region.

1 This article is part of an ongoing academic capacity research project conducted and which will be presented at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute in New York. The final output will be released by February 2015. The research outcome will propose a new pragmatic policy approach to the changing nature of the strategic balance of power among states.

2 HBO TV series, by David Benioff and D.B. Weiss as main writers. It is an adaptation of *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin’s series of fantasy novels, the first of which is titled “A Game of Thrones.” Set in a feudal environment, the series chronicles the dynastic struggles among the realm’s noble families for control of the Iron Throne.

3 Marios P. Efthymiopoulos, “An Alliance between Greece, Turkey and Israel?,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 11 No. 3 (2012), p. 149, <http://www.turkishpolicy.com/article/842/an-alliance-between-greece-turkey-and-israel-fall-2012/>

For the sake of this article, the area in and around the Black Sea is named “Middle Earth.” The “Beyond” part of this “Middle Earth” includes the Middle East, Southeast Mediterranean, and Southeast Europe.⁴

Game of Thrones, an *HBO* TV series, materializes on two fictional continents: Westeros and Essos. Westeros is known in the fiction to be the “Middle Earth,” which this article names as the Black Sea region, and Essos comprises the areas “Beyond,” meaning the Middle East and Southeast Mediterranean regions.

Game of Thrones opens at the end of a decade-long summer and the impending winter brings with it sudden geopolitical shifts that threaten to upset the balance of power. Several “plot lines” are added as the story progresses. Plot lines are game changing opportunities, attempts to change the balance of power. Alliances eventually shift and new alliances are created.

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The main plot lines of the TV series follow a dynastic war among several noble houses for control of the “Iron Throne” (The “Iron Throne” rules over seven kingdoms, namely “Middle Earth”); the rising threat of the fierce peoples beyond Westeros’ northern border (the Russian Federation factor); and the ambition of Daenerys Targaryen, the exiled blood line relative of the realm’s deposed ruling dynasty (Western institutions), to reclaim the throne (Ukraine and Georgia claim to belong to the West and therefore are part of Western institutions).

Game of Thrones is an exploratory TV series, and can function as a novel lens when leveled in the field of political science. Like the series, this article explores issues of gamesmanship in the geopolitical arena, changes in the balance of power, and the diversity of strategic options, but recasted in the 21st century context.

Pragmatism, Practicality, and Ideology and the Game of Thrones

Pragmatism. The current crisis in Ukraine poses a far greater challenge than solely the stability and security of the country.⁵ Given this broader scope of implications,

4 The lord of the Rings vs. the Game of Thrones, Noble Smith, *Huffington Post*, 3 January 2014, “...I believe that Middle-earth will be held up as an exemplar of fantasy (and literature) long after...” Westeros Being one portion of the Middle earth and of clans according to both the Game of Thrones and Lord of the Rings.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/noble-smith/the-lord-of-the-rings-game-of-thrones_b_4532480.html

5 Nicholas Blanford, “Is Ukraine crisis just part of a broader Russian strategy? (+video),” *Christian Monitor*, 15 May 2014, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2014/0515/Is-Ukraine-crisis-just-part-of-a-broader-Russian-strategy-video>

“*Behind the swift move of Russia to recognize Crimea, according to leading academics of the Russian Federation, was the desire to fix a ‘historical mistake that eventually needed to be corrected.’*”

there is a need to analyze how the future may look in terms of strategic stability, both for Ukraine and its surrounding area. What options are there for lasting peace, stability, and actual development in the region?

Pragmatism requires us to dream, visualize, and realize a new, regional world and create a new geostrategic map. In this world a new “Middle Earth” and a new region “Beyond” is envisioned. These new areas will need to guarantee stability, strategic security, and economic development.

Practicality. A path of historical change has been in effect since the fall of the Soviet Union. New concepts and ideologies for 21st century regional stability are developing around themes of redemption and solitude. We are therefore experiencing an age of renewal and/or shifting of alliances, which renders the “Game of Thrones” possible.

