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EU Ukraine Strategy should include the Eurasian Spine

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The European Union needs to raise its head above the parapet to scan the geopolitical horizon to be able to deal more effectively with a number of key threats. This is particularly important because as Russia's illegal war of aggression rages on, Moscow has been seeking to broaden its options geographically and strategically. In particular, Europe needs to engage along the Eurasian Spine: the line stretching from the Alps to the Himalayas and beyond. The multiple conflicts festering here will affect European security, peace, and prosperity for a long time to come. Moreover, it is in the EU's enlightened self-interest to seize the opportunities for partnership presented by the Global South, enhancing in the process its own stability and security. Some of these areas in the Global South are also a source of direct threats and instability that can be exploited by Russia to aid its aggressive strategy. The EU, in a nutshell, needs to "Zoom Out" to rediscover the art it seems to have lost of playing the game of global geopolitics on multiple fronts simultaneously, backed up by hard power, in an era in which geopolitical changes will not only be persistent, but likely permanent as well.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION – AND SIZE MATTERS!

Russia is seeking to travel the highways and byways of its geography to capitalize on its twin strengths: size and location. These enable Russia to strengthen its hand in the European theatre by operating its levers in Asia. For example, circumventing trade sanctions through Iran, thus accessing the fast-growing markets of the Gulf, India, and other Southeast Asian countries. Moreover, these Asian levers offer Russia opportunities to ignite mischief, conflict, and violence. They also include a cheap source of labour from its erst-while Central Asian sister republics, thus effectively importing deflation. The Caspian Sea in particular lies at the heart of current Russian plans to create an alternative trade route through Iran and beyond to Asian markets. The geopolitical and economic consequences of the existing agreements among the littoral states of the Caspian Sea led to the de facto dominance of Russia over Caspian Sea affairs. The Caspian Sea may also be playing a key role in securing a route for Russia's arms supplies. Critically, Russia has successfully argued that these agreements place the Caspian Sea outside of the jurisdiction of the international maritime treaties, treating it as an inland sea. The practical challenges of such an advantageous position are dawning on the other littoral states, and they should also be of concern to the EU. This is particularly important given Europe's rising interest in the region as an energy source, an economic partner, and a transport link to China.

These Asia-centred levers allow Russia to broaden the scope and geographic line of its European strategy. The EU must, strategically speaking, deal with both of Russia's instruments of location, i.e., Europe and Asia, as one.

This is not new. Lest we forget: during WWII, more materiel was delivered to Russia by the Allies through the Iranian ports on the Gulf, transported subsequently by rail over Iranian territory north to the Soviet Union (i.e., to the current Azerbaijan-Iranian border), than was delivered using the Atlantic route. Victory on the Eastern (i.e., European) Front was certainly aided by utlising this (from a European perspective) far-away Asian route. In the post-WWI period already, France and Britain made strategic pronouncements on the futures of the post-imperial East and Central European and Baltic dominions in parallel with making policy on the future of the two Straits, the Levant, Persia, and the Caucasus.

To completely bypass the European theatre is an old Russian playbook. It will be a strategic error on the EU's part to focus exclusively on its immediate east. The Russian activities along the Eurasian Spine, if successful, will have a direct and significant bearing on Europe's strategy in Ukraine, as well as on Europe's future security.

REDISCOVERING MAPS

Throughout its history, Russia has been adept at playing its hand along the Eurasian Spine. During the "Great Game", the Anglo-Russian competition in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Imperial Russia's activity ultimately resulted in an agreement with Britain that north of the Spine became a Russian sphere of influence, and south of the line the British equivalent, protecting the route to India. From Russia's perspective, as articulated by the last Tsarist Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov (the most under-read and under-rated Russian strategic thinker), one of the ultimate aims of playing a hard geopolitical game along the Eurasian Spine was to secure Russia's interests in Europe, particularly in the two Straits, the Dardanelles and the Bosporus, linking the Black Sea with the Mediterranean, as well as in other European regions to the east. It was, in effect, a purist (i.e., extreme) form of how geography determines the way in which strategic interests are defined in a very practical manner.

