



Space Without Borders: Russia and Its Neighbours

Timofei Bordachev

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Russia's policy towards its neighbours is based on three factors: **the traditional power component, the existence of a common geopolitical space, and a common history.** The main component in international politics is the balance of forces, but geography and ties that have developed over centuries are no less important in this particular case.¹ Russia has been and remains the dominant power in the so-called post-Soviet space, because it has the largest population, one of the world's best armies, and a large arsenal of nuclear weapons that is commensurate only to the US stockpile. However, it should be remembered that topography precludes the marking of clear dividing lines between Russia and its neighbours, and that common historical experience will always influence decisions.

Therefore, Russia's military-political might cannot guarantee control of its neighbours or allow it to keep aloof of them. Many problems could be solved if Moscow resumed a form of direct control of a part of the former Soviet republics. But the effort required could eventually prove fatal to the Russian economy and statehood. Keeping aloof of its neighbours would imply the development of a defensive strategy for the areas in direct proximity to vital centres of Russian territory. Military domination is a way to develop relations favourable for a sustainable but not imperial international order around Russia, that is, an order that does not include direct control of neighbours.

The countries that are located along the larger part of the Russian border are unable to independently deal with their development and security challenges. This makes Russia the main centre of power in this space, encouraging hope in the neighbouring states and attracting other powers. But the latter is only acceptable as long as it does not restrict the sovereignty of the neighbouring states.

Moscow needs to find a form of interaction with its neighbours that supports the national security and relative peace of the countries along Russian borders without dictating domestic or foreign policy rules to them. This is the common element of Russia's strategy towards all its neighbours, regardless of where they are located in the common geopolitical space. Ideally, Russia's foreign policy should be aimed at creating a chain of states on its border which can take independent foreign policy decisions with due regard for geopolitical circumstances.

¹ Although Estonia and Kyrgyzstan are two widely different states, these three factors determine their similarity from the viewpoint of Russian politics.

Sources and foundations of Russian policy

The general crisis accompanying the emergence of a new international order is forcing us to return to the basic categories that determine the behaviour of states. This is the only way to break from our natural tendency to interpret politics through the lens of accumulated experience and, accordingly, to continue along the same track, focusing on a state's actual development goals instead of ones that reproduce old templates based on historical experience.

A state, even one as large, rich in resources, and powerful as Russia, cannot afford to endlessly repeat the past. It would interfere with Russia's internal development, as well as with the changes that neighbouring countries are going through. Their relations with Russia are less amenable to analysis using most common theoretical constructs from the study of international relations than, for example, Russia's interaction with Europe, the United States or China. **Russia and former Soviet states are bound by a common geopolitical landscape and a shared historical experience, and this circumstance influences any theoretical argument.**

Most established norms and habits inevitably become a thing of the past. But today, things are changing much more dramatically than ever before in living memory. Change is coming for international institutions, rules and customs built in the 20th century as a result of the unique distribution of forces in the world at that time. The leading powers are, in fact, fine with the degradation of institutions that have supported the international order since World War II, and their decline is creating a sense of growing chaos.

The past 100 years have been favourable for the emergence and development of small and mid-range powers, but the new international order will hardly be comfortable for those who cannot rely entirely on their own resources. The changes in the global economy and politics mean that survival of the fittest is the order of the day. Therefore, Russia's neighbours, the states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR, have to rely on major powers having an interest in their survival, primarily as a resource for their diplomacy. That interest is declining, though, and so is the importance of international institutions where small and

mid-range countries are needed to form coalitions. This is an objective sign of a new stage in international politics. Russia and its neighbours have to learn to live in a world that is no longer accommodating to small and medium states.

Any international order shaped amid the redistribution of forces in the world rests on a number of immutable factors, history and geography being the most important of them. No matter how great and powerful China may become, it will still be surrounded by small and mid-range countries that have distrusted it for centuries – from all sides except the north. Impressive as India's economic progress and demographics may seem, it will always remain a peninsula that can be easily cut off from the continent by hostile powers or natural obstacles. Even if Europe's importance in international politics fades, its central location and the convenience of short distances will continue to determine its relative success and appeal. The United States will remain an island unto itself in international affairs no matter what happens with the US-China balance of power, or with American society. The United States will always enjoy the luxury of not having to view any regional challenge as an immediate threat to its security. Russia, regardless of how its power capabilities have changed over time, has retained its geopolitical presence in most of Eurasia, from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. This is the reason Russia has to keep an eye on several regional tracks at once and make efforts to influence several disparate regions.

Unlike other powers that succeeded the great European empires of the 19th century, Russia has a unique position being surrounded by countries that replaced its past imperial possessions from the Pamirs to the Baltic Sea. The only neighbouring country Russia never controlled is China, on the east, which also has all superior indicators of power except for military. Unlike Austria or Turkey, Russia is still many times greater than its neighbours in terms of size and overall ability to project power, and will remain so in the foreseeable future.

As for some of its neighbours, the viability of their statehood remains questionable even thirty years after they gained independence. Moreover, given the depth and breadth of their ties with the Russian Federation, their viability cannot be considered outside the context of their relations with Russia. For all those neighbouring countries, the situation in Russia always remains a decisive factor for the implementation of their own development strategies.

Russia is the key national security factor for 14 sovereign states from Estonia in the west to Kyrgyzstan in the east. Those countries' development and foreign policies remain part of Russia's security palette and interaction with other major powers. In a sense, Russia and its neighbours are elements of a single whole interacting with each other in a broader international context. We can trace signs of both in Russia's relationships with all countries that emerged thirty years ago after the collapse of the former USSR.

Geography is a constant in any state's foreign policy. The balance of forces determines the international order; the geographical position provides opportunities for using force to survive, to protect national interests and values. In this sense, geographic location is a state's most basic resource and important support in international politics, not a "curse", as one sometimes hears. In its relations with neighbours, Russia can use the benefits of its geographic location to achieve its own security and development goals.

History – historical events and experiences – is a source of inertia that influences the actions of states. Russia and its neighbours' shared historical experience is part of Russia's modern strategic culture. This is primarily reflected in its pronounced ethical tendency to protect the weak. Russia can do this regardless of how much its own perceptions of justice coincide with those of the country it seeks to protect. When Alexander I spoke at the Congress of Vienna, he was confident that Poland's accession to the Russian Empire would be the fulfilment of his moral duty to its population.

But, unlike geography, history does not have to predetermine foreign policy; the influence of past circumstances and decisions can be overcome. More precisely, its lessons can be taken into account to avoid exactly replicating the solutions that happened to work in other historical periods. A state can direct its actions beyond national borders in a way that will ensure its survival in the future. Any successful foreign policy is an example of rethinking a given path based on available resources and with a view to strengthening the state.

