



INSTITUTE FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE



Think  
Visegrad  
V4 Think-Tank Platform

## Untangling Russia-West knot of confrontation: what future for a post-Covid-19 European security?

*Elkhan Nuriyev, PhD\**

### Abstract

While today's world is facing a severe crisis, tomorrow's world is already struggling for survival in the future. This transition process will inevitably be painful, as shown by renewed great power rivalry between Russia and the West in a rapidly changing Eurasia. Due to lack of a pragmatic vision and political capacity, for the time being, neither of these two powerful actors is ready to finance this future on their own. Several incidents, including NATO expansion, the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, colour revolutions, the Arab Spring and the Ukrainian crisis, have deepened the strategic distrust between Russia and the United States-led West.

Another increasingly important source of much concern is a heated debate over the future of post-Soviet territory which comprises new emerging markets and aspiring democracies with very different cultures that lean towards different extra-regional poles of influence. Never-ending conflict and the ruinous contest for this troubled part of the world where everyone loses have a direct negative impact on European security. Hence the greatest challenge in the post-Covid-19 era is to find the common paths to realistic futures in which Russia and the West could cooperate internationally in ventures that would improve their relations and help convert Europe to a better and safer system of comprehensive security. It is to these major questions that this article is primarily addressed.

### Introduction

---

\* 2021 Think Visegrad Non-V4 Expert Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Budapest (Hungary), Senior Expert on Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia at L&M Political Risk and Strategy Advisory, Vienna (Austria).

---

This analysis was produced within the Think Visegrad Non-V4 Fellowship programme. Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund. For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit [www.thinkvisegrad.org](http://www.thinkvisegrad.org).



Obviously, Russia-West relations have seriously deteriorated over the past several years. This relationship is now worse than during the Cold War period. Some already have called the new situation the beginning of a new Cold War.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, there is a risk that Russia-West confrontation may further escalate and that a structural, if not strategic, conflict is emerging with possible significant consequences.

But yet, the current deep crisis in West-Russia relations is not a new Cold War. It is not even a renewed East-West divide. It is a grand high-stakes geopolitical game that has been fuelled by decades of mutual mistrust and competing interests of great powers. This explains why Russia-West relations have sunk to their lowest level in modern times, not to mention they have always been complicated and intriguing.

Amid lingering geopolitical concerns, the situation in Europe in recent years has indeed become highly uncertain and full of new security threats. This is mainly due to the mounting tensions over war-torn Ukraine and insurmountable differences between the West and Russia. The real risk now is that along with quite a lot of long-simmering regional conflicts, one could see how a renewed escalation would lead to outbreak of another world war. That is the main thing the world has to guard against.

In the next coming years, it will be difficult for Russia and the West to agree on key contemporary European security issues. The very fact that top American and Russian diplomats made no major breakthrough at the January 2022 talks in Geneva, Brussels and Vienna<sup>2</sup> has shown that Russia and the Western powers are still not prepared to reach a compromise on many tough strategic problems. Right from the start, the main goal was to establish a dialogue between both sides, even despite their different approaches to the future of European security. The crux of the issue is that amid the current intricacies of the US-Russia-EU triangle, these differences have an obvious impact on neighbouring post-Soviet partner countries, which are straddling fault lines and choosing sides in the Eurasian region. The biggest challenge will therefore be to find the real strength to continue the dialogue aimed at easing current tensions and building consensus. For this to occur, however, Russia and the US, as well as the EU, NATO and OSCE, must show more

---

<sup>1</sup> For interesting overviews, see Richard N. Haas, “Cold War II,” *Project Syndicate*, February 23, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/new-cold-war-mainly-russia-s-fault-by-richard-n--haas-2018-02>; Sergei Karaganov, “The West’s Unilateral Cold War,” *Project Syndicate*, March 20, 2018, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/west-and-russia-no-new-cold-war-by-sergei-karaganov-2018-03>.

<sup>2</sup> For background, see Shaun Tandon and Jonathan Braun, “West Warns Russia Against ‘Any’ Ukraine Incursion,” *The Moscow Times*, January 20, 2022, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/01/20/west-warns-russia-against-any-ukraine-incursion-a76107>; see also Brendan Cole, “Ukraine’s Future Looks Bleak As Russia Runs Out of Patience,” *Newsweek*, January 14, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-ukraine-nato-talks-steven-pifer-vladimir-putin-1669453>.



seriousness and flexibility in the main issues of contention and should demonstrate stronger political will in security negotiations.<sup>3</sup>

## The shadow side of the geopolitical chessboard

The current international situation reminds one of a chess game in which kings, queens, and pawns are moved with an illusion of an absent opponent, neglect for his possible moves, and unawareness of potential positions of the opposing chess pieces. Yet in this game the chessboard is a very real battlefield with such hotspots challenging global security as Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, North Korea, Iran and other modern pivot states. The ability to see the entire battleground is therefore crucial. Meanwhile, as the true positions of the rival players on the Eurasian chessboard are unknown to Western decision-makers, they are just moving chess pieces around, without knowing how to take the king. That is precisely why the United States, NATO and the EU often move their pieces down the flanks of the grand chessboard to avoid the centre, where their positions are more vulnerable.

