Is the 'new regionalism' of Importance to East-West Security?

Written by Vera Michlin

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Potentially regional and sub-regional cooperation can create real and viable mechanisms to facilitate security. However, currently, 'new regionalism' in the FSU is lacking a firm basis with which to be of real importance to East-West security. Future trajectories of regional and sub-regional development are important for the post-Soviet space, as many recognise them as the best way of overcoming soft and hard security threats in the region.[1] As far as East-West security is concerned, soft security threats (like trafficking and criminal activities, which are often a result of weak government), regionalism has little relevance. However, the possible development of cooperation on this level, through regional organisations and Western assistance, can likely increase security in the region while simultaneously reducing security threats which may affect the West.

This work will look at the idea of regionalism and its link to security. It will argue that the post-Soviet space does not necessarily consist of one region in all manners, but that Eurasia, in terms of security, consists of a regional security complex. However, looking at the current conditions in the sub-regions of Eurasia, recent experiences emphasize the weakness of regionalism. Regional security is more advanced in identifying threats than constructing viable mechanisms and institutions to tackle them. An illustrative example can be drawn from both the Central Asian and the Caucasian cases. This work will try to emphasize the main linkages between regionalism and inter-regional security in the case of Central Asia.

What is a Region?

A region constitutes a physical area. But, in international relations, a definition of an area as a region refers to a certain interconnectedness of its constituent parts. Hence, domestic development in one state in the region affects other states more than developments in other parts of the world.[2] In that sense, Eurasia can be regarded as a regional security complex. Regional security complexes mean that tensions in one area can generate a spill-over and create tensions in other part of the larger region.[3] Eurasia shares certain prerequisites, which produce transnational security threats. Once these threats are identified, states are more likely to cooperate on regional level.

It is hard to define the former Soviet Union (FSU) as a region. In many senses, its various parts share no more than the Soviet legacy and a proximity to Russia. It has been argued that, as time passes, many of the NIS are likely to develop different interests and security concerns and that they will, ultimately, have very little in common, save their proximity to Russia. Nevertheless, despite the possibility of the notional collapse of the FSU, security in the FSU is still, to a large extent, interlinked. This has been especially true with regard to Russia's fear of spill-over and transnational assistance between oppositionist and separatist groups in the NIS. The colour revolutions show the difficulty of defining regionalism in the FSU in a general sense. On the one hand, there was tangible assistance and obvious transnational regional diffusion of ideas between Georgia and Ukraine. On the other hand, these revolutions were precisely targeted at breaking dependency on Russia, and, in effect, might have contributed to the weakening of the FSU as a region. The colour revolutions underscored the means by which regional trends in the FSU have often worked to undermine the notion of a broader 'region' over the long term.

Nevertheless, it is apparent that the FSU (which is the core of Eurasia), at least currently shares an increased

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interconnectedness which may classify it as a region. In a greater sense, the Western parts of Eurasia are connected to Europe, while Central Asia is connected to the northern tier of the Middle East, as well as to China.

Even when broken down into sub-regions, definitions can be evasive. For example, Central Asia is not an easily defined region. The two most obvious characteristics are the religious and the ethnic dimension shared by most Central Asian states. All Central Asian states are Sunni Muslim and all, but Tajikistan, are ethnically Turkic.[4] Both these characteristics were suppressed by the Soviet regime, and it is a contested issue as to whether these states can be regarded as forming one, singular region.[5] Nevertheless. Central Asian regimes can be identified by several characteristics which exist as potential transnational, sub-regional threats: unfavourable geographic conditions, economic underdevelopment, pan-religious and pan-ethnic mobilisation and environmental disasters.[6] Since these issues threatened the viability of the Central Asian states and their governing elites, they became to be regarded as national security threats and were addressed on the sub-regional level.[7]

Western and Eastern Perceptions of Security

As the literature on regional security points out, the addressing, and identification, of various challenges is neither centred upon one state (i.e. isolated from wider geographical context), nor it is fully global (i.e. oversteps the regional context).[8] Delineation of security complexes, i.e. regions, is one of the bases for understanding international relations and perceptions of threat. Every complex has its own centres of gravity and identifies security within that context. Hence, the need to identify a region is not only an intellectual exercise, but also an important element of understanding foreign policy on an inter-regional level.