Both Russia and its neighbours are just beginning to forge a new historical experience for themselves. What happens to Russia is more important simply because of its size. Due to its scale and unbroken 500-year

tradition of powerful statehood, it is capable of rational behaviour in this situation.

As for its neighbours, with practically no exceptions they are just beginning to emerge as sovereign states responsible for their own future in the given circumstances. It is essential for them to be able to correlate their own idea of themselves with others' ideas as well as with reality. This should guarantee the survival of young states and the preservation of their sovereignty, in which Russia has a considerable stake. It should be their way to overcome the history of their dependence on Russia (or on other great powers) and seek guarantees of sovereignty in themselves rather than in a new dependence.

The Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 was Russia's attempt to break the historical inertia and free up its tremendous internal potential. That potential was expected to compensate for all the losses as well as to propel the country towards a new position in international politics. However, that potential has instead contributed to keeping Russia's position in the international system unchanged. Even having given up its possessions in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia remained a huge continental power operating in the same conditions of open spaces.

The creation of the Russian Federation has not changed the country's place in the global composition of forces. Its power capabilities and potential ruled out joining the community of Western countries as a junior partner to the community's leader, the United States. Russia may have to rethink its history many times, but it should definitely use its geography as a source and resource. Going back to an imperial pattern (direct control of its neighbours) seems the simplest and most reliable solution. **The fact that Russia has managed to resist the temptation of restoring the imperial order for 30 years is an achievement in breaking away from the old path and an indicator of the state's maturation.**

Russia's policy in relation to its neighbours should now focus on reassessing the potential benefits from its immediate environment and on ensuring vital national interests and values. Its historical background creates a rigid framework that real politics needs to overcome if it wants to be future-oriented. Denying shared historical experience or trying to separate from one's neighbours in a way that denies geography would be

counterproductive. On the other hand, to continue pursuing traditional policies is only possible if one's goal is revanchist. In other words, Russia should choose to construct its policy towards neighbours within a historically prescribed framework if it aims to return to the old format of interaction, namely, Moscow running an imperial system closed to the outside world, which would require now independent states to be integrated into Russia. This prospect is neither reasonable nor desirable, which means Moscow's policy needs to rely not on historical expectations, but on modern ideas about its national interests.

Being open to the outside world, one can adopt a much more flexible approach to interacting with their neighbours; Russia could involve countries that used to be beyond its historical perimeter in achieving its foreign policy goals now. Today, Russia can afford a policy that does not include clear delineation between its zones of interests or presence along its borders. Its immediate surroundings no longer matter per se – only in the context of broader processes and global projects. It would be odd for a country of Russia's scale and ambition to limit its interests to a narrow geographic area. Specific zones of interest imply exclusive relations, something that is difficult to imagine in the modern world. On the other hand, Russia's neighbours need to be able to pursue a mature foreign policy relying not on their historical experience and myths, but on a sober assessment of their situation.

Due to its geopolitical peculiarities, Eurasia is not a region where dividing lines are possible. After the Cold War, the only attempt to pursue this kind of policy based on political motives was made by the European Union after its expansion in 2004. It undermined the core aspect of security, ultimately causing a crisis in the entire European international order.

Russia's new policy manifests itself in an increasingly individualised approach to its neighbours. It is based on respect for their sovereignty and carefully considers each state's importance for the security of Russia's territory. This way it is possible to use our common historical heritage without remaining a hostage to it, to make use of Russia's unique geopolitical position as a great power that operates in several theatres and upholds its own security through flexible interaction with its neighbours.

The philosophy of flexible and open interaction should underpin a legitimate international order along the entire perimeter of Russia's borders. In this zone of interest, Russia is a power whose actions are primarily determined by its capabilities, geopolitical position and historical experience. Russia will bear a special responsibility for the formation of this new order. This process will hardly be simple or institutionally coherent, but it is fully in Russia's interests.

The balance of forces in Russia's neighbourhood

According to international power politics, Russia has the biggest stake in the maintenance and strengthening of the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. None of them can potentially pose a threat to Russia, while their ability to take independent and rational foreign policy decisions guarantees that their territories will not be used by major states that are hostile or potentially unfriendly towards Russia. The Russia-Ukraine conflict is rooted in Ukraine's inability to steer such a policy and its dependence on the power centres that are external with regard to Eurasia. There is no other rationale for tensions between Russia and its neighbours. Military-political rapprochement with the West is the most probable reason for any increased tensions between Russia and neighbouring states.

Russia does not share borders with any other world power (excluding China), and so it has no reason to adopt a buffer policy. Before the First World War, Russia bordered Germany and Austria-Hungary in the west, the Ottoman and British empires in the south, and China in the east.

The European Union is a co-author of the international order that developed after the Cold War without any contribution from Russia and even contrary to Moscow's interests. But the EU is not an integral state, and the behaviour of Ukraine and Moldova shows that it has limited control over them even despite their oath of allegiance to it. China has not yet

indicated a desire to use its power politics in the post-Soviet space. But if China changes its behaviour, Russia should adjust its policy in the region of common neighbourhood (Central Asia).

So far, Russia's domination in the common geopolitical space is absolute. Even when Russia's strength was at its lowest ebb (1991–2004), Moscow retained the ability to intervene so as to restore order in neighbouring states. There have been no cases where conflicts involving Russia's neighbours have been settled with the use of military force by other countries, and only Russian peacekeepers have helped settle conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Discussions on the possible use of other countries' forces in Georgia and Ukraine did not gain traction. The biggest achievements of Russia's geopolitical opponents are the OSCE Minsk Group on Nagorno-Karabakh and the Minsk process for a settlement in eastern Ukraine. Even Turkey's assistance to Azerbaijan during the war to regain the territory it lost in the 1990s was limited to the management of military actions and the commercial supply of military equipment.

The neighbouring states' fear of Russia is rooted in objective reality, and instead of trying to overcome it, Moscow should deal with the inevitable consequences of this fear. Many experts, from Bishkek to Yerevan and Kiev, support this view. Therefore, the fear of Russia's might is a structural factor of relations, especially since the countries of interest for Russia do not have to deal with comparable powers in terms of military capability. Some Central Asian states, for example Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, fear China, but this fear is not a structural factor precisely because of the presence of Russia with its overpowering size and capabilities. The potential Chinese threat pales in comparison with the apprehensions regarding Moscow's actions.

Russia also has apprehensions and suspicions regarding the possible use of neighbouring territories by powers that pose a real or potential threat. Its geopolitical opponents have established their presence in Georgia and Ukraine, where they have created a situation that is endangering Russia's basic interests and values. Russia's foreign policy guidelines identify the use of neighbouring countries as bridgeheads against Russia as red lines.