Europe is at risk of providing the illustration for the other extreme of the spectrum: ignoring geography and focusing on the softer aspects of international affairs, led by culture and values, with a limited regard for the deeper geographic and historical contexts. This approach risks weakening the rigour required, away from emotions, to deliver on the desired objectives in the exercise of the different forms of power.

RUSSIA-IRAN COOPERATION

The Russian-Iranian cooperation on transportation and trade into Asia, born out of a mutual need to bypass sanctions, is growing rapidly alongside their military cooperation across the Caspian. The international press reported that Russia is jointly developing with Iran, at a cost of US$25 billion, a new 3000km trade corridor for the former's transcontinental trade that is, in principle, beyond the reach of "foreign" intervention, including the sanctions imposed on both countries. It stretches from the eastern edge of Europe to the Indian Ocean, through a network of rivers and railways that are linked by the Caspian Sea. In addition to bypassing sanctions, this route opens the fast-growing Asian markets, particularly the Gulf, India, and ASEAN. It also establishes a sanctions-proof supply chain.

The route stretches from the Sea of Azov and the mouth of the River Don (another reason for Russia to try to hold onto the Crimea), through a network of river, sea and rail connections, to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the choke point of the Strait of Hormuz. Iran claims that Russia will grant Iranian ships the right of passage along the Russian inland waterways of the Volga and the Don rivers. Iran's Mehr News Agency reported that the first such journey was undertaken to ship 12 million tons of Russian grain bound for India transiting Iran. In September Putin explicitly outlined the plans for the route. Russia considers Iran as a logistical bridge in this massive undertaking. Russian exports to Iran surged by 27% YoY in 2022 to US$5 billion. The two countries are aiming to achieve US$40 billion through a Free Trade Agreement. Moreover, in July 2022 Gazprom and National Iranian Oil Company signed a deal worth US$40 billion for joint investment in oil and gas projects. In the same period the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines Group invested US$10 million in Solyanka Port on the Volga River with the aim of doubling the cargo capacity to 85,000 tons a month, possibly the first of a series of such investments.

INDIA: A GENERATIONAL OPPORTUNITY BECKONS FOR THE EU

India should be the big prize in any European Eurasian Spine strategy. India, with its long and strong relationship with Russia stretching back decades, has not signed up to the sanctions. It continues to be one of the largest buyers of Russian oil through Gulf intermediaries and traders (i.e., inter-Asian trade along the Spine). Between April to December 2022 alone, Indian imports of Russian crude oil rose to US$21.7 billion from $0.94 billion in the entire period 2020-2021. This corresponded to an increase, as a percentage of total crude imports, from only 0.2% to 17.1%. This reflects both countering domestic pressures to blunt inflation on the one hand, and keeping Russia engaged with India to help counter-balance China's relationship with Russia, given Indo-Chinese tensions, on the other.

Crucially for Europe, and despite these figures and geopolitical dynamics, India is executing a difficult balancing act as it attempts to diversify its defence and industrial supply chains away from dependence on Russia, as well as secure food and fertilizers. Its leadership position in the Global South should add significant further impetus to an invigorated European approach to India. It hosted the Global South Summit in January 2023. The EU should capitalize on the excellent French success in building advanced defence links with India. India's relationship with Russia is interest-based in a narrow sense, as there are no shared values, which should provide an excellent foundation for deepening Indo-European relations. This Indian attempt to shift away from Russia and into a middle ground represents a key generational opportunity for Europe. To grasp it, Europe should go the extra mile to help create space for India's new strategic paradigm (that includes membership of the Quad, and closer links with France and Israel) as an integral part of its Eurasian Spine strategy. In addition, such a development will help counter, strategically, China's efforts to develop much closer ties along the Eurasian Spine with other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Council.

