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Considerations for US Strategy in Post-Communist Eurasia

PAUL H. HERBERT

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With the collapse of communist and Soviet power in Europe, the slow but steady political and economic reform of the 27 successor newly independent states (NIS), and the impending admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of new members, the United States has a real but fleeting opportunity to realize significant strategic gains in post-communist Eurasia in the years to come. Wise policy in pursuit of these opportunities requires recognition of the region's complexity.[1]

The United States has two overriding and closely related regional interests, one immediate, the other long-term. The immediate interest is that the former Soviet Union's weapons of mass destruction and related technologies not threaten the safety of the United States nor that of our allies. Any loss of control over those weapons and any proliferation of them to other states would constitute a potential threat. The longer-term interest is that the region's vast human, natural, and material resources not be dominated by a single power whose values and interests are inimical to ours. Both of these interests can be described in positive terms by stating that the United States has a long-term interest in the integration of all 27 NIS into the cooperative community of secure, free-market democracies.

A Region of Diversity and Change

Our policies in pursuit of these interests must be carried out in a region that is nothing if not diverse. The NIS can be regionally grouped as shown in Figure 1 below. While some such aggregation is necessary to preclude dealing at the strategic level with 27 discrete states, it is also conditional at best. At worst it can lead to false generalizations or assumptions that can undermine strategic analysis and policy. For example, Central European states whose national histories are centuries old might well object to the connotation of youthful inexperience in the term "newly independent." The Baltic states and Romania are determined to assert their identity as Central European. Despite its historical, cultural, and linguistic ties to Russia, Ukraine likewise seeks an independent identity as a neutral Central European state. Classifying Romania and Moldova as Balkan states is geographically inaccurate. It also might imply to some Moldovans an historical and cultural tie to Romania inconsistent with their strong desire for independence. But neither is Moldova Russian, or Ukrainian, or Caucasian.

Regions of Newly Independent States (Populations in Millions)	
Central European (Total = 64.6) Czech Republic (10.4) Hungary (10.3) Poland (38.5) Slovakia (5.4)	Old Russia (Total = 211) Belarus (10.3)* Russia (148.6)* Ukraine (51.8)*
Baltic States (Total = 8.0) Estonia (1.6) Latvia (2.7) Lithuania (3.7)	The Caucasus (Total = 15.5) Armenia (3.3)* Azerbaijan (7.1)* Georgia (5.4)*
Balkans (Total = 64.5)** Albania (3.3) Bosnia-Herzegovina (4.6) Bulgaria (8.8) Croatia (4.7)	Central Asia (Total = 53) Kazakhstan (17.2)* Uzbekistan (22.1)* Kyrgystan (4.4)* Tajikistan (5.4)*

FYROM (Macedonia) (2.7)	Turkmenistan (4.2)*
Moldova (4.5)*	
Romania (23.2)	
Serbia (10.7)	
Slovenia (2.0)	
* Members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (see map at Figure 3).	
** See map of Balkans at Figure 2.	

Figure 1. Newly Independent States, Grouped by Region.

The populations of most of these states are also quite mixed by ethnicity, language, religion, and culture, compounding the difficulty of national cohesion within currently recognized borders. Many states (e.g., Georgia, Moldova, Romania, Tajikistan, Ukraine) have significant minorities whose ethnic, historical, and cultural identity is toward another neighboring state. The largest such minority is the ethnic Russians. The collapse of the Soviet Union left an estimated 22 to 25 million ethnic Russians living within the NIS, some of them third- and fourth-generation residents. Their status ranges from fairly thorough assimilation, as in Kazakhstan, to ostracism as an unwanted remnant of Soviet domination, as in the Baltic states. Their plight has deep resonance within Russian society. Russia has asserted a national interest in their welfare, which, in turn, its neighbors find threatening. Compounding these difficulties is the movement throughout the former Soviet space of what can be described as ethnic refugees, that is, persons of certain ethnic origins forcibly removed from their homelands by Joseph Stalin's regime who are now attempting to return. The number of such refugees has been estimated at nine million.[2]

If national identities are not entirely clear, neither are the borders themselves. The collapse of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe has reawakened historical disputes over borders that go back to the Congress of Vienna or earlier, while some successor states to the Soviet Union, especially in Central Asia, are bounded by administrative lines drawn specifically to divide powerful ethnic groups. Unsettled questions of territory, nationality, and citizenship have significant implications for political stability, economic development, and security, as recent and ongoing conflicts in Armenia, the Balkans, Chechnya, Georgia, and Tajikistan clearly illustrate.

