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RUSSIA'S ALLIES AND THE GEOPOLITICAL FRONTIER IN EURASIA

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The risk of Russia's involvement in low-intensity military conflicts has been growing since the early 2000s. Instability along many stretches of the border has forced Moscow to increase its military presence in the neighboring areas. Russia has military bases in high conflict risk areas, notably South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Moldova, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Also, Russia cannot take a hands-off approach to developments in Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine and will likely become involved in a potential confrontation in the Korean Peninsula or Iran and a possible escalation of the conflict in Ukraine.

The number of regions where military force could be used to protect national interests has recently increased. These include not only areas within the national borders but also in the regions that were part of the Soviet Union's zone of military and political responsibility during the Cold War. In 2013, the Kremlin proposed deploying Russian peacekeeping forces on the Syrian-Israeli border on Golan Heights. Negotiations are underway to establish a Russian air force base in Cyprus in direct proximity to the Russian naval base in Tartus, Syria.

Russian peacekeepers help maintain peace in the frozen conflicts in the CIS countries following civil and international conflicts of the 1990s. A new potential source of military conflict developed on the Russian-Ukrainian border in 2014. Taken together, it means that Russia will be unable to reduce its military presence on its border in the near future. Moreover, the current tendency is to expand the area of its military presence. This is increasing the risk of Russia's involvement in military conflicts as a peacekeeper or the guarantor of the status quo.

Is this a deliberate and intentional process? Or is Russia's military might growing randomly without any rationale or strategic plans? The biggest danger in this situation is that ideological priorities may prevail over rational considerations, forcing the country to overreach itself.

Geopolitical Frontier in Eurasia

Russia has acquired a new geopolitical status in recent years. It has reaffirmed its claim to a strong and independent role in international affairs, which its Western partners put in question after the Soviet Union's dissolution. The military operation

in Syria has helped Russia become a key factor in the post-conflict settlement and has demonstrated Russia's fundamentally new military and political capability. The Astana format of the Syrian settlement, which Moscow has initiated, provides for addressing the key security issue in the Middle East without Western contribution, if necessary. At the same time, Russia maintains dialogue with regional powers – Turkey and Iran, which had no decision-making power under the Western scenario or had limited influence on the settlement in Syria.

The achievements of Russia's foreign policy are obvious in the post-Soviet space. In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, Vladimir Putin focused on the issue of NATO's military expansion towards the Russian border. Ten years later, the issue of NATO expansion has been practically removed from the agenda.

Georgia cannot join the bloc, at least until it recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Otherwise, the bloc would have to share the risk of a direct military confrontation with Russia in a region with an uncertain status. Even if NATO decides to take the risk, Georgia's strategic value will be negative for the bloc. In the current balance of forces in the South Caucasus, Georgia will be unable to protect itself without foreign assistance. In other words, NATO would not strengthen its security by admitting Georgia but would have to assume responsibility for a vulnerable partner in an emergency.