SPINE PLAYERS, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL, FILLING THE GEOPOLITICAL VACUUM

Geopolitics abhors vacuums. The US's significantly reduced engagement along the Spine (epitomized for example by the withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the reluctance to support the Gulf states against Iranian-backed Houthi attacks), has played a key role in re-arranging the deck chairs. Noteworthy in this regard is the Chinese spectacular success in recently reconciling Saudi Arabia and Iran, two avowed archenemies. The US has dominated regional geopolitical developments since WW2 in the Gulf region. This Chinese achievement is a clear indication that its aim of playing a significant role along the Spine is bearing fruit in a key part of it- the part that delivers energy and sits at the geographic crossroads between Europe and Asia. China has already secured rights to use the Pakistani Port of Gwadar on the shores of the Arabian Sea just 120KM from the border with Iran and has been negotiating rights to use the Iranian Port of Chabahar, on the other side of the Pakistani-Iranian border. These developments will have both short and long term implications for European interests. It isn't just China. Russia is attempting to maintain its significant influence in Syria, i.e., in the Mediterranean. Putin held a summit meeting recently with Syrian President Bashar Al Assad that reportedly included discussing the Syrian-Turkish relationship and possible outcomes for the conflict along the Turkish-Syrian border. The outcome of these discussions will have a direct impact on European interests and relations with Turkey. Syria is also being rehabilitated by other Arab states, starting with Saudi, UAE and Oman, whilst the Saudi-Iranian agreement, under Chinese patronage, is very likely to have dealt with Lebanon's failed state and economy status. This should be of direct European interest and concern. There are roughly 3 million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon (Lebanon's total indigenous population is roughly 4 million), where the banking and health systems have collapsed. All these dangerous dynamics are taking place barely 200KM from Cyprus, i.e., from the EU's own border. Berlin, geopolitically speaking, is that close to the Levant. Migration pressures, and Hybrid operations inducing such pressures, are a very realistic scenario to contemplate given the dire state of affairs in Lebanon. Moreover, protecting the maritime border demarcation agreement between Lebanon and Israel, that itself enabled an agreement to be reached on the offshore gas fields, should be a top European priority because a key part of the diversification strategy away from Russian gas depends on how the politics of Lebanon and Syria will evolve. The future of the Eastern Mediterranean Pipeline will depend on gas production in these fields. The significant narcotics trafficked through the region is another reason that should excite direct European engagement. This is not just a criminal concern. It is also a terrorism threat as the nexus between criminal and terrorist activities continues to thrive.

The Eurasian Spine isn't part of how the EU thinks about its geostrategic interests nowadays and seems to be absent in the calculations on the current Ukraine war. It wasn't always thus. This causes a serious gap in developing Europe's strategic approach to Russia. Beyond Russia, it is also a weakness in Europe's own security strategy where the Spine runs through Europe's neighbourhood. For centuries, this is what European leaders fully understood.

CONFLICTS IN EUROPE'S NEIGHBOURHOOD WILL ENGENDER INSTABILITY

This is particularly the case in the Levant, the southern Caucasus and Africa. Any conflagration in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to cause a resurgence in Islamist extremism and Jihadist terrorism along the Spine (Afghanistan being a prime candidate). Reliable reporting from Afghanistan indicates that the Taliban (and allies) remain wedded to its old ways. This is not reassuring, particularly if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict takes on a distinctly religious tone. Other Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan, as well as Pakistan, are also concerned about triggers in the complex Afghani equation. These scenarios could open the door yet again to security, radicalization, and terrorism concerns on European soil.

In addition, both Iran and Russia command pole positions in Syria (and the former also in Lebanon) with plenty of appetite for hybrid mischief on Europe's doorsteps, whether through disinformation, migratory pressures, undersea operations against critical infrastructure, or terrorist and criminal activities. Any conflagration that will involve Iran, including in the Caucasus, or in the case of an Israeli strike on Iran, will not only lead to kinetic military activities stretching potentially from the southern Caucasus to the shores of the Mediterranean, but it will also likely lead to (even a weakened) Hezbollah to activate its operations, including potentially strengthening their cooperation with Russia in Central Africa.