Ideology. In this 21st century “Game of Thrones,” new ideologies emerge that give rise to opportunities. Ideologies project change in terms of regimes and borders. Countries like Ukraine but also “Beyond” states such as areas and countries in the Middle East will be eventually affected.⁶

The Game of Thrones introduces an understanding of nationality and statehood. This understanding is seen to emerge as “the dawn of a new era” in the wake of the crisis in the Black Sea region and the Middle East. In this new understanding of statehood, there are some important questions that need to be answered: How will new democracies, if any, emerge? Can democracy be practically administered? What will be the economic order? Who will rule the lands – religious leaders, extremists, elitists, or oligarchs? Will these new societies include morality and value for “ethos?” Will dignity be accounted for?

Practically, it is estimated that the creation of new “microstates” is imminent. Microstates are states created out of strategic opportunity, but are not internationally

6 Marios P. Efthymiopoulos and Igor Okunev, “Tactical Moves. The Real Game of Thrones in Ukraine,” *CNNi*, 3 March 2014, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-1099749>

recognized.⁷ They are small in area. They may eventually turn out to be a better outcome for all sides, when viewed from all strategic perspectives. They shall provide an opportunity for Western and Eastern institutions to expand, while making sure that global centers of gravity re-instate normality in their relations (i.e. Russia with the EU and the US with Russia).

Microstates are first being seen in South Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk), but not Crimea.⁸ More microstates will come to being and will possibly expand in Georgia’s breakaway areas, but also areas of Kurdistan. This will color future developments in the Middle East that are against the ISIL reaction, as Syria is a failing state. In Moldova, Transnistria is already at breakaway status and has officially requested to become part of the Russian Federation.⁹ An institutional membership race is in effect, through membership in international or regional organizations. Then why is there a reaction/the creation of a new institutional establishment called “The Eurasian Economic Union” (EEU – led by Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus, and with Armenia and Abkhazia awaiting membership)?¹⁰

Regional (re-)Allocations in Middle Earth and Beyond

Crimea is now considered a *de facto* part of the Russian Federation. It is however solely being recognized by Russia as being part of the Russian federal structure. Powers from all around the world and Ukraine do not recognize the status of the breakaway area. Behind the swift move of Russia to recognize Crimea, according to leading academics of the Russian Federation, was the desire to fix a “historical mistake that eventually needed to be corrected.”¹¹ Following the annexation referendum in Crimea on 14 September 2014, Crimeans by 98 percent of the total votes¹² stated

7 A small number of microstates are founded on historical anomalies or eccentric interpretations of law. These types of microstates are usually located on small (usually disputed) territorial enclaves, generate limited economic activity founded on tourism and philatelic and numismatic sales, and are tolerated or ignored by the nations from which they claim to have seceded.

Source Princeton University: <https://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Microstate.html>

8 Crimea’s status is unclear. A unilateral declaration of unification to the Russian Federation was simply made.

9 “Anxiety grows in Europe as Transnistria asks for Russian annexation,” *Euractiv*, 19 March 2013, <http://www.euractiv.com/europes-east/romanian-president-fears-moldova-news-534219>

10 The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), also known as the Eurasian Union is an economic union which is planned to be established by a treaty signed on 29 May 2014 between the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia. The Union will go into effect on 1 January 2015 if the treaty is approved by the Parliaments of the three countries. They will be followed by Armenia to join the Treaty and in 10 years’ time from the date of approval and ratification of the Union members will be discussing according to sources in Moscow, a common and joined currency.

11 A professor of Political Science, who does not to be named publicly, and a leading personality in Moscow’s foreign and defense policy affairs. When I addressed the question of what does Crimea constitute, this individual provided me with the picture of the Crimean Bridge, which was made in honor of the people and region of Crimea and its unity with the Russian people. It was “a mistake that needed to be corrected” he stated. In the actual region the majority of the people constitute Russians rather than Russophones, as I also personally noticed during my field study.