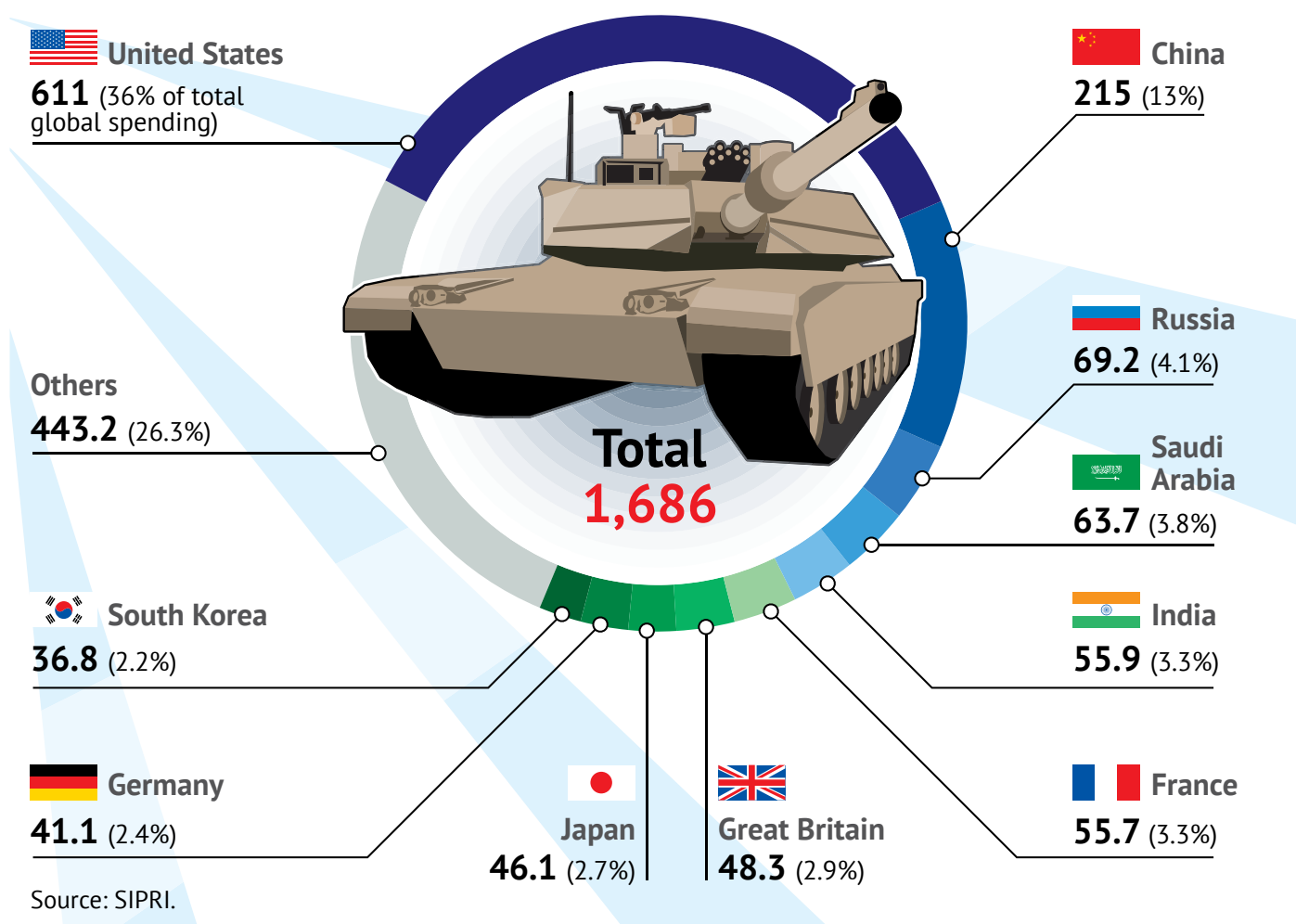
The same concerns Ukraine, which has not abandoned its claim to Crimea. Hence its admission into NATO would involve the bloc in a territorial dispute with Russia. Neither can Ukraine join NATO before settling the civil conflict in Donbass. The Obama administration probably hoped that the post-Maidan government in Kiev would quickly suppress resistance in Donbass and consolidate the regime on the anti-Russia basis, which would have created conditions for Ukraine's admission into NATO. But Kiev has not consolidated the country, which is reeling with internal political crises and huge economic losses, and has refused to settle the civil conflict in the eastern regions. Ukraine is a weak state, which also implies military weakness. This means that it has negative value for NATO.

If we imagine Russia-West relations of the past few decades in the form of a frontier as a flexible and wide border line, we will see that this frontier has moved away from the Russian border in the past decade. The acute stages of the crises in the Caucasus (2008) and Ukraine (2014-2015) have shown that security issues in the post-Soviet space cannot be settled without Russia's involvement and its final say. The Syrian operation of Russia's Aerospace Forces has shifted the Russia-West dispute over Russia's international status to the Middle East. The Russia-West frontier at the opposite end of the Eurasian continent

WORLD MILITARY EXPENDITURE

Top 10 largest spenders in 2016 (billion \$)

The 10 largest spenders account for **\$1242.8 billion**, or **73.7%**, of total global spending

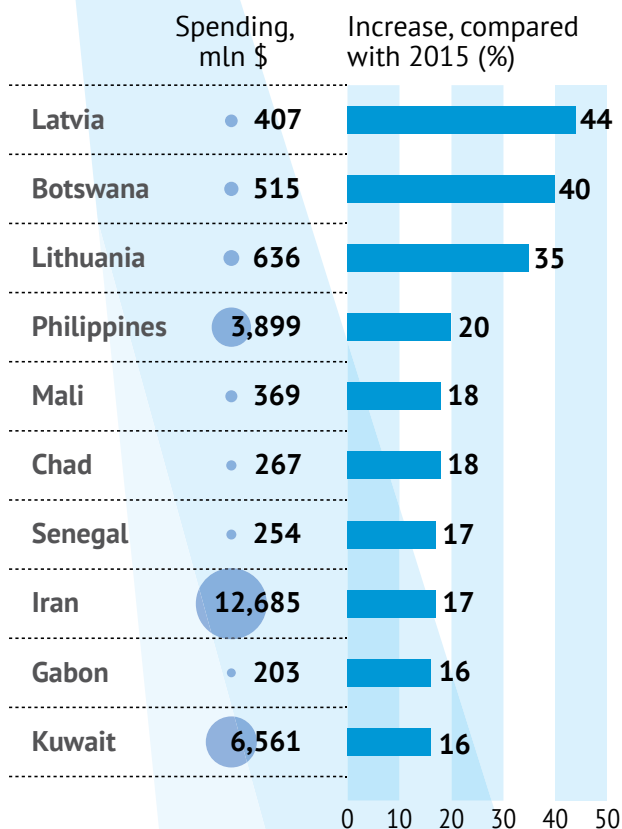


is uncertain: the nascent Russia-China rapprochement and the recent ties between Russia and Japan have shown that Moscow will play a new role in the balance of forces in Asia Pacific.

