

US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL SECURITY TRAJECTORIES

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Nearly four years after Colin Powell heralded the beginning of the “post-post Cold Era”, so as to describe the end of the relative complacency with which the US faced the period following the disintegration of the Soviet Union up to the 9/11 attacks, we are still in demand of accurate epithets with which to characterize the identity of the “New Global Disorder” unleashed in New York that late summer morning. Apart from the perilous straining of the US-Saudi “special relationship”, and the aftermath of the US. invasion in Iraq, the most important parameter of this systemic disorder as pertaining to the northern “tip” of “Greater Middle East”¹, refers to the US-Russian relationship and its potential geostrategic antagonism over a region that spans from the easternmost tip of the Balkan Peninsular to the Chinese-Central Asian border.²

That antagonism in the form of competitive interventionism, which has been described -not entirely inaccurately- as the “New Great Game”³,

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1. Despite the fact that the “boundaries” of the so-called Greater Middle East remain elusive, a working definition of that region would certainly include the Persian Gulf, as well as the southern-zone of the CIS space from the Caucasus to Central Asia.

2. On the “demarcation debate” see inter alia, Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 253-269; Anoushiravan Ehteshami (ed.), *From the Gulf to Central Asia: Players in the New Great Game* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994), pp. xi-xvi; Geoffrey Kemp and Robert Harkavy, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East* (Brookings Institution Press, 1997), pp. 8-15; and Theodoros Tsakiris, “Rearranging the Grand Chessboard: The Role of Greece in the Geopolitics of Caspian Oil,” in Christodoulos Yiallourides and Panayiotis Tsakonias (eds.), *Greece and Turkey After the End of the Cold War*, (New York: Caratzas Publications, 2001), pp. 471-479.

3. The Historic Great Game over the containment of Russian advances to British India and the Persian Gulf via the plains of Central Asia and the Caucasus mountains was directly related to the global systemic balance of power of 19th and early 20th century geopolitics leading to the disintegration of both the Tsarist and Ottoman Empires. It was an extension of the Russian-British antagonism over Eurasian domination that would reverberate to the European and Global balance of power. The New Great Game is primarily about Russia's ability to regain dominant power status within Central Eurasia -and not outside Central Eurasia. What Russia is seeking in the Near Abroad and more importantly what she is more likely to get is the establishment of a “Monroe-doctrine” for its southern periphery, namely a “Finlandization” formula for the newly independent states of Eurasia that would not lead to their costly re-integration into a formal state Union like the USSR, but would keep those states foreign and defense policy under Russian patronage with Chinese “underwriting” as far as the smaller Central Asian states are concerned.

remains the main geopolitical impediment to the resolution of a plethora of ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space from Moldova to Transcaucasia and would constitute, if further deteriorated, probably the principal external trigger of many of the existing “flash points” spanning the area.⁴ Before 9/11, given the priority of NATO's expansion to the tips of Russia's western borderlands, a potential break-down of Russian-American relations in Central Eurasia could have “spilled-over” internationally but only with relative damage to US interests, as long as it was “regulated” without resort to any military means.⁵

It can be argued that after 9/11, Washington's relative cost from such a potential break-down has expanded. The 9/11 attacks were supposed to provide US Grand Strategy with a better level of coherence and clarity in its dealing with the other Great Powers of the Eurasian Chessboard. It was assumed that the “mini Cold-War” would significantly atone since Russia was able to underwrite US objectives in destroying Al-Qaeda's network in Afghanistan and Central Asia, not to mention helping Washington to succeed in the most vital parameter of its anti-terrorist campaign: namely deterring -via counter-proliferation policies- the ability of Al-Qaeda to launch “mega-terrorist” attacks using any Weapons of Mass Destruction. In view of the “official” rationale behind the invasion of Iraq a more cooperative Russia on the counter-proliferation front seems to be in the cardinal interest of the United States both before⁶ but especially after 9/11.

The Caspian Oil Pipeline Conundrum has been the geo-economic expression of that wider antagonism and should not be per se identified with the New Great Game. As the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) noted in his critique of the Caspian Oil “frenzy” of the late 1990s: “what is really being resolved in Caspian energy negotiations is the nature of those states and their outward orientation”. IISS, “Caspian Oil: Not the Great Game Revisited,” in *Strategic Survey 1997-1998* (London: IISS, 1997), pp. 22-29.

4. Raja Menon, “After Empire Russia and the Southern “Near Abroad”, in Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), *The New Russian Foreign Policy* (Council on Foreign Relations/CFR, 1998), pp. 107-114, and pp.125-148., Dov Lynch, *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan* (Macmillan Press: 2000), pp. 37-90, and Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to Repetition? The Rise, Fall and Reprise of Soviet-Russian Military Interventionism, 1973-1996* (MIT Press, 1999), pp. 311-328.

5. Such an potential crisis would still be extremely dangerous to regulate without a major military episode/crisis given Russia's reaction to the NATO occupation of Kosovo, when in back June 1999 Moscow's Bosnian peace-keeping detachment unilaterally “secured” Pristina's airport. This was merely the first step in a far greater operational plan that aspired to deploy 10,000 already-mobilized “peace-keepers” thereby creating a separate de facto Russian occupation-zone in the province. For the overwhelming majority of Russian strategic planners NATO's campaign against Serbia was merely a precursor of a future US intervention within the former Soviet space. For a first-hand account of the crisis, Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), pp. 298-349 and pp. 346-348 (for the Pristina Airport incident).

6. This argument was comprehensively, if not prophetically, presented by Richard Betts, “The New Threat of Mass Destruction,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 1 (January-February 1998), pp. 26-41, especially pp. 33-34 and p. 40.

A new “strategic partnership” between the two nuclear “super-powers” was supposed to emerge, founded on the premise that the enemy of the “Islamist *Internationale*” would be perceived as mutual and high security priority for both Moscow and Washington⁷ even if that would result in the re-prioritization of US strategy over Chechnya and NATO's enlargement, especially after the Alliance's second round of expansion.⁸ The rationale behind such a “rapprochement” was certainly valid and initial US-Russian cooperation in Central Asia and Afghanistan seemed to corroborate a renewed cooperative “alliance”.

This paper will argue that the aforementioned cooperative “rapprochement” is not without qualifications. The current trajectory in US-Russian relations points out to the fact that things may turn out different than expected. The US campaign in Iraq and Washington's unilateral strategic engagement in the wider region⁹ can prove to be quite unsettling for Moscow as it reverberates throughout the Greater Middle East (GME) and into Russia's self-perceived Near Abroad sphere of influence. The so-called Georgian “Revolution of the Roses” back in October 2003 has been interpreted by some as a sign of an unstable period in the US Russian interaction.

7. The “Greater Middle East” in its “Eurasian” definition presented here is nearly identical with the elliptical region of the “Eurasian Balkans” put forward by Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives* (Basic Books, 1997), pp. 215-218 (in the Greek edition). This concept which extends “from Suez to Xinjiang and from the Russian-Kazakh Frontier to southern Afghanistan” is reaffirmed in Brzezinski's latest work, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership* (Livani, 2005), pp.88-89 and p.146 (in Greek).

8. Michael Mandelbaum, “Diplomacy in Wartime: New Priorities and Alignments,” in James Hoge and Gideon Rose (eds.), *How Did this Happen? Terrorism and the New War* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), pp. 258-259. The need for a drastic improvement of US-Russian relations -focusing especially on verbal US pressure to Russia over Chechnya and NATO's over-expansion- was also underlined by John Lewis Gaddis, “And Now This: Lessons from the Old Era for the New Era,” in Strobe Talbott and Nayan Chanda (eds), *The Age of Terror: America and the World After September 11* (Basic Books, 2002), pp.13-15.

9. Even though the initial edition of the Greater Middle East Initiative (GMEI) officially launched by the Bush Administration and approved by the G-8 in its June 2004 Sea Island Summit, did not include the Former Soviet Union, the revolutionary upheavals in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as Lebanon were latter endorsed by the Administration as an example of the sweeping justification behind the rationale of the GMEI and indirectly of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. For the text of the G-8 GMEI, The White House, *Partnership for Progress and a Common Future with the Region of the Broader Middle East and North Africa*, <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/06/20040609-30.html>; Gilbert Achcar, “Fantasy of a Region that Does not Exist: The US Plan for the Greater Middle East,” <www.modediplo.com/2004/04/04world.html>; and Tamara Cofman Wittes, *The New US Proposal for a Greater Middle East Initiative: An Evaluation*, (The Brookings Institute Saban Center Middle East Memo No.2, 20/5/2004). For the FSU “inclusion”, Zeyno Baran, “Getting the Greater Middle East Initiative Right,” *The National Interest*, <www.inthenationalinterest.com/Articles/Vol3Issue9/Vol3Issue9_Baran.html>. Characteristically enough when President Bush visited Georgia in May 2005 he lauded President Saakashvili for his contribution to the Democratic Cause by stating that: “Your most important contribution is your example. (B)efore there was a Purple Revolution in Iraq or Orange Revolution in Ukraine or a Cedar Revolution in Lebanon, there was a Rose Revolution in Georgia”, Elizabeth Owen, “In Georgia Bush Emphasizes Freedom, Conflict Revolution,” *Eurasia Insight*, 10.05.2005.

The discussion in the following pages will first succinctly analyze the reasons and process behind the potential deterioration of the US-Russia rapprochement. It will then pinpoint its detrimental repercussions in a trans-regional (CIS stability) and global (Deterrence of Islamist (Mega)-Terrorism) level.