The cause of Russia's fear is not the neighbouring states themselves but the consequences of their activities. Russia is responding to the

neighbours' unacceptable actions, which are being encouraged by their external patrons, by placing new restrictions on their sovereign rights, up to and including the loss of their territory, as in the case of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. The neighbours' fear of Russia is more existential and is connected with concerns regarding the preservation of their states as such or their existence within the current borders. Practice shows that Russia is ready to take restrictive decisions when a neighbour's behaviour contradicts Moscow's basic interests and becomes irrational regarding its own geopolitical situation.

Another major consequence of Russia's power dominance is the preservation of the ethical considerations in Russia's foreign policy with regard to the countries that are weaker and not hostile towards Russia. The demand for moral motivation and commitment is connected with Russia's unique power and geopolitical position, which makes material requirements less important. In general, Russia's foreign policy is not focused on material considerations: the issues of security, prestige and ethics prevail over gains and benefits.

Thanks to its huge size, rich natural resources and the structure of foreign economic ties, Russia is not as heavily dependent on the international order and the ability to influence it than the other global players (the US, China and Europe). But Russia's domination in the post-Soviet space and its geopolitical integrity do not mean that Russia's relations with its neighbours are immune to the influence of the broader context. The fear of losing control over the periphery to the other powers is always on the Russian agenda and is one of the greatest irritants to the public. Russia is concerned about relations between relatively large powers and post-Soviet states, not to mention such major players as the US or China. However, a strict dividing line must be drawn between the potential use of neighbouring territories by hostile powers and neighbours' interaction with states that do not have any such goal or lack the ability to attain it.

The military aspect of international politics is still based on the existence of several nuclear powers, which are by far superior to other states in terms of their capabilities. It also includes the phenomenon of collective institutions of the US-led Western world, which comprise vast military and economic might. These factors are adding an element of certainty to international affairs.

The rise of China has changed the traditional power structure of the world in terms of its aggregate (rather than exclusively military) capabilities. China's resources have become an alternative source of development for both small and mid-range powers. Some of them, in particular, Pakistan and Iran, can use their reliance on China to act independently. Overall, the relative weakening of the West and the impossibility of restoring the strictly bipolar international order are forcing medium-sized powers to pursue a more flexible foreign policy. For example, Russia is actively developing ties with Iran, Turkey and Pakistan, which had previously been its ideological opponents or US allies. As a result, the interaction between Russia, its neighbours and the medium-sized powers does not amount to their transition from the area of Moscow's influence under the umbrella of other players, but rather to the involvement of all players, including Russia, in the process of building a new international order.

The essence of the so-called post-Soviet space as an integral military-political whole is becoming eroded, though not through its dissolution and the inclusion of its components into the zone of influence of the other poles of power, but through the development of broader communities. Russia remains the strongest player in all these communities (excluding the Western community) even when a powerful external force joins in the conflict, for example, when the US and the West in general joined in the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, or Turkey in the conflict in the South Caucasus in 2020. Russia's military power is pivotal for the further development of both situations.

As global US-China differences widen, small and mid-range countries will no longer need to look for a "third option" but instead will seek an opportunity to interact with each of the indisputable global leaders. Russia should adopt the principle of openness and stop trying to bind its neighbours in the areas where it cannot offer them a full range of services or technologies. The attempts to create an isolated community in a geopolitical space where Russia is dominant at the military-political level will do no good.

When forces are balanced, Russia's domination in the post-Soviet space is a fact of life that is reinforced by its ability to use force. This domination is the main reason behind Moscow's interest in its neighbours' ability to take independent foreign policy decisions. **Russia must abandon**

the historical perception of the neighbouring countries as a zone of its a priori influence. It should stop relying on its unique capabilities to use force to maintain its monopoly, and instead use these capabilities to engage other countries. Russia's advantage is not that its neighbours have no other option but that it can act more effectively than its rivals in any situation. Its neighbours should not think that Moscow will buy their loyalty or hope that they can disregard the objective balance of forces in the common geopolitical space. This understanding should become the most reliable method of overcoming the historical perception of Russia as the parent state rather than a standalone power, although a friendly one.

The ability to take sovereign decisions does not mean acting on the basis of historical experience but on a rational assessment of one's current position. Russia is demonstrating this ability on the global scale, by trying to prevent its differences with the West from crossing the dangerous line beyond which lies an armed clash.

Here are the conclusions from this review of the balance of forces, after 30 years of the post-Soviet space.

First of all, Russia remains the dominant power that is directly or indirectly spreading its domination beyond the areas of interest to it.

Second, Russia's military power has been the key factor throughout the period under review, but it was used in a variety of ways. During the initial stage (1991–2008), its inherent existence was offset by Moscow's unwillingness to take decisive action. Conditions have now developed in which Russia can use its objective advantages more energetically, meeting the wishes of its neighbours. "Russia must act" is what experts in the post-Soviet states say about Moscow's policy.

Third, the biggest threat to the neighbours' survival would be the loss of their ability to independently take rational foreign policy decisions. Russia does not want to recreate an empire, but it would like its neighbours to act in keeping with the objective balance of forces.

Fourth, the involvement of external players, who do not have the capability to threaten or do not want to threaten Russia, in its relations with its neighbours is an objective process that is strengthening Russia's standing.

Russia's neighbourhood geopolitics

There are no natural borders in Eurasia that would allow for drawing clearly defined dividing lines between the areas of influence of individual powers. Essentially, the Amur River acts as the only natural border. Behind the Amur, the Chinese civilisational space begins, its uniqueness needing no political justification. Its existence is reinforced by China's powerful dominance to the south and the east of its territory.

The rest is an endless open space, politically restricted in the west (as the area of political and economic dominance of Euro-Atlantic institutions) and wide open in the south. The Caucasus Mountains should not be considered a natural barrier because the post-Soviet states behind them have no alternative power to Russia. Even the active powers like Turkey and Iran pale in comparison to Russia in terms of military capacity. Therefore, any threat coming from them can be countered by Russian involvement. A military conflict with Turkey would not be an existential threat to Russia.

Any attempts to define the internal borders of Eurasia and areas of cooperation relatively isolated from the rest of the world are purely speculative. Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, Europe from the Atlantic to Vladivostok, the Russian World or Turan are political concepts without a solid geographical foundation. **Eurasia is a single geopolitical community centred around Russia due to its size and military capacity.**

The geopolitical status of the states that emerged from the Soviet Union in 1991 does not permit an isolated foreign policy, and Russia is no exception here. Considering that a country's geographical location serves as a base from which the country takes action during war and a strategic position during peaceful times, the lack of natural frontiers forces a country to take its neighbours' opinion into account even when it comes to core national security matters. Of course, as the largest power, Russia has been able to separate its own security from its neighbours' in certain situations, for example in the 1990s. But even then, Moscow had to be actively involved in settling conflicts on the periphery. This is why the Russian military were involved in settling domestic crises (specifically, in Tajikistan) even as Russia itself was confronting the immense challenges of the 1990s.