Russia used a favorable situation to launch an active policy and thereby moved the frontier of its confrontation with the West further away from its border. This frontier now lies in the Middle East, the Balkans and the domestic policy of the United States and the EU. As a result, many post-Soviet security issues have lost their geopolitical dimension; they are no longer burdened by the Russia-West confrontation. Now that the Ukrainian crisis has moved down the international agenda and the Russia-West frontier has been shifted away from the post-Soviet space, the frontier countries can focus on internal affairs. Many post-Soviet countries feel that they don't need to worry about their security and can use this respite to calmly review their priorities without external pressure.

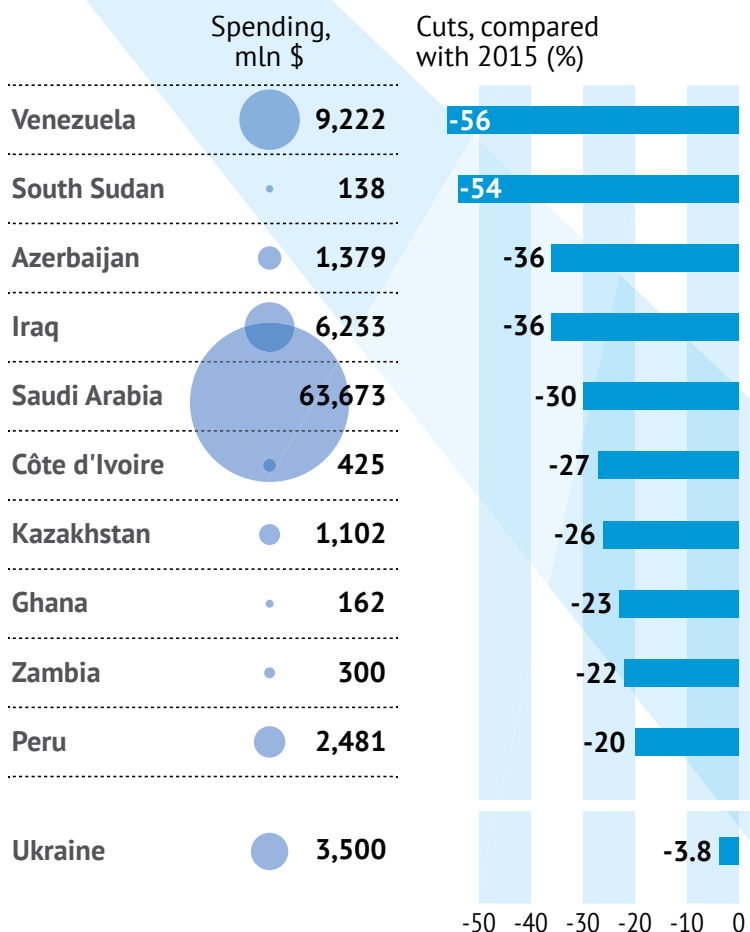
WORLD MILITARY EXPENDITURE

Top 10 Countries with Increase in Military Expenditures in 2016



Source: SIPRI.

Top 10 Countries with the Largest Cuts in Military Expenditures in 2016



However, the West may eventually resume or even strengthen its pressure on Russia's interests in Eastern Europe, disregarding Russia's requests for a collective European security system. In this event, Moscow will have to apply the same old methods to make US policy more realistic, that is, by shifting the geopolitical frontier to the Western Hemisphere, away from its front door. The establishment of a military base in Venezuela or Cuba, political involvement in Panama or Mexico, and the encouragement of anti-American coalitions in Latin America would be a forced but the only possible measure to reduce US pressure on Russia in Europe in the 2040s and 2050s.

Russia's increased resources and new standing have presented it with two interconnected questions. They are of crucial significance for long-term foreign policy planning, but they can be difficult to see amid the current euphoria after Russia's recent successes.

Question One: What is the optimal limit of influence on international politics from the viewpoint of Russia's interests and capabilities, and what is the reasonable limit of involvement in international affairs? Question Two: What system of alliances can uphold and formalize Russia's increased global influence?

We will not go into detail about the huge and highly specific system of economic alliances, focusing only on military-political unions.