Russian Security Debate Post-9/11

The view that 11 September was a transforming event in the history is grounded in the premise that a conceptual revolution in the global security agenda has taken place over the past years. In a variant of “big bang” theory, proponents of this thesis present a stark picture of two contrasting worlds: the pre-9/11 security environment characterized by the geopolitical competition and differing threat perceptions; and the post-9/11 world, in which a chastened global community, suddenly perceiving the larger menace of international terrorism and other “non-traditional” threats, unites for the greater good. In both thought and deed, Russia, under Vladimir Putin, has demonstrated its partiality to this interpretation - but with the critical qualifier that the revolutionizing impact of 9/11 was on the West rather than on Russia whose security perceptions had already evolved some time ago. As Bobo Lo has noted, in some of its initial reactions Moscow evinced a smug, “told you so” attitude. Having tried, but failed, to convince others that its conduct of military operations in Chechnya was justified as part of humanity's wider struggle against the scourge of international terrorism, the Russian government seized on the attacks of 9/11 as proof of its foresight and judgment.¹⁰

Overall, contrary to what one might suppose, there has been no substantial change in Russian security perceptions. The real difference lies in the fact that 9/11 afforded Moscow a priceless opportunity to take advantage of US new-found vulnerability, in order to declare Russia's position as an indispensable player in developing a new global security regime.

The terrorist attacks and the immediate declaration of solidarity with the US allowed Moscow to retroactively justify its strategy in Chechnya.

10. Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy* (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003), p.123.

From the start, the stakes were much higher. The situation offered enormous potential political, economic and security dividends expressed as faster integration in Europe and with the West and Russia's more positive and solid entry as an international actor.

For Putin, the challenge was how to maximize the opportunities arising from 9/11 while containing any adverse consequences to Russian security and geopolitical interests. Here, Putin has been very successful; first and in connection to the international security agenda itself, and Moscow's role in relation to it. Putin has effected a smooth and rapid transition to the traditional Western image of Russia as a largely obstructive contributor. Second, Putin has neutralized the importance of old-style geopolitical calculus in Russia and the West. True, there are numerous domestic critics who condemn the increased American presence in Central Asia and Transcaucasus. But it is obvious to all but the most intransigent that Russia was powerless to prevent this in any event; better therefore to package it as part of a strategic partnership against a greater enemy. Third, the strategic disarmament agenda, an area where Russian interests appeared to be in a state of public rout, has miraculously transformed into the spearhead of Russia's global resurgence. Finally, there is the renegotiation of the relationship with NATO. Here, the substance of the Rome Agreement of May 2002 is less significant than the fact of its existence. The agreement does not give Russia a major role in European security decision-making but it is a definite step forward, marking a growing acknowledgement in the West of Russian like-mindedness while offering Moscow the prospect of more substantive engagement.

What Lo indicates is that the common theme defining Moscow's approach to foreign policy priorities after 9/11 is one of opportunism. Putin did not so much make a "strategic choice" in favor of the West, but took advantage of an extraordinary set of circumstances to pursue objectives that were already in place but, for one reason and another, were difficult to realize. The American government, shocked by events it failed to anticipate or else underestimated, took the lead in reshaping the system of international interactions. The result was greatly enhanced role for Russia, one that no amount of effort on its part could have produced independently. Moscow was able to grasp the essence of the new global dynamics, and to

make the best out of it establishing Russia as a respected international player; mending and then improving the relationship with the West; opening up real foreign policy options; and restoring national self respect.¹¹

In such a context, it can be argued that Russia's foreign policy is not so much pro-Western *per se*, but in pursuit of the most effective means of maximizing Russian national interests. And although, the likelihood of a strategic about-turn is small, there may be fluctuations, upsets and reversals. The West should harbor no illusions that Putin envisages a “normal” Russia as we might understand it. For him, and for the vast majority of his compatriots, Russia's normal state is as a great global actor, not as a second-line and essentially regional power like the leading European nations. Irrespective of whether Moscow is able to make good on such grandiose ambitions, this great power mentality will prove highly resilient and it will determine the trajectory of US-Russian relations.

The Realities of the “Potemkin Partnership”¹²

When President Putin became the first foreign leader to express his condolences to President Bush over the shocking events of September 11 and offered significant political and military assistance in the conduct of the anti-Taliban operation, many analysts attempted to interpret this impressive “about-face” according to their subjective perceptions rather than following a pragmatic analysis of the Russian national interest at the time. Many analysts both in the US and in Russia heralded the active cooperation of Putin with the US over Afghanistan (October 2001), his latter “acquiescence” to NATO's expansion into the Baltic Republics (December 2001) and the abrogation of the ABM Treaty (May 2002) as a historic shift away from the classical imperialist, and “Great Power” syndrome of Russian diplomacy over the last 300 years.

Some minority US enthusiasts clearly exaggerated those calculated diplomatic maneuvers heralding Putin as a great Westerniser, a new “Peter the Great” who has “anchored a Russian state solidly in the West for the first time in a millennium”.¹³ Even at the beginning of the diplomatic flirting, the

11. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

12. This characterization belongs to Andrew Kuchins of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, “Post-Election Briefing,” <www.ceip.org>, 16.03.2004.

13. Michael Wine, “An Act of Terror Reshapes the Globe,” *The New York Times*, 30.09.2001, sec. 4, p. 1

majority of US elite and expert opinion was balanced between denial of any rapprochement¹⁴ and a skeptical “wait-and-see” approach¹⁵ that tried to capitalize on the shift of the public diplomacy of Russia in order to push its own policy priorities over NATO expansion and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty), without a break-down in the bilateral relationship. In the Russian case, things were much more complicated since internal opposition to any rapprochement - even on the limited issue of dethroning the Taliban - was much more significant. To the group of Russian “anti-Americanists” the 9/11 attacks presented an opportunity for Russia's resurgence as a dominant world power and as a manifestation of American weakness that Russia should exploit to its own benefit. They obviously excluded any form of cooperation and perceived any US military deployment in Central Asia as an encroachment of Russia's “sphere of influence”,¹⁶ a position underlined by Sergey Ivanov's strong opposition to that eventuality until he was overridden by President Putin on September 24, 2001.

A closer analysis though, of the motives behind Putin's decision would question the argument that Russia appeared to be too condescending with regards to the US agenda at the detriment of its own national interests. Russia's role in the demise of the Taliban regime has been the most decisive factor save the US military campaign. Russia did not only arm the Northern Alliance considerably but actively participated in the initial steps of the campaign by ordering its 10.000-strong 201st Motorized Rifle Division that was guarding the Tajik-Afghan front, to invade Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in order to set and defend pontoon-bridges. This strategic bridgehead greatly facilitated the flow of armaments and supply to the Northern Alliance troops in the subsequent phases of the campaign. Russia also used various contingents of its Speznats (Special Forces) to pinpoint Taliban and Al-Qaeda mountain strongholds for the US Air Force during most of October and November 2001.

14. See characteristically, Zbigniew Brzezinski, “A New Age of Solidarity? Don't Count on It,” *The Washington Post*, 11.02.2001, p. A29 and Stephen Blank, “Putin's Twelve-Step Program,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2002), pp.147-160.

15. Paul Saunders, *US-Russian Relations after September 11: A Dialogue*, (Washington D.C: The Nixon Center, January 2002); and Angela Stent (interview with Theodoros Tsakiris), “The Russian “Connection,” *Defensor Pacis*, Issue 10 (January 2002), pp. 21-26.

16. Vladimir Shlapentokh, “Is the Greatness Syndrome Eroding,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 138-141.

Yet, since Russia, excluded itself from the burden of removing the Taliban militarily and, more importantly, safeguarding the post-war situation with extensive troops on the Afghan ground, Putin had no option but to logistically support the US deployment, while limiting its geopolitical impact in the region stressing that Russia would acknowledge and support only a limited and temporary US presence in Central Asia.¹⁷ Instead of acquiescing to American wishes and thus “undermining Russian influence in Central Asia”¹⁸ Putin, in reality, used the US military to destroy the Taliban regime without having to burden Russia with the long-term cost of Afghan reconstruction and nation-building that would certainly ensue. Russia armed and assisted the Northern Alliance while it maintained and maintains via a multitude of political/tribal alliances its influence inside an Afghanistan under reconstruction.

A few thousand US troops, confined to providing airport security while conducting search and rescue operations, do not change the strategic balance of power in the region where Russia is and will probably remain the preeminent power even after 9/11. As long as the Taliban remain a threat to Afghan/regional stability, the US military will not be given any opportunity to antagonize Russian regional preeminence. Afghanistan and the hunt for Osama bin Laden is proving a harder “nut to crack” than originally thought. American presence in the region is already significantly over-stretched due to Iraq's enlarging “black hole” and there is still no real control of the Karzai government in the southern and eastern provinces of the country.

In addition, Russia's presence in the region is justified for reasons that preceded the 9/11 attacks and Central Asia's defense from Islamic Fundamentalism, since Moscow is decisive as a neutralizing balancer of Uzbekistan's hegemonic ambitions *vis-à-vis* the entirety (save Turkmenistan) of its neighbors. This geopolitical reality was manifestly re-affirmed by the inauguration of the Russian air-base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, in October 2003. The date was not coincidental since it marked the beginning of the rapid deterioration in the US-Russian *détente* in view of Georgia's “revolution of

17. On Russian military assistance during the Afghan War, see Mary Buckley, “Russian Foreign Policy and Its Critics,” *European Security*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2002-2003), p. 32. As Celeste Wallander notes, “By supporting the United States, Putin achieved a significant security objective that Russia had been unable to achieve alone”: Celeste Wallander, “US-Russian Relations: Between Realism and Reality,” *Current History* (October 2003), p. 309.
18. Oksana Antonenko, “Putin's Gamble,” *Survival*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Winter 2001-2002), p. 49.

the roses”. Yet, even back in early 2002, at the height of the diplomatic flirtation over the demise of the Taliban, it was evident that the rapprochement could move forward only if it followed a hard-core realpolitik approach that respected Russia's “Near Abroad” sensitivities.