12 “Ukraine’s Crimean Region votes,” *CNN*, 14 September 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/03/16/world/europe/ukraine-crisis/>

to be nationally Russian, and therefore needed to be reinstated to Russian Society through passport requests, an area with almost 2.4 million citizens.¹³

The future of the south and southeast part of the “old Ukraine,” which were waiting to be given the status of microstate, is not clear: The future statehood is in question, while they look east towards Russian annexation. The region of the “old Ukraine,” aspirant with microstates looking at Russia, starts with the oblast (Ukrainian provinces), oblast of Donetsk (Donbass area) including the coastal city of Mariupol, oblast of Luhansk and the oblast of Zaporizhzhya and in it the city of Melitopol, areas located or bordering the coastal line of the Azov Sea. They also border, directly or indirectly *via* the sea, the independent Crimea in the west. In the east, they border the Russian Federation province of Rostov.

“The EU and NATO will enlarge in the next four years to come to include the New Ukraine as part of a ‘group project.’”

For the south and southeast of the old Ukraine, regional elites seem to be slowly gaining the status of wider autonomy. This has led to independence but not yet international recognition. It is all a result of a “domino effect,” of an enlarging crisis. A result of the supposed “independence” of Crimea is the wish for changes in borders in other regions as well.

A *New Ukraine* will give rise to membership in Western institutions. A New Ukraine, stable and secure, will be included in the NATO security framework, and, later, in the economic and political organization of the EU. This will take place through a level of engagement that already includes involvement of the IMF and the EU, and may later involve the World Bank. A post-crisis Ukraine may even engage with regional banks such as the Black Sea Development Bank for regional investment procedures that may render New Ukraine fiscally attractive for investments.¹⁴

The EU and NATO look eastward. This is a clear objective. They will enlarge in the next four years to come to include the New Ukraine as part of a “group project.” There will be a combination effort by a group of countries to join NATO. Ukraine will go along with Georgia as part of a group membership. The Western Balkans’ remaining states will also look at group enlargement. Moldova will lead the way on

13 “Russian passports issued for 98% of Crimean Citizens,” 12 September 2014, *Itar-Tass*, <http://crimealibre.com/russian-passports-issued-for-98-of-crimean-citizens/>

14 Andre de Nesnera, “Will Ukraine Join NATO Anytime Soon?,” *Voice of America*, 3 April 2014, <http://www.voanews.com/content/will-ukraine-join-nato-anytime-soon-/1885749.html>

its own, either establishing a level of cooperation or eventually becoming a full member of NATO and signing a trade agreement with the EU.¹⁵

Middle East states and/or Southeast Mediterranean states – including Jordan, Cyprus, Israel, and possibly Egypt – will also look at a more engaged role with NATO and the EU at different national levels. They will see this engagement as a necessity to strengthen their society and institutions, economically develop and secure themselves against global security challenges.

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The EU’s leading states, such as Germany, France, and the UK, and peripheral states, such as Poland, Romania, and Hungary, will come closer to Ukraine through the projection of cultural exchanges and joint trade, mass investment, energy hubs, land use, and religious commonalities through Christianity in Catholic and Orthodox forms.¹⁶

The Russian Federation will assert new relations with this New Ukraine. It will however, have to re-examine and posture its national security objectives through the prism of trade relations and effective cultural and language engagements. A new common trade-agreement relationship is to emerge in the near future which will give way to a direct fund of support, through the newly established department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the “Department for International Development Assistance.”

