

Moldova and NATO: Expansion Stops at the Dniester River?

Written by W. Alejandro Sanchez

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W. ALEJANDRO SANCHEZ, JAN 9 2013

On August 27, 2012 the Republic of Moldova celebrated its independence from the Soviet Union. However, sovereignty has not been easy. The landlocked nation is a peripheral, underdeveloped European country with a high rate of poverty. In addition, secessionists fought a short-lived war against the government in 1992 and managed to create an autonomous region in the country, known as Transnistria. [1] The status quo between Chisinau (Moldova's capital) and Tiraspol (Transnistria's capital) has remained essentially unchanged since then, earning the label of a "frozen conflict." [2] While not much may have changed domestically in Moldova in the last two decades regarding Transnistria's status, there have certainly been changes in European geo-politics, particularly regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

NATO's strategy was altered following the dissolution of the USSR, the Alliance's nemesis and *raison d'être*, which signaled the end of the Cold War. The Alliance's strategy further shifted over the past decade, this time with a focus on battling transnational terrorist movements, such as Al Qaeda, following the 9/11 attacks against the U.S. (and other high-profile attacks like the bombings in Madrid in March 2004 and in London in July 2005). [3] It is in this evolving reality that Moldova emerges as an interesting case study regarding the Alliance's future when it comes to issues such as enlargement, geopolitical interests and relations with Russia.

Moldova is one of the few European countries that is not a member of NATO, and it is debatable whether this will occur in the foreseeable future. A key factor to keep in mind is that if Moldova achieves NATO membership, the Atlantic Alliance would further encroach on Russia's sphere of influence (it already touches Russia's borders via the Baltic states and Poland). On the other hand, if enlargement does not continue anytime soon, is it correct to say that NATO expansion has stopped at the Dniester River?

Moldova's Relations with NATO and the US

While not particularly extensive, Chisinau has developed relations with both Washington and NATO, including diplomatic visits and some policy initiatives. For example, in July 2011, two high-level Moldovan officials, Minister of Defence Vitalie Marinuta, and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and European Integration Andrei Popov visited NATO's headquarters to discuss a treaty between NATO and Chisinau. More recently, prior to NATO's May 2011 summit in Chicago, Moldovan Prime Minister Vladimir Filat visited Brussels and met with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen. The NATO official stated: "our discussions today [...] confirm our commitment to develop and deepen our partnership, which only reinforces Moldova's path towards European integration." Moldova joined NATO's Partnership for Peace program in 1994 and then signed the Individual Partnership Action Plan with the Alliance in 2010.

Furthermore, relations between Washington and Chisinau, while not particularly strong, are noteworthy. In 2010, the two countries signed a \$262 million, five-year Millennium Challenge Corporation contract for economic development and investment. In 2011 relations were furthered strengthened when U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Moldova. Nevertheless, a 2011 analysis on U.S.-Moldova relations by the Jamestown Foundation argued that "US policy toward Moldova has been replete with good intentions poorly executed, periodical gestures without continuity and

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few deliverables beyond generous US economic assistance.”

Certainly, Moldova is not a high priority for the White House, the lack of initiatives is due partly because Washington may not want to unnecessarily test Moscow’s patience, as Russia has an interest in Moldova and Transnistria’s future. Given the current minor importance of Moldova compared to other transatlantic countries, Washington probably does not desire to become a major participant in Moldova’s complicated and protracted secessionist conflict, particularly as other Western agencies, specifically the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), are already involved.[4] It is worthy to note that the current head of the OSCE Mission to Moldova is an American.

Transnistria

With all of the literature available on the history of the Transnistrian conflict, we will focus on providing some of the most recent and relevant facts.[5] The root for the conflict can be centered on tensions between the ethnic Russians living in Moldova, who were worried that, after the fall of the USSR, Moldova would enter into a political union with Romania. An important figure in the conflict was Igor Smirnov, who promulgated these concerns among the ethnic Russians while looking to become a leader within the secessionist region. A critical instigator of this situation was Moscow, as Russian troops throughout the 1992 conflict actively supported the secessionists. Russian troops remain in Moldova to this day, with Moscow stating that they are “peacekeepers” and are necessary to maintain the peace between the two sides.[6] Despite these claims, Chisinau has repeatedly called for Moscow to remove its troops from the country.

The secessionist region carried out elections on December 2011, in which Smirnov lost in the first round. Yevgeny Shevchuk, the country’s new president has been labeled as “not only the province’s first post-Soviet leader, but also the candidate that nobody expected would win and whom Russia opposed.” Nevertheless, in spite of a new leadership, the frozen status quo is maintained between Chisinau and Tiraspol. A number of options have been put forward regarding the country’s future, including the creation of some kind of confederation, so that Transnistria would enjoy a high degree of autonomy.[7] Figuring out a political system that could work in Moldova has also touched on a debate regarding the merits of federalism versus regionalism. However, political negotiations have yet to progress.[8]

In any case, it is clear that any breakthrough in negotiations will only occur if Moscow is willing to cooperate, as the secessionist region depends on Russia’s support (particularly military) to maintain its independence from Chisinau’s rule.