The de facto and ex post facto legitimization of Russia's two Chechen Wars constituted another important US gesture that seemed to consolidate the aforementioned approach. As Angela Stent and Lilia Shevtsova pointedly remarked “by making a direct link between Russia's Chechen problem and Al-Qaeda, links that the American Government has acknowledged, Putin all but silenced American criticism of the conduct of Russian military operations”.¹⁹ Even ardent Russian nationalists like the influential media commentator Aleksandr Zipko and the then Chair of Duma's International Committee Dimitrii Rogozin, supported this argument when calling upon Putin to align himself to the US against Al-Qaeda.²⁰ If Putin had opted for following a more conventional approach, like the one followed by China and India, of merely expressing sympathy for the victims of 9/11 while doing very little to assist America in destroying the state perpetrators of these attacks, Russia would not have eliminated the Chechen “thorn” as a serious bone of contention in the bilateral level.

Throughout 2002 and 2003 American respect to Russian sensitivities in the “Near Abroad” remained the only tangible gain Moscow could present for its decision to actively align itself with Washington in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless in retrospect, it is safe to note that this “respect” proved to be rather a tactical US move: a matter of proper prioritization rather than a policy-shift since both during 2002 and 2003 the abrogation of the ABM Treaty, NATO's “Big-Bang” expansion and the Iraqi War topped the agenda of US-Russian relations. In each of these policy-initiatives Washington always tried to “gild the pill” for Moscow, but the fact of the matter remained that in various degrees Putin did acquiesce to the US agenda since in policy areas outside the CIS, Russia could have a serious impact on US policy only in concordance with other Great Powers, as it was clearly evidenced with the second Iraqi War.

19. Angela Stent and Lilia Shevtsova, “America, Russia and Europe: A Realignment?,” *Survival*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Winter 2002-2003), p. 124.

20. Shlapentokh, “Is the Greatness Syndrome Eroding,” p. 141.

Nevertheless, Putin's decision to drop his rhetorical opposition to the development of a National Missile Defense (NMD) system and especially to the inclusion of the Baltic Republics into NATO, did cost Russia diplomatically without offering any commensurate offset. The difference though between NMD and NATO is that in the former case Russia was damaged only diplomatically and primarily out of its own account, since the scope and technological potential of any NMD system under Pentagon's planning and development cannot, possibly, constitute a threat to its strategic deterrent for the foreseeable future.²¹ This was a reality that President Putin was quick to recognize only after 9/11, a reality that was emphasized by the conduct (February 2004) of Russia's largest Nuclear Readiness exercises in over 20 years, when Moscow tested a "deep maneuvering" Topol ICBM [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile] capable of penetrating any NMD system.²²

Since Russian diplomacy decided to underplay the significance of the US deployment, then the diplomatic backlash remained limited. Yet, Russia could not have afforded to look as it had been approving US unilateralism. The problem was again how to balance the Bush Administration's unilateral instincts without alienating the Russians. Consequently the square was not circled, but a treaty came into being because basically the Russians, backed by Colin Powell, demanded one. The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty or S.O.R.T. was in reality quite short of a treaty since it really committed both sides to signing it without offering a clear timetable on its implementation, until almost the time of its expiration in 2012.

Moreover, despite its "Reductions" title, the Treaty didn't actually reduce the respective strategic stockpiles of either side to between 1.700 to 2.200 warheads for each side. In fact the warheads are to be decommissioned and reserved but not disassembled.²³ The very fact that the Russians got a

21. Robert Gallucci (interview with Theodoros Tsakiris), "Understanding the Nuclear Conundrum: US-Russian Strategic Relations in the Post-ABM Treaty Era," *Defensor Pacis*, Issue 12 (September 2002), pp. 15-24; and Celeste Wallander, "Russia's Strategic Priorities," *Arms Control Today* (January-February 2002), available at <www.armscontrol.org/act/2002_01-02/wallanderjanfeb02>

22. Tom Neilan, "US Pulls Out of ABM Treaty," *International Herald Tribune*, 14.12.2001, p. 1 and 3. On the Pre-9/11 US-Russian strife over the abrogation of the ABM Treaty, see Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, pp.370-397. On the February Topol ICBM testing, Kim Murphy, "Russia Tests Missile That Could Evade US Defense," *Los Angeles Times*, 19.02.2004.

23. Michael Gordon, "US Nuclear Plan Sees New Weapons and New Targets," *The New York Times*, 10.03.2002, p. 1 and p. 8. For the full text of SORT, see "US and Russian Arms Treaty," *Reuters*, 24.05.2002, and Gallucci, "Understanding the Nuclear Conundrum," p. 23.

legally “binding” document is a success, which is balanced off only by Russia's fruitless anti-NMD polemic before 9/11. In reality, 9/11 gave President Putin the chance to get out of a trap he had set up for himself. Contrary to the ABM issue, the expansion of NATO was an even harder pill to swallow for Kremlin and this time the process of gilding the pill (NATO-Russia Council) would prove to be much less rewarding than its NMD equivalent (SORT Treaty) and nowhere near as commensurate. Apart from blowing the threat-perception issue out of proportion, one of the most important mistakes in Russia's strategy against NATO's expansion since 1996 was that it opposed NATO's extension in principle thereby turning the negotiation process into a Cold War type zero-sum game.

The first round of expansion was depicted by the majority of the military brass and many in the diplomatic establishment -particularly under Yeltsin and Primakov- as nearly catastrophic for Russian interests. When accession came in July 1997, Moscow still did not put forward the necessary emphasis on its red lines beyond which any NATO expansion would provoke a geopolitical meltdown. Most importantly it did not clearly and adamantly characterize the Baltic States as constituting a “deal-breaker”, probably because the Baltics were not perceived as part of Russia's post-Soviet “Near Abroad”.²⁴ Consequently, a dangerous perception of “cost-free” NATO expansion²⁵ was assumed by several prominent policy makers, particularly in Washington.

If Russia accepted the first round of enlargement without any serious “fight” then why not accept the second, or the third wave, the argument went. It is true that the strategic damage of a Polish inclusion would be objectively much greater than the integration of any of the smaller, less populous and much harder to defend Baltic States. In reality, the Russian real “red line” consists of the CIS states, namely the range of Moscow's

24. Laura Johnson, “Russia and the Near Abroad: Concepts and Trends,” in B.Hansen and B. Heurlin (eds.), *The Baltic States in World Politics* (Curzon, 1998), pp. 112-128, especially pp. 127-128. For the opposite opinion that includes the Baltics in the Russia's Near Abroad, see Robert Donaldson and Joseph Noguee, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests* (M.E.Sharpe, 1998), pp. 155-156

25. Theodore Tsakiris, “The New Rubicon: The Geopolitical Repercussions of NATO's Open Doors Policy,” in John Migciel (ed.), *Democracy and Integration in an Enlarging Europe*, (New York: Columbia University, 2002), pp. 134-147. On the cost-free perception, Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, p. 415; Anthony Lake, (interview with Theodoros Tsakiris), “The Future of the European Security Architecture: American Perspectives on the Evolution of NATO and ESDP,” *Defensor Pacis*, Issue 12 (September 2002), pp.9-14 and Ronald Asmus (interview with author in July 2002, in Washington D.C.).

self-proclaimed “Near Abroad”,²⁶ and primarily Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine, all of which applied for NATO entrance in 1999 and the latter on May 2002.²⁷ Despite the fact that all of the aforementioned candidacies remain for the foreseeable future strictly academic,²⁸ even for some of the most ardent supporters of NATO's expansion to the Baltics,²⁹ the problem for President Putin was how to justify this impressively perilous “about-face” both inside Russia as well as internationally.

Why Putin didn't use his Anti-Taliban leverage in order to at least postpone the inclusion of the Baltics into NATO, a realistic scenario, in early 2002³⁰ will remain an issue for future historians. In the meantime one probable explanation for the shift in Russia's strategy may be that Putin chose, naively enough, to go for a greater bargain that would provide Moscow with some real policy-making influence inside the Alliance in exchange for the smooth integration of the Baltics. Another explanation may be that Russia was “conserving” its diplomatic “ammunition” in case any of the “Near Abroad” States attempted to realistically pursue a concerted policy of NATO accession.

Whatever the case, Putin tried unsuccessfully to capitalize on his Afghan “connection” in order to obtain something more than just a voice over NATO's decision-making. The ensuing compromise solution hammered out in Moscow (December 2001) and Reykjavik (March 2002)

26. John Black, *Russia Faces NATO Expansion: Bearing Gifts or Bearing Arms?* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 221-237.

27. The Ukrainians chose to file their official NATO candidacy on the same day President Bush arrived in Moscow for his four days visit leading to the signing of the S.O.R.T. agreement. Taras Kuzio, “What Future for Russo-Ukrainian Relations?” *The Moscow Times*, 10.06.2002, p.10. The candidacy was latter withdrawn in view of Kuchma's pro-Russian shift in late 2003.

