



HOW THE ARAB SPRING COULD INFLUENCE INTERNAL AFFAIRS IN CENTRAL ASIA AND RUSSIA BY GRAEME P. HERD, GENEVA CENTRE FOR SECURITY POLICY

egime change has rippled across North Africa – first in Tunisia, next in Egypt, then Libya. Its effects have been felt in Yemen and Bahrain and now Syria totters on the brink of implosion. On the eve of the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, might "revolutionary contagion" once again become a driving dynamic in Eurasia? Throughout 2011, the media and analysts debated the causes, course and possible consequences of the Arab Spring, including the potential of direct spillover into Eurasia. The Arab Spring has also implicitly challenged the viability of existing United States, NATO, Russian and European Union strategic approaches to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), especially the assumptions upon which these approaches rested, and raised the question: What are the implications of such reassessment and recalibrations to European-Eurasian relations?

# ARAB SPRING, EURASIAN WINTER?

The commonalties between the Arab Spring in the MENA region and conditions on the ground in Eurasia are apparent: Enduring inequalities and dignity deficits continue, long-standing authoritarian republicanism remains in place, intra-regional transnational societal spillover potential is ever-present, and resource distribution and allocation is explained by pre-existing family, clan, tribal, ethnic, religious and gender allegiances and animosities. These commonalities have little resonance in Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, more so in Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan and are most striking in Central Asia. In Central Asia, authoritarian incumbents in Kazakhstan

and Uzbekistan have held power for more than 20 years. Dignity deficits are well attested. Food price hikes and electricity cuts in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are ongoing, and border regimes are opaque. Transparency International, in its most recent "Corruptions Perceptions Index," ranks Kyrgyzstan 164th, Tajikistan 154th and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan tied at 172nd out of 178 states surveyed (Kazakhstan is 105th).

However, important differences are apparent between MENA conditions and those in Central Asia. First, the post-Soviet authoritarian equilibrium differs from that in the Arab world. The ruling elites in Central Asia – the "selectrocracies" – are centered on the presidential family, cronies (friends of the leading family) and leaders of business conglomerates. In contrast to the MENA region, the highest ranks within the military and security services are not visible parts of this power nexus. The Egyptian military, for example, holds a symbolic as well as functional role. The army holds status as the core state institution (founded in 1953) and a guardianship function, being at once above politics and the embodiment of the state itself (despite the fact that it supplies presidents). In Egypt, the military, as a classical state structure and institution, was able to stand above the fray, maintain its legitimacy, and intervene for the good of society to "restore order." In Central Asia the military reflects the state of the region's infrastructure - it is degraded and crumbling. Defense of the regime remains the role and function of elite military units there. In addition, in accordance with Soviet tradition, militaries are firmly under civilian control. If an Arab Spring scenario did occur in Central Asia,

would indigenous militaries be willing or able to fill the resulting security vacuum?

Second, the notion that revolutionary "contagion" will spread from the MENA region to Eurasia is dismissed by political elites, although the explanations put forward to suggest "immunity" from contagion differ in detail. The general claim is that there is an inherent predisposition and preference for gradualist reform in Central Asia rather than revolution. The burden of history has inoculated Tajikistan, which, based on its 1992-97 civil war, still suffers from revolution fatigue. Rather than being the object of an Arab Spring spillover, President Roza Otunbaeva argued that the Kyrgyz revolution of April 2010 provided the model that gave impetus to the Arab Spring of early 2011. The massacre in Andijon in Uzbekistan in 2005 and the clashes in Osh and Jalal-Abad in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 demonstrate that what little discontent exists is localized rather than widespread and can remain contained. Leadership change had occurred already in Turkmenistan in 2007, when President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov took power after the death of Saparmurat Niyazov, thus nullifying any Arab Spring scenario. President Nursultan Nazerbayev of Kazakhstan renewed his presidential mandate with "free and fair" elections in 2011.