Any attempts to expand collective security systems focused on containing Russia to Eurasia inevitably met with resistance from Eurasian countries – even when Russia itself was formally leaning towards closer relationships with NATO and the European Union. In the 1990s, having made its political choice, Moscow was seeking, if not participation in Western institutions, then at least maximum proximity. But, for geopolitical reasons, it was extremely jealous of the West for attempting to wriggle its way into Russia's neighbouring countries.

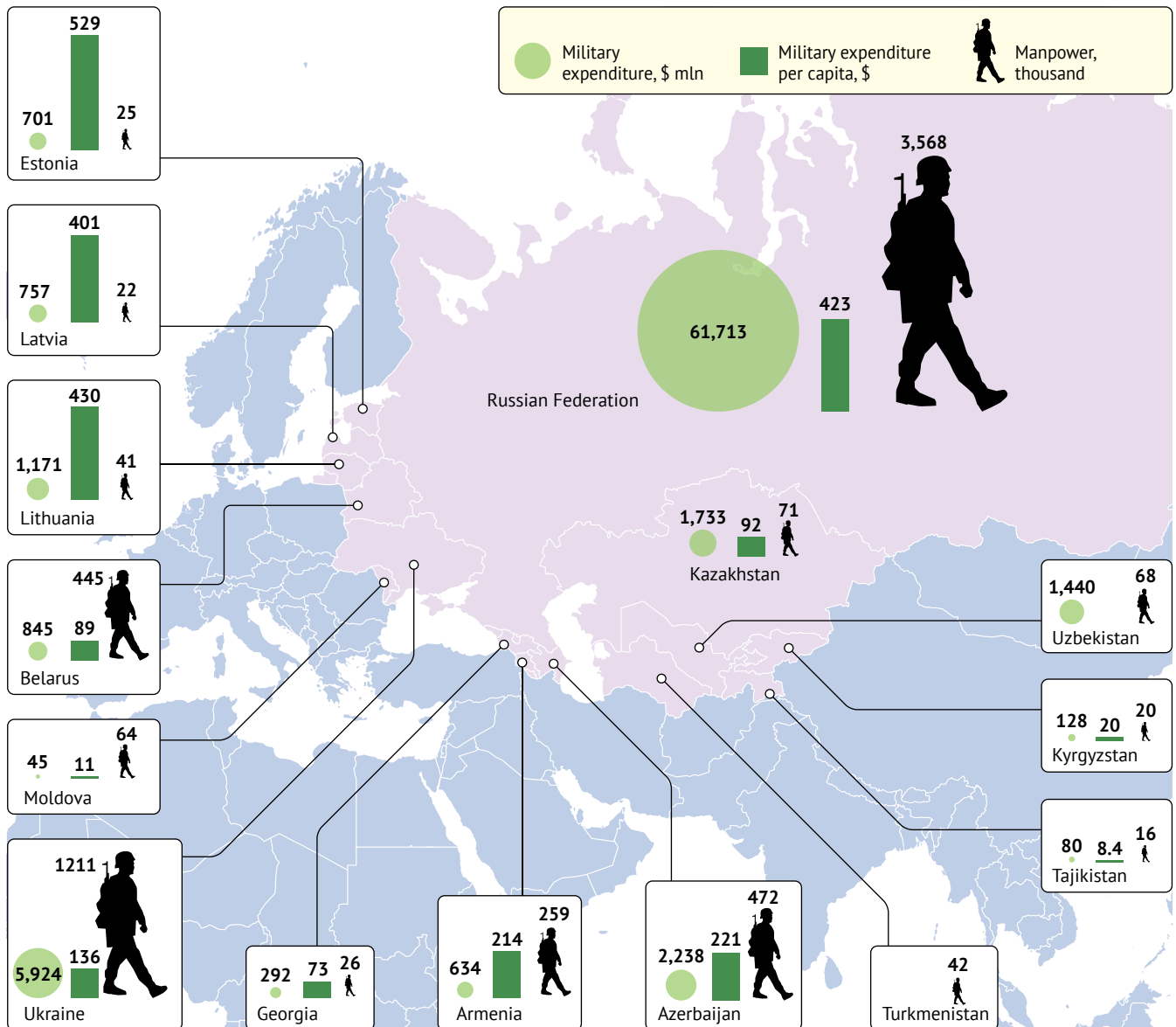
Historically, the absence of internal borders in Eurasia is a result of the Russian state's expansion. Over the course of its history, the Russian state conquered the Ural Mountains and used several enormous Siberian rivers as vital thoroughfares. History and geopolitics intersect and complement each other in Eurasia. Due to historical factors, Russia's cultural influence there is most significant and persistent regardless of whether the Russian element itself has a small or big presence in the neighbouring countries.

Thanks to its geopolitical location and subjective military and economic capacities, Russia stands at the centre of the Eurasian space from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Each of the other major players can be considered an important factor only in one region, either Europe, the Middle East or Central Asia. Russia is the only country that is present everywhere. Therefore, whenever Russia's ability to participate in any developments in neighbouring countries expands or contracts, that immediately becomes the key factor in these countries' foreign policies and even development.

Following the serious weakening of Russia's ability to wield power after 1991, most of its neighbours not only had to look for alternative survival resources elsewhere, in some cases managing to reduce their economic and political dependence on their huge neighbour. That tendency affected all of Russia's neighbours to various degrees.

None of the newly sovereign countries completely broke away from its former 'parent state', because even when Russia did not pay much individual attention to its neighbours, it still remained the centre of gravity. For weaker states, the problem with having Russia as a neighbour was that they could not ignore it even when Russia was unable or unwilling to dictate. With minor exceptions (Baltic states), Russia's weakness did not exclude it from adopting important decisions.

MILITARY STRENGTH OF FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS



Sources: SIPRI, IISS, UN, The World Bank

In the case of the Baltic states, it became possible because from the very beginning they were drawn into the power orbit of the West and started moving toward the institutional and legal space of Western Europe and the United States. All attempts to create institutional associations on the territories surrounding Russia without Russia, or against its interests or expectations (GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development), remained tactical or failed. For each of the participating states, its relationship with Russia was much more important than any other relationship. Military and political structures in Eastern Europe, even aside from the European Union or NATO, would have had certain

prospects because, in a hypothetical confrontation with Russia, they would have relied on the forces of Western Europe and the United States. In the case of the former Soviet states, there are no powers standing behind them with comparable capacity to Russia's.