The NIS also differ dramatically from each other in terms of the transitions they are making, and it is here that policymakers must be very careful to perceive important differences. There are at least five transitions taking place in each state. No two states are at the same point in all five, which makes each state's transition unique. The five transitions taking place are from communism to something else; from command to market economies; from underdevelopment to modernity; from domination to independence; and from global or regional power to a lesser status for the near term.

Political Change

The political change from communism to something else varies widely among the NIS. No two states began with the same experience under "communism," which varied significantly from country to country and from time to time. Hungary's "goulash communism" was significantly different from Nicolae Ceaucescu's cult of personality in neighboring Romania, for example. Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia steadfastly pursued his own brand of communism independent of the Kremlin, and Albania just as steadfastly maintained its brand independent of Tito. The Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics accepted communist slogans and labels and Russian *apparatchiki* from Moscow, while maintaining some of their traditional ways of life, including the importance of clan relationships in local political arrangements.



Figure 2. The Balkan States (shown in white in original).

During the same period, we in the West so long equated "not communist" with "democratic" that we tended to perceive the collapse of communism as the prelude to the inevitable emergence of democracy. The simultaneous collapse of both communist and Soviet power has indeed opened the gates to Western and democratic influences. But it has also allowed other political values to emerge; meanwhile communism, as the Russian elections show, is by no means extinct. So exactly what kind of political structures will develop in any given state remains to be seen.[3]

Economic Development

In many countries, political development will parallel economic development, and here the variety is as great as the conditions are daunting. Because under communism products did not have to compete, every state inherited an outmoded and near-obsolete industrial plant. Soviet and satellite industry was heavily skewed toward defense and does not now easily convert to consumer or domestic production. For ideological and security reasons, central planners scattered industries widely. Thus the Slovak Republic is the heir to factories that built aircraft fuselages, while Poland built the wings, and Ukraine built the engines. No one satellite state built the entire aircraft. In Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Russia, the Soviet government built many medium-sized cities, each for the sole purpose of housing workers for a single defense enterprise that is now defunct. The workers and managers who emerged from communism brought with them little or no experience in free-market techniques. Under communism, there existed no body of business law to protect investors, owners, managers, workers, or customers, nor is there now a legal culture by which people expect fair treatment under known and impartially applied laws.

National responses to these conditions have not been uniform. Poland's "shock therapy" (by which the government rapidly divested itself of almost all state-owned enterprises while encouraging foreign investment and writing laws to protect business) caused massive dislocation and discontent, but now seems to be bearing the fruit of a rising gross domestic product and standard of living. By contrast, Bulgaria has yet to privatize its huge state enterprises and thus endures the triple disadvantage of low foreign investment, high government debt, and unemployment and worker discontent. The Czech Republic hopes to become a competitive producer through a strategy of privatization, modernization, and defense conversion. Less-developed states like Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan look to resource extraction as the engine of their developing economies, while still others, such as Georgia and the Baltic states, hope to benefit from the transshipment of goods through their territories.

These economic conditions have political and international repercussions. Privatization schemes in the absence of effective laws invite corruption and organized crime. Foreign investment brings with it highly visible hallmarks of foreign culture which is not always welcome. The image of foreign investors and local entrepreneurs enriching themselves through privileged acquisition of former state properties, service sector businesses, and mineral extraction--while once productive arms factories and their work forces lie idle--is ripe for exploitation by nationalist ideologues. Workers must work, and so governments are under intense pressure to pursue inflationary spending practices that inhibit development and foreign assistance, notably from the International Monetary Fund. Russian arms sales to China, India, Iraq, and Iran, and nuclear assistance to Iran and Cuba, can be seen in part as acts of economic desperation; by exporting what it can to the only people who will buy the product, Russia seeks to keep a hard-pressed sector of the economy afloat.

Underdevelopment to Modernity

A third dimension of change is from underdevelopment to modernity. It is fair to call nearly all the 27 NIS "underdeveloped." They all are characterized by a standard of living and quality of life far below what should have been possible given their potential. Despite impressive scientific, industrial, and military accomplishment due to concentrated government effort, and the provision for most citizens' very basic needs, the societies under communism did not prosper and advanced only fitfully and slowly.

The degree of initial underdevelopment and the degree of progress toward modernity since the collapse of communism vary greatly from country to country. Countries with a cohesive population, a nascent middle class of intellectuals, a relatively modern infrastructure, relative confidence in their security, and close proximity to developed sponsors have made great strides: Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Poland, and Estonia are among this group of states. Countries without such good fortune--Slovakia, Georgia, Armenia, and Tajikistan--are much further down the scale. Whether the bulk of its people see modernization as exhilarating, threatening, or simply impossible depends largely upon a state's position on this difficult scale.

