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How the West Helps Putin Fulfill His CIS Strategy

By Elkhan Nuriyev

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Western democracies fear Russia's power so much that the U.S. and the European Union are actively striving to prevent President Vladimir Putin from reintegrating the Commonwealth of Independent States countries into a Eurasian Union. Fully aware of the competitive nature of today's multipolar world, Washington and Brussels do not believe that Russia can be a reliable, significant and responsible contributor to international security and order. Russia, in turn, demands that Western powers behave as equal strategic partners in the global arena.

Indeed, the Russian factor plays a key role in the unfolding security situation in the CIS region. Despite outside strategic concerns like the ongoing crises in Ukraine, the North 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 major potential in resolving security issues in their own backyard.

More recently, Moscow has succeeded in strengthening ties with Yerevan and Baku, with the West progressively losing ground to increasing Russian economic, military and political

advancement in the South Caucasus, as evidenced by Russia's military agreement with Armenia and growing energy ties with Azerbaijan. Similar steps have been taken toward Central Asian states where incumbent regimes do not want the West to interfere in their internal affairs. Moscow is trying to create strong new content-based relations with CIS countries, and all the latest political steps by the Kremlin have been aimed at enhancing Russia's geopolitical position in the post-Soviet Eurasia.

Russia's successful foreign policy in the region also results from the failure of other international players in the area, or at least the systemized weakening of their stances. U.S. President Barack Obama's shortsighted policy has seriously weakened U.S. strategic objectives in the CIS. Washington's failure to craft any coherent vision as to how the post-Soviet territory fits into broader U.S. strategy has allowed its role to be increasingly defined through the prism of Russia. The lack of a meaningful U.S. response to the challenge presented by the protracted conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr not only highlights the low level of U.S. engagement in the conflict-torn regions but also casts doubt on the U.S.' ability to be an effective player in international organizations like the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Likewise, the EU lacks a visionary and principled approach in its policy toward resolving post-Soviet regional security issues. Brussels has practically no role in conflict settlement and therefore does not have the necessary tools to intervene in the peace process, offering only confidence-building activities. Such a situation strongly limits the influence of the EU in the CIS and dramatically hinders Brussels' capacity to formulate meaningful policy to deal with simmering secessionist conflicts.

This means that U.S.-EU policies are neither balanced, nor coordinated. Instead of earning credibility as mediators and security guarantors, Washington and Brussels have so far failed to create win-win situations for the parties involved in the conflict resolution process and demonstrated their inability to push pro-Western CIS countries for wider regional integration. It is thus no surprise that Western powers are 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.

Consequently, Russia is seen as essentially having a monopoly over reshaping the contours of regional security architecture in the region. While the Kremlin seeks to cause Euro-Atlantic security arrangements in the region to disintegrate, Western powers simply underestimate Russia's increased role in orchestrating today's geopolitical processes in post-Soviet Eurasia. The Kremlin may be successful in helping some CIS countries resolve ethnic conflicts, thus fostering greater stability of the entire region. Most local leaders know full 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. Some states may decide that Russia is not necessarily their main threat, and instead view Moscow as a natural ally against domestic and external threats.

U.S.-EU geopolitical intrigues about regime change in Ukraine have resulted in a new cycle of tensions between Russia and the West. A renewal of their strained relations could easily

contribute to the future isolation of the CIS region. It appears that Russia is rethinking whether it should join a united and peaceful Europe. 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 of the state. A stronger Russia than in the 1990s may further enhance its geopolitical clout in various, subtle ways so as to develop and execute problem-solving scenarios that would gratify not only Russia's interests but also the entire post-Soviet neighborhood. Such a move could urge CIS political leaders to accept the Kremlin's rules and eventually integrate their countries into a Eurasian Union.

Yet the Kremlin seems to be waiting for a suitable time and favorable circumstances before putting Russia's weight behind a solution to regional security issues in the region: when a new, beneficial geopolitical situation that fits well into Russia's strategic interests is finally formed in the post-Soviet space. Until this happens, Russia in the near term appears to prefer a "managed instability" to a breakthrough or, in other words, a frozen solution to a lasting stability. The failure of the West to get proactive in CIS affairs demonstrates its inability to build international support around interests that are in competition with Russian ones.

Still, the more pressure the West applies on Moscow regarding CIS affairs, the sooner Putin will move forward with materializing his plan for Russia's neighbors — a Eurasian Union. What Western powers and Russia really need at present is a cooperative security dialogue based on mutual trust, respect and openness that may help them better understand and meet their international obligations. Otherwise, neither the West nor Russia will be capable of confronting future challenges and threats in the 21st century.

Elkhan Nuriyev, a former director of the Center for Strategic Studies in Azerbaijan, is advisory board member at the Caucasus Institute for Democratic Integration in Tbilisi.

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