Its location on the map has always been a blessing and a curse for Russia itself: a blessing because any geographical direction can be approached from a position of choice rather than from a position of necessity; a curse because this ever-present opportunity to choose prevents Russia from focusing on one particular direction, even an obvious priority. The persisting formal identification of the former Soviet space as the top priority of Russia's foreign policy is an exception. How this declarative approach was put into practice is up for debate. Although it does reflect the reality. Even when Russia paid little attention to its neighbours, the formal priority corresponded with its objective status despite having neither time nor administrative resources to act on it.

Europe per se has no longer been a threat to Russia since the mid-20th century. Russia's only source of security concerns moved far beyond its neighbouring territories. Russian diplomats direct all efforts toward regulating relations with the United States and Europe – often overlooking its immediate neighbours. Moscow's West-centric foreign policy is rooted in two aspects: Russia's ambition to become part of the balance of powers that historically posed a threat, and the importance of the nuclear factor in the survival of the Russian state.

In its commitment to much closer interaction with the Western community in the 1990s, Russia was after a place in that community that would have allowed Russia to fully realise its potential. The adverse effect of this strategy on Russia's relationship with its immediate neighbours was obvious as neither of them was an important enough partner to bring Russia closer to the West. Moreover, close cooperation with former Soviet republics would have been an obstacle to the relationship concept proposed to Russia by its European partners. Western institutions are designed to support different forms of relationships with individual countries rather than groups of countries. Deeper connections between Russia and former Soviet states had already been a cause for suspicion in the West but in the mid-90s, they began to meet with resistance. The establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and later the Eurasian Economic Union impeded integration of their members, including Russia, with Western institutions.

Consequently, Russia's geopolitical status is the most diverse and, therefore, most complicated. Russia is constantly faced with a choice between different directions and cannot fully focus on any of them. Along the more distant perimeter of Eurasia (Western Europe and, indirectly, the United States, as well as China and India), there are powers that could compete with Russia on a global level. This forces Russia to concentrate on its relations with these powers at the expense of its immediate neighbours. Russia's neighbours are spared the same prospect for geographical reasons and Russia expects that they will act accordingly in their foreign policy.

All the former Soviet states have an extremely advantageous geopolitical position.

First, they neighbour either weaker or equally strong countries, Russia being the only dominant player. This position is comfortable, for smaller states do not have to accommodate the interests of two or more strong neighbours that are capable of consuming them or threatening them with military force. The survival strategy of every Russian neighbour has always been reduced to security considerations of its eastern or northern neighbour.

Some of the Central Asian countries border China, and yet they do not have to consider China's security to the same extent as Russia's. We know of only one case when a foreign political decision of Central Asian governments threatened China's interests. It concerned the deployment of US military bases and bases of US allies in Central Asia in the early 2000s (with Russia's consent). In all other aspects, China's interests were ensured through Russia's geopolitical dominance.

Over thirty years, we cannot recall a time when the vital interests of Russia and China collided. In 2013, China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative that could, in theory, impose additional obligations on some of the former Soviet republics. And even then, these countries did not see opposition from Russia. More than that, in the past few years, China has actually reduced its presence in Central Asia to occasional economic projects. A poll conducted in several Central Asian capitals shows that the Chinese factor is not considered an alternative to the relationship with Russia – and it is definitely not serious enough to grow into a choice between the two.

Proximity to Turkey and Iran is an important factor for countries in the South Caucasus. However, the capacities of these two states pale in comparison to Russia, relieving the South Caucasus of a choice between equally powerful neighbours. Even Ukraine and Belarus have been able to avoid dilemmas caused by their proximity to Europe, unlike Poland and Belgium, which are surrounded by strong competing countries. Poland was and remains caught between Russia and Germany while Belgium is faced with an even more complicated arrangement of three European powers, Britain, Germany and France.

Second, another distinctive characteristic of the geopolitical position of Russia's neighbours is that neither of them can take on the risky role of a buffer since neither is located between Russia and a comparably strong power. No such arrangement can be expected even from Ukraine, Belarus or the Baltic states. Their western borders are not with countries that could measure up to Russia but a cluster of less powerful nations, each playing a minor role in their international associations.

The South Caucasus or Central Asia would fit the role of a buffer even less. The powers behind them will never even come close to Russia in terms of military and economic capacities. Russia and China do not need a mediator country, for they share a long enough border. Turkey and Iran do matter in their neighbours' foreign policy planning. Their role may be significant at times but still not game-changing. The only Russian neighbour with buffer potential is Mongolia. Perhaps, that is why its foreign policy is fairly rational.

A military threat coming from a neighbour is completely absent in the expert opinions of our colleagues in the post-Soviet space. Even for Armenia, Turkey's historical enemy, the possibility of a Turkish military threat is nothing more than an idea in the national narrative. An external military threat against Ukraine, Belarus or Moldova is out of the question.

Third, all the countries we are interested in either share a border with Russia, the only pole of strength in sight, or are located within the same geopolitical space. That imposes more serious obligations on Russia than it probably wants to assume. The United States, for example, is geographically distant from its dependents in Latin America, sharing a border only with Mexico that has essentially been controlled by the United States for more than a century. And yet, even in this case, the US

government cannot completely deny Mexico City its economic or military support if a crisis happens. So, with no natural obstacles separating it from its neighbours, Russia will always have to come to their rescue.

In these geopolitical circumstances, attempts by Russia's neighbours to pursue a multi-vector approach to foreign policy are understandable, especially when the pole of strength weakens. But there is still a risk that these policies will go beyond reasonable behaviour. The intention of Ukraine, Armenia and Belarus to pursue many vectors at once has caused acute crises in the past decade. In Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, interaction with external partners has been more successful, alleviating the consequences of Russia's complete geopolitical dominance.

This being said, every Russian neighbour has its own unique geopolitical position that shapes its opportunities. The most important factors include borders with third countries, regional environment and distance from Russia as the strongest state in a shared geopolitical space. Proximity to China or Turkey creates different preconditions, including for interaction with Russia, while the absence of a direct border allows them to be less dependent on events in Russia and changes in its foreign political interests.

Kazakhstan

The Kazakhstani elite and the country's intellectuals are relatively satisfied with what fate has dealt their state. Their satisfaction can be explained mostly by Kazakhstan's favourable location. It is precisely Kazakhstani experts who have the greatest confidence in Russia as a guarantor of their country's sovereignty and ability to counter external challenges and threats. Kazakhstan has a relatively small population of 19 million and a vast territory adjoining Russia's highly important Western Siberian regions. During its 30-year independence, Kazakhstan has made headway in establishing a modern state, due to the policies of Nursultan Nazarbayev, which have been continued by his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Kazakhstan has now entered a new stage of development, and, as experts agree, this may provoke decisions unsupported by any rational assessment of the country's geopolitical status.