In turn, Russia not only sees where major players are on the grand chessboard, it sees the entire geopolitical battleground with great clarity, round-the-clock, real time, and in all types of situations. Since Russian President Vladimir Putin comprehends the global line-up of forces with that kind of lucidity and his Western opponents do not, Russia enjoys an advantageous position that can determine its victory.

It is no coincidence that the Kremlin leader makes moves with masterful skill – going after the West’s strategic centres of gravity with much more efficiency. Perhaps more than any other leader, Putin, by virtue of his long-time Soviet intelligence experience, understands how Western democracies operate in the contemporary world. He likewise knows how to use the West’s clout against the West itself. But while the Russian President has been making bold moves with the right motives at the right moment, and Russia has been rapidly returning to global power politics, the West has not been standing idly by. It has been relentlessly trying to contain Russia, and if necessary, reduce its growing role in international affairs.

The most striking thing for the West is how Putin is advancing Russia’s national interests against those of its rivals. True, boldness, creativity and independence are the main assets of his leadership. He always plans and thinks ahead, and then makes the right move that brings him success. Western leaders just cannot understand how Putin has thus far managed to keep Russia ahead in the geopolitical game. All attempts by the United States and the EU, obsessed with weakening Russia at all costs, to isolate and sanction Moscow have so far proved futile. The containment strategy has had a reverse effect: it has fuelled

---

<sup>3</sup> Elkhani Nuriyev, “Egy újabb eszkaláció egy újabb világháború kitöréséhez vezethet” (A new escalation could lead to another world war), Interview by Edith Krisztina Dócza, *Magyar Nemzet*, January 19, 2022, <https://magyarnemzet.hu/kulfold/2022/01/egy-ujabb-eszkalacio-egy-ujabb-vilaghaboru-kitoresehez-vezethet>.



anti-Western sentiment in Russia, deepened considerable strains in the EU-Russia relations and raised the risk of an unintended flare-up with the United States.

More recently, Putin's public announcement of obtaining new nuclear weapons<sup>4</sup> has sharply raised the stakes of a direct U.S.-Russia confrontation, which currently risks reaching a dangerous point. If Putin's announcement is not sabre rattling and Russia's nuclear strategic posture has indeed undergone profound changes, then it means not just an improved nuclear arsenal but a shift in the global power balance that could be called a genuine revolution in military affairs.<sup>5</sup> Yet even so, Moscow is unlikely to be interested in a broader conflict. Rather, it would like to reconstruct its relations with the West as this is essential to addressing many of today's persisting challenges to global peace and security. After all, both sides share far more than just common history and geography. Their strategic, long-term interests overlap over a variety of global threats, including proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and international terrorism.

In the meantime, unending mutual accusations, allegations and claims are creating an environment where mutual estrangement, misunderstanding and different perceptions are separating Russia from the Western world and dividing the West itself over how best to proceed on Russia. Areas of serious disagreement include U.S.-Russian competing military operations in Syria, Ukraine's prolonged crisis, NATO's enlargement, missile defence system, lingering conflicts in the post-Soviet Eurasian countries, escalating cyber breaches, and dependencies in the field of oil and gas. The fact that these disputes remain very much at the core of what divides Russia and the West today and that they have not yet been addressed through common effort means that both sides are ill-prepared to strike a bargain that would account for joint security concerns.

## A new Eurasian geopolitical axis

Against a markedly different geopolitical backdrop compared to the Cold War era, the sharp deterioration of Russian-Western relations has a negative impact on the security environment in today's vastly turbulent Eurasia. Not for the first time in its long history, big geopolitics is emerging as a powerful tool in shaping the Eurasian security system. As always, Eurasia, which sits at the heart of a knot of strategic issues that surround international politics, is dominating the global chessboard. Several major players – the United States, Russia, the EU, China, and the Islamic world – have arisen today in the

---

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting analysis, see Steven Pifer, "Putin on the Nukes," *Order from Chaos*, Brookings Institution, March 2, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/03/02/putin-on-the-nukes/>; Akshai Vikram, "Russia's New Nuclear Weapons: Understanding Avangard, Kinzhal, and Tsirkon," *Nuclear Network*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2, 2021, <https://nuclearnetwork.csis.org/russias-new-nuclear-weapons-understanding-avangard-kinzhal-and-tsirkon/>.

<sup>5</sup> In an interview aired on 12 December 2021 as part of a documentary film called "Russia: New History," Russian President Vladimir Putin made a big claim that Russia is a world leader in the development of advanced weapons unconditionally. For more on this issue, see "Russia leads the world in hypersonic missiles tech, Putin says," *Reuters*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-leads-world-hypersonic-missiles-tech-putin-says-2021-12-12/>.