Lastly, in contrast to the EU, NATO and U.S. strategic approaches to the MENA region, the most powerful regional actors and institutions in Eurasia - the Russian Federation/Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and China/Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – are conservative and cast normative shadows which strongly support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states. This solidarity is buttressed by both 9/11 and the legitimation of pre-existing anti-radical Islamist narratives, and by their unified understanding of the nature of "Color Revolutions" in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan and their commitment to oppose their export by Western security services in collusion with nongovernmental organizations.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev rejected the notion that "Middle East-style scenarios" could occur in Russia and somewhat cryptically reinforced the notion of a conspiracy to destabilize the state: "They prepared such a scenario for us previously. And now they will try to put it into practice. But in any case, they will not succeed."3

The December 4, 2011, Duma elections resulted in United Russia gaining less than 50 percent of the vote (238 out of 450 seats) and street protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg called for fresh elections amid allegations of widespread voter fraud. Senator McCain's Tweet: "Dear Vlad, The Arab Spring is coming to a neighborhood near you," as well as the claim by Russian authorities, not least Prime Minister Putin, that US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton "gave a signal" to Russian protesters who "heard this signal and with support of the US State Department began their active work" 4 all served to heighten media analysis of

these events in light of the Arab Spring. While such comparisons are premature,<sup>5</sup> at least in terms of the consequences of these protests, a case can be made and sustained which focuses on authoritarian incompetence, a decline of trust in the ruling regime within a rising urban professional class and vibrant 50 million-strong online community. A Russian civil society that demands new political rights and possesses the skill and the will to undermine autocratic rule, has come of age.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR EUROPE

In Europe and Eurasia the reality of armed humanitarian intervention in Libya and growing pressure for external intervention in Syria, as well as regime changes and revolt throughout the region, have focused thinking on crisis management and operational issues: the emergency evacuation of foreign nationals, disclosure/freezing of incumbent assets and sovereign wealth funds, elite travel bans, the recalling of ambassadors, the redrafting of bilateral military-aid conditionality clauses, the imposition of no-fly zones and the threat and deployment of armed humanitarian interventions in the name of "responsibility to protect."6 At what point should erstwhile external strategic partners pivot to counter-elites when longstanding incumbent allies become albatrosses, while still ensuring a dignified, orderly transition? How can grassroots activists demanding regime change be supported in Egypt without extending such support to all mass protests? Incumbents, as was the case in Iran with the Green Revolution, use external support for legitimate protest to delegitimize the protest and protesters, labeling them a fifth column. Can this be avoided?<sup>7</sup> How can opposition groups in Syria be supported in their efforts to gain power while avoiding sectarian massacres or external military intervention?

In January 2005, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice characterized six decades of U.S. policy toward the Middle East as having sacrificed liberty on the altar of authoritarian stability but gaining neither. On the one hand, Western strategic interest (regional stability, the continuity of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace) were secured through long-standing strategic partnerships with U.S.backed autocratic security-providers. On the other hand, Western market-democratic states promoted democratic principles and values (accountability and transparency). Six years later in 2011, the question was urgent: Can there be a prudent blend of power and interests with principle and values, of *realpolitik* and idealism, or do blatant double standards and hypocrisy only serve to delegitimize both? Are Western interests and values now aligned?8 Portuguese Foreign Minister Luis Amado has cautioned: "Foreign policy is not necessarily only based on principles but also on interests. And in that sense, our foreign policy is no different from that of all those European states which currently face the same type of foreign policy developments. It is absolutely ridiculous to wish to



Leaders of the Commonwealth of Independent States meet in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in September 2011. The CIS comprises all the former Soviet republics — with the exception of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, as well as Georgia — many of which have failed to complete the transition to democracy.

develop ties based on the democratic conditions of each country. If that were the case, we would not have ties with many countries with whom we have had ties for decades."9 Is the real choice between having stable MENA states with independent foreign and security policies or weak, fragile authoritarian Western puppet regimes?

