Troubles to Come: The Emerging Security Challenges in the Balkans and the Former Soviet Union

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More than a decade has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the start of a transformation in European and Eurasian security. The collapse of the Soviet Union barely two years later made this great conversion irreversible. The dominant Cold War threats of large-scale conventional and thermonuclear war receded. And the map of Europe and central Eurasia changed dramatically with the unification of Germany, the expansion of NATO, the restoration of fully sovereign states in Central Europe, and the creation of new states from the ruins of old in the former Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.

The new security environment this map represents is still in flux, but the last decade has provided a glimpse of its future. The new and often weak states that have emerged from the old empires dominate this environment. Violence is more prevalent in and around Europe than at any time during the Cold War. Civil strife, ethnic cleansing, and regional conflicts have prompted both outside interventions and indifference. Russia is a much-diminished state in comparison with its Soviet predecessor, and it is in the midst of a complex transformation. The outside world—from China to the European Union—has fashioned new trade, political, and security ties with countries of this formerly closed space. The result is a more complex and fragmented region, with multiple trouble spots and sources of conflict.

Weak States

Weak states are the most dangerous element of instability and the most likely source of new trouble spots in the decades to come. In particular, the new states of the Balkans and the former Soviet Union, especially along the southern tier, are vulnerable. They have inherited

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the ills that come from large-scale social and economic disruption and past socialist economic practices: poverty, the spread of AIDs and other infectious diseases, pollution, state inefficiency, and corruption. They face simultaneously the challenges of establishing and maintaining sovereignty, reforming political and economic systems rooted in a Soviet or socialist past, creating a stable security environment, and responding to complex geopolitical and global trends.

Several factors are key to their enduring weakness:

- **Civil strife and widespread violence.** Bosnia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have confronted ongoing or imminent violence since the moment of independence. These states still face deep divisions or even separatist entities on their territories. Violence is a political habit that is difficult to extinguish.

- **Long-term social dislocation and instability.** The 2000-2001 World Development Report shows Albania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan at per capita income levels that are characteristic of low-income nations. Even Russia still reports that 30 percent of its population lives below the poverty line. Many of these same nations suffer from declining health and social standards. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also face swift population growth, thus tipping the balance in society in the next several decades toward the young.

- **Ethnic divisions.** Large minority populations are characteristic of many of the states covered in this report and do not by themselves create weak states. However, ethnic divisions that are unable to play out in an open political system do so by sapping the state of legitimacy and strength. Weak states are, in turn, unable to mediate and contain them. Debilitating ethnic divides of this kind are a continuing factor in Bosnia, Macedonia, Moldova, the Caucasus, and the Fergana Valley in Central Asia.

- **Character of the politics of the weak states.** The collapse of the old order opened up an unprecedented opportunity for influence and gain. In every state covered by this report, highly competitive political and economic factions emerged to exploit these opportunities. These factions seek to dominate the political office and the complicated processes of resource allocation and privatization. The most successful states have managed to regulate these processes and control the behavior of competing factions. The weakest have not. The politics of weak states are often an extension of this factional battle, with the victor controlling the spoils.

The regimes that result appear in many different guises, from relatively pluralist (Ukraine) to authoritarian (Turkmenistan). Most have restored economic growth, but they have not been able to create effective state institutions capable of making headway on the political and social problems they face. They are best at muddling through.

The authoritarian or paternalistic states—such as Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan—hide their weakness behind centralized and personalized power. A single strongman exercises control, but control is not the same as strength. They have chased
underground all opposition, risking the radicalization of forces like Islam or workers’ movements that should be openly contributing to the strengthening of society. Such a policy invites opposition, when it emerges after long dormancy or suppression, to do so in the streets and with violence. The authoritarian handiwork of these men faces a near-term test, as aging leaders pass from the scene and expose the gaps and weaknesses in their personalized regimes.

This concentration of weak states creates long-term security challenges. The outbreak of factional strife, ethnic violence, or succession struggles could turn a weak state into a failing one. Afghanistan has been a textbook example for two decades, and the impact of its failure has been all too clear since September 11, 2001. Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan could exert a powerful negative influence on their neighborhoods by their own internal failings. Unless conditions improve in Ukraine and Belarus, for example, the European Union’s planned expansion over the next decade could draw a new dividing line between haves and have-nots, an unappealing prospect but also a potential source of instability in Europe. Needless to say, a sustained period of weakness in Russia will magnify these problems. And relations between Russia and China will be shaped by the internal success and strength of Kazakhstan and its neighbors, either removing or creating a potential bone of contention for Moscow and Beijing.

