

WHEN OUTSIDERS

Countries targeted by Russia
or other external actors must
develop an internal resilience

INTERFERE





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Azeri soldiers prepare to fight ethnic Armenian separatists in the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh in October 1992.

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The post-World War II era has been one of increasing international cooperation and the empowerment of multinational institutions. But the Euro-Atlantic area is facing a new division. Some states would like to return to the Westphalian international order and its inherent strong state sovereignty in the hope of avoiding international interference in their internal affairs. For the Russian Federation, this concept is the foundation of its foreign policy and, as pronounced by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on numerous occasions, Russia believes a majority of states share this view.

Certainly, this view appeals to leaders who seize power and do their utmost to perpetuate that power. However, it is doubtful most of Europe agrees. Many Europeans live in a post-Westphalian world where states, societies and people interact freely, human rights matter more than state sovereignty and globalization, in spite of its downsides, is regarded as advantageous — an engine that creates more affluence for everybody. Nevertheless, a state's behavior rarely follows neat theoretical constructs. States that tout noninterference often claim the right to interfere in the affairs of others, and even liberal countries occasionally object to having the same standards apply to them that they apply to others. Still, there are limits to relativity; it is nearly universally acknowledged that living in Sweden or Germany is better than living in North Korea or Somalia.

States use various justifications for interfering, often pointing to values and interests, historical and ethnic links, or anything else they see fit. On a more concrete level, states use various grievances, such as discrimination against, or mistreatment of, minorities (or in extreme cases, genocide) to legitimize interference. Those who view international relations through the lens of international law should be aware that many instances of interference are within the rules. States have an elementary interest in influencing their environment favorably. However, the fact some interactions are legal does not mean they are welcome, and legal equality is distinct from military or economic equality. Thus, states and societies must develop a capacity to resist and react to challenges in order to restore equilibrium. Call this “resilience.” In extreme situations, resilience is how states and societies resist collapse under the weight of disastrous events.

Resilience is only possible if the state and society anticipate the potential consequences of events, be they man-made, caused by natural disaster, or the result of internal or external challenges. Consequently, resilience is contextual; its many forms are dependent on the environment. It is also contextual in the sense that each state and society prioritizes the threats and challenges against which it develops resilience. Resilience incorporates governance, the cohesion and support of society and state capacity, which can be developed with the help of internal and external forces.

Protracted conflicts

The area of the former Soviet Union — a strange term to describe a group of countries 25 years after the Soviet state dissolved — has the characteristic features of a regional

security complex; its security relationships can be interpreted only in connection with each other. However, it stops short of being a security community, characterized by intense cooperation among the parties and a prohibition on war against each other. It is worth noting that these countries, long part of the same country, cannot always establish harmonious relationships today. Fortunately, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was largely peaceful, though violent conflicts erupted in its final years and, more recently, after its demise.

The term protracted conflicts refers to those in a lasting stalemate with little promise of resolution. Introduced in the post-Soviet era, the concept addressed a number of conflicts in the south Caucasus and one in Moldova. None of those conflicts has been resolved, and new ones have emerged. The term is arbitrary in two senses: The geographical scope of its application is confined to the west and southwest of the post-Soviet space (excluding other conflicts of lower intensity, such as in Central Asia), and the conflicts to which the term refers are in different phases of the conflict management cycle.

In 2014, two conflicts broke out within Ukraine's borders — with the significant involvement of Russia, including its armed forces — after mass demonstrations against the political course set by Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, resulted in his ouster. Other conflicts, such as those in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea, have been terminated but not resolved. This is negative peace without positive peace. Still others, such as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, threaten to return to high-intensity violence.

It is open to question which divisions or social cleavages are at the root of these conflicts and what contributes to their perpetuation, meaning there is a need for sober analysis on how to overcome these divisions. Although the protracted and potentially protracted conflicts do not have identical roots, a few common characteristics can be identified:

- Most protracted conflicts date to the decline of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s/early 1990s. The oppressive Soviet central apparatus weakened significantly, allowing a freer expression of disagreements in some societies and caused the unified “Soviet people,” which turned out to be little more than a popular illusion, to splinter into groups formed from the Soviet Union's constituent nationalities. Hence, long-suppressed ethno-national animosities resurfaced.
- Questions also arose regarding territorial arrangements that the Soviet leadership once regarded as insignificant. The nearly bloodless dissolution of the Soviet Union in accordance with the *uti possidetis* principle was a great achievement. However, it gave way to some centripetal tendencies that drove smaller entities toward *de facto* autonomy, or even attempts at *de jure* separation. Russia was not immune, either, though central power was sufficiently strong, and a determined use of force against Chechen separatists maintained its territorial integrity. Other less determined, less powerful states have been less able to rebuff separatism. Russia capitalized on this weakness by forcibly annexing Crimea from Ukraine.