The EU also urgently needs to accurately gauge the consequences of war in the southern Caucasus. It is unlikely that any such conflagration will be contained either geographically or geopolitically. It will draw in Turkey and Israel on the side of Azerbaijan, and Russia and Iran on the side of Armenia. A key risk is for the current low intensity, under-the-radar Israeli-Iranian military conflict to turn into a very high intensity war as a result of a war in the Caucasus, dragging in the different protagonists, such as Turkey and the Gulf states, on broader fronts. Russia and Iran seem set to deepen their cooperation across the board. The Great Powers may not be able to remain uninvolved given the current patterns of alliances and military deployments. Such dynamics of extreme geopolitical and security volatility are already being exacerbated by the impact of a weaker and distracted Russia on maintaining the unstable status quo between Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as on the geopolitics of, and balances in, Central Asia. This is not a faraway conflict in distant lands. It is not difficult to see how such an entangled web of competing and conflicting interests will directly impact Europe as it links the conflict in the Caucasus to Europe through the Levant, Turkey, and the Mediterranean and Black Seas. It wouldn't be the first time that a conflict on Europe's periphery, left to fester, led to a catastrophic outcome.

THE WAY FORWARD

For the EU to continue to protect, defend and promote its interests, in a manner that will deliver on the outcomes it seeks in this geopolitical contest with Russia, it will need to effectively counter Russia's strategy. As Russia seeks to broaden its line and scope of confrontation, Europe should respond by broadening its global engagement along the Eurasian Spine, and more generally with the Global South as an equal partner. This should be accompanied by a step-change in Europe's communication strategy with regards to the scale of its engagement. This aspect of communication is integral to the effectiveness of its engagement, and should not be seen as a poor addendum, or an afterthought.

The Global Gateway should acquire a "Belt & Road" branding and perceptional quality: the intended outcome is for the target societies to automatically think that if it is European then it must be Global Gateway, and vice versa. Nothing illustrates this better than the Albanian example in Europe's own continent: polling shows that more than 70% of Albanians think that China is the biggest investor in the country. It isn't: Europe in fact is. Moreover, all strategic dialogues, such as that with India, must consider Europe's counter parties' interests seriously and in a practical manner, such as in their distinct lack of enthusiasm for the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM). The modus operandi of Europe's global engagement pre-Ukraine must urgently and flexibly adapt to the realities of this brave new world post-Ukraine.

This leads to another key element in building the engagement of the future: Europe needs to eschew double standards in international relations. This latter requirement will become increasingly critical if Europe is to convince the rest of the world that the war of aggression against Ukraine is not "just a European war". Mao famously called the two World Wars the "European Civil wars". We are at risk of a similar perception taking hold. India's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, stated in June 2022 that "Europe has to grow out of the mindset that Europe's problems are the world's problems, but the world's problems are not Europe's problems". German Chancellor Olaf Scholz quoted the Indian Foreign Minister during the 2023 Munich Security Conference, acknowledging that Europe needs to engage differently. But time is of the essence, and inertia is the enemy of change: the EU needs to act with a sense of urgency and flexibility in departing from "business as usual".

Another key strategic objective of sustained engagement should be to garner and secure votes in the UN General Assembly and the various international standard-setting organisations. It will be difficult to continue to have international legitimacy without UN support. This is also relevant for any future UN resolutions on Ukraine and Russia. If we aim to garner support in the UNGA we will need to better understand that this is a numbers game. It is clearly not too soon to double down on engagement with the Global South and deal with the threats posed along the Spine.

Russia's classic strategic thinking, historically, enlisted actors and geopolitical features along its entire geographic environment to deliver, simultaneously, both advantages for itself as well as instability to its nemeses. The mix may look new and pregnant with factors of instability and unpredictability, but it is also as old a geography itself. We are in one sense dealing with the revenge of geography. Maps should start to accompany all value-laden hopeful statements and all expressions of concern, for hope is not a strategy, and concern is not a policy.

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