From Domination to Independence

A fourth important dimension of change is the transition from domination to independence. Here again, despite very general similarities, the transition is unique in every case. The collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the withdrawal of Soviet military forces from Central Europe did in fact grant to the non-Soviet and Baltic states their long-desired independence. These countries are able to hark back to a pre-World War II national existence against which their postwar experience can be seen as a long, painful, but temporary interruption. They are again nation-states, and they have embraced their national identities with gusto in a profusion of flags, symbols, slogans, and songs. Nevertheless, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania feel constrained by their Russian minorities, their proximity to Russia, and Russian rhetoric that implies only halfhearted acceptance of their independence.

For other countries the situation is more problematic. Clearly, the national identity and independence of the Balkan states is still very much an open question, with Slovenia alone having made the transition relatively peacefully and with no immediate threat currently visible. Belarus has no tradition of independence, nor does Ukraine. Despite considerable domestic opposition, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko openly seeks complete reintegration with Russia, while Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma just as vigorously pursues complete independence. Georgia, with a centuries-old national identity founded on religion and ethnicity, enjoys only *de jure* independence. Russian peacekeeping troops enforce the *de facto* separation of Abkhazia from Georgia, and several thousand more Russian soldiers occupy key points throughout the country and patrol Georgia's southern border with Turkey. Under the mantle of peacekeeping, Russian forces likewise patrol the separatist Transdniester region that splinters Moldova; they also play a direct role on the government side in what amounts to an ethnic civil war in Tajikistan.

For most of the former Soviet republics, the Baltic states excepted, the issue of true national independence poses a dilemma. They face both centrifugal and centripetal forces relative to the former capital in Moscow. On the one hand, they genuinely relish their independence. Their memory of the Soviet Union is painful on two counts, first, that it was communist and second that it was Russian. Communism required subservience to an all-powerful center in Moscow and to a stifling orthodoxy that stunted economic growth, repressed local tradition, culture, and religion, and enforced

through terror a depressing and impersonal sameness on nearly everyone. Because of the central role played by Russia and Russians in this system, the non-Russian republics equate their sad experience with Russian domination and are therefore highly suspicious at best of Russian intentions toward their nations now.

On the other hand, these states cannot escape either their history or their geography. Their Soviet experience is not regarded as universally bad. In the minds of many, it provided a far greater degree of social justice than appears to be the case in capitalist countries. The states have strong economic, cultural, political, and security links with Russia and with each other. Russian is the one language spoken by nearly everyone throughout the region. Nearly all significant real property is of Russian manufacture. They are important trading partners for each other. They have common security interests with regard to China, India, and the Middle East. For all these reasons, many of these states seek close cooperation with each other. Some degree of regional reintegration is probably inevitable.

No institution illustrates these tendencies more than the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), formed in 1991 from the remnants of the Soviet Union and embracing 12 former socialist republics (see Figure 3). The member states have widely divergent notions of what the CIS should be. Russia takes the maximalist position that it should be a very strong organization that includes security, defense, and foreign policy dimensions, and the elimination of customs barriers. Russia tries to differentiate between CIS internal and external borders and claims an interest in helping member states patrol their external borders.



Figure 3. The Commonwealth of Independent States (shown in white in original).

With the probable exception of Belarus, no other member seeks such close integration. For every step toward integration, some members take a step back. Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan recently signed a treaty calling for greater economic cooperation and integration. But Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan almost immediately thereafter joined with Uzbekistan to create a combined peacekeeping battalion and offer it for use worldwide, significantly not under CIS control but only under United Nations auspices. Likewise, these Central Asian states have formed their own trade association and have invited Turkey to participate in their discussions. Nearly every former Soviet republic denounced the Russian Duma's non-binding vote in March 1996 to declare the dissolution of the Soviet Union illegal. Economic cooperation, but not political union or military alliance, seems to be the desire of most CIS members.

Energy is a central element in the related issues of economic development and national independence. Russia is the key supplier of oil, natural gas, and nuclear technology to almost all its neighbors, whether CIS members or not. The dependency of its neighbors is magnified by the depletion (as in Romania) or absence (as in Ukraine) of indigenous

resources; the environmental drawbacks to coal, as in Poland; and the strong need for low-cost energy sources in each of the developing economies. As Western technology, investment, and business practices take hold, Russia will become a more important energy exporter, enjoying both the influence that comes with supplier status and the sorely needed foreign currency and credits that come with energy sales.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, several NIS are now potential competitors with Russia for the energy export market. Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan all hope to benefit directly from the exploitation of the Caspian Sea and other oil and natural gas fields. Iran, Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Armenia are in competition for the pipeline routes that will carry those resources to ports and the international market. A pipeline through Kazakhstan to China is under consideration. With a growing economy and lacking easily accessible indigenous energy resources, China will be very interested in the energy potential of Central Asia. Thus far, these states have asserted their interests largely through diplomacy and the creation of international consortiums in which US and other Western companies have played a major part.