Russia

As previously mentioned, Moscow has an interest in the outcome of the Moldovan conflict, as has been evident since the 1992 War of Transnistria, when the Russian military supported the secessionists. Today, the Russian 14th Army continues to be deployed in Transnistria, under the notion of peacekeeping. In addition, there are still substantial amounts of USSR-era weaponry in arms depots around Transnistria, like in Colbasna village, which are guarded by Russian military servicemen. Because of its Moscow-friendly government, Transnistria, from a geo-strategic point of view, stands as an important ally of the Kremlin in south-eastern Europe. This has become even more of a necessity for Moscow as a mounting number of former Warsaw Pact members continue to join western organizations. For example, Bulgaria and Romania joined NATO in 2004, which provides NATO a firm foothold on Black Sea geopolitics. (Turkey has been a NATO member since 1952).

Nevertheless, unlike with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Moscow has stopped short of recognizing Transnistria as an independent state, and it seems content to maintain the current status quo.[9] Vladimir Socor, an analyst at the *Jamestown Foundation*, argues that “for 20 years, Russia simply ignored Moldova’s territorial integrity and sovereignty in Transnistria, but acknowledged those theoretical concepts during most of that time. More recently, Moscow often withholds even those verbal acknowledgments.”

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Recently, the Russian government proposed opening a consulate in Transnistria, a proposal that Chisinau, unsurprisingly, rejected, as this could be interpreted as another step to recognizing the separatist region as an independent state. Meanwhile, Moscow is concerned that Moldova's current government is too pro-Western for its liking and is using diplomatic and economic sanctions (a November *Reuters* article explains that Moldova is "heavily in debt to Moscow for cheap gas imports that help keep its economy afloat") to prevent this rapprochement from continuing.[10]

Analysis

Moldova's constitution states that it cannot join an international military alliance. In spite of this, it is possible that, given enough political support, this clause could be changed so that the country could join NATO in the future. However, it is doubtful that this will happen anytime soon, despite the fact that Moldova has given the occasional statement regarding its interest to join the Alliance. For example, on February 2011, Moldovan Defense Minister Valeriu Marinuta declared that joining NATO is crucial to gaining European Union membership, demonstrating that discussing a membership in the Atlantic alliance is no longer a taboo subject in his country. In addition, the Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS) published a provocative analysis in 2009 written by the Chisinau-based Institute for Development and Social Initiatives (IDSI) precisely entitled: "In NATO we Trust: Why Moldova should join NATO." Nevertheless, besides occasional declarations and academic analyses, little else has happened to further unite Chisinau and the Alliance.

In addition, there is the question of whether NATO will accept a country that has a major internal security issue (see German Chancellor Angela Merkel's negative stance to a Georgia's NATO membership bid), such as a secessionist movement. NATO members like Spain, with the Basque separatist ETA, as well as France with its occasional violence in Corsica in the Mediterranean,[11] have experienced various degrees of internal violence in the past decades, but none as politically complicated as Moldova. On the other hand, Cold War geopolitical interests helped make Turkey a NATO member in the 1950s. Ankara has remained a NATO member to this day, despite having battled PKK insurgents since the late 1970s/early 1980s. Turkey may provide an example of the Alliance accepting (and keeping as a member) a nation with significant internal security issues, but, for the time being, Moldova's geopolitical importance in south-eastern Europe is not high enough for the Alliance to take that step.

Currently there are only a handful of European states that have yet to join NATO. The list includes Western European states like Sweden, Switzerland, and microstates like Andorra and Monaco. When it comes to south-eastern Europe, besides Moldova, Albania and Ukraine, countries that were part of the former Yugoslavia, such as Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia-Herzegovina and FYROM Macedonia are also not members of NATO. At one point there was an interest in Georgia to join the Alliance, but the 2008 war with Russia put such aspirations on hold, at least temporarily.[12] Meanwhile, the May 2012 NATO summit in Chicago concluded with vague statements regarding enlargement, demonstrating that the Alliance has little interest in expanding for the time being. As a *Foreign Policy* article put it, the summit has forced "several countries to wait another two years to move toward membership in the world's premier military alliance."

If Moldova wanted to join NATO, would the Alliance welcome it? One precondition would arguably be that the issue with Transnistria would have to be resolved via some kind of agreement, like the creation of a federation-type of government. Furthermore, there is the *Realpolitik* question of how Moldova would contribute to the security of NATO. The aforementioned PASOS/IDSI analysis describes NATO's possible reluctance best by explaining that "Moldova has a dwarf military potential which can hardly contribute to the NATO military capabilities, being in fact a candidate for free riding. [A] few NATO members are also concerned about certain political costs related to a Moldova's membership in NATO, given Russia's opposition to it" (P. 43). In other words, there is little, at the present time, that Chisinau may be able to contribute to the Alliance to make it desirable as a member. At the same time, given the Georgian precedent, NATO may not want to admit a state with ongoing secessionist problems (particularly if Russia has an interest, and a military presence, in it).

Predicting the Future

Moldova and NATO: Expansion Stops at the Dniester River?