The very opportunity to establish a Kazakhstani state was the result of a unique combination of geopolitical and historical circumstances, including the creation of the national elite's foundations in the 20th

century, Russia's refusal to directly control Kazakhstan in 1991 and the inability of other major powers to establish control over the country (due to Russia's proximity). Kazakhstan was therefore able to overcome the history of its relations with Russia under the "metropole-periphery" principle and to retain its geographical status as a huge state with an insignificant population. However, this achievement still cannot be seen as something irreversible.

Kazakhstan's geopolitical status makes it possible to retain close relations with Russia, which is also interested in such relations, and with Kazakhstan's southern neighbours. Kazakhstan may find that the southern sector contains the greatest number of risks because most of the country's population lives in its southern regions. In turn, Kazakhstan's neighbours, except Uzbekistan, are not prepared to reliably shield the country from external threats. But not a single neighbour can curb Kazakhstan's freedom to pursue its national priorities, especially following China's decision to scale down its presence in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan not only has a more favourable location, it also boasts a population of 33 million. Its history and geography create an almost ideal combination: statehood is based on a tradition of feudal entities that predated the territory's incorporation into the Russian Empire, within the framework of the independent Bukhara Emirate in the 18th and 19th centuries. And, within the Soviet Union's framework, this was formalised by a substantial transfer of educational and production capacities. Uzbekistan is surrounded by countries with smaller populations and militaries, and it does not directly border on Russia. As Uzbekistan's neighbours are weaker, the region has seen no serious interstate clashes over the past 30 years, although many unresolved territorial matters have accumulated.

Afghanistan with its Uzbek minority is the only potentially dangerous region. However, Afghanistan cannot act as a potential aggressor in the capacity of a state. Afghanistan can only spread its revolutionary ideology "across the river" if the socio-economic situation in Uzbekistan favours this. Consequently, instead of preparing to struggle for survival against a powerful external aggressor, Tashkent should improve the quality of domestic governance. Assuming that, in the event of negative internal developments in Afghanistan, instability would inevitably engulf Central Asia, is tantamount to labelling the countries of the region as failed states.

To make progress, all Tashkent needs to do is reliably control the border with Afghanistan and guarantee that Uzbekistan's behaviour will not cause Russia to doubt the need for providing it with relevant assistance. According to all experts who have been surveyed, Afghanistan is the only foreign policy issue that causes concern. The country is located far away from Russia, and this influences the way it fears Russia's military might, which does not pose a threat to Uzbekistan's territorial integrity and sovereignty, but which is seen as a factor that inevitably constrains its foreign policy.

Kyrgyzstan

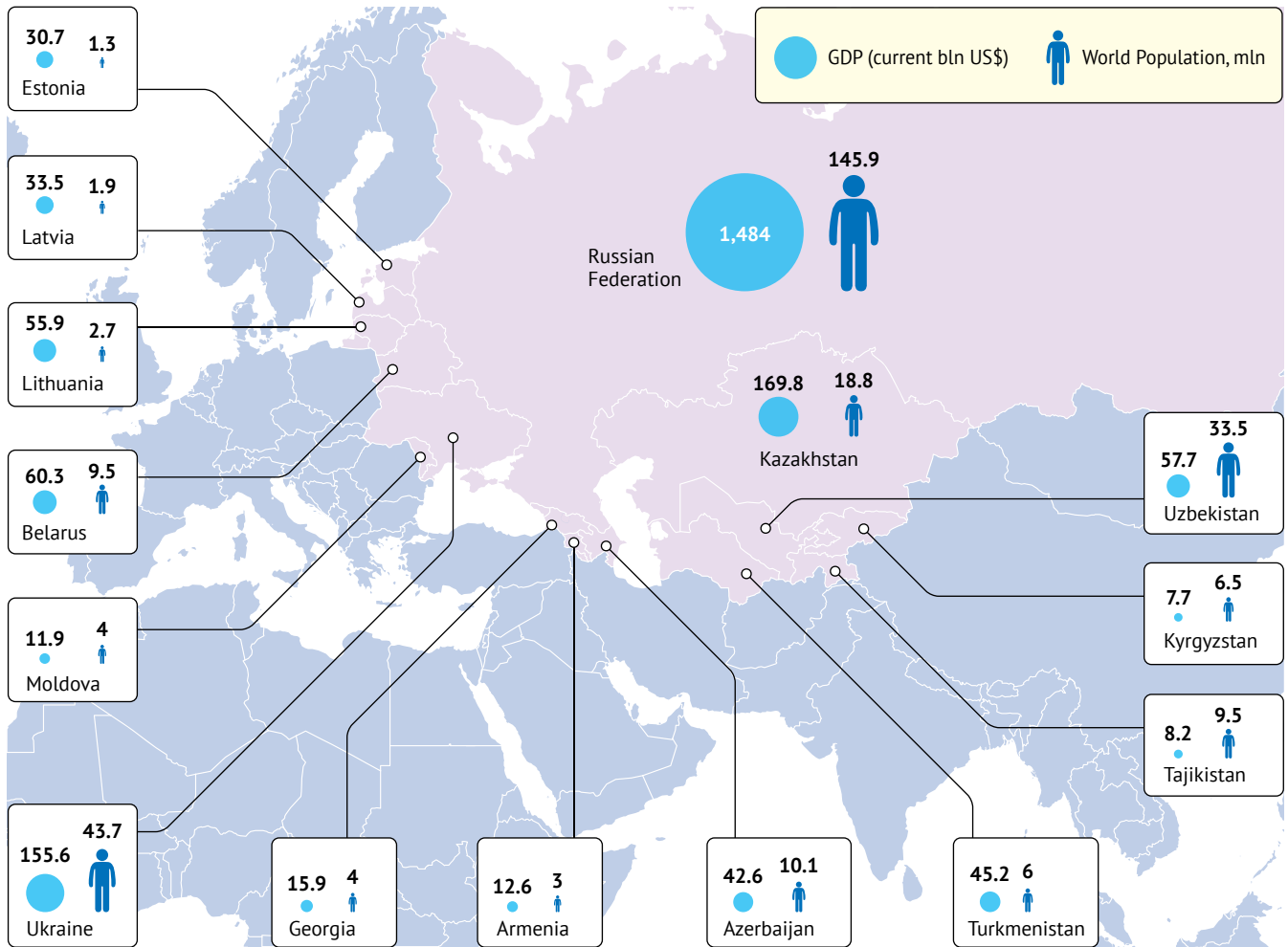
The people of Kyrgyzstan have always seen history as the experience of surviving among more powerful neighbours. However, the situation changed drastically after the Russian Empire deployed its forces in the foothills of the Tian Shan mountain range. The people of Kyrgyzstan received an opportunity to create their territorial statehood within the framework of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, without fearing a possible takeover by China that had integrated the Uyghur ethnic group in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Consequently, representatives of the local expert community agree to a greater extent than their counterparts in other neighbouring countries that national independence, acquired in 1991, became a challenge to survival.