The stakes in this development are great indeed. In addition to the obvious economic benefits, energy suppliers have tremendous influence on the international scene. They can affect world markets. They have a powerful influence over energy-dependent customers. The possession of lucrative oil fields and pipelines can foster independence, domination, or both. A powerful neighbor may attempt to dominate a state whose energy resources it covets. Those same resources may provide to other powerful actors an interest in the state's continued independence, as the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War so aptly illustrates. This is not to say that the exploitation of energy resources in the former Soviet Union will necessarily lead to military conflict. No state in the region has the military capability, political will, or financial resources for such conflict at present. However, in the development of their energy resources, many of the NIS and other countries have important interests as well as rich opportunities for both cooperation and confrontation.

Changes in Relative Power

The fifth and final transition--changes in the relative power of the former Soviet states--has been most dramatic for Russia, where a sense of national humiliation attends both the loss of empire and the nearly universal rejection of an ideology widely associated with Russia. If there is a national longing for greatness in Russia, there is also an awareness that for the moment, Russia's power and influence are not great. In other former Soviet republics, elation at independence is balanced to some degree with a similar sense of loss. Ukrainians may wonder aloud whether the sacrifices made to give up their nuclear weapons have been appreciated and compensated as they consider French nuclear testing, the enlargement of NATO, and feeble international assistance with the Chernobyl cleanup. Kazakhstan may have similar misgivings, while Belarus's quirky president has tried to hold his 18 remaining SS-20s hostage against NATO enlargement. Yugoslavia stands almost universally condemned and isolated for her aggression in this century's fifth Balkan war.[4]

Because one pole of the bipolar world collapsed, too much emphasis can be placed on the apparent loss of power and prestige and its presumed psychological consequences. No successor state enjoys the power or prestige of the old Soviet empire. However, each successor state, with the possible exception of Russia, enjoys far more influence as an independent nation than it ever did as a mere part of the old empire. Russia, liberated from the crushing economic burden of maintaining that empire, is the sole heir of the empire's nuclear weapons and retains the old Soviet seat on the United Nations Security Council. Russia enjoys a certain degree of respect, so far not entirely eroded by the war in Chechnya, for its role in the peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia's shaky transition to democracy captivates the world's attention and ensures continued Western assistance with economic recovery. As a member of the Council of Europe, Russia aspires to convert the G-7 into the G-8. Most important, Russia shares with the other successor states an unprecedented degree of engagement with the rest of the world.

Opportunities for the United States and for Europe

These widely varied conditions provide both opportunities and risks for the United States, and call for a well-balanced, flexible, and long-term strategy focused on three distant goals: democracy, development, and integration. The collapse of the Soviet threat in Europe was one of the most momentous geopolitical realignments of this century. It allowed the United States and its allies to shift attention and resources to domestic needs while consolidating democracy and

stability in Europe and pursuing engagement in other parts of the globe where the need is great. A return to anything like the Cold War in Europe--for example, a "cold peace" between an enlarged NATO and a brooding, partially reintegrated, nuclear armed, and uncooperative Greater Russia--would be a tremendous strategic setback.

By contrast, there is an alternative future that goes well beyond the mere absence of the old Soviet threat. That future includes integration of the former communist states of Europe with the West; a working partnership with a secure, prosperous, and democratic Russia; and further integration of the remaining NIS through multiple international organizations.

An American policy that can foster such a future will rest on several fundamentals. First, Russia is key. That state will be a significant regional economic and military power within the next generation, one that aspires to "greatness," meaning an international role as well as a regional role. Russia has legitimate security interests in Europe, the Caucasus and Middle East, Southern Asia, Eastern Asia, and the Pacific. Russia's success in the transition to democracy and a free market, assurance of its own security through transparent defense cooperation with its neighbors, and engagement as an active partner of the West--all are of tremendous strategic importance to the United States.

Second, some degree of reintegration of the former Soviet republics is not only inevitable but probably in the best interests of some republics; the United States should not reflexively oppose such an evolution. The process of reintegration must be peaceful, voluntary, and democratic. Reintegration that respects sovereignty, fosters trade and development, reassures mutual security, and promotes democracy and international cooperation is not to be feared in the West. A CIS that really is a commonwealth and really has independent member states could be an important partner. Russia's greatest challenge is to show its neighbors that reintegration as described above is possible; it will likely be a long, hard sell. The United States and its Western allies, and Western security organizations which the United States does not lead, can meanwhile play an important, constructive role as trusted third parties, encouraging and assisting the normalization of international relations among the former Soviet republics, including reintegration where that is desired.