15 Klusmann Uwe, Schepp Matthias, and Wiegrefe Klaus, “NATO’s Eastward Expansion: Did the West Break Its Promise to Moscow?,” *Global Research*, 2 May 2014,

<http://www.globalresearch.ca/natos-eastward-expansion-did-the-west-break-its-promise-to-moscow/5380144>

16 Inter-religious dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Christian Church is ongoing, otherwise both known as the Western Church and the Eastern Roman Church of the Roman Empire, according to Roman and Byzantine laws. It has started over 50 years ago, celebrated during the first week of June of 2014, both the Pontific of the Catholic Church and the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church at a joined pray in Jerusalem, The summit marked “the 50th anniversary of the meeting in Jerusalem between Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople that ended 900 years of mutual excommunications,” <http://www.christianpost.com/news/pope-francis-patriarch-bartholomew-pray-at-holy-sepulchre-church-to-promote-christian-unity-120353/> Later on to continue the joined prayers and meetings of the two churches in the Vatican but possibly also in Constantinople (otherwise known in the international wording not the Byzantine as Istanbul who’s meaning means: “at the City of Constantine=Constantinople). Referring to the case of Ukraine and the surrounding areas of the Black sea, a variety of interfaith dialogue meetings have been noted and youth meetings discussing the future of faith in the region and problems faced with extremism of foreign faiths, when manipulated.

Looking eastward along the coastline of Georgia, aspired “revolutionary” areas such as Abkhazia will follow. Abkhazians may follow the same path, and as such becoming closer to joining forces with Russia, while Georgia looks for more integration with NATO first and the EU at a later stage.

Amidst this geopolitical re-posturing, there are lingering issues that must be raised in regards to energy and strategic affairs: (1) The future of energy and trade relations between the Russian Federation and Turkey; (2) Regional energy security in Iraq and Syria; (3) The energy security of existing gas pipelines starting from Azerbaijan towards Europe;¹⁷ and (4) The security dimensions of two possible new pipelines to be constructed, which will start from Israel, pass through Cyprus transport infrastructure, and continue towards Greece to connect with TAP.

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In terms of strategic challenges, there are questions that need answering: What is to be done in the Kurdish areas, considering the new geopolitical game of alliances and Kurdish statehood aspirations? Where will the Syrian civil war leave the Eastern Mediterranean region? What will be the strategic role of peripheral states to Syria given there is a necessity to react swiftly to ISIL? What about discussions for the future of stability triads or quartets between Israel,

Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece? What about the security dialogue and the waters of the Exclusive Economic Zones of the Eastern Mediterranean?¹⁸ What about the reaction of Turkey? Will Turkey join forces with the quartet being created, by recognizing strategic realities in the Mediterranean region? Will Turkey finally recognize the international law of the Seas and join future regional cooperation discussions?

Outcomes and Conclusion

Power effectiveness and power projection were measured among all regional actors. A new balance of power through new alliances called “Game of Thrones,” will eventually bring all sides to a more concrete negotiating table. The outcome shall be a new balance of power. New forms of relations will be eventually established,

17 The Transadriatic Gas Pipeline (<http://www.tap-ag.gr/>) and the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline, are the southern gas energy “corridor” for Europe for the time being.

18 Yossi Alpher, “The Ukraine/Crimea crisis: ramifications for the Middle East,” *Open Democracy*, 8 May 2014, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/yossi-alpher/ukrainecrimea-crisis-ramifications-for-middle-east>

giving way to new Alliances based on strategic interests. In essence, the new balance of power being created may not lead to what has been termed a “Cold Peace,” but will lead to new geopolitical realities.¹⁹

There is a clear shift in the foreign policy objectives of leading powers and national objectives of regional, peripheral, and global powers. Commonalities will soon be evident that will bring together competitive parties, rather than push them away.

The attempt of this article was to stimulate recognition of the changing nature of the power balances in areas stretching from the Black Sea, named as “Middle Earth” but also the area “Beyond” meaning the areas of the Middle East and Southeast Mediterranean region, which are both areas in flux. Current crises can be attributed to a new balance that is coming about, among powers and alliances. The new order of things consists of a shifting from old alliances to new interest formations based on geographical interests and possible trade agreements.

19 Eric Engle, “A New Cold War? Cold Peace. Russia, Ukraine, and NATO...,” *St. Louis University Law Journal*, Forthcoming, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2419414