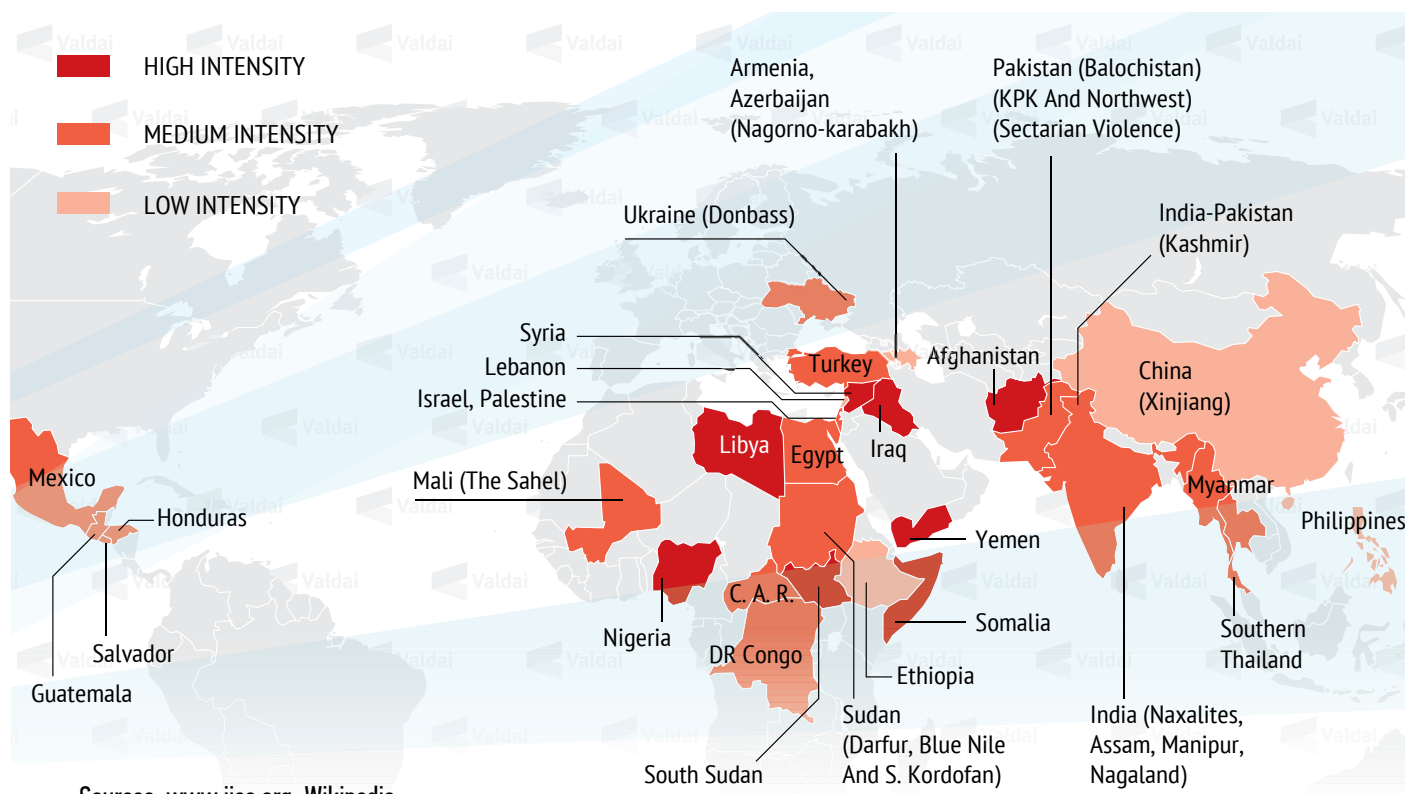
Alliance Transformation

International political structures are changing similar to the way in which erstwhile forms of organization in politics and economic life, which have become a hallmark of the 20th century, have also changed. Large and stable, "permanent" structures, such as political parties, trade unions, and draft-based armies are replaced by a kaleidoscope of ad hoc political alliances. Influential political movements can spring up in a matter of days around a specific issue and crumble shortly having exhausted their agenda. Interestingly, they are more popular and successful than the old political parties or public organizations with their traditional bureaucratic structure.

The sphere of defense is becoming more professional and more sophisticated. Mass draft-based armies, which historically determined the expansion of citizenship and the creation of modern nations, are becoming a thing of the past. War, as in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, is becoming a thing of elites, not peoples. The spread of private military campaigns – in essence, modern condottieri – is eroding the very basis of modern democracy and modern sovereignty that preclude the privatization of violence.

The state bureaucracy, on the one hand, due to the legacy of liberal deregulation conducted by Reagan and Thatcher, is losing control over society, and, on the other hand, is increasingly taking root in this society through partnership mechanisms with corporations and non-governmental organizations. The border between civil society and state is being erased, and they are morphing into each other. The corporation, the core organization of modern capitalism, is changing its nature. Bureaucratic hierarchical entities are being

ARMED CONFLICTS WORLDWIDE



replaced by network entities, and the corporate legal structure is being fragmented and becomes more complicated. In the labor market, collective long-term contracts give way to flexible employment systems, which make the hired workers' situation even more unstable.

The concept of management as a set of recurring procedures is replaced by its interpretation as a series of unique projects, each of which involves the use of a unique set of people, solutions, and resources.

The “project” as a key characteristic of the modern world (Luc Boltanski, Eve Chiapello) manifests itself in the field of international relations. The ever-growing popularity of coalitions created to address a specific task has existed for a while now. Just like flexible hiring allows companies to avoid unnecessary commitments with regard to trade unions or long-term contracts with employees, these coalitions allow the most powerful states in the world to avoid providing their partners with sustainable guarantees. The bureaucracies of the “traditional” blocs, the need for multi-stage and long-term approvals within such alliances are perceived as an obstacle to effective action. The US-led anti-Iraqi coalition of 2003, as well as the US-led coalition fighting ISIS, were organized outside the US military alliance system. Donald Rumsfeld’s famous dictum that the mission defines the coalition marked the triumph of project logic in matters of war and diplomacy.