28. Raja Menon, “Structural Constrains on Russian Diplomacy,” *Orbis*, (Fall 2001), pp. 586-591.

29. Ronald Asmus, Interview with Theodoros Tsakiris, in Washington D.C., July 2002. Ronald Asmus was among the pioneers of NATO's “Open Doors” strategy and a very close associate of Assistant Secretary of State Strobe Talbot. Asmus served under Talbot as the Head of the Policy Planning Team and latter as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs. For Rasmus Ukraine will not have a pragmatic chance of joining the Alliance prior to 2010, but its “anchoring” to the West should constitute the most “pressing priority” of NATO's New Eastern Agenda after 2004. Ronald Asmus, “Rebuilding the Atlantic Alliance”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.82, No.5 (September - October 2003).

30. Talbot, *Russia Hand*, p. 416 and Stent (interview with author December 2001), p. 23. Even before 9/11 the freezing of the Baltics' inclusion into NATO was proposed as a means of improving US-Russian relations, see characteristically, Henry Kissinger (forward), *What Needs to Be Undone?: A Policy Agenda for the New Administration* (Washington D.C.: The Nixon Center, 2001), pp.10-11. As early as December 2000, Andrew Kuchins of Carnegie's Endowment for International Peace, argued that “NATO should not accept any new members from former Soviet territory before 2005, and we are realistically talking only about the Baltic states here, of course. Unfortunately, NATO opened a Pandora's box of trouble with Russia by prematurely taking on new members before a firmer foundation had been established towards relations with Russia”, in L.McAdams, “US Policy Experts Call for Renewed Relations with Russia,” *RFE/RL*, 08.12.2000.

gave Russia a louder voice by allowing her to participate into NATO's governing body, namely the North Atlantic Council, on a series of issues (Terrorism and Counter-Proliferation) that were deemed to be of a common interest between NATO and Russia. The Permanent NATO-Russia Council (NRC) established in December 2001 would put Russia on the same table with any other member, but in case a consensus would not be reached with the participation of Moscow, then the North Atlantic Council would reconvene without Russia.

The first joint meeting convened in Rome among great fanfare a few days following the signing of the S.O.R.T. Treaty in Moscow. The compromise, which incidentally followed a proposal "aired" by Henry Kissinger back in November 2001,³¹ offers no guarantee to Moscow and nothing more substantial other than a more celebrated talking-shop compared with the Helsinki compromise of February 1997. Pointedly enough even during the Beslan tragedy of September 2004, Russia received no sympathetic hearing at the NRC level.

In spite of the Islamic terrorist attacks in Madrid (March 2004), Beslan (September 2004) and London (July 2005), the spread of "revolutionary democratization" in the southern-CIS zone and Russia's continuous support of Iran's nuclear efforts in 2004 and 2005 transformed the NRC into yet another "empty shell" of a theoretical US/NATO-Russia "Entente anti-Islamiste". None of the three immediately concerned parties of this equation view Al-Qaeda as serious enough a threat to drastically rebalance their cost-benefit analysis *vis-à-vis* each other, and, as it has been evidenced by the Iraqi debacle, this has been unfortunately the sole reality on the ground ever since September 12, 2001.

Despite the US-Russian break-down over Iraq, provoked primarily by the inability of Washington to have at least "a serious discussion of protecting Russia's interests in Iraq",³² namely a guarantee of post-Saddam oil contracts and "wealth management", relations seemed to have been getting off to a new start by the Bush-Putin Camp David meeting in September 2003. There, President Bush seemed to be embracing a

31. Henry Kissinger, "What to do with the New Russia?," *The Washington Post*, 13.11.2001, p.A7.

32. James Rubin, "Stumbling into War", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol.82/No.5 (September-October 2003), pp.55-56.

revitalized relationship by stating that he “respects President Putin's vision for Russia”.³³ However, within a matter of weeks, starting with the arrest of Yukos' Khodorkovsky and the inauguration of the new Russian airbase in Kant, the climate would be completely reversed.

Colorful Revolutions and the US-Russian Rapprochement: Free Fall?

In order to better underline the significance of the Georgian Revolution back in November-December 2003, one should dispense with some major public perceptions regarding the cause and repercussions of the Georgian and latter on the Ukrainian and Kyrgyz “eruptions”, and namely that: (a) the Shevardnadze and Kuchma were basically subservient to Russian interests, (b) that this subservience constituted the main reason for their revolutionary overthrow respectively in November 2003 and December 2004 and (c) that these revolutions were actively aided and abated by the US Government.³⁴

Yet a closer examination of the Georgian and Ukrainian cases, would suggest that none of the aforementioned regimes can be seriously accused of being subservient to Moscow, since they both followed an elaborate balancing act between the realities of Russian regional predominance and their willingness to follow a separate set of foreign and security policy priorities. Furthermore, even in the Georgian case, the main reason behind the fall of³⁵ the Shevardnadze government had very little to do with its perceived Russophile diplomacy and very much to do with the regime's

33. William Maynes, “Loosing Russia: To Prevent a 'Cold Peace' the West must retreat from Cold War Policies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15.02.2004.

34. Jean-Baptiste Naudet, “Le Fin du Domino Kirghiz: La Contagion Démocratique Gagne l'Asie Centrale”, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 31/3/-6/4/2005, p.36, and Paul Quinn-Judge, “Follow the Leader : First Georgia, then Ukraine, now Kyrgyzstan. Which ex-Soviet state will be next to topple its government?”, *TIME*, 4/4/2005, pp.34-35

35. Pointedly enough Anthony Lake had “forecast” back in July 2002 that any renewed geopolitical clashes between Russia and the US over Central Asia would herald the termination of the latest détente; Lake, “The Future of the European Security Architecture,” p.11. Even in Georgia, the most “anti-Russian” of the CIS states, the collapse of the Shevardnadze regime was primarily attributed to its own rampant corruption and the general degradation of the Georgian economy that ended up in late 2003 with a GDP less than half of Albania's. Despite the fact that over 65 percent of Georgians had a University level degree, they managed to survive with a per capita GDP of less than 1-2 USD per day, equal to that of Haiti. A few weeks prior to the November election, a survey of the Georgian Institute for Political Studies indicated that only 45 percent the public trusted the state's judiciary system while 92,4 percent believed that the result of the upcoming elections will be rigged. Georgi Derluguian, *Georgia's Return of the King, Program on New Approaches to Russian Security* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, Working Paper Series No. 22, February 2004), pp. 3-6 and Nana Sumbadze and George Tarkhan-Mouravi, “Public Opinion in Tbilisi: In the Aftermath of the Parliamentary Elections of November 2, 2003,” at <www.psigeorgia.org/undpsa/files/IPS_Survey_Nov_percent_202003.pdf>. For Ukraine, see Adrian Karatnycky, “Ukraine's Orange Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, Issue 2 (March-April 2005), pp. 52-53.

rampant corruption. Finally, even though there are indications of non-official or semi-official US involvement in terms of financing the student/youth organizations that spearheaded the revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, it was the diplomatic support offered by Washington to the respective post-revolutionary governments that affected negatively the US-Russian rapprochement.

Georgia

Shevardnadze's dethronement precipitated the creation of the aforementioned public perceptions primarily due to the acerbic anti-Russia rhetoric of his successor, who was elected President of Georgia in January 2004 by concentrating the overwhelming 97 percent of votes. What though seems to have escaped the attention of several observers is that President Saakashvili's predecessor did not follow a qualitatively pro-Russian policy vis-à-vis Mr. Saakashvili himself. Even though Shevardnadze accepted the *de facto* independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and allowed the remaining of Russian military bases in Georgia Proper (i.e. Javakhetia and Adjara) during 1992-1994, the former Soviet Foreign Minister, had transformed into Russia's most polemical adversary within the CIS-space after 1997-1998.

Shevardnadze has played a protagonist role in the establishment of the Turkish-Georgian-Azeri axis that founded a trilateral diplomatic and military cooperation which constituted -with active US assistance-the geopolitical underpinning of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline project. It was Shevardnadze who convened the first trilateral "energy security summit" back in April 1998 and pushed hard within the OSCE framework for a Russian commitment to withdraw from its military installations in Georgia proper during the organization Istanbul Summit in November 1999. It was again the predecessor of Mr. Shaakashvili who, willingly or unwillingly, contributed to the transformation of the Pankisi Gorge area to a "safe heaven" for numerous Chechen terrorist groups, who according to Russian and international sources perpetrated several attacks on Russia's North Caucasus republics after October 2001. Finally, it was Shevardnadze who in February 2002 organized the surprise deployment of 200 US military trainers thereby initiating the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) so

as to deter a possible Russian intervention in Pankisi.³⁶ During that period Russian pressure on Georgia was mounting up significantly by the periodic bombardment of areas inside the Gorge from Russian Air Force and the parallel incursion of Spetznat groups inside Kodori valley who practically invaded Georgian soil, in hot pursuit of Chechen Jihadists up to April 2002.³⁷ On the other hand, despite Shevardnadze's record, the millions invested by the Soros, the Republican, and the Democratic National Foundations on his political opponents and the student Kmara movement, did not make a big difference on the President's overthrow in November 2003.³⁸

Washington found itself regularly at odds with the several members of the Shevardnadze apparatus that included several pro-Russian *Siloviki* in its Armed and Intelligence forces and was more than eager to impede any compromising formula brought to the table by then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.³⁹ What nevertheless consolidated the Russian perception of an American “intervention” was personified in a sweeping visit of Transcaucasia by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld one month after Shevardnadze demise. During his visit to Georgia and Azerbaijan Rumsfeld pushed for what amounted to the outright militarization of US policy in the “New Great Game”, by openly debating the merits of deploying the US forces as a security guarantee of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline and establishing a forward material or “lily-pad” base for the US military in Georgia.⁴⁰

Even though this has not heretofore materialized, Washington upgraded its military assistance to the Saakashvili government after GTEP's expiration by initiating a 60-million\$ program aspiring to prepare a second Georgian brigade for peace-keeping duties in the “Greater Middle East”, namely Iraq.⁴¹ Irrespective of the fact that Secretary of State Powell (January

36. For the deployment of the GTEP mission see Rick Fawn, “Russia's Reluctant Retreat from the Caucasus: Abkhazia, Georgia and the US after 11 September 2001,” *European Security*, Vol.11, No. 4 (Winter 2002-2003), pp. 138-140 and Theodore Tsakiris, “From Rapprochement to Reality: The Strategic Parameters of the US-Russian Relationship under Putin's Second Term,” *Defensor Pacis*, Issue 15 (June 2004), pp. 80-81.