At the same time, Kyrgyzstan does not directly border on Russia, and this presents a problem for the republic, all the more so as it found itself on the periphery of Russian attention in the 1990s. The deployment of US and NATO forces in Afghanistan and Central Asia in 2001 became the only factor that forced Moscow to pay attention to Bishkek. Since then, experts have been noting Russia's return to Kyrgyzstan, and the ouster of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010 became a landmark event in this context.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan, a fragment of the Persian civilisation in the Eurasian geopolitical space, is locked between Turkic-speaking neighbours and an unstable Afghanistan. Tajikistan has a complicated geopolitical status which is hardly tragic. Russia is forced to focus on this country because it borders on Afghanistan, and because revolutionary Islamic ideas have the highest chances of penetrating Tajikistan.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPACITY OF FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS



Sources: UN, The World Bank

Tajikistan is linked with the Eurasian region to a smaller extent than other Central Asian countries. The country is not surrounded by military and economic powers, and its military ties with Russia prevail over the less pronounced geopolitical factor. This determines Dushanbe’s behaviour regarding the situation in Afghanistan. The country can drift towards a similar civilisation down south in geopolitical and civilisational terms. However, it remains within Russia’s military domination zone, and this forces Dushanbe to develop policies that rely on Moscow’s military capabilities.

Even in the 1990s, Russia devoted close attention to Tajikistan, accommodated representatives of the democratic opposition and actively facilitated the national reconciliation process. This has become even more relevant now that the radical Taliban² movement has regained

²The Taliban is an organisation under UN sanction for its terrorist activities.

power in Kabul. Tajikistan is closely linked with Afghanistan because Tajiks account for a considerable part of the latter's population. This is why, unlike Tashkent, official Dushanbe is even less prepared to engage in dialogue with the Taliban, and this is why it creates favourable conditions for a more substantial Russian presence on its territory. In this respect, Dushanbe profited more than Bishkek from the border conflict that flared up in late April 2021.

Ukraine

Ukraine suffered the most dramatic fate in the western sector. We cannot feel confident that the country will retain its current geographical contours because of an inability to change its historically predetermined role as a scene of struggle between Russia and Europe, and this nullifies the advantages of Ukraine's geopolitical status.

In the geopolitical context, Ukraine initially ranked among those few post-Soviet countries which could function as a buffer state. However, this was hindered by the insignificant military capacity of Europe which relies on the United States and depends on it in military-political matters. Instead of becoming a buffer between Russia and the European Union, Ukraine remained in Russia's geopolitical domain but became the source of policies hostile to Russia's interests. The common historical experience factor also played a negative role.

Belarus

Just like Ukraine, Belarus could act as a buffer state if the European Union pursued more independent policies on the international scene. But the EU's status as a weak partner has created a situation when the preservation of Belarusian statehood remains in question.

Russia faces a problem of how not to absorb Belarus and how to preserve it as an independent neighbour. The integration of Belarus into the European international order, dominated by the EU and NATO, would threaten Russia's security. Just like with Ukraine, Russia also faces a stark choice here. On the one hand, Russia finds it profitable to preserve the neighbouring country's sovereign statehood. On the other hand, it is impossible to ensure its friendly nature.

The absorption of these countries by Russia, either completely or in part, may prove an inevitable solution, although this is not in Russia's long-term interests.

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia

The geopolitics of the three South Caucasus states favours their expanded autonomy and responsibility for the various decisions they make. They are physically separated from Russia by the Greater Caucasus Range, and a huge area occupied by civilisations with a historical experience of taking over these countries looms down south. In the past 30 years, **Armenia** did not reflect deeply on its own geopolitical status. This is exactly why the Armenian discourse is so focused on myths that have an historical origin.

Although **Azerbaijan** is prone to making irrational decisions, its behaviour is more predictable because it relies on a clear perception of its place on the geographical map, at least for the time being.

Georgia has deliberately renounced full sovereignty in the hope of becoming part of the Euro-Atlantic community. However, it may face growing problems now that Europe and the United States are less interested in expansion.

Common historical experience and the international order

History, as Henry Kissinger said in one of his early works, is the memory of nations. With the exception of the Baltic states, the statehood of all republics of the former USSR took shape within its present territorial limits while they were parts of a unique union, even if they had achieved statehood of their own in the past, enjoying it for quite long in certain cases, and possessed a rich ethnic history. Russia stands out among them because it boasts an uninterrupted 500-year history of statehood, although it has also experienced the influence of the Soviet period. Therefore, the historical experience of co-development within a

single state will continue to play an important part in the policy-making of Russia and its neighbours for a long time to come. While the extent of the influence may vary, the past will continue to shape their foreign policies during the next few decades.

But it is for this reason that **shared historical experience remains the most important obstacle to Russia and its neighbours evolving foreign policies that are reflective of the composition of forces and indivisibility of the geopolitical space in this part of Eurasia.** The USSR's common political space persists at the level of strategic culture, so much that both the old guard of the political elite and younger officials align their actions with it. This factor is so significant that it often almost fully neutralises individual positive effects derived from sharing similar cultures and political traditions. This experience is emerging as the basis of a mythologised foreign policy that proceeds from categories unrelated to rational behaviour rather than objective factors, resulting in dramatic consequences and excessive tensions in relations.

The stage of joint development in the USSR was key to the Soviet nations acquiring their own national identity. But it could not facilitate the acquisition of experiences conducive to rational foreign policy decision-making based on a sober assessment of their geopolitical status. It is precisely this, however, that is emerging as a crucial factor of survival under present-day conditions. The objective trend of modern times is that the great powers are no longer able to waste resources upholding numerous commitments.

International politics is drifting back to the traditional order based on a dynamic balance of forces in an extremely unfavourable epoch, given that all governments have to convince their own populations of the fairness of the existing domestic economic and political order. In this environment, it is hard to believe that major outside players would be able to focus on the domestic problems and foreign policy concerns of Russia's neighbours.

Although a unified order is hardly possible, relations between Russia and its neighbours can be rooted in a common understanding of the rules of behaviour based on objective factors and historical experience. These factors include continuity of the common geopolitical space, which imposes certain obligations on Russia whose dominant power capabilities command a respectful attitude to its interests and values among its neighbours.