The weak state is a building block of future trouble. It spawns within itself civil, ethnic, and regional conflicts. It becomes a haven for drug traffickers or terrorists. It lacks the resources to shape its own security environment, inviting by its weakness outside powers and potential rivals to intervene and recreate new regional competitions.

**ACTIVE AND DORMANT CONFLICTS**

For now, the list of active or imminent conflicts in the region is short. It includes factional strife in Macedonia, continued Chechen resistance to Russia, and the ongoing war against terrorism and its aftermath in Afghanistan. But this list was once much longer and could be again. Over the last decade it would have included conflicts in Abkhazia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Tajikistan. These conflicts have been frozen, not resolved, by differing combinations of internal exhaustion, political agreement, and outside interventions.

But the conditions that spawned them remain. The most active program to keep them frozen is in the Balkans, and it came only after years of failure in Bosnia. What has been achieved there is due in no small measure to the West’s enormous commitment of military, political, and economic resources. U.S. pressure produced the Dayton accords, and Western aid and engagement keeps that peace. NATO fought its first shooting war with Serbia over Kosovo. NATO forces and Western diplomacy are now attempting to keep ethnic conflict at bay in Macedonia. Few observers believe that the current status quo could survive a Western withdrawal.

Military and political standoffs have happily brought respites in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The brutal application of Russian military power brought an end to the current phase of the Chechen War, though fierce resistance continues. Russian forces
are a crucial factor in maintaining the ceasefire agreement in Tajikistan. Nowhere in these zones of conflict are there large-scale political and economic progress, ethnic reconciliation, and other basic building blocks of a peace without these outside peacekeepers.

These active and dormant conflicts have enormous strategic significance, for they are a crucial factor in defining the military environment. They are a testing ground for the tactics, strategies, and forces of resistance movements, separatists, and terrorists. In turn, they also shape the forces and doctrines of leading military powers, which must adjust to the demands of these conflicts if they are to intervene. Indeed, these regional conflicts are key factors in both American and Russian military thinking and force planning.

**AN UNFINISHED AND DIMINISHED RUSSIA**

Russian power, in one form or another, has been the organizing principle in central Eurasia for half a millennium. Now a diminished Russia in an unfinished transition stands in the place of a strong, highly centralized imperial state. The eventual shape of this transition will be decisive both for resolving the security challenges Russia’s current weakness creates and determining the role Moscow will want and be able to play in the future.

It is easiest to begin with the facts of Russia’s diminished capacity. Economically, Russia’s recovery is now gaining momentum after the 1998 financial crisis, but this recovery must still compensate for the almost 40-percent drop in GDP from 1992 to 1998. Per capita GDP indicates Russia’s place in the world is still somewhere alongside Thailand and not among the major powers. Moreover, the state’s monopoly over the mobilization of economic resources has been lost, and the range of domestic and social demands for government resources (pensions, education, and health care) has drastically expanded.

Politically, the powerful state has given way to a more fragmented but pluralistic political and social life. However, like other states in the region, Russian politics is marred by the wide division between rulers and ruled, corruption, and a fragmentation of state power when it comes to central economic, social, and security tasks. Russian president Vladimir Putin has strained to overcome the worst excesses of the Yeltsin era, raising concerns in the process about his commitment to democratic reform. Yet both he and his closest advisors still believe that such reform will only flourish through a strong and effective state and that what is needed now is more authority, not more checks and balances. It is likely to be some time yet before the outlines of a fixed and stable Russian politics will become clear.

The Russian military is also a diminished asset. Officially reported budget increases—totaling nearly 80 billion rubles from 2000 to 2001—will help. So will deep personnel reductions and leadership changes designed to spur military reform. But Russia simply cannot afford to maintain the lion’s share of the Soviet military legacy that it inherited. Nearly a decade-long delay of genuine reform has made the problems of maintaining a stable nuclear deterrent, addressing the looming obsolescence of key conventional systems, and meeting the housing and social needs of its personnel and their families even more acute. The war in Chechnya has diverted scarce military resources, while pressures from regional instability near Russia’s borders to so-called “small wars” are likely to continue. Beyond these nearby sources of instability loom countries with long suppressed regional ambitions and growing
modern military capabilities, such as cruise and ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, the military dynamism of the rim states of Eurasia is likely to prove a challenge for both Russia and the United States.