37. Alice Lagnado, “Russians Withdraw after Stand-Off,” *Financial Times*, 15.04.2002.

38. Derluguian, *Georgia's Return of the King*, pp. 2-3.

39. *Interfax*, 26.11.2003.

40. Nick Paton Walsh, “US Privatizes its Military Aid to Georgia”, *The Guardian*, 06.01.2004; Peter Baker, “Old Enemies Enlist in US Terror War: Former Soviet Republics Become Allies,” *Washington Post*, 01.01.2004, p.18; and John Banusiewicz, “Rumsfeld Visits Georgia, Affirms US, Wish that Russia Honor Istanbul Accords,” *American Forces Press Service*, <www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2003/n12052003_200312053.html>, 05.12.2003.

41. Theresa Freese, “Georgian Defense Minister Visits Washington, Seeks to Strengthen US-Georgian Security Ties,” *Eurasian Insight*, 23.06.2005.

2004), and later President Bush (May 2005), in their respective visits to Georgia, dramatically underplayed Rumsfeld statements,⁴² the US intervention in Georgia's "revolution" was far more evident and steadfast than what followed in Ukraine in late 2004.

This signifies not only the absence of any pro-Russian party in Georgia's political elites, but also underlines the country's crucial geostrategic position as an irreplaceable transit state for the BTC pipeline, and the overall prioritization attributed to that energy security project by US foreign policy in the "New Great Game". Even though Saakashvili used Shevardnadze's evident failure to "re-unify" Georgia, as a justification for his overthrow, the "ultra-nationalistic" and often polemical diplomacy of President Saakashvili is also extremely useful as a legitimizing means (rally-around the flag impact) for consolidating the coherence of the centrifugal collation, which currently dominates Georgia's political scene. Saakashvili thereof has serious additional reasons for engaging in his vociferous brinkmanship tactics *vis-à-vis* Russia's *de facto* protection over Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

What Saakashvili has so far been unable to understand is that neither the US nor NATO will -or for that matter should- offer him any security guarantees in case his brinkmanship tactics "blow up" at his own account. Saakashvili's initial success in winning back Ajaria's control from Aslan Abashidze, its decade-old self-proclaimed potentate, should have indicated: (a) that Russia's concordance for the re-unification of Georgia remains a condition *sine qua non*⁴³ and (b) that the re-unification of Georgia, in the absence of US military protection, can only be attained through peaceful means. At the end of day Adjara was not a Russian protectorate, so when Saakashvili attempted to implement the "Adjarian formula" against South Ossetia during June-July 2004, Russia's reaction was direct, dynamic and relatively violent,⁴⁴

42. For Powell's visit see, US Department of State Interview On CNN With Jill Dougherty Secretary Colin L. Powell in Tbilisi, Georgia, January 25, 2004", *Russia Weekly*, No. 293; and Celeste Wallander, Director of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, (interview with author), "The Collapse of the US-Russian Rapprochement?," (in Greek), *Stratigiki*, Issue 115 (April 2004), pp. 58-59. For the May 2005 Bush visit, see Elizabeth Owen, "In Georgia Bush Emphasizes Freedom, Conflict Revolution," *Eurasia Insight*, 10.05.2005.

43. Russian troops were present in Ajaria during Abashidze's showdown with Saakashvili and had "booby-traped" several key bridges connecting Ajaria to Georgia proper, but did not intervene to stop the former's downfall. Irakly Areshidze, "Did Russia and Georgia Make a Deal over Ajaria?," *Eurasia Insight*, <www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav051904.shtml>; and "The Comic Opera Ends: The President of Georgia wins his stand-off with Ajaria," *The Economist*, 05.08.2004, pp. 28-29.

leading to the dangerous brinkmanship of August 2004, when Saakashvili publicly warned the Georgian public of the increasing likelihood of “a Russian-Georgian War”.⁴⁵

Apart from internationally de-legitimizing the scope of his own diplomacy, Saakashvili's re-unification strategy seems to underestimate the magnitude and reciprocity of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's dependence on Russia,⁴⁶ while simultaneously overestimating the added value other GUUAM countries can offer to his own cause. Georgia has won very little out of its President's vociferous support for Ukraine's “Orange” Revolution and the “Carpathian Declaration” of January 11, 2005, where Saakashvili and Yushchenko reassured all western CIS states that their revolutionary movements will “constitute the precursors for the final victory of liberty and democracy throughout the European Continent”.⁴⁷

A few weeks after the Yushchenko-Saakashvili declaration, Russia decided to block the continuation of the OSCE observers' mission in Pankisi Gorge that could monitor the “trafficking” of Chechen Jihadists in and out of the enclave, thereby potentially refuting Russia's *raison d'etre* behind a probable military intervention.⁴⁸ This OSCE “spat” lifted the final “curtain” on another long-standing drama in Russia-Georgia relations regarding the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Akhalkalaki and Batumi bases in accordance with President Yeltsin's own commitments back in November 1999. Despite the initial agreement for the demilitarization of the South Ossetian-Georgian “border” reached between Moscow and Tbilisi in March 2005,⁴⁹ the bases issue fired up again during the next two months, both before and after President Bush's historic visit in the country on May 9-10, 2005.

44. Jean-Christophe Peuch, “Rogue Elements Blamed for South Ossetia Violence,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 18.08.2004.

45. Igor Torbakov, “South Ossetia Crisis Stokes Tension Between Russian and Georgia,” *Eurasia Insight*, 25.08.2004.

46. As professor Charles King of Georgetown University noted “Abkhazia and Ossetia are undoubtedly dependent on Russia. Their trade moves nearly exclusively to the North and Russia's economic assistance, particularly through the exporting of energy supplies, constitutes the basis of their existence. Furthermore, Russian bases support the local economy even outside the separatist zones. Their closing down without a plan for replacing the jobs, which will be lost, would be catastrophic”, Charles King, “A Rose among Thorns: Georgia Makes Good,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (March-April 2004), p.17. So as to underline the strategic importance of these two enclaves for Russia, Defense Minister Okruashvili, noted in his recent visit to Washington, (June 2005) that “non-resolution of the Abkhazian and Ossetian Question hold hostage the deepening of Georgian Relations with NATO”, Freese, “Georgian Defense Minister Visits Washington.”

47. Karatnycky, “Ukraine's Orange Revolution,” pp.52-53.

48. US Ready to Find a way without Moscow to monitor Georgian Border”, *Agence France Presse*, 03.02.2005.

49. “Russia, Georgia Agree to Demilitarize Breakaway South Ossetia”, *MosNews*, 17.03.2005.

The bilateral agreement of May 30 seems to have initially resolved the outstanding dispute, even though the long duration of its implementation up to January 2008 and its pro-Russian articles may derail or even reverse the process of dismantling the bases. One of the agreement's most nebulous provisions calls for the establishment of a Joint Georgian-Russian Anti-terrorist Center that will absorb a significant part of the personnel and the armament, previously stationed in Akhalkalaki and Batumi, while organizing joint border patrols of the Russian-Georgian borderline including Pankisi.⁵⁰

If that Center is not established, or if it is transformed into an empty-shell “good-will gesture”, Moscow can either re-deploy this arsenal in Abkhazia, Ossetia, or Armenia or destabilize the anyways fragile condition of Javakhetia's Armenian minority.⁵¹ At the very least such an eventuality will most certainly harden Moscow's policy *vis-à-vis* Tbilisi in the secessionist question of Abkhazia and Ossetia, thereby bringing to “ground zero” any attempts at a negotiated resolution. The issuance of Russian passports to many Abkhazians and Ossetians already constitutes an act of serious semi-official recognition in the separatist status of these *de facto* “Transcaucasian Kaliningrads”.

Given the volatility of the overall situation, another brinkmanship crisis may tilt Russia closer to the option of a conditional annexation. Recently, Taymuraz Mamsurov, the Moscow appointed-President of North Ossetia, stated on June 10, 2005, that the only viable solution to the South Ossetian problem would be its re-unification with its Northern ethnic kin. A few weeks latter (July 5) the South Ossetian leadership responded to Saakashvili's invitation for a Peace Summit in Batumi, by conducting major military maneuvers in the Java region, which were, according to the Georgian President, aided and abated by the Russian armed forces.⁵²

50. The agreement demands the complete shut-down of the Akhalkalaki base by January 1, 2007 and that of the Batumi base by January 1, 2008. Robert Persons, “Russia Agrees to Pull Troops from Georgia by 2008,” *RFE/RL*, 30.05.2005.

51. On April 2005, several thousands of Javakhetian Armenian (around 6.000-9.000) staged a peaceful demonstration in Akhalkalaki demanding the continuation of the basis' presence, while demanding the recognition of their population as an official ethnic minority. For the Armenian protest, “FM Lavrov Suggests Immediate Pullout of Russian Bases From Georgia,” *Itar-Tass*, 25.04.2005 and Grigor Hakobyan, “Demonstration in Javakhetia Marks Increased Tensions in Armenian Populated Regions of Georgia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 06.04.2005.