- Often, these conflicts had an ethnic basis. It is clear that the Abkhaz did not feel accommodated in Georgia, something they made clear even while Georgia was still part of the Soviet Union. And South Ossetians understandably felt closer to their ethnic brethren across the border in Russia's Republic of North Ossetia-Alania than to Georgians. The Transnistria-Moldova conflict is somewhat similar, because the ethnic mix in Transnistria is different from that in the rest of Moldova. This dates to the historical reasons that Moldova's (and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova's) current state borders are not identical to the historical borders that predated World War II. Last, but not least, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict revolves around a combination of territorial and ethnic issues.
- Those factors do not offer a full explanation of every protracted conflict, because other factors may have complementary roles. Economic factors, including the level of development and trade patterns, play a role, as is clearly the case in both Transnistria and Ukraine's Donbas (Donetsk and Luhansk). Both areas are more industrialized and have traditionally generated a higher per capita gross domestic product (GDP) than the national average. Their economies are linked far more to Russia than to the rest of the countries to which they belong. Before the conflict broke out in 2014, 70 percent of the Donbas' external trade was with Russia, and the share (if not the volume) has since increased. Hence, people there are understandably supportive of building connections with the main economic partner. Russia may be a relatively small player in the world economy, representing less than 2 percent of the world's GDP, but it still accounts for more than half of the GDP of the 12 former Soviet republics.
- Although neither Transnistria nor the Donbas has a Russian ethnic majority, their cultural, civilizational and linguistic links with Russia are extensive. In South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the linguistic and cultural links to Russia are important because their national languages are so small that exclusive reliance on them would marginalize societies where most members possess Russian passports anyway.

Living with stalemate

Conflicts in another region, Sub-Saharan Africa, provide a clearer picture of the prospects for resolving protracted conflicts in Europe. There is agreement that the chances for resolution improve when warring parties reach a state of mutually hurting stalemate and seek to attenuate the pain of maintaining the status quo by negotiating. This would seem to apply to the conflicts in the former Soviet Union; however, the situation is far more complex for a variety of reasons. Most important, these conflicts cannot be isolated from the roles of external players.

All of these protracted conflicts include external participation/involvement. External actors' roles are multilevel and multilayered. These include guaranteeing one party to the

conflict — most often a separatist entity — security, economic contributions and access to internationally recognized travel documents. Hence, external sources offset the pain and cost of stalemate. Russia plays this role in most conflicts in the post-Soviet region. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia — two entities that Russia recognized as independent states, helping them go beyond de facto separation — this role is clearly visible, though Moscow could not generate much international support for its action. In Ukraine, the situation is similar; Crimea was annexed by Russia and now lives on and contributes to the Russian budget. The Donbas would not survive independently and increasingly looks like a Russian economic outpost, while Transnistria has been in a similar situation for decades. Nagorno-Karabakh is the only protracted conflict in which Moscow does seem to be a direct contributor to its perpetuation. There, Moscow has been contributing to crisis stability by backing Armenia to balance Azerbaijan's military superiority, thus guaranteeing Armenia's continued control of the territory it occupied by force.



An ethnic Armenian soldier in the Nagorno-Karabakh defense forces adjusts the aim of an artillery piece during a flare-up in the long-simmering conflict with Azerbaijan. REUTERS

In most cases, Russia is an indispensable external factor in guaranteeing that the parties remain in the status quo. However, Moscow does not see its role as external. It does not view the end of the Soviet Union as the end of its controlling interests in the region and has maintained a patronizing role. Russia moved from ignoring the post-Soviet space in the first half of the 1990s to a policy of dominating relations within "its" region for more than two decades since. Russia's primary objective has been to keep outside powers from interfering in regional conflicts. Aware of its relative weakness and perceiving that change would not be in its interest, Moscow long favored the status quo. However, due to its economic upswing supported by higher prices for its main export commodities, primarily oil and natural gas, Russia felt increasingly entitled to use its power to interfere and change the status quo to its



Masked Russian soldiers take up positions around a Ukrainian military base in Crimea in March 2014, as Russia illegally occupied and later annexed the territory. GETTY IMAGES

liking. This is often described as a move from Russian revisionism to revanchism. It is fully understandable that a great power tries to capitalize when circumstances are favorable; however, using force to realize its political objectives crosses a line when it deprives its partners of political independence. Russia did this in Georgia in 2008 and has been doing so in Ukraine since 2014. A country that is disrespectful of the sovereignty of its neighbors undermines its argument for a sovereignty-based system. This classic double standard is familiar in the international system and in the structural version of the realist school of international relations.

Russia's influence

How should Russia's involvement in the post-Soviet conflicts be assessed? Is Russia simply trying to maximize its power to assert itself as an indispensable regional leader? Or is Russia trying to establish a ring of loyal partners and allies in its natural sphere of influence? Did Russia cause or contribute to protracted conflicts in order to curtail the influence of other external players from the West? All of these factors play a role.