Does the Arab Spring signify an epitaph for an age of liberal interventionism, mirroring the global and regional decline of the U.S.? As Jaswant Singh, a former Indian finance, foreign and defense minister, noted: "To ignore the bloodshed in Syria is to give tacit recognition to Iran's regional influence. That lack of resolve invariably diminishes Saudi Arabia's prestige and raises even more questions within the kingdom about the reliability of U.S. protection - hence further eroding America's regional position. The emergence of a more assertive Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan asserting itself in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire attests to America's diminished regional prestige." 10

Certainly, analysts have noted that the U.S. has recently decided to "lead from behind" through adopting a supportive role (strategic communications, munitions, supplies and intelligence). The Arab Spring demonstrates that "the U.S. will not hesitate to lead 'wars of necessity' in defense of European allies. But it will not take the lead in 'wars of choice' in or around Europe, such as Libya."11 In June 2011, on the eve of his retirement, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned that NATO could face "a dim if not dismal" future if military spending shortages and national caveats were not addressed, given that his generation's "emotional and historical attachment to NATO" is "aging out." 12 Some were quick to argue that NATO members were no longer much interested in NATO's future. NATO was brain-dead; all that remained

was to switch off the life support machine and, after a respectful silence, pronounce the eulogy: "Just look at the NATO-led war in Libya in which only six out of the 28 NATO countries are participating, and only three of those actually attack Libyan targets to enforce the United Nations' mandate ... after a mere 11 weeks of conflict against Libya, the 'mightiest alliance in the world' has run out of munitions, does not have enough aircraft to conduct its missions, and seems unable to prevail against a minor military power."13

By September 2011 it was clear that the NATO-led UN-mandated intervention in Libya ("Operation Unified Protector") had been a success. Through 2011, NATO has focused thinking on crisis management and operational issues, particularly in conjunction with partner states and international organizations, as well as the balance between interests and norms that justify such intervention.14 As Philip Gordon has noted following a NATO Berlin Ministerial Meeting in April 2011: "NATO partnerships allies agreed to enhancements for engaging partners across the globe, and indeed, Libya is a classic example of why NATO needs good mechanisms for partnerships, because we're actually undertaking a partnership mission as we speak."15 The peace building challenge in Libya now under way will likely highlight the mismatch between the kind of internal systemic and structural sources of insecurity facing NATO Mediterranean Dialogue and Istanbul Cooperation Initiative partner states, and the confidence building measures NATO partnerships are designed to provide. The MENA region is characterized by relative deprivation - the gap between high expectations and diminishing opportunities - and uneven resource distribution. This demands an agenda centered on human and societal security concerns that is

best addressed through broad development policies, an agenda that NATO partnerships do not address.

The Arab Spring has highlighted a collective action problem, with splits within and between the Non-Aligned Movement, Arab League, the UN Security Council and the EU. The EU, with 27 national governments, was in disarray over Libya, demonstrating that a pre-emptive humanitarian operation is much harder to legitimize than one after the fact. On March 17, 2011, when the Security Council passed Resolution 1973 on the creation of a no-fly zone over Libya, Germany abstained alongside Russia, China, India and Brazil. The big EU three (France, Germany and UK) were unable to find common cause in a high profile foreign policy challenge: "The vote represented a break with Germany's foreign

stability of Russia's "Near Abroad," and then its "Far Abroad." Three recent proposals to reform the CSTO – elaborated by President Medvedev's think-tank (INSOR) and floated at the Yaroslavl Political Forum on September 2011 – are worth noting.