ARMED CONFLICTS WORLDWIDE

1,000-10,000+ DEATHS IN CURRENT OR PAST YEAR

Start of conflict	Conflict	Location	Cumulative fatalities
1947	Kashmir conflict	India, Pakistan	43,910–47,000
1978	War in Afghanistan	Afghanistan	1,240,000–2,000,000
1984	Kurdish–Turkish conflict	Turkey, Syria, Iraq	45,000
1988	Nagorno-Karabakh conflict	Armenia, Azerbaijan	27,287+
1991	War in Somalia	Somalia, Kenya	500,000
2003	Iraq War	Iraq	251,000–1,000,000
2003	War in Darfur	Sudan	178,363
2004	War in North-West Pakistan	Pakistan	59,725
2006	Mexican Drug War	Mexico	165,000
2009	Boko Haram insurgency	Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, Chad	28,800
2011	Syrian Civil War	Syria	250,000–470,000
2011	Libyan Civil War	Libya	14,382
2011	Yemeni Civil War	Yemen, Saudi Arabia	7400
2011	Sinai insurgency	Egypt	4511
2011	Ethnic violence in South Sudan	South Sudan, Ethiopia	50,000
2012	Northern Mali conflict	Mali	829–2416+
2014	War in Donbass	Ukraine	9640

Sources: www.iiss.org, Wikipedia

This shift leads to a variety of consequences. We will focus on some of them, which are critical for the ensuing narrative.

First, understanding a union as a project makes commitments assumed under it less reliable than they were before. Relations between the three Baltic states and their NATO allies in 2014-2016 provide a clear example of that. The deployment of NATO battalions in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania publicly portrayed as “defense against the Russian threat” made it clear that the security guarantees provided to the alliance members are insufficient in and of themselves. In a critical, according to Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius, moment there was a need to back these guarantees by deploying troops.

Second, the transformation of the alliance exacerbates inequality in the international system. Large countries with great military and political capabilities begin to perceive the alliance as a burden. As a result, they can assume fewer formal and informal commitments than they had in the past, and these commitments can only be effective for a relatively short period of time. Small and relatively weak countries are deprived of guarantees which they could rely on earlier. This pushes them to pursue one of the two basic scenarios. Either they begin to maneuver between major powerhouses risking to make their position even less stable, or they seek additional guarantees from their international patrons exaggerating the threats they are facing. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania opted for the latter scenario having made a decisive contribution to securitizing the Baltic agenda in recent years.

Third, the legal certainty of alliances is eroding. Is there a need to provide a complex legal foundation for a project that will take one to two years to implement and in which the most influential participants do not want to assume unnecessary obligations? If there's no specific legal framework, would it be true to say that only states can enter into unions? The project can involve non-state political and/or military organizations, individual elite groups within a particular country, the most influential media, interest groups, religious leaders, and so on. The guarantees that the participants may need can be obtained through a series of private investment or lending transactions. Is the alliance between the United States and the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf in effect? Sometimes, this seems doubtful. Is there an alliance between the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf and US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton? Definitely. The coalition which opposes the Syrian government includes states, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United States, and non-state entities such as countless Syrian armed opposition groups. This coalition is waging war, but its members have virtually no legal obligations towards each other.

We reiterate, the popular term “proxy war” does not reflect the entire complexity of what is happening. The term assumes that there’s an actor and an intermediary, a principal and an agent. In fact, the non-state groups that are part of this bundle cannot be referred to just as intermediaries or agents; on the contrary, they often determine the agenda of the coalition and create its mission in line with Rumsfeld’s dictum that the mission must determine the coalition, rather than the coalition must determine the mission.

Fourth, there’s a contradiction between the project, that is, by definition, an impermanent nature of coalitions and the need to maintain a long-term infrastructure for international cooperation. Thus, transport routes, including pipelines, have been in operation for decades, organizing and linking economic activity in a certain way along their entire length. Economic cohesion can appear as a political factor in the face of abrupt political changes. Contrary to the liberal prediction that the growing density of economic ties will make international politics more predictable and less controversial, economic calculations are increasingly being sacrificed for political or ideological reasons. This, however, does not negate the need to maintain the infrastructure of global economic ties.

In addition to the economic infrastructure underlying cooperation, there’s also military infrastructure, and the contradiction between the growing frailty of the unions and the long life of this infrastructure also makes itself felt. A military base abroad can be a source of strength, but may also be a factor of vulnerability, as happened, for example, to the Russian military bases in Georgia in 2004-2006, when the servicemen and the personnel at those military bases occasionally became targets of provocations by Tbilisi.

Russia and Its Allies

There is little sense in comparing the network of unions where Russia is a member to the well-known military-political alliances. It would be more reasonable to consider their correspondence to the global trend for the transformation of international military-political alliances as an institution. This analysis shows that some characteristics of this network, which are believed to be its weaknesses compared to the traditional alliances, are in fact its strong sides.

To begin with, we believe that we should talk about the network of unions as a system of multilateral and bilateral ties and obligations that take different forms and have different timeframes. Some military-political and economic integration ties can intertwine within this network. Multilateral ties are complemented with more concrete bilateral relations.

