

WHAT NEXT FOR RUSSIA'S FRONT-LINE STATES?

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This Letort Paper examines in what ways Russia's front-line states have changed or, alternatively, maintained their foreign policy posture in response to Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. In general, they have either made concessions or strengthened defenses against Russia's new capabilities demonstrated in Ukraine and Syria. Laying out the risks and assets that each of these countries derive from their relationship with Moscow helps explain what may have justified one calculation over another. This analysis excludes Ukraine (which is already suffering the consequences of Russia's readiness to use military power to counter perceived strategic threats) and the Baltic States (which have already entered Western-led alliances).

Belarus

President Lukashenka will continue his efforts to leave sufficient freedom of maneuver for his country by striking an uneasy balance between reducing dependence on Russia and building ties with the West. The risk of a Russian reaction, which it is his priority to avoid at all costs, will remain constant.

Moldova

Despite signing a European Union (EU) Association Agreement (AA), Moldova's economy still remains highly dependent on Russia. This gives Moscow the opportunity to exercise economic pressure and interfere in local elections. Given that pro-European reforms are stalled, it is expected that pro-Russian parties will replace the current pro-EU governmental coalition in the next parliamentary elections in 2019. No viable settlement for the conflict in Transnistria seems to loom large.

Central Asia

There is a fundamental paradox in Central Asian foreign policy. On the one hand, since 2014 to 2015, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have sought to distance themselves from Russia and to establish closer ties with the West and China. On the other, the West's relative inaction during the Ukraine crisis signaled that Euro-Atlantic alliances are unlikely to assist in security crises in Central Asia, but also that Western security interests in the region are weak. In particular, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (i.e., the richest hydrocarbon-exporting Central Asian countries) will remain wary of Moscow's intentions while maintaining good relations for regime support and shared values. Being more dependent on Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (the poorest countries in the region) share the view that a U.S. presence is necessary to balance Russia and China, yet they recognize that it is in their best interests to stay aligned with Moscow. In general, the region's authoritarian leaders fear popular revolts and seek to safeguard the political status quo, which is why they do not welcome the sort of change promoted by Western value-based agendas. Nevertheless, the damage to the Russian economy caused by falling oil prices, together with Western sanctions and countersanctions, have reduced the appeal of closer economic involvement with Russia. Ultimately, China's projects will dwarf Russia's existing economic ties to the region.

Armenia

The country's foreign policy is first and foremost defined by the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Russia's actions in Ukraine served as a confirmation that the

capital of Armenia, Yerevan's, decision to withdraw from the AA with the EU in September 2013 to join the Eurasian Economic Union was wise. Dependent on Russia for its security and most of its energy supplies, Armenia is not in a position to resist Moscow, and the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the EU in November 2017 should be viewed with this caveat in mind. At the same time, there is a growing realization that acquiescing to Russian demands has not won Yerevan any preferential treatment from Moscow. For example, Russia has continued to supply weapons to both sides in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. This has led to re-engagement with other partners.

Azerbaijan

The Ukraine crisis has opened a new dilemma for the country's foreign policy. On the one hand, the government in Baku fears regime change by popular protest, but on the other, Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine are a violation of Ukraine's territorial integrity, which echoes Azerbaijan's stance in the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. Overall, Azerbaijan has never shown interest in integrating into Euro-Atlantic structures. Nonetheless, while Azerbaijan does not want to provoke Russia, it has no intention of joining any Russia-led integration projects. Turkey will remain Azerbaijan's closest ally in its neighborhood, but a good working relationship has been established with countries such as Israel.

Georgia

Russia's support for separatist elements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria was a challenge for Georgia long before the 2008 war, but Georgia's experience with the direct Russian military intervention in 2008 served as a precursor to that of Ukraine 6 years later. Since then, in general, Georgia's pro-

Western geopolitical orientation and its overt opposition to Russia have remained unwavering. A preferential trade AA was signed with the EU in 2014, and Georgia was granted visa-free travel to Schengen Area member states in March 2017. Yet, the Georgian Dream party, which succeeded Saakashvili's rule, chose to be less confrontational than its predecessor, which had presided over the loss of 20 percent of Georgian territory in 2008.

The policy recommendations provided in this Letort Paper aim to assist the U.S. Government in general, and the U.S. Army in particular, in maximizing prospects for a new alignment of former Soviet states and minimizing the risk of a repetition of Russian actions in Ukraine elsewhere.

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