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Recently, Moldovan president Nicolae Timofti declared his interest in increasing ties with NATO, but does not want to join the military alliance. Hence, for the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that Moldova will be applying for NATO membership, particularly as it has yet to solve its issues with the separatist region of Transnistria. This doesn't mean that Chisinau-NATO and Chisinau-Washington relations are not going to continue to grow but, for that to happen, a major factor to take into account will be the future of Chisinau-Tiraspol as well as Chisinau-Moscow relations. The Moldovan government, like other former Warsaw-Pact and USSR-states, may very well try to balance Moscow's influence by approaching Western institutions with increasing frequency. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we may see a Moldovan application to NATO anytime soon. NATO expansion in south-eastern Europe, at least regarding Moldova, may have reached a frozen impasse.

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[1] Some articles that touch on Moldova's history, particularly the Transnistria War, and its effects include: Sanchez, W. Alejandro. "The 'Frozen' Southeast: How the Moldova-Transnistria Question has become a European Geo-Security Issue." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*. Apr-Jun2009, Vol. 22 Issue 2, p153-176. Also: Cojocaru, Natalia. "Nationalism and National Identity in Transnistria." *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Sciences*. Sep-Dec2006, Vol. 19 Issue 3/4, p261-272.

[2] A good analysis as to why the Moldova/Transnistria issue continues to be labeled a "frozen conflict" can be found in: Socor, Vladimir. "Transnistria Remains the only really 'frozen' conflict." *New Atlanticist* blog. Atlantic Council. January 26, 2010. Available: http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/transnistria-remains-only-really-%E2%80%9Cfrozen%E2%80%9D-conflict

[3] "NATO and the fight against terrorism." NATO website. Available: <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/76706.htm>

[4] For OSCE documents and resolutions on this conflict, see: "The Frozen Conflict in Transnistria." Document Group. Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe. Available: <http://www.osce.org/moldova/66269>

[5] See note 1. Also see: Rodkiewicz, Witold (Ed.). *Transnistrian conflict after 20 years: A Report by the International Crisis Group*. Center for Eastern Studies and the Institute for Development and Social Initiatives "Viitorul." Warsaw, Chisinau. 2011. Available: http://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/Transnistrian_Conflict_after_20_Years.pdf

[6] *Peacekeeping Operation in Transnistria*. Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. Available: http://eng.mil.ru/en/mission/peacekeeping_operations/more.htm?id=10336232@cmsArticle

Moldova and NATO: Expansion Stops at the Dniester River?

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[7] Russia proposed a confederation-type of government between Chisinau and Tiraspol in 2003. The document is known as the Kozak Memorandum. An English version of a draft of the memorandum can be found here: <http://www.stefanwolff.com/files/Kozak-Memorandum.pdf>

[8] For example, Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin rejected the Kozak Memorandum's proposal for the creation of a confederation (see note 7).

[9] Russia fought a short lived war with Georgia during the Summer of 2008. Moscow won the war and, in the aftermath, recognized Georgia's secessionist regions as independent nations. "Russia recognizes South Ossetia and Abkhazia to save people's lives." Pravda. RU. August 26, 2008. Available: http://english.pravda.ru/russia/kremlin/26-08-2008/106214-russia_ossetia_abkhazia-0/

[10] An example of growing EU-Moldova relations would be that the EU plans to send an assessment mission to the country in 2013 to discuss the liberalization of the visa regime. See: "EU assessment mission to visit Moldova in 2013." Black Sea News. December 18, 2012. Available: <http://www.blackseanews.net/en/read/51792> Also note that European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso visited Moldova in late November 2012. The visit was widely regarded as a success for Moldovan diplomacy, with political analyst Viorel Cibotaru stating that the visit marks Moldova's last stage of preparation to start negotiations on accession to the EU. See: "Top EU official's visit represents success for Moldova, analysts say." AllMoldova.com. December 1, 2012. Available: <http://www.allmoldova.com/en/moldova-news/1249054877.html>

[11] Willsher, Kim. "On Corsica, the intrigue of crime and politics claims another life." The Guardian. October 20, 2012. Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/oct/20/corsica-intrigue-crime-politics> . Also: Sanchez, W. Alejandro. "Corsica: France's Petite Security Problem." Studies in Conflict and Terrorism. July 2008 Vol. 31 (7).

[12] Some commentaries and analyses regarding Georgia's relations and security issues with NATO and Russia include: Parsons, Robert. "Georgia pays price for its NATO ambitions." The Telegraph. August 8, 2008. Available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/2524629/Georgia-pays-price-for-its-Nato-ambitions.html> . Also see: "Russia wary as Georgia cozies up to NATO." Russia Today. September 10, 2012. Available: <http://rt.com/politics/russia-nato-georgia-saakashvili-781/> . Also see: Ozkan, Gokhan. "Georgia's NATO membership within context of Black Sea dimension of 'The New Great Game.'" Journal of Black Sea Studies. Autumn2010, Vol. 7 Issue 27, p1-22.

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Moldova and NATO: Expansion Stops at the Dniester River?

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