52. Molly Corso, “Georgia Promotes South Ossetia Peace Plan,” *Eurasia Insight*, 12.07.2005. More recently, in September 2005, Tskhinvali, the capital South Ossetia, was hit by Georgian mortars injuring 10 citizens. Liz Fuller, “Georgia: Tensions Again On The Rise In South Ossetia,” *RFE/RL*, 27.09.2005.

All in all, in spite of Abashidzhe's expulsion and the fragile base-closure agreement it has signed with Russia, Georgia has not moved an inch closer to its strategic goal of integration to either NATO or the European Union. To the contrary, Saakashvili's polemical diplomacy, and his "democratizing" alliance with Ukraine's revolutionary coalition, has hardened Russia's antithesis to any negotiated settlement over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, without simultaneously increasing US material and primarily military assistance to Tbilisi. If President Saakashvili continues to pursue a re-unification strategy based on the erroneous perception that Washington will come to his aid in case of a renewed outbreak of violence, then another episode of Russo-Georgian brinkmanship may be closer than anyone may presently prognosticate.

Ukraine

Even though the international press widely misperceived the Ukrainian Presidential election of winter 2004 as the "logical" continuation of the Georgian revolution, one even greater misinterpretation lies in the oversimplified identification of the two competing coalitions as respectively pro-Russian (Yanukovich) and pro-American (Yushchenko). Yet, a closer analysis of the electoral result would point out that the only real common denominator of the two revolutionary movements refers to the massive financing of the student organizations spearheading the regime's collapse on behalf of the Soros Foundation and a multitude of US-based NGOs with bipartisan affiliations.⁵³ Other than that, the country's ethnological composition, its overwhelming economic dependence on Moscow, and its vital military location as the base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in Crimea, cannot remotely compare with Georgia's geopolitical environment.

Ukraine's aforementioned geostrategic idiosyncrasies can also justify to a very considerable extent for the fissiparous nature of the Yushchenko coalition and the nearly suicidal repercussions any complete break-down of Russian-Ukrainian relations may have on Ukraine's ability to prevent it self from imploding along Yugoslavia's tragic example. Ukraine does not simply

53. Jonathan Steele, "Yushchenko Got the US Nod and Money Flooded into his Supporters," *The Guardian*, 26.11.2004, Paul Quinn-Judge and Yuri Zarakhovich, "The Orange Revolution", *TIME*, 06.12.2004, p.22 and Jonathan Mowat, "The New Gladio in Action? Ukrainian Postmodern Coup Completes Testing of New Template," <www.onlinejournal.com/Special_Reports/031905Mowat-1/031905mowat-1.html>.

host some Russophile microscopic enclaves that have very little in common with Russia's cultural and linguistic heritage, as is the case with Ossetia and more importantly Abkhazia.⁵⁴ In Ukraine 22 percent of the country's population are ethnic Russians, while an additional 25 percent to 30 percent are Russophone Ukrainians and/or those speaking a local dialect that is a hybrid of Russian and Ukrainian, called *surzhyk*.

This ethnic/linguistic mass is not a minority, but constitutes close to half of the state's population and remains very closely identified, both culturally and politically with Russia, following a historical heritage going back to the *NovoRossiya* (New Russia) territories of southern and southwestern Ukraine, which were colonized by Catherine the Great in the late 18th century.⁵⁵ This critical mass is also concentrated on the highly industrialized eastern 1/3 to 1/2 of the country in provinces very close to or on the Russian-Ukrainian border. Within this great ethno-cultural divide Crimea stands out as a predominantly Russian exclave with over 67 percent of its population claiming a Russian descent, something rather logical since the province was "incorporated" into present-day Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev's edict as late as 1954.⁵⁶

In Ukraine, there are not simply a few Soviet-inherited bases, but the entire 25,000 men-strong Black Sea Fleet, currently deployed in the harbor of Sebastopol and three more large naval installations in the Crimea.⁵⁷ Ukraine does not merely have privileged economic relations with Russia or

54. Ossetians made only 3 percent of Georgia's population in 1989 and are an ancient nation of Iranian origin that were largely christianized and incorporated in the Tsarist empire during the late 18th and early 19th century. Abkhazians which are predominantly Sunni Muslims, ethnically akin to many North Caucasian Tribes such as the Chechens and the Cherkess, constituted 17 percent of Georgia's population of 5.4 million in 1989 and were an independent kingdom as early as 8th century A.D. The Abkhaz were annexed into the Georgian medieval state around 1000 A.D. but were never culturally assimilated by Georgia's predominantly Orthodox population. Linguistically Abkhaz and Georgian are completely different. Georgiy Mirsky, *On Ruins of Empire: Ethnicity and Nationalism in the Former Soviet Union* (Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 66-80.

55. On Ukraine's ethno-cultural composition, see CIA, World Factbook: Ukraine, pp. 4-5. Mirsky, *On Ruins of Empire*, pp. 117-135 and p. 146; Ian Bremmer, "The Politics of Ethnicity: Russians in the New Ukraine", *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 46/No. 2 (1994), pp. 268-272; Sherman Garret, *Keystone in the Arch: Ukraine in the Emerging Security Environment of Central and Eastern Europe* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1997), pp. 11-28; and Janusz Bugajski, "Ethnic Relations and Regional Problems in Independent Ukraine," in S. Wolchik and V. Zviglyanich (eds.), *Ukraine: The Search for National Identity* (Roman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 165-181.

56. For the current ethnological synthesis of the Crimean exclave and the history of NovoRossiya, Mirsky, *On Ruins of Empire*, pp. 129-133; Oleg Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (Toronto University Press, 1988), pp. 172-177; and V. Yetoukh, "The Dynamics of Interethnic Relations in Crimea," in M. Brohobycky (ed.), *Crimea: Dynamics, Challenges and Prospects* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), pp. 69-85.

57. Russia controls 82 percent of the Soviet-era Black Sea Fleet and has -according to the 1997 accords- a 20-years lease on the Crimea bases, with the possibility of a 5-year renewal. Sherman Sheer, "Russian-Ukrainian Rapprochement?: The Black Sea Fleet Accords," *Survival*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Autumn 1997), pp. 33-50.

is seriously dependent on its energy exports. Ukrainian economy is organically dependent on Russia, which covered in 2001-2002 almost 50 percent of its total import needs while absorbing around 20 percent of its exports.⁵⁸ Nowhere else is that strategic interdependence more evident than in the energy sector, since Russia covers 80 percent of all Ukrainian petroleum imports, equal to 70 percent-75 percent of its oil demand.

Through Ukraine it also transited up to 80 percent of Russia's total oil exports to Europe that in 2002 covered almost 22,3 percent of total EU-15 oil import needs.⁵⁹ That interdependence is even more significant when it comes to the natural gas sector. Ukraine covers nearly 80 percent of its natural gas needs via Russian imports and Russian-controlled imports from Turkmenistan, while the use of natural gas amounts to 45 percent of its Total Primary Energy Supply and 40 percent of its electricity generation output. This practically means that short of any LNG imports or a Turkmenistan-Ukrainian pipeline that by-passes Russia, Kiev is totally dependent on Russian-controlled gas for 32 percent of its electricity and 36 percent of its Total energy needs.

On the other hand, Russian exports to Europe, that constituted nearly 70 percent of total Russian gas exports, are nearly completely (around 90 percent) exported via Ukraine's pipeline grid. These exports covered in 2002 nearly 40 percent of total EU-15 natural gas imports.⁶⁰ Given Russia's strategic leverage over Kiev, Russia could easily leave with either candidate as Victor Chernomirdin, Russia's former Prime Minister and Ambassador to Ukraine, stated several months before the November 2004 debacle. Putin's political advisors failed dramatically to follow Chernomirdin's advice. They demonized Mr. Yushchenko's politics, the American parentage of his wife, and overplayed Russia's support for Yanukovich by promoting a policy of

58. Andrew Wilson and Clelia Rontoyanni, "Security or Prosperity? Belarusian and Ukrainian Choices," in Robert Legvold and Celeste Wallander, (eds.), *Swords and Sustenance: The Economics of Security in Belarus and Ukraine* (The MIT Press, 2004), pp.36-38.

59. US Department of Energy, Energy Information Agency (EIA), *Country Analysis Brief: Ukraine*, <www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/ukraine.html> (January 2005); and European Commission Directorate General for Energy and Transport, *EU Energy and Transport in Figures: Statistical Pocketbook 2003* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2003), Table 2.2.6.

60. EIA, *Country Analysis Brief: Ukraine* <www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/ukraine.html> (January 2005 and September 2003); EIA, *Country Analysis Brief: Russia: Russian Pipelines* <www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/russpip.html> (November 2002) and European Union, *Green Paper: Towards a European Strategy for the Security of Energy Supply* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, 2001), p.42. From the 80 Billion Cubic Meters (Bcm) of Ukrainian gas demand, Kiev produces 18 Bcm, imports 25 Bcm from Russia and 36 Bcm from Turkmenistan via Russia, Neil Buckley and Tomas Catan, "How Ukraine will Fare without Russian Gas?," *Financial Times*, 31.12.2005.

overt interference that culminated in President Putin's two official visits near the end of the campaign period. These profound tactical mistakes⁶¹ contributed to the “eruption” of the electoral crisis as much as any NGO “plot”.