Russia has few military allies. Only its legally binding agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia say that an armed attack against one partner is considered an attack on the other partner. There is no such provision in Russia's other agreements, including with the countries that are considered its closest allies. The Collective Security Treaty Organization members have milder obligations than the NATO countries, as can be seen from a comparison of their provisions on mutual guarantees.

Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, signed in Washington on April 4, 1949: "The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all."

Article 2 of the Collective Security Treaty, signed on May 15, 1992: "In case a threat to security, territorial integrity and sovereignty of one or several Member States or a threat to international peace and security Member States will immediately put into action the mechanism of joint consultations with the aim to coordinate their positions and take measures to eliminate the threat that has emerged."

This difference in security guarantees reflects the main feature of the CSTO, which is asymmetry. Russia has a much larger military-political capability than its partners, and the potential threats to its partners are absolutely or mostly different. It is difficult to imagine a common challenge to Armenia and Tajikistan, and it is impossible to imagine that they would provide practical assistance to each other if one of them is involved in an armed conflict. On the other hand, all CSTO member states are interested in maintaining a common military infrastructure (for example, air defense), military technical cooperation, information exchange and the training of military professionals.

In fact, the CSTO provides an institutional basis for this cooperation complemented with Russia's guarantees to its partners under bilateral agreements. As a result, Russia has military-political partners in the regions where it needs to maintain security, while its partners only share responsibility for the region of their location. At the same time, this regional security

OPERATION OF THE RUSSIAN ARMED FORCES IN SYRIA

Operation of the Russian Armed Forces prevented the collapse of the Syrian state, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said at the extended session of the Russian Defence Ministry Board

The Russian aviation has performed



18,800
flights



71,000
strikes on terrorists'
infrastructure



Over the past year, the Sukhoi Su-34 fighter-bomber has been demonstrating its deadly potential against terrorists in Syria

During the operation in Syria more than 160 advanced and upgraded Russian-made weapons have been field-tested

The Russian Aerospace Forces eliminated



35,000
insurgents including
204 field commanders



725
training
camps



405
plants which
produced munitions



1,500
military vehicles
of terrorists

Militants have lost



448
tanks and
other armored
vehicles



57
multiple
launch rocket
systems



418
improvised
MLRS



410
mortars



28,000
small arms

As a result of the military operation



More than 9,000
insurgents have
laid down their arms



26,853
explosive devices defused
in the territory of 1,420 hectares



66 thousand tons
of explosive devices
defused in the
liberated Aleppo

1,074
inhabited areas with total
population of about 3 million people
have joined the ceasefire regime

108,000
refugees have
returned back
to their villages

Have joined the Russian humanitarian operation in Syria



The United
Nations



Armenia



Serbia



Belarus



India



China



Kazakhstan

Source: http://eng.mil.ru/en/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12106806@egNews

system is open to countries that have no allied or even diplomatic relations with each other. For example, a Russian military base in Armenia, which is part of the joint Russian-Armenian group of forces, maintains interaction with Russian bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russia's operation in Syria is an example of the diversity and changes in the system of allied relations. Close ties with Syria date back to the Soviet period. The naval facility was established in Tartus in 1971. The agreement on the deployment of the Russian aerospace group in Syria, signed on August 26, 2015, mentions the Soviet-Syrian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (October 8, 1980) and the agreement on military cooperation signed between the Russian and Syrian defense ministries on July 7, 1994. The air base in Latakia was established very quickly, and the March 2016 statement by President Putin on the withdrawal of the larger part of the Russian group from Syria pointed to Russia's willingness to reduce its military presence in Syria whenever necessary.

Russia and Syria have no legally binding commitments that would compel them to join the hostilities in case of an attack against one of the partners. However, they have a large set of cooperation mechanisms, from the coordination of diplomatic statements and military supplies to joint military operations. The Russian-Syrian union, if it can be described as a union, is based on permanent and short-term elements and can be easily adapted for the achievement of different political goals.

Russia's military ties with Iran are difficult to judge based on open sources. However, it is a fact that they are closely cooperating in the military operation in Syria. Russia has used Iran's airspace, and possibly its territory, for delivering strikes against the terrorists in Syria. However, the only document binding them in this sphere is an intergovernmental agreement on military cooperation. Russia's statements on the provision of Iran's territory for Russian air strikes against the terrorists in Syria have provoked a negative reaction in Tehran. Although Russia and Iran are cooperating within the framework of the Syrian operation, their relations cannot be described as those of allies.

Elements of a new geopolitical reality are developing in the Balkans. The Montenegrin authorities have accelerated their country's movement towards NATO under the pretext of the alleged Russian involvement in organizing a coup. Montenegro is probably doing this to show that it is different from Serbia, which is actively developing military and technical cooperation with Russia, which includes buying Russian weapons, holding joint military exercises and coordinating military plans. In principle, this can result in Russia granting unofficial security guarantees to Serbia and making it a *de facto* member of the CSTO collective security system. Serbian experts say that the 1999 aggression

against Yugoslavia would have been impossible in the current conditions thanks to a new level of relations with Russia.