There is a certain value gap which translates into diverging perceptions of security between liberal West European regimes and many of the semi-authoritarian or fully authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia. This is not to say that there are no points of mutual agreement. Securitisation of terrorism, for example, was seen across the board of Western and Eastern states. Under the same banner, secessionist movements and religious extremism were regarded as challenges to regional stability and international peace and security. However, there is a certain divergence on the preferred nature of domestic political process as an assurance for regional security. While Western powers, even if selectively, view democratisation as a guarantee for political stability, many regimes in the FSU see the survival of the current political elite as a prerequisite for stability and security.

Economic development and soft security threats, such as HIV, poverty, human trafficking, and narcotics are probably the one field were there is a greater overlap between Western and local threat-perceptions. In this field, the West has been willing to commit resources and make real steps towards change. Former Soviet republics, for their part, have been more cooperative with Western agents in addressing soft security. At the same time, these states have been working on the regional level to increase economic cooperation and produce safer working and environmental conditions.

The post-Soviet experience of regionalism was mixed. There has never been any disagreement that strong regional development could be a viable answer to addressing security issues in the FSU.[9] On the one hand, attempts were made to increase regional cooperation in order to overcome relative underdevelopment, and to mitigate difficulties integrating states into the global security system and global market economy. On the other hand, certain systemic obstacles and clashes of interest meant that these experiences produced limited results.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) represents the strongest body of regional cooperation in the FSU. It includes all former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic States. The CIS operates as a Military Security Framework. The military security structure is done under the Tashkent collective security agreement (1992), however, the agreement failed to develop a structure for coordination of international security.[10] In 1994, a sub-CIS group created the collective security treaty (CST), which included most CIS states. In 2002, the treaty became an organisation (CSTO). The only example of a collective CIS security operation was the peacekeeping operation in Tajikistan.[11] However, the CIS lacked legitimacy, and was seen by most of its members as a vehicle of Russian domination in the region. Thus, cooperation within the CIS was often not sufficient to facilitate real responses to regional security threats.[12]

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In Central Asia, regional cooperation has generally lagged behind. Most cooperation, in the post-Soviet era, was state centric in nature, making it fragile and not sufficiently embedded.[13] A Central Asian attempt to establish security cooperation resulted in the Central Asian Union (CAU), which cooperated with the UN and NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP). However, this organisation is constrained by bilateral relations between the Central Asian states and Russia.[14] Other initiatives by Kazakhstan were curtailed by Russia, and a Turkic or Economic Cooperation organisation (ECO) initiative is unlikely to develop a security dimension.[15] Other possibilities for regional cooperation include cooperation within the ECO, which includes Turkey, Iran and Pakistan. However, this was never fully developed, as it holds the potential of possible competition between Iran and Turkey, which only further complicates security dynamics in the region.[16]

A strong basis for regional cooperation, which emerged in the last decade, was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). SCO includes Russia, China and the Central Asian states. The SCO poses a real opportunity for regional cooperation, since it brings together the interests of two large powers. For the first 4 years of its existence, SCO was regarded as a 'talking workshop' by most Central Asian leaders, who sought cooperation on a bilateral level with Russia or the US and NATO.[17] The organisation lacked mechanisms of implementation which could make it a viable regional player, and which could provide security assurances for its members.[18] However, the situation changed in 2005, when both Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan experienced high levels of civil unrest. These events made Central Asian regimes seek security assurances among each other and from China and Russia.[19] In recent years, SCO conducted several military exercises and engaged in economic as well as military cooperation. However, so far, SCO has not managed to develop criteria for its inclusion (which hinders the development of a strong policy agenda) and lacks the apparatus to make itself a viable international organisation.