For more than 15 years, Russia has maintained that the international system should be multipolar and Russia should be one of its poles. Although there can be a multipolar international order without Russia forming one of its poles,

it is understandable that Moscow regards itself as entitled to that position. In fact, Russia is a de facto power because of its geographical size, nuclear arsenal, diplomacy and hydro-carbon reserves. However, Russia is unimpressive in other areas: It is not a role model for most countries, nor does it produce world-class consumer products, be it automobiles, mobile phones or computers. Although its public diplomacy has improved greatly, the annexation of Crimea and Russia's subversive military presence in the Donbas undermine its credibility. Nevertheless, Russia knows that relative power matters and seeks to maximize it.

Russia needs followers in order to increase its weight in the international system. Although it has massive influence in some countries, e.g., Syria or Iran, the number of staunch followers remains limited. It is easiest to gain influence in its natural sphere, the post-Soviet space. However, Russia alienates some partners with an impatient, often reckless coercive policy. Some countries are reluctant to associate with Russia beyond what is absolutely necessary. Others, short of alternatives, such as Belarus, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, follow with more or less hesitation, while still others are affected by protracted conflicts, such as Armenia and Moldova. Consequently, a number of other factors contribute to enticing states to follow Moscow, such as small economies, poor natural resource bases

and insufficient support from other sources of political and economic power. The economies of Armenia, the Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova and Tajikistan are smaller than \$30 billion each, making their dependence on Russia existential. The largest five economies in the post-Soviet space are all natural resource exporters and, with one exception, producers. This means that no post-Soviet state has found its way to self-enrichment, though Georgia (No. 6 among the 12 post-Soviet states) has made progress. Therefore, protracted conflict alone does not result in voluntary self-subjugation. Rather, protracted conflicts play

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a contributing role to the acceptance of Russian superiority, though each case is different and requires independent analysis:

- Armenia's case is crystal clear: Without the backing of Russia, both bilaterally and as a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, it would be enormously difficult for Armenia to withstand Azerbaijan's military and economic advantages and maintain control of Nagorno-Karabakh.
- For Moldova, it would be difficult to compensate for the massive asymmetry between the parties and its multidimensional dependence on Russia; however, with skillful politics (attracting the European Union as an alternative trade partner) and multilateralization of dispute settlement related to the Transnistria conflict, Moldova has been able to avoid full dependency.
- Georgia has lost its secessionist territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and there is practically no chance that they will return to Georgian rule. However, Georgia has been developing rapidly since reforms initiated by former President Mikheil Saakashvili. In spite of a somewhat controversial record, Georgia will remain the state that has successfully broken out of the post-Soviet paradigm. It has massively reduced corruption, consolidated good governance and attracted foreign direct investment on a level unique for a country without large reserves of natural and energy resources.
- Ukraine's protracted conflicts have been relatively short-lived and thus it may be premature for predictions. However, in spite of certain governance shortcomings in Kyiv, Ukrainian society has demonstrated a cohesion that curtails the chances of returning to the political *status quo ante*. Nevertheless, it could be concluded that the territorial status quo has changed, because Crimea may well remain part of the Russian Federation, despite the illegality of the annexation. It is important to note that the conflicts between Ukraine and Russia have not resulted in increased influence of Moscow over Kyiv, although they are elevating Russia's international notoriety.

In sum, protracted conflicts clearly result in increased Russian influence as an intervening partner or direct party. This offers other external players some room to maneuver, although it would be best not to imply that a geopolitical contest is under way in the post-Soviet space between Russia and the West.

The conflict management mechanisms dedicated to protracted conflicts are unsatisfactory. These conflicts are being managed, rather than resolved. This is understandable when the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) plays a major role. The OSCE is an inclusive institution where every participating state has an equal role in decision-making. Its decisions are made by consensus and every state has a veto. The organization does not have strong enforcement mechanisms. Hence, decisions fall to the states and their willingness to seek resolution. Furthermore, in many cases the status quo is not sufficiently unbearable to precipitate change. This certainly applies to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Crimea, three conflict zones where the new territorial status quo holds, and it is largely true for Transnistria. In the remaining two cases, the situation is volatile and the conflicts are furthest from being frozen; however, the status quo has held in Nagorno-Karabakh for 23 years and, irrespective of the heated propaganda exchanges between Baku and Yerevan, there is some accommodation. In the Donbas, finding a resolution is more complicated because the direct and indirect parties want to change the political, but not necessarily the territorial, status quo.

Conclusions

- Most protracted conflicts have not reached the phase of "mutually hurting stalemate," inhibiting sufficient motivation to find a resolution. If external players — who may not always regard themselves as external to the conflict — stop exerting influence and support, this could change. However, it may result in "defreezing" the conflict and a return to violent escalation.
- Political actors may keep the conflict on the domestic political agenda and develop support for their agenda by declaring an external adversary. Nevertheless, people act in their best interests. The longer a protracted conflict holds, the more societies adjust and people find ways to get on with their lives.
- The involvement of Russia — the only great power that does not regard itself an external actor — in protracted conflicts has seldom resulted in additional leverage over the conflicting parties.
- Conflict management mechanisms and institutions stop short of effectively seeking resolutions. The power of international organizations is often too limited to achieve radical change, and that contributes to the perpetuation of the conflicts. □