Eurasian chess game. Realizing that the emerging global order is being shaped by various twists and turns in the Eurasian geopolitics, they all vie for regional pre-eminence. Each of them pursues its own strategic goals in this resource-rich continental landmass. Each actor plays on its own and against each other, without siding openly with anyone for the moment.

Perhaps still more striking is that renewed great-power rivalries for spheres of influence and struggles for control over energy reserves and pipeline routes have uncovered shadow sides of the Eurasian high-stakes game. The point at issue is the geopolitical behaviour of major regional actors that have developed covert attitudes. At first sight it seems, that the new geopolitical environment dominated by the tensions between the West and Russia pushes the region's prime players to delicately and diplomatically balance their relationships with both sides and calibrate their policies accordingly. While in reality flirting with the West, most regional powers hide their true intentions and genuine stance and are taking joint steps behind the scenes to end the American unipolar world order. This is especially true of the Middle East, where the United States and the EU have displayed a discord over peace efforts, and sharpened regional differences between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel.

More fundamentally, the Kremlin's military victory over the Islamic State in Syria has signalled Russia's renewed assertiveness in the Greater Middle East, provoking enormous dissatisfaction among Western powers that are not willing to share power with Moscow in the expanded region. Reinserting itself as a major power broker into the peace process, Russia has made it clear that its serious interests are protected not only in the Arab world but also in the entire Middle East where oil prices are set. How events in this long-troubled region will proceed is anyone's guess, but Eurasia's future geopolitical landscape will primarily depend on the volatile strategic situation in Syria, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, North Korea and the CIS countries.

Already now, however, quite noticeable is a new Eurasian geopolitical axis that is being quietly and steadily formed by the Russian-Chinese tandem. The simple fact that Putin's heavyweight partners in the BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) continue to back Moscow in its sharp tussle with Washington and Brussels proves that Russia is far from being isolated. Aligning itself more closely with China, Iran and India, on the one hand, and forging good partnership relationships with Turkey, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Israel against all odds, on the other, Russia appears well prepared to confront a disordered world that NATO and the EU built after the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. The more the West tries to rally the world against Moscow and Beijing by demonizing Russia and containing China, the sooner Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping will expand the region's political-strategic axis that may well include the post-Soviet countries.

A great Eurasian alliance may indeed abruptly appear in resistance to America's claims to world superiority, triggering a new unintended shift in geopolitical alignments. If Beijing, Tehran, Delhi and Ankara finally get fully sided with Moscow, then the game will be





stopped, and the battle will end. Something like that will happen sooner or later anyway, even despite the West's attempts to slow down the final stage of the Eurasian chess game. Moreover, most regional powers view their relations with Russia as an interest-driven partnership. They may have an intention to develop new relations as allies and to commit themselves to continuously maintain strong interaction on the grounds of their mutual interests and actions prompted by shared concerns.

In uniting with Moscow for reaching common objectives, the Eurasian countries may display solidarity with Russia motivated by pragmatic reasons. Such a possible outcome may arise from region-to-region cooperation and strategic partnership-type relationships. Should this scenario happen, the world will eventually be more Eurasian and less Euro-Atlantic. But this goal can be achieved only if Russia displays readiness to assume a more meaningful leadership in global affairs and to ensure that a full-scale power shift will make the world more stable and secure than it is now.

### **Post-Covid scenarios for post-Soviet Eurasia**

In the meantime, the post-Soviet territory likewise represents one of the major theatres of great power competition between the United States, Russia and the EU. None of the CIS countries can cope with regional security problems without external help. Most of them expect principal powers to focus their resources, determine their priorities and thoroughly review the instruments in their foreign policy toolkit. Even as several countries of Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia are seeking greater intermediary assistance from global powers, Russia and the West have become involved in the geopolitical tug-of-war over dominance in Eurasia, continuing to draw up war plans against one another. Such a complicated state of affairs explains why geopolitical shifts adversely affect peace processes in Donbas, Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria.

Clearly, Russia has always considered itself a great power that should be surrounded by semi-sovereign buffer states. Even today, the Russian factor plays a key role in the security situation in the entire post-Soviet space. Despite outside strategic concerns like the ongoing crises in Ukraine, the South Caucasus and other parts of the former Soviet Union, Russia has so far taken a proactive stance in CIS affairs, trying to convince the West that the Kremlin has a major potential in resolving security issues in their own backyard. Indeed, Moscow is seeking to create new, stronger, meaningful relations with CIS countries, and all the latest political steps by the Kremlin have been aimed at enhancing Russia's geopolitical position in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Russia's successful foreign policy in the region also results from the failure of Western powers in the CIS, or continuous weakening of their positions, in the least. As a result of Washington's failure to craft any coherent vision as to how the post-Soviet territory fits into U.S. broader strategy its role is increasingly defined through the prism of Russia. The lack of a meaningful U.S. response to the challenge posed by the protracted conflicts in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus not only highlights the low level of U.S.



engagement in the conflict-torn regions but also casts doubt on its ability to be an effective player in international organizations such as the UN and the OSCE.