Russia’s emergence as a weakened state attempting a large-scale transformation has several security implications. The first and most obvious is the weakness itself. The danger of fragmentation of Russia has passed, if it was ever very likely beyond the North Caucasus. Today, the most obvious and persistent security threat from a weakened Russia is the potential leakage of nuclear material, technology, and know-how to states and terrorist groups seeking a shortcut to acquiring nuclear capacity. Moscow, with U.S. assistance, succeeded during the last decade in retaining sole control of the Soviet nuclear arsenal by withdrawing enormous strategic assets from Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine and tactical forces from forward-based former Soviet units. However, it has not yet consolidated and secured the vast array of technical and military nuclear assets under its control. Weaknesses in the existing command and control system, in military and civilian storage and controls of nuclear materials, and especially in the flow of scientific know-how and personnel place the problem of loose nuclear weapons at the top of the security agenda.

Second, however enfeebled Russia might be as a global actor, it retains significant influence and capabilities near to home. The failure of Russia’s attempt to create an integrated community on the territory of the former USSR—the Commonwealth of Independent States—has led to a shift in tactics but not to Moscow’s abandonment of its fundamental interests and active engagement around its borders. For the past several years, Russia has placed greater emphasis on strengthening bilateral ties. It has used growing concerns among Central Asian states over the threat of instability and Islamic extremism from Afghanistan to rebuild frayed security ties there. It has fashioned what is nearly an out-and-out alliance with Armenia. And it has retained stationed troops in Tajikistan, Armenia, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. Here Russia’s relations to its nearest neighbors and its internal political and economic course are inextricably intertwined.

A more authoritarian Moscow is likely to take an interventionist course and to seek in its control over what is near at hand some compensation for the influence it has lost globally. There are always voices in Moscow who urge integration and even resubordination of some of the new states, as the Duma showed in December in its law on admitting new candidates to the Russian Federation. Moreover, such an interventionist course will doubtless place heavy burdens on both reform efforts at home and genuine and sustained cooperation with the West.

Finally, Russia is not able to be either a strategic partner or a strategic adversary. Even though Presidents Bush and Putin have substantially altered the tone and direction of U.S.-Russian relations since mid-summer 2001, and especially in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Russia’s place in the world is still likely to be a modest one. Moscow can no longer afford a global perspective on many issues of importance to the United States, frustrating those who hoped to see U.S.-Soviet global rivalry somehow become U.S.-Russian global cooperation. It is also likely that the Russia to emerge from the current transformation will simply not see eye-to-eye with America on many basic issues. Moscow is suspicious of how the United States will use its status as the sole superpower. It is selling a wide
range of advanced arms and technology to Iran and China. It is skeptical of continued sanctions on Iraq. It continues to share basic nuclear nonproliferation concerns with the United States, but its own vulnerability to a much wider range of more immediate threats makes these concerns far less pressing for it than for Washington. There remain deep differences on strategic issues, especially missile defense. While the two sides strive to do better, prudence dictates that both plan on a much narrower sphere of cooperation than summit statements suggest.

NEW REGIONS, NEW RIVALS
Ironically, the “multipolar world” so admired by former Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov and other Russian statesmen already exists. It is on the territory of the former USSR.* This region has all the characteristics of multipolarity. It lacks a single great power or two bipolar rivals. There are multiple centers of power, with Russia by far the largest state but unable to dominate its neighbors. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are vying to become regional centers in their own right. Armenia and Azerbaijan are locked in a long-term stalemate. These regional rivals have solid links to different outside powers: Armenia to Russia and, to a lesser extent, Iran; Azerbaijan to Turkey.

Outside actors, from the European Union to China, exert increasing political, economic, and security influence over portions of this region. But this multipolar world lacks the basic conditions for stability: it is one made up almost entirely of weak states, new regions, new interlocutors, and few established rules of the road. Although the role of military force has diminished in many regions of the world, military power continues to play the role of final arbiter in both internal and external security matters here.

