

# REGIONS IN BETWEEN: EUROPE, NATO AND THE GEOPOLITICS OF SHIFTING FRONTIERS

*The enlargement of Western institutions and the incorporation of regions in between has been defined by the desire of those regions to shed their 'in between-ness'. Despite resistance from Russia and Western Europe, this momentum will likely continue. The West's premier institutions, the EU and NATO, with an open mind towards involving Russia, would do well to positively engage in the geopolitics of shifting frontiers.*

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Geographers rightly point out that the continental concepts of Europe and Asia are difficult to objectively sustain. Why the low-lying hills of the Urals or the narrow isthmus of the Bosphorus should present dividing lines any more significant than those of the Alps or the British Channel is less a matter of geography than of prejudices and politics. Eurasia is really one vast continent –early 20<sup>th</sup> century British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder called it "The World Island"– with the 'continent' of Europe as its major peninsula. That said, there have been for millennia, splits between East and West, North and South, in and around the peculiar European peninsula. The specific fault lines and regions that straddled them have shifted over the centuries, but there are some areas that maintain the character of frontiers for longer than others.

These are the 'regions in between': geographical, political, cultural or economic areas that have alternately served as barriers or corridors, no-man's land or vital buffers between empires, states and spheres. Regions in between serve both as economic gateways and borderlands, shifting from the dominance of one established power to another. They serve as cultural bazaars in which distinct traditions coexist and/or clash. Most strikingly, however, they serve as battlegrounds for geopolitical maneuvering, whether symbolized by the destruction and refortification of forts and strongholds, or the posturing of alliance membership.

### *Shifting Frontiers*

The Baltics are one such region in between, for centuries occupying a position as trading hub or choice territory between maritime Europe and European Russia – two very different worlds. The greater Black Sea region, overlapping with the Balkans and the broader Caspian region, has historically played gateway for Europe to the 'wild East', has seen its trade blossom and dwindle, and its shores coveted by Argonauts, Byzantines, Tartars, Ottomans and a resurgent Rus. In many ways a sub-region of the former, the world's ultimate region in between, the Caucasus, has quite mischievously served as a crossroads between Russia, Asia Minor, the Persian world and the Middle East, as well as Central and Inner Asia.

But, regions in between can shift, from being less 'in between' and more 'inside'. During the geopolitically ahistorical Cold War, Austria was a region in between: semi-neutral, jutting into the Eastern bloc, the sight of defections and spy novels. Now, due to the enlargement of NATO and the European Union, Austria more easily connotes terms like 'heart' or 'central'. The eastward expansion of Western institutions in the past two decades also means that more traditional regions in

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between are passing their duties onward to neighboring spaces unaccustomed to the role of middle-man. The three examples given above, the Baltics, the Black Sea region and the Caucasus, all have this dynamic in common.

The Baltics are the furthest along in this respect. Their near-simultaneous entry into NATO and the EU and relatively well-managed economic and social development have meant that Belarus and western Russia itself are now political, economic and social borderlands. Just southwest of the Baltics, the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad –site of some of the Second World War’s most atrocious ethnic cleansing– will remain a geopolitical, military and environmental headache for the EU, even if relations with Moscow improve. Peter the Great’s genius move in flanking maritime Europe by building St. Petersburg will also mean that Russia will always play a major role in the north of the continent - and will thus always contribute to determining the region’s ‘in betweenness’.

It is, however, the greater Black Sea and Caucasus regions that now face a historic transition towards ‘insider’ status. Over five centuries, the Russian and Ottoman Empires and their Soviet and republican successors jockeyed for territory and influence in large parts of these regions. Had Catherine the Great’s plans to seat an Orthodox emperor on the throne in Istanbul been realized, the Black Sea may well have shed its borderland status to become a Russian pond. But, the Ottoman decline was an exceedingly gradual one, and the North-South split across the region, which began at Astrakhan was only solidified by the Cold War.

For Western Europe, the Iron Curtain concealed a body of water once navigated by Genoese and Venetian traders, and patrolled by British steamships. But, Turkey’s NATO membership ensured that the Black Sea also remained a region in between East and West, with Alliance forces closely watching the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and its forays into the Mediterranean. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Black Sea saw its littoral area split between newly liberated and independent states, once again assuming the mantle of crossroads within a region of varying transition and tumult.