Mostly the same is true of EU's Eastern Partnership policy, which reflects an unconcerned attitude and offers a mere pittance to six countries - Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Despite an expansionist regionalist logic of EU integration geared toward acquiring reliable partners,<sup>6</sup> Brussels does not want to invite them as full members but rather seeks to make the entire region more controllable and to create a secure geopolitical buffer between itself and Russia. It is hence no surprise that since its launch, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) has been called into question for being ineffective. The critics have argued that the EU lacks the ability to offer its partner countries the full benefits of freedom, interaction and cooperation.<sup>7</sup>

All these factors have limited the EU's influence and enabled Russia, via "smart power" diplomacy, to consolidate its geopolitical standing in the "near abroad" countries. Moreover, Russia's heavy military presence in the conflict-torn areas has complicated the EU's strategic thinking on Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Moscow can affect the security situation of the post-Soviet states in both positive and negative ways, whilst Brussels does not have such direct leverage since the EU has refused to be a relevant security actor. The very fact that Brussels lacks the necessary tools to intervene in the peace processes, offering only confidence-building activities instead, vividly testifies to the absence of EU's visionary and principled approach to resolving regional security issues. These constraints have questioned the adequacy of the EaP and hindered Brussels's capacity to formulate a meaningful policy to deal with simmering secessionist conflicts.

Because the EU-sponsored EaP and the Russia-driven Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are in direct competition with each other, Brussels and Moscow are locked into a struggle over who is most capable of attracting the partner countries and under what terms and conditions. Integration policies in both the EU and Russia are built on the view that internal security challenges originate outside their borders. Russia generally regards closer regional integration with the EU as a geopolitical loss, while the EU views growing rapprochement with Russia as an attempt to restrain its own regional leverage.

Yet the challenge faced by Brussels in advancing a more integrated and effective policy in the Eastern neighbourhood is not only external but also internal to EU member states that still share relatively different views about the rationale, importance and ultimate goal of the EaP. The EU could not act coherently as a single state actor in devising a comprehensive strategy for the EaP region. The EU member states have not coordinated with each other

---

<sup>6</sup> James Headley, "Is Russia Out of Step with European Norms? Assessing Russia's Relationship to European Identity, Values and Norms through the Issue of Self-Determination," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64:3 (2012): 428.

<sup>7</sup> George Christou, "European Union Security Logics to the East: the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership." *European Security*, 19, no. 3 (2010): 413-430. See also Paweł Dariusz Wiśniewski, *The Eastern Partnership – It is High Time to Start a Real 'Partnership.'* Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2013): 38.



to craft achievable policy goals, while Russia and China are strengthening their strategic cooperation, putting forward joint narratives and moving closer to creating their own Eurasian security alliance to compete actively with the West. Such a complex reality involves two competing European and Eurasian visions for reshaping the region, which prolongs the cycles of instability but does nothing to resolve regional security problems in the shared neighbourhood.

Nevertheless, Ukraine has always had a special place in the Russian cultural and geopolitical mindset. Many Russians have difficulty seeing Ukrainians, at least those from the east, as a distinct people and instead argue that the two groups belong together. For Russia it is simply inconceivable that Ukraine is a foreign country because back in the tenth century, the Russian state and Russian Christianity were both born in the ancient city of Kiev (Kyiv), the capital of modern Ukraine. Moreover, the Kremlin has always been concerned with the presence of Russian-speaking populations in Crimea and in the eastern regions of Ukraine. It is also no less important to mention that the presence of the Russian Navy in the Crimean port of Sevastopol, with its extended lease until 2025, was strategically vital for Russian access to the Eastern Mediterranean and its naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. Last but not least, the formal annexation of Crimea and incorporation into the Russian Federation in 2014 irretrievably altered the context of a wider regional security by making Russia the most significant power in the Black Sea region.

Clearly, the Ukraine conflict has become a critical turning point that exacerbated tensions between the West and Russia, but at the same time revealed their strong mutual dependence in the fields of energy, trade and security. While fears of a possible Russian military invasion of Ukraine continue to grow in the West, the Kremlin has repeatedly denied any plans to invade neighbouring state. Certainly, Russia has all the capabilities to invade but the key question is whether the Kremlin leader will decide to do so indeed. While Moscow strongly demands that Ukraine never be admitted into NATO, it is obvious that the US and its allies would never agree to these terms because NATO members in the region are at the easternmost frontier of the alliance. As tensions loom, the US and Russia are pulling on the knot of war, albeit both sides are well aware of the destruction that could follow.

But understanding of Russia's logic for the current crisis looks simple, though it requires a bit of explaining. Recent statements about future NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia have sparked consternation in Moscow, making President Putin especially anxious about a possible Western military intervention into the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin has increasingly cast Western support for Ukraine as an existential threat, claiming that the former Soviet republic has been turned into an "ant-Russia" that NATO could use to attack or at least weaken Russian Federation. President Putin sees the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO and the alliance deploying weapons there as a "red line" for Russia. Increased military activity by the United States and its NATO allies in Ukraine has therefore caused Russia to shift its military posture in the Black Sea region. This in fact explicates Russian military build-up, including the amassing of troops and equipment near Ukraine's border.