This new status quo is feeding the hopes of those in Belgrade who would like to revise the results of Yugoslavia's disintegration. In late 2016 and early 2017, the authorities in Belgrade made several significant moves regarding the security of the Serbian enclaves in Kosovo and in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We can easily imagine a situation when the snowballing problems in the Balkans – Serbs living outside Serbia are discriminated against and Belgrade moves to protect them – would encourage Serbia to use Russia's informal security guarantees and involve it in an undesirable crisis. The possibility of a new war in the Balkans evokes obvious historical parallels and hence must not be considered lightly.

Russia maintains close military ties with China and India and holds joint war games with them. However, this is not a military union but an element complementing close political ties and Russian military deliveries, which creates a transparent and predictable military political environment in relations with partners. At the same time, Russia and China are working to create a multipolar world order as a network of "lasting international relations of a new type that are not spearheaded at other countries" and are based on the principles of equality, noninterference and respect for mutual interests. Moscow and Beijing have strengthened their relations with military confidence-building measures and security guarantees for the Central Asian buffer states. Due to the above, Russia and China are not divided by the geopolitical frontier, such as exists between Russia and NATO in Eastern Europe. The partnership between Moscow and Beijing has been strengthened by their confrontation with the United States over Ukraine and the South China Sea. It can be said that Russia and China are standing back to back against a common opponent.

The erosion of the legal basis of stable alliances adds significance to the search for ideological similarities in the common cultural and historical heritage. The Soviet heritage continues to attract leftwing Latin American leaders to Russia, hoping to exploit Moscow's striving for independence in international affairs. But some Balkan politicians are using an opposite part of Russia's heritage, namely Orthodox Christianity, Russia's imperial past and rivalry with the Ottoman Empire and Western Europe over the Balkans.

Lastly, Russia also has non-state allies; relations with them cannot be given a legal framework, for obvious reasons. These are the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics, which receive broad political and other support from Russia, and Transnistria, which receives various types of assistance from Russia and even holds joint military exercises with the Russian peacekeepers stationed in the region. Contacts between Russian officials and the leaders of various political and military groups in Libya can probably be placed in the same category.

Insular Geopolitics

Comparing modern Russia and the Soviet Union as global players is a separate and potentially inexhaustible subject. We will only mention several aspects that are vital for this survey.

First, Russia has fewer allies than the Soviet Union did, and the few allies it has are not connected to it by strict commitments such as in the Warsaw Pact or NATO. Neither does Russia have as many satellite countries as the Soviet Union did. Russia is helping several small countries, both recognized and self-proclaimed ones. Overall, this is incomparable to the wide network of friendly countries which the Soviet Union supported and could rely on.

Second, Russia has a much more balanced policy on regional contradictions. For example, the Soviet policy in the Middle East was based on large-scale assistance to ideologically friendly governments and the absence of diplomatic relations with the ideologically unfriendly ones, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Modern Russia is investing relatively modest sums in helping its traditional ally, Syria. At the same time, it maintains an active dialogue with Israel and the Gulf monarchies, which have significant influence in the region. In the Far East, the Soviet Union was a besieged country waging a cold war with the United States, without a peace treaty with Japan and diplomatic relations with South Korea, and unable to patch a long-time rift with China. Today, Moscow has trust-based relations with Beijing, conducts an active political dialogue with Tokyo, and claims the role of a power that can ensure balance in the region.

Third, unlike the Soviet Union, modern Russia seems to be disappointingly indifferent to ideological aspects. The recent conservative trend in Moscow's rhetoric is a defensive reaction against attempts to undermine national sovereignty and interfere in Russia's internal affairs under the banner of progress, instead of offering it a new global agenda. The Kremlin's ideological, or rather emotional, sympathy for foreign conservatives is not all-embracing but highly selective (we like Marine Le Pen but not John McCain). Indeed, the principle of universalism is inapplicable if we want nations to maintain their traditions and not lecture others. It would be enough to live and let live. Some forces, for example the Russian Orthodox Church, attempted to add a broader ideological content to Moscow's policy, but they have very little, if any, influence on foreign policy. Evidence of this indifference to ideology is the incredible flexibility of state propaganda: over the past six months, the image of President Trump has changed from the enemy to the symbol of hope and finally to just one of the many foreign politicians.

The Soviet Union was a continental empire with a global historical mission, while modern Russia is an almost ethnically homogenous state governed by a pragmatic, if not entirely cynical, political class devoid of ideological illusions, which will not urge the world to work towards a brighter future, but will fight tooth and nail for its place in the world. Paradoxically, Russia,

which is a weaker state than the Soviet Union on many counts (a smaller territory, population, army and share in global GDP), has become a global leader capable of putting in question Western hegemony in many important areas.

The reason for this is not that the Russian government is using available resources better than the Soviet government did, or that the West has weakened compared to 25 years ago. The reason is that Russia's geopolitics has changed. Russia is becoming established in a new geopolitical niche, which Vadim Tsybursky described in the early 1990s in an article titled *Russia Island*.