The uncertainties of that era, however, are now coming to a head, with the eastward expansion of Western institutions dominating the region’s geopolitical deliberations. Greece is eager to give up its centuries-old status as a region in between and now supports Turkey’s entry into the EU, even if thorns such as Cyprus and religious freedom in Turkey still remain annoyingly in the side of relations. Athens knows that its large neighbor’s coming in from the cold will mean not only increased trade ties and new markets, but increased geopolitical security as well. As the newest members of NATO and the EU, Bulgaria and Romania are focused on consolidating their gains, but efforts such as Bucharest’s

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2006 Black Sea Summit presage regional interests and concerns that will require much greater NATO and EU involvement to the countries' east. The EU has already launched a 'Black Sea Synergy' initiative, meant to encourage regionalist cooperation in a number of key areas, including energy, transport, trade, education and good governance.

Moldova's contemporary territorial woes are shaped by its history as part of a region in between. Its breakaway territory of Transnistria –the site of a major former Soviet arms depot– presents a simmering governance black hole, a nexus for transnational threats to the Black Sea region and the countries of the EU. President Vladimir Voronin has done his best to remain internationally inconspicuous, but his country's frozen conflict and its sandwiched position on the front line of Euro-Atlantic expansion means that Moldova will inevitably be drawn into questions of Western integration. The first stage in this process has already begun, as this past May saw Moscow courting Chisinau with a comprehensive peace plan for Transnistria, which unsurprisingly stipulated that in exchange for conflict resolution, Moldova would have to forgo any future desires to join NATO.

Ukraine's already crowded and convoluted political debate is increasingly dominated by questions of future NATO and EU membership. While Western skeptics and Russian opponents focus on the majority of the Ukrainian population that looks unfavorably on NATO membership, all three of the country's combative major political parties support efforts toward eventual EU accession. More and more Rada members, whether their strategic sympathies lie with Moscow or Warsaw, raise the question of why Ukraine cannot emulate Sweden or Cyprus in acceding to the EU, without NATO membership.

Since its 2003 'Rose Revolution', Georgia has been the poster-child for the eastern expansion of Western institutions. President Mikhail Saakashvili's reforms have been deep, wide and uncompromising. In that past two years, Georgia was both the fastest reforming country in the world and the site of a disappointing crackdown on opposition protestors. Georgia's enthusiastic drive towards NATO and EU membership, as well as its festering frozen conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have propelled the birthplace of some of the Soviet Union's most ruthless leaders to the front line of the East-West boundary shift. The paradox of a country whose government buildings are draped in EU flags, is the third largest contributor to the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, but whose sovereignty is threatened by Moscow-backed separatists and Russian troops on its soil, excellently encapsulates the changing nature of geopolitics in Eurasia. Georgia's symbolic importance has surpassed its strategic significance.

Even Armenia's leadership, closest to Russia in the region since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan during the break-up of the Soviet Union, has begun to frame its rhetoric in terms of NATO military reforms and EU governance standards. The greatest perceived blow to Yerevan's credibility came from Western shock and disapproval following a post-election government crackdown in February. President Serzh Sargsyan is now desperately trying to regain favor in the West.

NATO-member Turkey has trundled through the rigmarole of EU accession far longer than any other state in the region. While its current prolonged political crisis has most to do with societal and economic shifts –expressed through disputes over religion and traditional mores– inconsistent signals from Europe have contributed to a significant undercurrent of frustration amongst political leaders and the public. Ankara's recent warming ties with Moscow have not diminished its importance as an illustration of the great potential and obdurate limits of Western integration.

While it is the EU that falters in Turkey, it is NATO that has so far skirted significant involvement in the security concerns of the Caucasus. Europe's need of alternative routes to alternative sources of energy, however, has compelled a working relationship with Azerbaijan for over a decade. For its part, Baku has steadily called for greater Euro-Atlantic involvement in the region, whether to help find a resolution for Karabakh or bridge the gap between the Caspian's east and west banks. Energy, transport and trade concerns, as well as the need for overland supply routes for operations in Afghanistan, have brought high-level EU and NATO officials to Baku, Ashgabat, Astana and Tashkent in recent months.

In the fostering of their multi-vector foreign policy strategies –balancing Russia, the West, China, and to some extent Iran and Turkey– the Caspian states increasingly see Western countries and institutions as potential primary partners. The lure of the West has brought Turkmenistan's Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov to Brussels and the NATO summit at Bucharest (where he met one-on-one with U.S. President George Bush) and compelled Astana to put up a major, and successful, effort to chair the OSCE in 2010. For its part, Uzbekistan has come back in from the cold to facilitate non-lethal supply routes for NATO forces in Afghanistan.