Yushchenko's demonization proved very handy in his own political struggle against the Kuchma regime. It not only attracted centrist Ukrainian voters to his cause that would have normally been repelled by the virulent anti-Russianism of Western Ukrainians in the Halitchina oblasts, but also assisted him to completely disassociate his record as a Prime Minister under Kuchma back in 2000-2001 with the regime's rampant corruption. It also helped to outshine the realities behind Kuchma's supposedly pro-Russian foreign policy, during his decade-old “reign from 1994 to 2004. Kuchma did not follow either a systematically pro-Russian or anti-Russian foreign policy but attempted to balance off between his aspirations for Ukraine's closer integration with Euro-Atlantic Institutions and the realities of Russia's strategic leverage over Ukraine's geostrategic environment.

We should not forget that Kuchma did not hesitate to confront the Russians over a series of critical issues from the restructuring of Ukrainian gas debts in 2001-2002,⁶² the country's initial application for NATO membership (May 2002)⁶³ -withdrawn in October 2004-, the deployment of Ukrainian forces in Iraq (June 2003) and the Russian-Ukrainian crisis over the legal domination over Tuzla islet situated on the tip of the Azov Sea back in October 2003. Russia was approaching completion of a dam that would close the bottle-neck of the Azov sea and questioned Ukrainian sovereignty over Tuzla. As the verbal war escalated, Kuchma condemned the imperialist reflexes of some Russian power circles, admonishing Moscow that “the closer that dam comes to our shores, the closer we will advance towards the West”.⁶⁴

61. Sergei Karaganov, “Lessons of the Ukrainian Crisis,” *RIA Novosti*, 25.11.2004, (Editorial) “Did Moscow Back the Wrong Ukrainian Candidate”, *RIA Novosti*, 24.11.2004; and Alan Cullison and Guy Chazan, “Putin's Role in Ukraine Election Stirs Backlash,” *Wall Street Journal*, 29.11.2004.

62. Rawi Abdelal, “Interpreting Interdependence: National Security and the Energy Trade of Russia, Ukraine and Belarus”; Robert Legvold and Celeste Wallander, *Swords and Sustenance*, pp. 116-121.

63. Kuchma chose to file Ukraine's official candidacy for NATO on the same day President Bush arrived in Moscow for his four day summit leading to the signing of the S.O.R.T agreement. Taras Kuzio, “What Future for Russo-Ukrainian Relations?,” *The Moscow Times*, 06.10.2002, p.10.

64. Carl Schreck, “Russia Calls a Halt to Work on Disputed Dam,” *The Moscow Times*, 24.10.2003. Kuchma's statement came in reply of persistent rumors regarding a potential bombardment of Tuzla by Russia's Air Force., *BBC Monitoring*, “Putin's Chief of Staff reportedly ready to Bomb Ukraine over Disputed Strait,” *Stolichnyye Novosti*, Kiev, 21.10.2003; and Agence France Press (AFP), “Imperialist Russia is Pushing Ukraine Closer to West: Kuchma,” 27.10.2003.

What is ironic in Yushchenko's case is that he was also as anti-Russian as President Kuchma, but his tactical electoral dependence on Halitchina's fiercely nationalistic and Greek-Catholic "Westernizers",⁶⁵ Yulia Tymoshenko's charismatic populism and Russia's own active hostility pushed him in rhetorical outbursts more appropriate for the temperament of his Georgian counterpart rather than the political realities of Ukraine's ethno-cultural divisions. Above all Yushchenko is a pragmatist and he is most likely to follow into the diplomatic path of his predecessor once the political situation in his own country settles-down after the forthcoming parliamentary elections in March 2006.

His record after one year at the helm of Ukrainian politics has corroborated a realistic approach vis-à-vis his relations with Russia that was already evident even before the "third" round (December 26) of last year's tumultuous Presidential election, when on November 28 he publicly declared that he is not going to get Ukraine into NATO, something he reiterated after the elections via statements by the country's supreme military leader.⁶⁶ Yushchenko also clarified that he will not renegotiate the Black Sea Fleet Accords before their normal expiration in 2017,⁶⁷ while on early February 2005 his newly-appointed Foreign Minister, Borys Tarasyuk, in an interview with *Izvestia* recognized that Ukraine was unready for NATO membership confirming that neither NATO nor the European Union demanded the withdrawal of the Russian Fleet from the Crimea.⁶⁸

Despite Tymoshenko's appointment as the Prime Minister, the Ukrainian President did not hesitate to initiate the withdrawal, (January 2005), of the 1640 peacekeepers deployed in Iraq, a process that was

65. The inhabitants of Western Ukraine have historically constituted the core of Ukrainian nationalism defined in its most anti-Russian, and anti-Orthodox form and were incorporated into modern Ukraine as a consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Ukrainians from this region fought along side the Nazis during WWII and organized under Stephan Bandera a very efficacious resistance network against the Soviet Army that lasted up to the end of the 1950s, when Bandera was assassinated by KGB in Western Berlin. Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History*, pp. 453-480; and John Armstrong, *Ukrainian Nationalism*, (Ukrainian Academy Press, 1980), pp. 46-100.

66. BBC *Monitoring*, (Interview of Viktor Yushchenko), "Russia Made "Big Political Mistake" over Ukrainian Poll Says Yushchenko," *Ren TV*, 28.11.2004 and Mara Bellaby, "Ukraine Defense Chief: NATO Not a Priority," *Kiev, Associated Press*, 05.02.2005.

67. Jeremy Page, "Ukraine Could Sink Russian Fleet," *The Times*, 06.12.2004.

68. Yanina Sokolovskaya (interview with Borys Tarasyuk), "Ukraine: New Foreign Minister on Russian Ties, NATO, Iraq Presence" *Izvestia*, 11.02.2005. In April 2005 NATO and Ukraine decided to have initial talks on whether to open discussions over a potential Ukrainian candidacy, Steven Weiseman, "At NATO Talks, Accord and Discord with Russia," *The New York Times*, 22.04.2005, p.A10.

completed on December of last year,⁶⁹ regardless of the US Congress's retaliatory decision to slash its annual aid allocation from 60 to 33,7 million USD for 2005.⁷⁰ On the same time, while promoting a policy of low-profile rapprochement vis-à-vis a more than cautious European Union, on the issue of EU-Ukrainian integration,⁷¹ Yushchenko tried to co-opt several of the major Russian, and Russian-affiliated oligarchs, like Mikhail Freedman (Alfa Group) and Oleg Depipaska (Rusal) by blocking Timoshenko's plans for a massive re-nationalization of nearly all privatization contracts approved under Kuchma's rule.⁷²

The Kiev Summit between Yushchenko and Putin, (March 2005) proved to be the apex of a realistic rapprochement between the two major Slavic states, since Yushchenko not only reconfirmed the validity of three critically important Kuchma-era agreements regarding the Black Sea Fleet Accords (1995-1997), the sovereignty dispute over Tuzla (October 2003) and the partial privatization of Ukraine's natural gas network (November 2003),⁷³ but also agreed to Ukraine's participation in the Eurasian Single Economic Area, a VAT free zone of commercial and energy exchange constituted by Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The initial plan, that includes an opt-out clause for Ukraine, envisions a long-term E.U. type economic integration target that would completely liberalize the commercial interactions of participating states and establish common market administrative institutions.⁷⁴ Russia, who is the driving force behind this project, has already tried to allure Ukraine and Belarus into an agreement by eliminating all VAT related to its already heavily subsidized energy exports.

69. During their 30 months-stay in Iraq Kiev rotated around 5.000 troops, Jim Garamone, "Ukrainians Head Home After Completing Iraqi Mission," *American Forces Press Service*, 19.12.2005, <www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2005/20051219_3701.html> .

70. Robert Mayer, "Where's Yushchenko's Letter", *Publius Pundit*, 21.03.2005 and Joel Brinkley, "Dollars for Democracy?: US Aid to Ukraine Challenged," *The New York Times*, 21.12.2004, p.A3.

71. The Great cautiousness with which all leading EU-Member States approached the issue of a potential Ukrainian membership into the Union was clearly manifested during Yushchenko's visit in Berlin and Putin's Summit with Chirac, Schröder and Zapatero in Paris on March 17-18, 2005. It is needless to say that the situation has been further gravely aggravated after the vote-down of the European Constitutional Treaty by the French and Dutch referenda of May-June 2005. Charlemagne, "Another Faraway Country: Brussels Faces Up Gloomily to the Prospect of Further Eastward Enlargement," *The Economist*, 04.12.2004, p. 34, "Ukraine's Future Lies in Europe says New President. Meanwhile, the EU is sending mixed reactions about Kiev's prospects as a future membership applicant," *EUObserver*, 24.01.2005; "Köhler empfängt Juschtschenko," *Der Spiegel*, 08.03.2005; and James Graff, "Brussels Burnout," *Time*, 06.06.2005, p.19.

72. Peter Gumbel, "Forging Ahead: Ukraine Plans to Reprivatize some of its most valuable industries. Is that good for business?," *Time*, 14.03.2005, pp. 46-49; and Erin Arvedlund, "Ukraine: Privatizations to be Reviewed," *The New York Times*, 17.02.2005.