Russia has stopped trying to take the place of Europe (and to turn Russia into Europe), a goal conservative and pro-reform Russian politicians and philosophers, such as Tyutchev and Peter the Great, have been advocating for the previous 300 years. It is no longer trying to solidify itself by incorporating limitrophe areas (border countries) that divide it from other civilization platforms in the West or the South, or by including them in its sphere of influence. Moreover, it tends to accept the identity flexibility of these areas as a fact of life. Russia now has a more cautious attitude to long-term political and military involvement outside the national border, and only maintains a selective presence in the regions of priority importance.

Russia does not always have clearly marked natural borders. It is most difficult to mark them in the west, from the Black to the Baltic seas where there are no clear language and cultural borderlines. In the south, Russia's North Caucasus smoothly merges with the southern ridges of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and on the other side of the Caspian Sea Russia merges with Kazakhstan. At the same time, Russia is quite conservative about state borders. Deliberations about Russian expansionism overshadow the fact that no influential political movement has developed in the 25 years since the Soviet Union's dissolution that would demand the reincorporation of the former Soviet republics. Russia has incorporated Crimea but not Donbass, refusing to initiate a large-scale re-carving of the neighboring country. This has provoked disappointment among some forces, but this disappointment has not grown into a political factor.

It is from this standpoint that we should regard the Russian system of unions, which is adequate to the insular geopolitical nature of Russia. These Russian unions were created for several reasons. First, they must ensure the safety of the "island": Russia will not allow a military intervention into its territory. The transformation of a limitrophe area into a bridgehead for a possible invasion into Russia is not acceptable, and hence Russia will do everything in its power to prevent this. In fact, this is the logic underlying Russia's resistance to NATO's expansion in the post-Soviet space. This logic also explains different approaches to the Baltic countries

on the one hand, and to Georgia and Ukraine, on the other hand. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania cannot be turned into a bridgehead for geographical reasons, while Georgia and Ukraine can.

The system of Russia's unions is also designed to provide the backdrop for Russia's role of an influential power in the regions where it has important interests. At the same time, coalitions capable of undermining Russia's influence must not be allowed to develop in these regions. While providing assistance to its allies, Russia tries to prevent the development of such coalitions and at the same time to avoid being manipulated by its allies. The recent examples of this approach are the focus on a multi-directional approach in Syria and dramatic changes in Russia's relations with Turkey. Not all of Bashar al-Assad's enemies are also Russia's enemies (and not always). After all, Russia's military might is used to strengthen the influence of Moscow rather than Damascus.

Similar examples can be found in other regions, too. Relations with Armenia are important for maintaining and strengthening Russia's influence in the South Caucasus. Russia will continue to provide military assistance to Armenia and facilitate its economic development through EurAsEC. However, it will try to prevent the emergence of a coalition that includes Azerbaijan, for example, and one or several other neighboring states. This is why Russia sometimes speaks directly with security providers in the opposite camp – Turkey, the United States and Western European countries – over the head of its allies. This equally gets on the nerves of Russia's allies in bordering countries (Belarus and Armenia) and also US allies (Poland and the Baltic countries).

Relations with Belarus are of crucial importance for Russia's policy against the NATO expansion. Belarus has prevented the creation of an unbroken line of hostile countries from the Baltic to the Black Sea. However, Belarus cannot be described as a Russian satellite or a country in the Russian zone of influence. Minsk is one of the many post-Soviet capitals that are using the Russia-West confrontation in the post-Soviet space as a source of strength and a means of gaining political and other advantages. The only difference is that other post-Soviet countries, for example, Georgia, tried to gain these advantages from the West, while Belarus received them from Russia.

The Union State of Belarus and Russia has entered a difficult stage in its history: the NATO expansion has halted, and the Kremlin does not view the area comprising the Kaliningrad Region, the Baltic countries and Poland as the most threatened area, as can be seen from its military activities of the past few years. The Union State's mechanisms are malfunctioning because its value has declined. A hypothetical agreement between Russia, the United States and key EU countries on a new European security system would be a much more serious political challenge to Belarus than its current economic hardships.

Conclusion

Comparison often breeds dissatisfaction. Risks to the Russian foreign policy and network of unions stem from the fact that the Russian political elite, which mostly comprises people who grew up in the Soviet Union, has not reacted to the geopolitical shift over the past 25 years. It turned out that Russia Island is not a project but a forecast, and Russia's views of itself are dominated by its perception of incompleteness compared to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. As a result, Moscow experiences phantom pains because it does not have certain elements of the geopolitical status its predecessors had.

There are several assertions concerned with phantom pains, which, we believe, should be put in question.

“Russia has few allies and must strengthen the existing unions and create new ones based on binding legal obligations.” In our opinion, Russia's isolation gives it room for maneuver in attaining its foreign policy goals.

“Russia must create an ideological alternative to the West (or to Islamic radicalism).” It is possible that the absence of an ideological choice and divestment of messianic policies allow Russia to maintain a high geopolitical status while spending fewer resources than the Soviet Union did.

“Russia must strengthen its positions in its traditional spheres of influence in every possible way, including in the post-Soviet space and the Balkans.” It is more likely that Russia should only stabilize the limitrophe areas to a degree that is absolutely necessary for maintaining its own security, and avoid being drawn into unnecessary conflicts by its allies.

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