Current regional structures are not sufficient to address security concerns. First, the development of regional institutions have not constituted a strong enough trend.[20] Second, clashing security concerns between East and West meant that the importance of such development for East-West security is negligible, or even harmful. Neither of the paths of development on the regional level, available to the Central Asian states, proved itself as a viable option for East-West security concerns. The FSU path lacks real viability due to Russia's stakes in the process. Disproportionally strong Russian involvement in the CIS reduced the possibility for multilateralism and shut the door on the possibility for real cooperation on the regional level. Furthermore, concepts of East-West security are alien to the CIS process. The Middle Eastern path of development of regionalism simply did not materialise, and with Iran's current stance against the West, this path is unlikely to contribute to enhancement of East-West security. The purely regional development so far was unable to overcome the Russian obstacle, and remains an unlikely option. The SCO remains one of the most viable channels of regional development. However, the SCO is dominated by China and to a lesser degree by Russia. Both powers have limited interest in facilitating East-West security concerns and are unlikely to direct the organisation towards these goals. Nevertheless, the SCO can be useful in containing negative trends in terms of where East and West interests overlap. For example, they are more likely to strengthen Central Asian militaries, which will have positive a positive influence in containing extremist groups in troublesome areas, such as the Ferghana vally.

Future development of regional and sub regional organisations could play a real role in addressing Eastern and Western security concerns, especially in the field of soft threats. In terms of economic progress, regionalism provides Central Asian, and FSU states in general, with an attractive alternative.[21] The case for regionalism as a positive trend is particularly strong, since integration of Central Asian states into the global market economy has been complicated by their underdevelopment and relative unattractiveness to foreign investors.[22] Strengthening cooperation on a regional level will yield positive results in terms of relative developments of the states, and also in terms of their attractiveness to outside actors. The benefits of regionalism on the political level are mainly in reducing legal/bureaucratic barriers and creating incentives for incumbent regimes to make progress in the sphere of market reforms. This, in turn, will act as a catalyst for reducing soft security threats, which mostly steam from poverty and weak governance.

To conclude, since regionalism is still a weak concept in the FSU, it is hard to attribute great importance to the role it plays in East-West security. Furthermore, divergence in perceptions of security means that the mechanisms which currently operate in the FSU are unlikely to produce positive outcomes across the board. The example of Central

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Asia emphasizes and underlines these phenomena.

[1] Bartlett D. in European Journal of Development Research, Vol. 13 No.1 (2001)

[2] Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000), p.3

[3] Allison R. in Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000) (ed.), p.149

[4] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), Pp.141-142

[5] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p.141

[6] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p.147

[7] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p. 147

[8] Buzar B. and Weaver O. (2006), p.43

[9] Bartlett D. in European Journal of Development Research, Vol. 13 No.1 (2001)

[10] Allison R. in Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000) (ed.), p.150

[11] Allison R. in Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000) (ed.), p. 151

[12] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p. 148

[13] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p.151

[14] Allison R. in Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000) (ed.), p.154

[15] Allison R. in Dwan R. and Pavliuk O. (2000) (ed.), Pp.156-157

[16] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p.155

[17] Chufrin G. paper presented at the IISS, London conference '10 Years to Shanghai Cooperation Process and Regional Security Challenges', May 2006

[18] Chufrin G. paper presented at the IISS, London conference '10 Years to Shanghai Cooperation Process and Regional Security Challenges', May 2006

[19] Chufrin G. paper presented at the IISS, London conference '10 Years to Shanghai Cooperation Process and Regional Security Challenges', May 2006

[20] Gharabaghi K. in Swatuk L. and Shaw T. (ed.), (1994), p. 155

[21] Bartlett D. in European Journal of Development Research, Vol. 13 No.1 (2001)

[22] Bartlett D. in European Journal of Development Research, Vol. 13 No.1 (2001)

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