Third, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization remains central to American interests in Europe and must be preserved as a working organization of like-minded democratic states. Its intended enlargement presents considerable difficulties and will require extremely careful management. To deny NATO membership to those Central European states who earnestly seek it and who meet the requirements could alienate them for generations. It could well forestall their evolution to democracy and relegate them to a nonaligned buffer zone between Western Europe and Russia that would present a constant source of fear and instability. Although an enlarged Alliance would present significant challenges in terms of consensus decisionmaking and the viability of Article V guarantees, it is nonetheless politically imperative, especially now that it has been publicly and repeatedly proclaimed as policy.

The key to NATO enlargement is to achieve it without sacrificing future Russian partnership. To do so requires taking account of Russian domestic political realities and strategic considerations. Domestically, any Russian government must respond to the popular perception of NATO enlargement as "moving NATO tanks to our borders." Years of communist propaganda equated NATO with earlier and real threats to Russia from the West. The lingering suspicion is exploited by a variety of Russian politicians. It must be countered by clear and convincing evidence that an enlarged NATO does not pose a military threat to Russia. Strategically, Russians fear that an enlarged NATO will place a defensive shield over historical antagonists who then will be able to pursue hostile policies with impunity. The response here is engagement and cooperation between the Alliance and Russia on matters of mutual interest. Some progress has been made: management of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and Russian participation in the Implementation Force (IFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina are examples. As the new government stabilizes following the Russian elections and President Yeltsin's recovery from surgery, NATO could take a positive step forward by offering that government a formal structure of consultation with NATO as the Alliance evolves and enlargement takes place.

Fourth, the United States enjoys considerable influence at the moment and must use it constructively. The euphoria that attended the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War has given way to more sober assessments by all participants. Initially disappointed over the absence of a new Marshall Plan for post-communist Europe and frustrated with the early results of reform and the slow pace of integration, the 27 NIS are developing a more realistic

determination to build their countries anew largely on their own.[5] There is little reflexive hostility to the West and considerable admiration. They look to the United States and the West for security and economic assistance and inspiration. The United States, while carefully prioritizing its commitments, must remain engaged and involved and meet these expectations to the best of its abilities. Nothing could be more damaging to the long-term prospects for a new community of cooperative democracies in Europe than the sense of abandonment that would attend any significant disengagement by the United States in the near term.

Finally, the United States must not be deterred by the appearance of temporary setbacks. The complexity of transitions taking place means that our goals are necessarily long-term. Democracy will not bloom overnight in any of the NIS, nor will peaceful or just solutions be found to every one of the region's manifold challenges. Each state has its own notions of its interests which are not always--or even necessarily--compatible with our own. However, not only is the Cold War over, but the end of the Cold War is over. The people of the former Soviet empire are now actively rebuilding their societies, for better or worse. The United States is not in the position of dominance that it enjoyed in the reconstruction of postwar Germany and Japan and so must pursue other, more conservative strategies. But our goal should be similar. A democratic, free-market, integrated, and cooperative community of nations embracing our former foes of the Cold War is possible and most assuredly in the security interests of the United States.

NOTES

1. This article is based on the author's experience as the Senior Army Fellow to the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies at Garmisch, Germany, for academic year 1995-96. The Center's College of Security Studies and Defense Economics conducts two five-month courses annually, each for about 75 military and civilian officials of the post-communist NIS. The courses seek to demonstrate how the Western democracies manage security affairs and thereby to encourage democratic reform in the NIS. As a student and classmate in one course, and a faculty member for another, the author had a unique opportunity for extensive dialogue with important leaders from almost all 27 NIS. This experience was supplemented during his fellowship and since with travel to Albania, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.
2. Francois Heisbourg, "Population Movements in Post-Cold War Europe," *Survival*, 33 (January-February 1991), 31-44.
3. For a provocative essay on the differences between democratization, modernization, and Westernization, see Samuel P. Huntington, "The West: Unique, not Universal," *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (November- December 1996), 28-46.
4. Yugoslavia here means the current federation by that name, comprising Serbia and Montenegro.
5. Recent elections across Central Europe emphasize this pragmatic trend: "Seven years after the fall of communism, millions looking for better lives across this region simply took advantage of an opportunity that democracy gave them. They voted for change." ("Across Eastern Europe, Voters Are Choosing Any Kind of Change," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 1996.)

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