73. Arseny Oganesyan, "Putin-Yushchenko: A Pragmatic Friendship," *RIA Novosti*, 21.03.2005.

74. Tom Warner, "Union of Former Soviet States Launched," *Financial Times*, 20.09.2003.

The VAT decree was signed by President Putin in August 2004 and came into effect as of January 1, 2005 thereby securing Ukraine's participation.⁷⁵

In the intervening period from the Kiev Summit to the Natural Gas showdown of early January 2006, Yushchenko came to reevaluate the cost-benefit equation of his tactical alliance with Timoshenko's camp. Already in February and March 2005 Yushchenko had quarreled with his Prime Minister's over the size of the re-nationalization review since Timoshenko wanted to re-examine more than 30,000 cases, while the President demanded the minimization of the review to a mere 30 cases.⁷⁶ Then in May, Timoshenko provoked another major crisis by unilateral deciding to impose price caps on the domestic fuel market that is dominated by Russian-affiliated refiners, thereby exploding the final market prices to the detriment of public finances. Back then, Yushchenko in alliance with Poroshenko, an arch rival of Timoshenko for the number two position inside the "orange coalition", forced the reversal of the Prime Minister's decision and nearly forced her out of government.⁷⁷

When her jousting with Poroshenko and the President, over the renationalization's review-range, got out of control in early September, Yushchenko sided with the comparatively pro-Russian Poroshenko,⁷⁸ sacking the populist Prime Minister along with several key members of his coalition government who are closely related to Timoshenko, like then chief of presidential staff Oleksandr Zinchenko and Security Service chief Oleksandr Turchynov.⁷⁹ Then, Yushchenko, in an apparent "wink" at Moscow and the Yanukovich camp, chose his close confidant, Yuri Yekhanurov, as the next Prime Minister in the interim period up to the crucial March 2006 Parliamentary elections.⁸⁰ Yekhanurov, who originates

75. FSU Energy, "Russian Oil Companies to Pay for CIS Integration," *Petroleum Argus*, 06.08.2004, p.6 and "VAT Abolished on Exports to CIS," *FSU Oil and Gas Monitor*, 18.08.2004, p.12.

76. Gumbel, "Forging Ahead."

77. Timoshenko blamed Moscow for artificially increasing the end-price of fuel regardless of its own price-capping initiative. The Victor and Yulia Show," *The Economist*, 18.06.2005, pp.25-26; and Tom Warner, "Political Rivalries Threaten Ukraine's Reform," *Financial Times*, 04.07.2005.

78. As *The Economist* recently noted "Poroshenko has at Times Seemed to Run a Private Foreign Policy at Variance with Mr.Yushchenko's Pro-western Orientation," *The Economist*, 10.09.2005, p.35.

79. Jan Maksymiuk, "Ukraine: Orange Revolution Drowns Amid Mutual Recriminations," *RFL/RE*, 21.09.2005, (Editorial), "Orange Crushed," *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, 22.09.2005.

80. The March 2006 elections are posed to transfer a significant amount of power to the Parliament, which will be responsible for selecting the Cabinet and electing the Prime Minister. Yushchenko will thus be forced to institutionally co-habitate in the apex of Ukrainian politics.

from the same region as Yanukovich, was regional governor of Dnepropetrovsk and is expected to follow an even closer conciliatory policy vis-à-vis Russia.⁸¹ That was one of the cornerstones of the Yushchenko-Yanukovich agreement that pushed through a second Parliamentary vote Yekhanurov's ratification as Prime Minister.⁸²

Given this political reshuffling that marginalized Timoshenko and opened the way for a centrist “Grand Coalition” between the two former Presidential archrivals, Russia's showdown over natural gas prices in early January may not have been the most opportune moment to remind Kiev's overwhelming energy dependence on Gazprom's exports. Whatever the case, Yushchenko is more likely to prefer a “Grand Coalition” formula in Parliament than a new co-habitation with Timoshenko. All in all, despite the revolutionary “brouhaha”, Kiev is slowly but steadily recalibrating its foreign policy priorities closer to Moscow, than either Washington or Brussels, who remain even more reluctant to materially support a drastic shift in its diplomatic orientation, than Georgia's case.

As a recent editorial in the *International Herald Tribune*, retrospectively underlined:

“at the time of Ukraine's so-called Orange Revolution in 2004, many in the West saw largely what they wanted to see...What the West chose not to see was that Yushchenko is more a technocrat than a leader, and that Timoshenko was at best a tactical ally whose suspect fortune and populist politics were bound to come in conflict with Yushchenko's plodding pragmatism. More to the point, many in the West chose to overlook that in Ukraine, part of the Slavic core of the old Soviet Empire, half the residents still identify closely with Russia, both ethnically and nationally. So, to believe that Yushchenko, could single-handedly shift Ukraine into the Western orbit was naïve. Not only was Russia interfering but Europe was, and is, far more interested in Russian gas than in Ukrainian democracy”.⁸³

81. Ukraine's Political Crisis: And then they woke up,” *The Economist*, 17.09.2005, pp. 33-34, “Ukraine to Modify its Russian Policy,” *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 09.09.2005. As President Yushchenko's close advisor, Boris Nedezhdin, noted in Russia's daily *Gazeta*: “Yekhanurov is a Russophile. His elevation to the Prime-Ministerial post will have a positive impact in the relationship between Kiev and Moscow, Olga Redichkina and Yulia Slavina, “Victor Yushchenko's Second Revolution,” *Gazeta*, 09.09.2005.

82. Alexei Makarkin, “Eastern Ukraine: The Ultimate Prize”, *RIA Novosti*, 27.09.2005; Ukraine Parliament Confirms Yushchenko's PM Nominee, *Agence France Presse* 22.09.2005; and Theodoros Tsakiris, *The Collapse of the Ukrainian Government Coalition: The Crucial Political and Geopolitical Parameters* (Athens: Hellenic Centre for European Studies (EKEM), 2005), <www.ekem.gr/archives/000191.html#more>.

83. “The Real Ukraine,” *International Herald Tribune*, 21-22.01.2006, p. 6.

Concluding Remarks

The discussion in this paper shows that in spite of NATO's second round of expansion, the Iraqi debacle, and the unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty, the *prima facie* reason for the deterioration of the post-9/11 US-Russian rapprochement, was the Russian perception that Washington aided and abated the revolutionary overthrow of the Georgian and Ukrainian governments in 2003 and 2004. It was seen in Moscow, that such a break-down may have undesirable effects on Russia's anti-proliferation cooperation with the US, thereby magnifying the dilemma associated with Iran's brinkmanship nuclear diplomacy.

In reality, even though Washington rhetorically supported the demise of the Shevardnadze and Kuchma regimes it did not materially, and more so military, support either Saakashvili or Yushchenko, not did it extend any security guarantees in case their pro-Western shift provoked a violent Russian reaction. The greatest danger to regional stability, and particularly Transcaucasian stability, is the misperception of a US-security guarantee by President Saakashvili.

As a consequence of those developments the wider region is considerably more unstable than it was back in 2003. Neither Georgia nor Ukraine is any closer to their purported goal of Euro-Atlantic integration and both are much more internally insecure. Ukraine is already shifting back into a more pragmatic relationship with Russia necessitated by both external and domestic political realities. Contrarily enough, Georgia, seems to remain adamant in its overall reunification strategy, continuously pushing for a coercive re-integration of its secessionist republics. Thereof, Georgia is and will remain for the foreseeable future the most dangerous flashpoint in the entire post-Soviet space.

European diplomacy can play a constructive mediating role and has already done so at the height of the Ukrainian Electoral crisis of November-December 2004. Europe has vital energy interests to defend by securing the stability of the Western CIS space since Russian oil and natural gas exports constitute the cornerstone of its energy import diversification strategy away from excessive dependence to OPEC and Middle East Oil. One major principle of this process would be not to create unrealistic expectations to any potential CIS candidate, that an EU membership is something attainable in the foreseeable future, at least as far as Turkey's candidacy is not finalized. Prodi's "Wider Neighborhood" strategy that would assist in the consolidation of democratic institutions in those states would be a valuable and realistic commitment all EU member-states can honor.

In the US-Russian relations nexus, while Moscow has not stood in the way of any decisive US military efforts to alter the strategic realities of the region, the current geopolitical earthquake in the Persian Gulf could jeopardize Washington's efforts to consolidate the independence of the Caspian Basin states. American preoccupation with the upheaval in Iraq, not to mention increased US-Iranian tensions, could lead to an increase of Russian pressures on Georgia and Azerbaijan to abandon their aspirations for inclusion in the Euroatlantic Community, and to step up its efforts to undermine any enduring US political and military presence in Central Asia. That would make it harder for the US to engage the Central Asian states in a larger effort to consolidate its position and combat Islamic fundamentalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A resurgence of extremism could then even acquire a regional scope, making it even harder for the US to develop and sustain policies of strategic domination over the area - a globally decisive hegemonic asset.

For Russia's relations with the US (and Europe), there is always a danger that Russia and the West may lose perspective and overlook the number and magnitude of the differences that still separate them. If previously the mistake was to focus too much on divisions instead of commonalities, then today the situation threatens to be the reverse. And this is something that should not be underestimated. Both sides need to appreciate that the process of political and security rapprochement will be prolonged and difficult, interspersed with the occasional crisis or major

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disagreement, setbacks of one kind or another, confusion and misunderstanding. It is unrealistic to expect that the slate of half a century of strategic confrontation can be wiped clean in a couple years or through a few, albeit important, agreements. In the end, the latter are just the tip of iceberg, masking enormous contradictions that will take considerable time, effort and patience to straighten out. More importantly, as the discussion in this paper shows, geopolitics has not demised. Issues of geopolitical projection and competition can recover their former priority at any time, especially in regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Russia–United States relations refers to the bilateral relationship between the United States and the Russian Federation. The United States and Russia maintain diplomatic and trade relations. The relationship was generally warm under the Russian President Boris Yeltsin (1991–99) until the NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the spring of 1999, and has since deteriorated significantly. In 2014, relations greatly deteriorated further due to the crisis in Ukraine, Russia's annexation of