In reality, there is nothing surprising, frightening or intimidating about contemporary Russian strategic behaviour. For the Kremlin strategists, NATO's advancing encroachment on Russia's borders implies Russia's exclusion from the European security space. For this reason, Moscow asked for guarantees that the United States and its NATO allies make a commitment not to keep forces or conduct any military activities in Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. Sometimes, great powers do not fully realize the implications of their actions that result in an unnecessary escalation, which means that more countries and more weapons get involved, and before world leaders can contain conflict, it already leads the sides ending up in a full-scale war. If the current Ukraine crisis escalates out of control, there is indeed a serious risk of new armed conflict in Europe, even at a time when most countries are dealing with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and growing economic woes. The failure of a series of diplomatic talks in European capitals to defuse the mounting crisis on Ukraine's border could have an even more dire consequences. The gap in security perceptions is so strong and broad that as much diplomatic effort as possible could be necessary to de-escalate and seek an obvious way out. Therefore, during the tense period, it is always essential to stay in constructive dialogue to avoid an outright and potentially disastrous confrontation.

Even so, the greatest problem for the West is that despite 30 years of sovereign statehood, several of the post-Soviet states remain weak and unstable to protect their national interests in a consistent manner.<sup>8</sup> They lack strength to defend themselves and deter a Russian advance. The tragic events of January 2022 in Kazakhstan where, in an unprecedented move, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev invited the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) troops to restore order, once again proved an increased reliance of Central Asia's largest country on the Russian security umbrella. This is also the case for Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan where Russia does have military bases, let alone joint military drills frequently conducted under the auspices of the CIS or CSTO.

Consequently, Russia is seen as essentially having a monopoly over reshaping the security architecture in the post-Soviet space. While the Kremlin views regional security of the CIS as fundamental to their interests, Western powers simply underestimate Russia's increased role in orchestrating today's geopolitical processes in post-Soviet Eurasia. This means that neither the United States nor the EU are ready to offer CIS countries a real alternative to Russian policies. The failure of the West to design a sound workable action plan for dealing with Russia's post-Soviet neighbours indicates that it is almost impossible for the United States and the EU to guarantee security for these nations. It is thus no surprise that Western powers have been unsuccessful in their post-Soviet strategies. The resulting lack of a common and integrated strategy may lead to a gradual withdrawal of Western democracies from the CIS and the loss of ground to Russia's more assertive foreign policy.

---

<sup>8</sup> Author's private conversation with several Western officials who requested anonymity, Berlin, Brussels and Vienna, September – November 2019.



Simultaneously, Russia may be successful in helping some CIS countries resolve armed conflicts, thereby fostering greater stability in the entire region. One good example can be the Second Karabakh War, which was halted by the Kremlin-brokered ceasefire deal signed on 10 November 2020 by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Vladimir Putin's key role in ending the hostilities moved Russia to the forefront, whereas President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev has managed to make Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Turkey a party to any future final peace settlement.<sup>9</sup>

Most local leaders know well that Moscow's blessing will be a necessary precondition for any political solution or peace agreement because the Kremlin holds the key to the major security puzzles. Also, many CIS leaders and Russian counterparts have certain ingrained affinities, not least that they were educated during Soviet times. They speak a common lingua franca, have close personal ties, and share a similar understanding of the geopolitics of the region, not to mention Russia's centuries-old influence over the economics, politics and security of the area. So, many states see Russia not as a threat, but a natural ally against domestic and external threats.

Interestingly, President Putin described Russia as "not just a country but a distinct civilization."<sup>10</sup> It is no surprise, then, that the Kremlin strongly wishes to recreate the former Soviet territory with a new outlook, mainly arguing that "Eurasian integration is a chance for the entire post-Soviet space to become an independent centre for global development, rather than remaining on the outskirts of Europe and Asia."<sup>11</sup> As one Moscow-based policy analyst points out, it is not imperial ambition that lies at the heart of this policy, but rather Russia's security needs, whereby the Russian policymaking process is defined by the best way to maintain security.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> The Russia-Turkey-Azerbaijan trio has created a completely new geopolitical reality in this still troubled region. The adoption of a new status quo between Armenia and Azerbaijan with the participation of Turkey as an observer, but with the leading role of Russia through military presence in Karabakh has certainly complicated Western strategic thinking on the South Caucasus. For details, see Elkhani Nuriyev, "Bullets Points and Strategic Recommendations from Azerbaijan," in Frederic Labarre and George Niculescu (eds.) *What Future for Nagorno-Karabakh in the Wake of the 2020 Six-Weeks War?* Study Group Publication Series, National Defence Academy, Vienna, Austria, 2 (2021), 13-18. Available online at <https://www.pfp-consortium.org/news/what-future-nagorno-karabakh-wake-2020-six-weeks-war-study-group-information-available-now>.