First, decision-making within the CSTO could be by majority rather than by consensus. Second, consideration could be given to "ensuring at least partial operational compatibility between CSTO contingents and the alliance's rapid reaction contingents." Third, the CSTO develops the capacity to carry out peace-enforcement operations in Central Asia. These changes can themselves be attributed to three factors. First, it acknowledges that Russia and the CSTO (alongside all other international organizations) were strategically paralyzed in the face of

# THE GENERAL CLAIM IS THAT THERE IS AN INHERENT PREDISPOSITION AND PREFERENCE FOR GRADUALIST REFORM IN CENTRAL ASIA RATHER THAN REVOLUTION.

policy maxim to never oppose its European partners and the United States." <sup>16</sup> Eighteen months after the Lisbon Treaty, which led to the creation of the European External Action Agency (EEAS), it is clear that "a foreign ministry is not a foreign policy, and there is little sign that the EU will devise one anytime soon." <sup>17</sup>

# CHALLENGE TO RUSSIAN MODEL?

Russia, along with other conservative status-quo regimes in Eurasia, consistently emphasizes stability and order at home, and criticizes "humanitarian interventions" abroad. The Arab Spring indirectly questions the viability of Russia's domestic authoritarian governance model, political transition and power dispensation. This issue has been brought into even sharper relief by Prime Minister Putin's announcement in late September 2010 that he intends to return to the Kremlin in March 2012. How resilient is the Russian system of authoritarian power and how sustainable current legitimacy narratives? The 1990s represented a lost decade in which the decentralization of power and authority resulted in chaos and anarchy. Vladimir Putin's social contract provided stability and prosperity (guaranteed by the managerial competence and patriotism of incumbents) within a "sovereign democracy" in return for a continuity of power in Russia. Variants of this narrative sustained authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, as well as those among Russia's partners in Eurasia today. However, just as with the MENA region, by 2011 this narrative was under serious stress.

The Arab Spring does not just raise questions relating to the sustainability of Russia's internal governance system and structures, but also its role as an international actor, presenting a series of serious challenges to Russian foreign policy interests. Russia's vital interests are first and foremost identified as stability domestically, then

the events in Osh and Jalal-Abad in June 2010. Second, it demonstrates a fear of Arab Spring-type spillovers into Central Asia in 2012. Indeed, in September 2011 CSTO "Tsentr-2011" military exercises were hosted simultaneously by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. President Medvedev and Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov attended a military exercise in the Chelyabinsk region. The scenario involved "mock terrorists dressed in white Arab robes taking over a school, infantry fighting vehicles advancing, airborne troops conducting a parachute drop, spetsnaz catching insurgents." 18 Third, it recognizes that, in the words of Fedor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the Russia in Global Politics journal: "In light of the situation in Afghanistan, a viable CSTO is not only necessary for Russia but also for NATO." 19

NATO's humanitarian intervention in Libya raised a set of strategic dilemmas for Russia. Russia did not want to support and justify a humanitarian intervention in Libya, as this would only serve to advance U.S. and European interests as well as reinforce threatening precedents set in Kosovo and Iraq.20 However, there was significant regional support for the resolution. In addition, the Obama administration was willing to decide the issue of military intervention within the UN Security Council. This was a demonstration of multilateralism, a seeming repudiation of Bush era unilateralism and implicit support for the U.S.-Russia Reset agenda. For all these reasons, a veto from Russia would have sent the wrong strategic signal. Abstention from UNSC Resolution 1973 had the strategic advantage of "placing Russia in a position to benefit from whatever political outcome."21

By contrast and with regards to Syria, Russia (alongside China, India and Brazil) strongly opposed UNSC resolutions condemning violence, sanctions and



foreign intervention against Syria and has threatened to veto any such UNSC resolution.<sup>22</sup> Unrest here is considered a purely internal affair. Syria, as Russia's one remaining strategic partner in the region, buys virtually all its weaponry from Russia and provides naval bases in warm waters.<sup>23</sup> In August 2011 it appeared that Russia had begun to soften its stance and hedge its bets. President Medvedev warned Bashir al Assad to open dialogue with the opposition: "If he cannot do this, he will face a sad fate and at the end of the day we will also have to take some kind of decision."24 However, there is a strong feeling in Russia (and China) that UNSCR 1973 should have been vetoed at the time, as NATO exceeded its mandate and has emerged as a strategic winner This perception reinforces the will to veto an equivalent resolution on Syria were it drafted and presented to the Security Council.<sup>25</sup> An additional factor is that in 2012, Russia and the U.S. have presidential elections which, inevitably, will encourage "toughness" and blame seeking, rather than further accommodation or compromise.

