

Countering the US-NATO Alliance: Moscow's Eurasian Union Project and Russia's Geostrategic Stability

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US top foreign-policy strategist and a die-hard Russophobe Zbigniew Brzezinski had a point when he wrote in *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* that "Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire. Russia without Ukraine can still strive for imperial status, but it would then become a predominantly Asian imperial state", moreover, a one under permanent pressure from Central Asian republics and China. He also stressed quite appropriately therein that "However, if Moscow regains control over Ukraine, with its 52 million people and major resources as well as its access to the Black Sea, Russia automatically again regains the wherewithal to become a powerful imperial state, spanning Europe and Asia".

In other words, Russia can't realistically hope to achieve geostrategic stability unless it manages to entrain Ukraine. As a result, the task of precluding synergies between the two countries occupies a significant line on the US and EU foreign-policy agendas. Russian premier Vladimir Putin's opinion piece published in *Izvestia* in 2011 - "A new integration project for Eurasia: The future in the making" - where he puts forward a case for building a Eurasian union in the post-Soviet space, simply had to come under fire in the West, as what Putin suggests is an alliance between Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, to which Kazakhstan and other republics of the former Soviet Union would also be welcome.

It is clear that the West will spare no efforts to prevent the project from materializing, and Brussel's tactic behind the free trade zone and association agreement with Ukraine reflects this wider approach. Kyiv faced avalanche criticism over the arrest of former Ukrainian premier Yu. Tymoshenko, and attacks on Ukraine's current leader V. Yanukovich occasionally border on direct threats, but, for much deeper reasons, the EU captains are ready to pen an association deal with the country, dispense Eurointegration promises to its leadership or even - in a distant future - actually admit Ukraine to the EU just to make sure that the unification processes within the community of the East-Slavic nations (and, potentially, further across the post-Soviet space) come to a grinding halt.

It is an open secret that Ukraine is key to the implementation of a host of Western geostrategic plans. It is offered to start preparing to join NATO, and circumstances like the Ukrainian constitution's stated ban on mergers with military blocs or the existence of the Russian naval base in the Ukrainian city of Sevastopol do not seem to make extending the invitation impossible. In fact, NATO is cultivating a relationship with the post-Soviet Georgia regardless of similar legal obstacles.

In my view, the integration of Ukraine into NATO would read as a casus belli for Europe. Under the arrangement, the world would find itself only a couple of steps away from a potentially global conflict, the first step being the deployment of NATO bases in Ukraine, the second – the entry into play of the factors related to the resulting unprecedented shortening of the time it would take US missiles to reach crucial targets in Russia. Pledges, assurances, or legal guarantees of any kind would not help to dispel Moscow's concerns considering that wars always begin in breach of the pacta sunt servanda principle. By the way, a talk I gave on the subject at an international conference hosted by the NATO headquarters in Brussels back in the 1990ies obviously attracted heightened attention at the time. Seeing its defense capabilities seriously eroded and left obviously unable to rely on the retaliatory strike strategy, Russia would have either to switch to that of missile launch on warning or, due to the brevity of the warning time, even to stretch its doctrine to the point of embracing preemptive strikes. The strikes do not necessarily have to be nuclear, but the whole situation would automatically turn into a prologue to an armed conflict. This is the number one reason why Ukraine's NATO membership would breed extreme risks and bring about the specter of a global catastrophe.

The EU tends to concentrate on the economic, social, and cultural issues, and Ukraine's positions in the spheres oscillate visibly as Kyiv attempts to rip off benefits simultaneously in the West and in the East. On October, 18, 2011, Ukraine signed in St. Petersburg a free trade zone treaty whose list of signatories currently comprises 8 post-Soviet republics, with decisions from 3 more – Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – pending. The treaty did come into being with serious limitations and does not apply to such commodities as oil, natural gas, metals, and sugar, but a plan to widen the scope of the accord is already on the table.

Generally, the post-Soviet economic integration moves on with great difficulty and recurrent setbacks. The simplest initial part of the process – the establishment of a free-trade zone – fully exemplified the tendency. Sketchily, the zone was created in 1994, but the participant's legislatures failed to ratify the corresponding agreement. Though a new deal was inked only in 2011, it still has to be born in mind that a free-trade zone is about duty-free commerce and essentially about nothing else. The customs union formed by Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (and which Kyrgyzstan is eyeing at the moment) was a natural next phase of the process as it implied its members' shared tariff policies vis-a-vis third-party countries plus a de-facto abolition of internal borders. A common economic space with its members synching a whole range of their economic strategies and policies and, possibly, opting for a shared currency should be a more advanced form of integration to go for.

The customs union and the common economic space should, ideally, be overseen by supranational institutions. Once such institutions are in place, the integration agenda can be upgraded to include the establishment of a Eurasian union described in Putin's October, 2011 paper. Other country leaders contributed to the debate: Belarus' A. Lukashenko in a paper titled "The Destiny of Our Integration" and N. Nazarbayev – in "The Eurasian Union: From Concept to History of the Future". Lukashenko, it should be noted, expressed in "The Destiny of Our Integration" a view to which his peers across the post-Soviet space would readily subscribe: equal rights, respect for national sovereignty, and the inviolability of borders are the only plausible principles the integration may be built on.

The question naturally arising in the context is what role is taken by Ukraine in the above dynamics. The country was on the hypothetical participants list when Putin spelled out the

agenda for the Common Economic Space back in 2003, but Kyiv chose to steer clear of the project. On October 18, 2011, Ukraine did pen an agreement on the free trade zone which 11 post-Soviet republics – all but Georgia – will likely uphold. Moscow would be well-advised to cultivate its relations with Kyiv within a sequence of alliances implying ever tighter economic integration. No doubt, economic interests of the parties involved are the adequate basis for the process. Ukraine has the observer status in the Eurasian Economic Community, plus now it is a signatory to the free trade deal, the reasonable gradualism promising considerable progress in the long run. Ukraine's free trade or association agreements with the EU, if they go through despite Europe's lingering systemic crisis, should not cause Russia to stop drawing Ukraine into the orbit of the post-Soviet integration. Moreover, Moscow should count working with Ukraine with this objective in mind among Russia's foreign-policy priorities, and fundamental advancements in this direction would immensely outweigh narrow gains like relaxed terms for various types of commodities trade.

There is however, one more significant factor that has to be incorporated into Moscow's geostrategic reckoning – namely, the relations between Russia and China. No doubt, for Russia China is already a significant partner in a number of existing frameworks – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICs, notably – but my impression is that Moscow's foreign-policy vision remains under the spell of Europe (this imbalance appears particularly undesirable following the turn towards Asia prescribed to the US by Washington's new military doctrine). Even Putin's paper says the Eurasian union should be „an essential part of Greater Europe”, but it is also true that the pertinent risk of over-reliance on Europe at the expense of Asia may not be discounted.

It would be a gross mistake to miss the importance of China to Russia's geostrategic security. In this connection, I would like to revisit the Russian proposal for a European security treaty, reiterating my suggestion to have it reinforced and transformed into a Eurasian security treaty, with China's rise duly taken into account. The long-term task of clarifying the defense dimension of the treaty would complement the ongoing interactions within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, especially since the former is a predominantly economic system and the latter – a fairly casual body.

The development and deepening of the strategic partnership with China, combined with convincing efforts to ally Ukraine (and with the necessary attention being paid to Belarus and Russia's other allies) would help Russia maintain its geostrategic stability at the level at which the country would be completely immune to the invectives churned out by McCain and his like

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