Understanding the rules is often something only certain leaders can do. Where leaders are unwilling to understand, it can override the objective prerequisites for understanding that exist, and what is called “pragmatism” vanishes from relations. A case in point is Armenia after 2018. Yerevan is among Russia’s best friends and maintains formal allied relations with it. But it has difficulty “reading” Russia’s interests and the logic behind its actions. In the case of Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, the system works at the level of top leaders, but there are problems with mid-ranking officials. Pragmatism is synonymous with rational behaviour in the post-Soviet space, but today it is a matter of individual choice and tends to falter in the long term. Leaders’ pragmatism in relations should be replaced with system-based pragmatism, although this runs counter to general political order in all countries under discussion.

System-based pragmatism can only be derived from historical experience, whose accumulation in neighbouring countries will require a lot of time. The important thing is for Russia to establish institutions capable of reducing this period with the help of legal tools. For the time being, it is the CSTO alone that reflects the alignment of forces of the member countries.

Eurasian integration

Eurasian economic integration is an attempt to create additional institutional mechanisms to promote trust between Russia and a group of neighbouring countries. But the political potential of this format should not be exaggerated. Under ideal conditions, any economic integration is a method to replace power relations between states with a new legal contract. From its inception, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was plagued by the conflict between Russia’s size and the formal equality of countries in shaping common legislation. The reasons behind this are clear: Russia is so much more powerful than all other EAEU countries that it is impossible to speak about equitable relations that could formally reflect this power differential.

EAEU institutions, therefore, are based on the absolute formal equality of member countries, something that makes them less interesting. It is hard to convince Russia to abide by common consensus-based decisions, if its real status within this community is not reflected. Currently, the EAEU can only have a limited application as a tool for long-term

stabilisation of relations between Russia and the other participating countries. At best, companies from other member countries can hope for additional opportunities for trans-border business to gradually emerge.

But the most important thing is that the attempts to create a stable international order across the former USSR, including via common institutions, may clash with Russia's global goals and interests. Given the Russian state's growing self-reliance and its retention of military capabilities and other resources, allied relations with smaller countries are not critically important for it, and the same is true of the United States and China. This is reducing the natural demand for a long-term integration strategy. But a hypothetical "egoistic" Russian policy will in any event have to take into account the factors that are lacking from other nations comparable to Russia in size and capabilities (Russia's irreversible status as dominant power and the unchanging reality of a shared historical experience).

The persisting "metropole-periphery" historical experience creates motives that run counter to objective geopolitical and power factors and must be surmounted. Its persistence will inevitably lead to the resumption of direct Russian control, and this is clearly at odds with the interests of Russia itself. But, as we can see, Russia is unable to become an entirely outside player, which would also be at odds with its long-term interests. It would be desirable for Moscow to respond to the rational behaviour of its neighbours with the broadest possible multi-format cooperation rather than with distancing and reliance on its internal resources. This cooperation can involve outside players and may be characterised by varying degrees of intensity and reciprocal commitments. The important thing is the rules of the game, not the practical steps taken during play.

The battle for hearts and minds

To what extent should Russia focus on raising its popularity in neighbouring states? The very concept of a battle for "hearts and minds" seems vague because it is based on a hypothesis that a priori denies the partners' ability to think independently. This concept emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, when the European powers, the USSR and the US had to deal with a surge of national self-determination. This process

took place against the background of intense bipolar confrontation and ideological struggle between the two mutually exclusive and aggressive ideologies, Marxism and liberalism. Both sought to spread their own universal values, putting them in tension with the rights of sovereign states. In the context of the rivalry between the leading powers, each found it hard to reconcile itself with the fact that newly independent countries are capable of being independent not only in form but also in terms of the ability to think without succumbing to outside influence.

Influencing public opinion is of considerable importance, of course, all the more so as the scale of mass politics will hardly shrink. During the 100 years since majority opinion really began to matter, all states have come to approach public opinion in the same way, creating a standard of thought and enforcing compliance with it. In international relations, psychological warfare emerged as both a component of hostilities during an armed conflict and a routine aspect of interstate relations even when nations were on cooperative terms.

Today it is assumed by default that if Russia won't influence the public in neighbouring countries in its favour, its rivals will. In other words, the rhetoric that Moscow should more actively seek to win over "hearts and minds" in neighbouring countries is nothing less than a demand that it more energetically wage psychological warfare against third countries on their territory. But the more intense this struggle, the farther off the day when Russia's neighbours will gain a capacity for independent and rational thinking. Their geographic space is turning into a territory with no importance of its own, where others are playing their zero-sum game.

Given that we believe Russia's strategic priority lies precisely in its neighbours' independence, the battle for "hearts and minds" per se cannot be the priority of Russian policy. However, this does not eliminate the need, **first**, to boost Russia's appeal as a way to cope with its demographic problem, and, **second**, to inculcate in the elites of the newly independent states the capacity for being guided by their own rational choice while engaged in decision-making, rather than by perceptions dictated from the outside. This task is much more difficult than creating, by means of state policies, a critical mass of people favourably disposed towards Russia in neighbouring states. But it is acting in this vein that can lay the groundwork for a more strategically stable situation.

Neither mother, nor stepmother

To be successful in the long term, Russia will have to constantly revise its specific aims and objectives. Each time, their content will depend on broader considerations, such as the dynamics of the global balance of forces, or relations with mid-level players (Europe, Turkey, Iran), or the internal evolution of its neighbours. There is no prescription for Russian success if its foreign policy is managed by purely administrative means.

The power differentials in the post-Soviet space and the lack of common geopolitical interests among the local players make the emergence of a regional international order unlikely. Each of the states will pursue its vital development objectives bilaterally in cooperation with outside partners (among whom Russia holds pride of place), rather than within a single system of rules and commitments). In effect, the Russian factor is the only systemic one in this space, with all others just calibrating its impact. In this sense, Russia bears special responsibility for the fates of its neighbours, who, in turn, are essential to its own security.

What Russia must do, above all, is make its neighbours capable of an independent foreign policy and conscious of the fact that this is the sine qua non of their survival. Russia itself must consistently reaffirm its ability to safeguard the sovereignty and legitimate internal order of neighbouring countries. This is clearly manifested in its actions following the pull-out of foreign troops from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021. Russia is honouring its commitments with regard to preserving the statehood of Central Asian countries bordering on Afghanistan and that of the CSTO members.

Russia's strategic priority is to help its neighbours evolve a stable sovereign statehood capable of a foreign policy conforming to the geopolitical status and the balance of power in the common space. Russia must be to its neighbours neither mother, nor stepmother, but the strongest state in the area, which bears responsibility for security in the common space, where its interests objectively predominate. Russia's responsibility for the fate of its neighbours is not the continuation of a historically predetermined course, but a rational choice of strategy under the existing circumstances.

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