<sup>10</sup> Ilya Klishin, "Putin and the 'Distinct Russian Civilization'" *The Moscow Times*, May 25, 2020. Available online at <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/05/25/putin-and-the-distinct-russian-civilization-a70370>; see also Andrei Tsygankov, "Crafting the State-Civilization: Vladimir Putin's Turn to Distinct Values." *Problems of Post-Communism*. 63, no. 3 (2016): 145-158.

<sup>11</sup> Vladimir Putin, Speech before members of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Moscow, Russian Federation, September 20, 2013. The online transcript is available at [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir\\_putin\\_meets\\_with\\_members\\_the\\_valdai\\_international\\_discussion\\_club\\_transcript\\_of\\_the\\_speech/?sphrase\\_id=701234](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech/?sphrase_id=701234).

<sup>12</sup> Author's private conversation with a Russian political scientist who requested anonymity, Moscow, 6 May 2018.



Strategically, however, the Kremlin may still see former Soviet countries as protective buffer states. Through BRICS, SCO and scores of joint energy projects and counter-terrorism manoeuvres, Russia collaborates closely with China, Turkey and Iran to keep CIS countries peaceful, compliant and relatively free of Western penetration. The return of global Russia may even push Moscow to view the post-Soviet world in a completely new way. The very fact that President Putin once famously noted that the collapse of the USSR was the greatest catastrophe of the twentieth century demonstrates his long-term goal to restructure the CIS by shifting away from confederation to a much more consolidated form of a new union in which economic, political and military factors are expected to dominate. Such a regional perspective best illustrates Russia's broad interests, of which Putin's Eurasian Union is but one important part.

It is commonplace among Western scholars to define Russia as a revisionist power.<sup>13</sup> Yet the character of Russia's revisionism, including whether it adopts neo-imperial forms, is largely shaped by foreign and domestic influences. Some experts in Moscow have therefore called Russia a "restorative power" seeking to reclaim what it believes is rightfully its own.<sup>14</sup> The restoration of the *status quo ante* implies a reversion to colonial boundaries. This is exactly why Putin famously said in a recent interview that former Soviet republics had left the USSR in 1991 together with "a huge amount of traditional historically Russian land."<sup>15</sup> Although his spokesperson later rebutted territorial claims on ex-Soviet nations, Putin's statement seems to have questioned the redrawn borders of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> This vividly suggests that the Kremlin leader has indeed revised the post-Cold War security order to something Russia sees as more favourable to her geostrategic goals. This likewise means that not merely Russia's smart power at work but its regional hegemony has been expanded through the EAEU as its institutional mechanism.

While assessing prospects for Eurasian integration, Moscow makes strategic decisions that advance the Russian agenda of geopolitical influence and economic cooperation in the CIS space. In order to succeed with the EAEU and become a centre of regional integration, however, Russia should first modernize itself and demonstrate its potential for long-term

---

<sup>13</sup> Ivan Krastev, "Russian Revisionism." *Foreign Affairs*, March 3, 2014. Available online at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-03-03/russian-revisionism>. For an alternative viewpoint, see also Fiodor Loukianov, "Russia, a Revisionist Power?" *Politique étrangère*, Issue 2, (2015): 11-24.

<sup>14</sup> Author's private conversations with Russian political scientists who requested anonymity, Moscow, May 15, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Gifts from the Russian People" *Russia-1 TV*, June 21, 2020, Original comments in Russian language are available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcNEb9Vzvw&feature=youtu.be>. See also Natalia Popovych and Danylo Lubkivsky, "Czar Putin Wants a New Age of Empires." *UkraineAlert*, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC (6 July 2020), online at <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/czar-putin-wants-a-new-age-of-empires/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Kremlin Denies Eyeing Territorial Claims After Putin's Comments In Documentary." *RFE/RL*, June 22, 2020, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/kremlin-denies-eyeing-territorial-claims-after-putin-s-comments-in-documentary/30684797.html>.



stability at any cost. Only by doing so can Moscow boost the Eurasian Union's attractiveness for the partner countries.

But all the same, the already-strained Russia-West relations could easily contribute to the future isolation of the CIS region. The Kremlin is talking more and more about the need to protect the state's frontiers and turn them into an impenetrable barrier against terrorists, criminals and would-be enemies. A stronger (than in the 1990s) Russia may further enhance its geopolitical clout in various, subtle ways to develop and execute problem-solving scenarios that would gratify not only Russia's interests but also those of the entire post-Soviet neighbourhood. Such a move could urge CIS political leaders to accept the Kremlin's rules and eventually integrate their countries more fully into the Eurasian Union.

As Russia and the West have entered a tense period of prolonged mutual distrust, the way forward for CIS countries is indeed difficult to discern. But yet the Kremlin seems to be waiting for a suitable time and favourable circumstances before putting Russia's weight behind a solution to security issues in the region: when a new, beneficial geopolitical situation that fits well into Russia's strategic interests is finally formed in the CIS territory. This is why the next few years will prove decisive in the struggle to reshape the post-Soviet neighbourhood and incorporate Russia's 'near abroad' countries into a new cohesive integrated union. The final chapter of the post-Soviet states is therefore still being written, and there is much work to do before long-term stability and lasting peace are firmly rooted in this part of the world.