Against this backdrop, efforts to normalize relations among potential rivals make good sense—such as efforts by Russia and China to seek greater involvement from global institutions and to create regional groupings to foster cooperation. To date, Sino-Russian and Russian-Iranian relations have been cordial, with both China and Iran respecting and encouraging Russia’s central security role in the new states that have arisen in the southern tier of the former Soviet Union. Turkey’s initial push for a large role in this vast region has largely faltered. Relations between these former Soviet states and countries like India, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia have developed and expanded, but with little near-term sense of creating a geopolitical challenge to the status quo.

The United States and NATO have been the most visible outside security actors in the region. Local powers often welcome U.S. and NATO security cooperation, both for its impact on indigenous militaries and for the signal it appears to send of outside support. Such security cooperation regularly draws the suspicion and even the ire of Moscow and Beijing. However, until September 11 brought American troops to Uzbekistan, there was little in the U.S. and NATO programs to suggest a serious effort to take on sponsorship of

* Similar processes are also at work in the former Yugoslavia, but the potential for major power rivalry is much less there as long as the West, through NATO and the European Union, takes on primary responsibility for managing regional conflicts.
local regimes or management of local conflicts. It still is unlikely that the United States intends these deployments to suggest such a long-term role.

Despite the success to date in dampening the prospects of new regional rivalries, the internal trends that erode stability within the region and the multiple external actors now engaged in the region make it difficult to dismiss out of hand concerns that such rivalries will reappear. The conflicts of interest among sovereign actors and the tendency for imbalance of power over time to cause war are some of the oldest problems in international relations. Their relevance to this region should not be overlooked.

**OTHER SECURITY THREATS**

Terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and organized crime pose a new set of dangers in contemporary international relations. These dangers go far beyond the age-old romance of brigands or smugglers, as drug traffickers or terrorists acquire modern conventional weapons or perhaps even chemical and biological agents. U.S. military deployments to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan demonstrate both American interests in and commitment to addressing the problem of terrorism, though the conditions that support it in Central Asia and the Caucasus will endure long after the Taliban are forgotten.

Much has been written about the Balkans and the post-Soviet space as centers of organized crime and drug smuggling. Weak states make fine hideouts or headquarters. Corrupt regimes partake in illegal trafficking or take a cut from it. The end of the war in Afghanistan will doubtless bring the poppy growers back to the fields. The weakness of local law enforcement and the limited reach of central institutions create weak links in international cooperation. The flow of drugs, prostitutes, illegal immigrants, and stolen property continues from Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine, and the Balkans. Legitimate European concerns about border security are likely to create great pressure for a stringent control regime, one that could potentially disrupt existing and beneficial links between what should eventually be the eastern edge of an expanded European Union and the states of the former USSR. These threats of crime, terrorism, and uncontrolled flow of refugees will create the greatest challenges to the free flow of ideas, people, and goods—not ideological differences or the balance of military forces.

A range of environmental challenges exists throughout the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe. The drying up of the Aral Sea and the ground water pollution from the run-off of decades of cotton production in Uzbekistan are obvious examples from Central Asia. The contamination from Soviet nuclear and other military sites is a common legacy throughout much of the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe. Some may well reach a level beyond human health risk to pose genuine security challenges to states in and outside the region. Candidates for such issues include the competition for water in Central Asia; the degradation of chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons storage sites; and the unchecked spread of infectious diseases.

**NOT TOO REMOTE FOR CONCERN**

In contrast to the bipolar world, the security environment now forming in the Balkans and the former USSR seems to be the work of a number of lesser but no less malevolent spirits.
These spirits have far less power to wreak wholesale destruction than their bipolar predecessors, but they work tirelessly and scatter conflict and misery far and wide. This environment is also more fluid than its predecessor. The trends now at work are deep but not fixed. There is still time for internal reform, regional statesmanship, and wise intervention to fashion a better future.

For the West to play a constructive role in that future, it has to see the security threats there with different eyes. The Western analytical framework still borrows consciously and unconsciously from the old world of bipolar confrontation, a world defined by robust U.S. and Soviet power. By contrast, the greatest dangers in the region look small and arise from weakness. Our rivals are poorly armed, and many are not really armies at all. Yet especially after September 11, they can no longer be dismissed as too remote for concern. A careful and sympathetic analysis of these dangers is the best intellectual defense against false confidence in the preponderance of Western and especially American power. For the forces now shaping the security environment of the Balkans and Eurasia as a whole regard this preponderance with indifference or disdain.