Europe's activity in the Caspian has been half-hearted and its foothold, as an influential geopolitical player, so far has been tenuous. Russian resistance, Iranian meddling and regional reticence contribute, but the symbolic element of the involvement of Western institutions on the eastern shores of the Caspian remains

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a major obstacle to a coherent Caspian strategy. Central Asia is simply unfamiliar territory for Brussels. In its engagement of the Caspian, the West has moved beyond the traditional greater Black Sea region in between and contributed to the realization of a new borderland further east. Not since Alexander has Central Asia been institutionally linked to maritime Europe. The East-West frontier has shifted. The broader Caspian is Eurasia's new region in between.

### ***Geopolitical Realities***

On 2-4 April 2008, Bucharest, the former capital of Communist strongman Nicolai Ceausescu, was the sight of NATO's largest-ever annual summit. The leadership of every Alliance country, as well as the presidents of Afghanistan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Russia gathered in what may always be known as the Ceausescu palace, the second largest building in the world, symbol of Soviet-sponsored tyranny in Central Europe. But, swathed in summit banners, with the Romanian, NATO and European Union flags flying outside, the building represented a great achievement – the freedom of the former Eastern bloc countries, and the expansion of voluntary partnership in security to most of the European continent.

However, more than any past NATO summit, Bucharest was characterized by the presence of one key non-Alliance member: Russia – specifically the country's then outgoing president and current powerful Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. According to one interpretation of the summit outcomes, Putin's presence, along with determined Russian pressure for months in advance, achieved the Cold War unthinkable: a Russian veto over Alliance expansion. In the face of significant pressure from Washington, Germany, Moscow's closest major NATO member pulled out all the stops to block the extension of Membership Action Plans –the first step towards membership– to the former Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine. The alternate interpretation stresses that even as Russia threatened to target nuclear missiles at Ukraine were it to move towards NATO, and while Putin made a point of unexpectedly showing up at summit meetings to which he was not invited, the Alliance leaders at Bucharest agreed to an unprecedented statement promising eventual membership to the two Black Sea states.

Whether public capitulation or crafty success, the gathering at Bucharest underscored more than anything else that the debate over NATO's future mission and makeup is no longer one for university lecture theatres and think tank seminars. With its expansion eastward into the greater Black Sea region and largest ever operations in Afghanistan, history's most powerful alliance is now a major force in the grand geopolitics of Eurasia. The strategic worldview of its headquarters and key members will henceforth have to encompass the mega-

continent of Europe and Asia. Above all, the Alliance will have to formulate a novel and coherent approach to the continent's dominant state, a familiar, but altered power: the Russian Federation.

Writing some six years before the creation of NATO, Sir Halford Mackinder succinctly described the primary elements of transatlantic power in the Cold War that was to come: "a bridgehead in France, a moated aerodrome in Britain, and a reserve of trained manpower, agriculture and industries in the eastern United States and Canada". This configuration served the Alliance well while Europe was cleaved down its center, but now, in the aftermath of Soviet disintegration, it is Mackinder's best-known geopolitical formulation, the 'Heartland' of Eurasia, which is most informative in understanding NATO's role in the continent's traditional and future regions in between.

As he revisited and 'tested' his thesis over the decades, the exact geographical scope of Mackinder's 'Heartland' changed, but it roughly encompasses the area of the former Soviet Union, with particular emphasis on Eastern Europe. In fact, Mackinder summarized his concept thus: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World Island controls the world". The geopolitical paramountcy of influence in Eurasia becomes clear through Mackinder's conception. The grand strategic vision that informed containment is in many ways more relevant now, as Western institutions find themselves not only looking into Eurasia from the outside, but actively participating in shaping its fate.

Mackinder's formulation serves as an insightful illustration, but the shifting dynamics on the ground produce the imperative of the expansion of Western institutions into and past Eurasia's traditional regions in between. Discussions about Western influence in the Caspian region usually centers on the importance for Europe of alternative routes to alternative hydrocarbons needed to help alleviate the continent's energy crisis. Some analysis also concentrates on NATO's need of countries like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to fully supply operations in neighboring Afghanistan. However, very little focus is placed on the region's interest in Western institutions. It is seldom noted, for example, that the contentious debate over Georgia's possible NATO accession was not spurred by glory-seeking decision-makers in Washington or Paris, but instigated by Tbilisi, which sees Alliance membership as the only way of securing Georgia's sovereignty.