One other set of dilemmas centers on the notion of a dichotomy between "Southern Engagement" and "Eastern Enlargement." It is not in Russia's interest to see the MENA region rise in strategic importance for Europe, as this will increase European engagement and influence in this region. NATO's Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stressed the need for a "free, democratic and stable" outcome in Libya. He argues that NATO's core values are "freedom, democracy and human rights" and that the intensification of political dialogue and new

partnerships in North Africa are distinct possibilities.<sup>26</sup> Lamberto Zannier, the new secretary-general of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), signaled that democracy promotion in the MENA region will become an OSCE priority, given shared interests in oil, trade, migration and combating terrorism.<sup>27</sup> In May 2011 the EU rejuvenated its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). It announced that the post of EU Special Representative for the Southern Mediterranean would be created, that the European Investment Bank and European Bank for Reconstruction and Development would extend its operations (and funding) to the MENA region, and that the EU would support "deep democracy" efforts.<sup>28</sup> However, might zero-sum logic apply to the EU and Russia? A reinforced European southern engagement will, in an era of financial constraints and Euro-zone crisis (which leaves no opportunity for strategic thinking), result in less time, attention and resources being spent on states in the common neighborhood, which gives Russia more power and influence within its self-declared zone of privileged interest.

## CONCLUSIONS

Structural and systemic causal factors common to both MENA and Eurasia are easy to identify, as is the notion in both regions that authoritarianism is the solution to instability, rather than the cause. Ultimately, however, these comparisons are superficial. The post-Soviet authoritarian equilibrium is composed and structured differently from those in the MENA region and this



suggests that should instability and upheaval occur in Eurasia, the unintended disruptive consequences will be equally hard to predict, manage and contain. Damage limitation will be extremely difficult to coordinate.

The Arab Spring has thrown into sharper relief a normative clash between Europe and Eurasia. Clearly, the outcome of the political transformations that are taking place will very much determine the emphasis and stress both Russia and the EU will place on advancing their stated interests and norms. A pragmatic Russia would cooperate where possible with consolidated market-oriented and democratic regimes in the MENA region, though this outcome would have a demonstration effect and impact through former Soviet space, implicitly challenging the normative status quo. A market-democratic outcome would undercut the Russian notion that revolutions that allow for free and fair elections would further encourage the rise of radical Islamist regimes and spread the contagion to Eurasia. In other words, that democracy means instability. Russia's state ideology - Russia as a sovereign democracy - embraces the idea that economic modernization without political liberalization enables stability. A market-democratic MENA region would undercut this understanding.

Should conservative reactionary regimes return to power in the MENA region, Western rhetorical/ public support for representative and participatory institutions, structures and processes in the region, rather than elite personalities, will grow, whatever the pragmatic reality in private. For the EU, a market-democratic outcome in the MENA region would reinforce its underlying strategic rationale for engagement with states in its common neighborhood that is, democratic transformation will occur via trade and economic integration. This notion is embedded to a greater or lesser extent in all EU policy instruments, giving them a degree of strategic unity and coherence. The EU's dilemma is how to foster that marketdemocratic outcome. For the EU, it remains to be seen whether the Arab Spring has reinforced or destroyed the notion that economic prosperity and political freedom go hand in hand. 

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A version of this paper ("Arab Spring – Central Asia Fall?") was first presented at a Faculty Advanced Research Seminar, George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, on July 6, 2011. I thank the faculty for their useful comments and feedback. All errors of fact and weaknesses of interpretation remain mine alone.

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