## **A new way forward for European security order: challenges and prospects**

As it was the case a century ago, the world is again facing a challenge: how to establish European security in view of changed realities? This is the most important task the politicians and decision makers face at present.

World politics often is about different psychologies, different narratives, and various perceptions of reality and about the persistence of historical experience, in particular that having to do with war, conflict, violence and oppression. Europe is replete with bitter historical memories and many of them can be felt in modern international relations.

Although relations between Russia and the West are still marked by conflicting interests and different interpretations of each other's strategic aims, there is room for them to listen, understand other perspectives, and try to de-escalate tensions. A major challenge in finding a new stable architecture for European security lies in bridging the psychological gaps between the various sides, which are created by perceived differences in values and goals. What is needed is a sense of realism on all sides involved and this requires a carefully crafted action-oriented negotiation, by which differences are contained and commonalities are accentuated - a well thought-out international diplomacy that might become as important as the policy of *détente* was in the 1970s.



Restarting a constructive relationship between Russia and the West is indeed essential to addressing many of today's more difficult challenges to international peace and security. The road to settling European problems encompasses the search for joint responses to new risks and threats. The subject matter experts should thoroughly examine the current situation and derive conclusions about the kind of Europe all the Europeans want to build and how they want to live in the twenty-first century. To do that, Russians, East Europeans and Westerners need to cast aside past dogmas and recipes in the area of security policy.

Moscow, Brussels and Washington should seek to identify common ground on which to build trust and confidence and to see whether they can create a trilateral relationship, which is characterized by stable expectations of the strategic intentions of all parties involved. This, in turn, may help to restore a crisis management dialogue channel and to resolve outstanding conflicts, even though for the time being strategic competition and joint attempts at problem solving will somehow have to coexist in relations between Russia and the West.

Put bluntly, Kremlin decision makers should reconcile themselves with the idea that Russia will not get far by seeking a veto over developments in Europe. In turn, East Europeans need to accept that it is in their own interests not to emphasize what divides them from Russia, but rather what brings them together. Past failures in conflict resolution will be now, under a more critical political situation, even more difficult. Hence, every state with separatist movements in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus has to find a new balance between engaging with and balancing Russia. The United States should reconcile itself with the fact that the world is indeed moving towards a more multipolar order and that new competing centres of power are emerging. This may require fresh approaches towards coexisting with these rivals on the U.S. part.

It is nevertheless tremendously relevant today to understand Russia's contemporary geopolitics under President Putin administration. For the United States, understanding the high price Russia is willing to pay to regain its influence in the post-Soviet Eurasia is imperative to developing a coherent and viable strategy. For Russia, realizing the long-term costs of its assertive foreign policy actions in the CIS territory is urgently required. For the EU, the question about how to end the ongoing crisis in Ukraine in particular and how to alleviate the situation of uncertainty in other countries of the common neighbourhood with Russia in general has become increasingly important in recent years.

Consequently, there is a strong need for a practical solution, based on the fact that new conflict resolution mechanisms can stimulate a new European security order where Russia can advance its interests by acting within the system and from which other post-Soviet countries do not perceive a threat against their national security. This suggests convening a European Strategy Group, where Russia and the EU can exchange views on European security and seek solutions to today's complex challenges.





It would be an opportune time to begin solving the most pressing problems with the mutual exchange of information and with the establishment of joint contact groups of representatives of different organizations that are dealing with the vital issues of the European agenda. Then, coordination could be intensified on the basis, inter alia, of agreements on the mechanisms for adopting coordinated, mutual decisions. An example would be the conduct of the peacekeeping operations and civilian monitoring missions using the material resources and infrastructure of the OSCE, CSTO, and the EU.

In general, the OSCE remains the preferred vehicle for a wider security dialogue and cooperation in Europe. It is important that all OSCE member states understand that the Europe of the twenty-first century should be free of both new and old dividing lines. The elaboration of a new security model is hence a concrete means of reaching that goal.

Clearly, a good option for renewed security dialogue could be a new conference for security and cooperation in Europe – “OSCE 2.0” which would revive the Helsinki Final Act’s forgotten instruments and put all post-Soviet territorial conflicts on the table. That would mean the return of the OSCE as a security organization and not only as an administrator of regional conflicts like in the past. All this requires strategic debates about a new European security order by the EU, Russia and the US.

However, the OSCE itself needs to be transformed and strengthened. The organization should play a more proactive role in European security affairs. That is why a more energetic approach is required to improve the OSCE institutions and mechanisms for better use, including putting into practice the regional tables that proved valuable at the time of building a new European security order. Initiating this process aimed at consolidating regional stability in post-Soviet territory could result in the creation of an “Eastern Table” for conflict resolution in Ukraine, Moldova, and the South Caucasus.<sup>17</sup> Harmonizing relations between NATO and the Russia-led CSTO and between the EU and the EAEU should also become “OSCE 2.0” priorities.