The great security and political successes of NATO and EU enlargement are obvious for governments and peoples on the outside, despite the fact that they are not always part of Alliance or Union leaders' talking points. The June rejection

of the EU's Lisbon Treaty only underscored the fact that the geopolitical aspect of the European project has always been more consequential than its integration, even if its authors have consistently chosen to ignore that reality. While Brussels cried foul, Kyiv, Tbilisi, Baku and Ashgabat barely batted an eye. The peace, prosperity and good governance experienced within the boundaries of NATO and the EU speak for themselves. No disappointing referendums or fractious summits will obscure those fundamentals.

In fact, the EU's most significant recent accomplishment was the approval by the European Council of a joint Polish-Swedish initiative dubbed the 'Eastern Partnership'. Ignored by a Lisbon-focused European press, the initiative, according to Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorsky seeks to increase EU links with Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus (on a more limited basis), while working to ensure that enlargement to include those countries will seem natural once the Union's internal squabbles are resolved. Turkey was not included within the initiative's framework, as accession negotiations, however tenuous, are already under way. While seen by many as an answer to the French idea of a 'Mediterranean Union', the Eastern Partnership will not require its own secretariat and budget. Instead, its has been bureaucratically set up to subsume the EU's lackluster European Neighborhood Policy – a subtle step which could go far in enhancing the Union's approach to Eurasia's shifting regions in between.

As its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year approaches, NATO would do well to agree on a similar approach to the Black Sea, Caucasus and Caspian areas, which explicitly complements that of the EU. The inextricable link, for better or worse, between NATO and EU membership is generally understood in the region as much as it is in Western Europe. And, as many governments in the region are interested in greater links with both institutions, it would be unserious to allow Western European squabbles about EU-NATO cooperation to torpedo coordination efforts on the institutions' shared periphery.

That said, it is NATO's spearhead which irks Russia. Speaking ahead of a 1997 meeting with then U.S. Vice President Al Gore, Russia's prime minister at the time, Victor Chernomyrdin assailed the expansion of NATO to Poland and the Czech Republic, warning that it would lead to serious consequences and marred relations with Russia. Ten years later, Vladimir Putin voiced the same mantra when Bulgaria and Romania joined the Alliance. His successor Dmitry Medvedev now says the same about Georgia and Ukraine. This unchanged position, despite significant shifting frontiers, highlights the emotional –rather than interest-based– nature of Russia's anti-NATO stance. It stems from a combination of residual fear of an alliance that bucked-up against Russia's Soviet predecessor,



combined with a sense that Russia's greatness as a nation, and influence in its so-called 'near abroad' is defined by the West's weakness in areas viewed as being part of Moscow's 'orbit'. This zero-sum outlook clouds shared interests between Russia and the West in reducing transnational threats, territorial tensions and ineffective governance in Eurasia.

But, there are signs that practicality may be winning over emotion. Overshadowed by discord at the April NATO summit was an agreement signed with Russia to provide supply routes over its territory to provision NATO and U.S. troops in Afghanistan. And, despite Russian envoy to NATO Dmitry Rogozin's continued loquacious pillorying of the Alliance, he quietly announced in early July that Moscow intends to propose a wide-ranging joint security system that is to cover all geography from Vancouver to Vladivostok. NATO should be prepared to put forth a united, but receptive front. A joint plan, which addresses the interests of both sides, as well as the sovereign choices made in the regions that straddle Eurasia's shifting frontiers, should be NATO's objective. Russia cannot be ignored, but it cannot halt Western integration of regions in between either. Contrary to popular wisdom, the key to improved relations with Russia lies in greater involvement in Eurasia. Moscow will only respect the regions' shift toward insider status if NATO, the EU and other Western institutions bolster their presence in the continent.

The broader Caspian region is rapidly transforming into the 21<sup>st</sup> century's great region in between. The mantle has been passed eastward as the greater Black Sea region steadily incorporates insider status. This shift of frontiers means increased potential for links further afield. The expanse of eastern China and Central and Inner Asia remains the last great unexploited trade route on the planet. The scope for Western connections to the Far East and South Asia is vast and largely unfulfilled. But, the transcontinental bonds of Eurasia can only be realized through increased understanding of and involvement in the regions in between. So far, both have been necessitated by the region's interest in the fruits of the West: peace, prosperity and good governance. The enlargement of Western institutions and the incorporation of regions in between has been defined by the desire of those regions to shed their 'in between-ness'. Despite resistance from Russia and Western Europe, this momentum will likely continue. The West's premier institutions, the EU and NATO, with an open mind towards involving Russia, would do well to positively engage in the geopolitics of shifting frontiers.