## Conclusion

Evidently, Russia remains a vital element of the rapidly developing European security order. Rethinking Russia could therefore start with considering it not as a threat to the West but rather as a critical contributor to Europe’s evolving security system. Instead of blaming Russia for everything that goes wrong in world affairs, Western leaders should answer one

---

<sup>17</sup> “Eastern Table” comprising a dedicated group of experts on Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus should be created to discuss and seek solutions on regional conflicts, which would then be integrated into a wider pan-European security model. This Eastern Table should also deal with regional economic issues and transnational security threats in order to provide a conflict foresight and a rapid response capacity with a special focus on confidence and security building measures. For more on this issue, see Elkhan Nuriyev, “Peace building in the Eastern Partnership: what roles for Russia and the EU? *ZOIS Spotlight* 45/2019, December 4, 2019, online version available at <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/01/30/how-the-eu-could-help-re-energise-peace-processes-in-the-eastern-partnership/>.



fundamental question that is essential for building an up-to-date European security system: Can Russia and the West ever become genuine partners, or will they remain forever adversaries?

This poignant question makes us consider broader, more politically sensitive questions: Do Russia and the West have the capacity to learn from history? Are they destined to go on making the same mistakes over and over again? Are they going to cooperate internationally in ventures that can unite them and help build a safer Europe and hence a peaceful world, or will they fail that test? These are perhaps the most difficult questions for the international community to answer as they concern the future of Russian-Western relations in the coming years. The answers to them may be yes and no.

Both sides may still find understanding through leaning the implications of past follies and errors, and committing themselves to seeing the signs of the new times and the meaning of change. True, geopolitical games are endless in nature. Sometimes they even become dangerous, especially when players breach the established rules and cross the red lines. An illustrative example is the Ukraine prolonged conflict – quirky, infuriating, intriguing, and wearying – that has definitively posed an “Eastern Question” to which Moscow, Brussels and Washington have so far failed to find a clear answer. That is largely because Russia and the West are engaged in fighting the Ukraine crisis instead of trying to solve it in earnest.

Addressing the Eastern Question requires building a new European security architecture that is comprehensive, flexible and acceptable to all. Neither Russia nor the West needs the re-emergence of Cold War-like security blocs which present serious risks to European stability. Instead they need a new model of international relations that would convert Europe to a better and safer system of comprehensive security. This is a policy of the necessity to forge a new cooperative security system in which Russia, the United States and the EU may well become founding members.

Time has shown that the United States and the EU have no credible strategies for containing Russia. Therefore, even in the highly violent, imperfect world that exists today, finding a middle ground between reconciliation and confrontation could be a positive outcome. Delaying to do so would merely make the endgame much worse. If the United States and the EU want to ensure a safe future for Europe, it should reconsider the European security order and keep the door open for a cooperative security relationship with Russia.

To succeed, Western leaders must change their approach to the Eurasian endgame, rejecting the assumptions that have shaped their policies since the beginning of the post-Cold War crisis of the world order. In order to confront emerging global challenges together and to enhance tomorrow’s prospects in the post-Covid-19 era, Russia and the West will have to demonstrate willingness to enter into talks without any preconditions. The key to success in the negotiating process is finding mechanisms that would harmonize relations between NATO and the Russia-led CSTO and between the EU and the EAEU. And

perhaps attempts to design a roadmap for a new mutually beneficial agreement may ultimately end the endgame.

Obviously, the security of Russia and the West cannot be guaranteed if both are isolated from each other. A prudent attitude would save the trouble of Moscow, Brussels and Washington to relearn the painful lesson that isolationism is the road to disaster. Although the voices of division remain strong, the new security environment facing both Russia and the West is so unstable and challenging that only continued dialogue will help them find solutions. But those challenges can indeed be transformed into opportunities if Russia and Western powers take responsibility and decisive action. Those who argue otherwise are caught up in the trap of outdated nineteenth-century geopolitics that has nothing to do with today's realities.

Although the endgame to any crisis is difficult to predict, today is a better time for top leaders of both Russia and Western powers to nudge their nations away from the brink of a no-holds-barred nuclear arms race and to reconstruct global security order in a harmonious international arrangement of major world powers. Otherwise, the future of a post-Covid-19 European security will look too gloomy for the West and Russia to be able to survive in.

### ***About the author***

Dr Elkhan Nuriyev is a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade (IFAT) in Budapest under the Think Visegrad Fellowship Scheme. He is a senior expert on Russia, Eastern Europe and Central Asia at L&M Political Risk and Strategy Advisory in Vienna. He is also a global energy associate at the Brussels Energy Club (BREC). In 2020, he was an Eastern Europe-Global Area (EEGA) research fellow in the Research Centre Global Dynamics (ReCentGlobe) at Leipzig University. In 2019, he was a Humboldt senior fellow at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Berlin. His work has been published widely in Routledge, LIT, CEPS, Internationale Politik, and Outre-Terre, among others.