The Road Not Yet Taken: Regionalizing US Policy Toward Russia

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Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, US policy toward Russia has combined elements of principled pragmatism, selective engagement, and containment. This at times self-contradictory approach by successive US administrations has left the United States without a sustainable policy toward Russia, oscillating repeatedly between euphoria and despair. The Biden administration has inherited this approach and a poisonous partisan atmosphere in Washington. Thanks to President Trump’s fixation on “getting along” with Russian leader Vladimir Putin and the swirl of Russia-related investigations during his presidency, Russia policy became excessively personalized and de-institutionalized. The Biden team has indicated that they believe that the foundations of Russia policy needed a complete overhaul as well as a reappraisal of what has and has not worked since the Ukraine crisis erupted in 2014.

Nevertheless, there is hardly any controversy about the enduring nature of the current crisis or about US priorities: restoring the credibility of the US commitment to NATO, defending frontline countries from a more assertive Russia, and supporting Ukraine. To meet those goals, calls have emerged for the Biden team to reprise...
the mix of policies from previous decades—including containment, principl
pragmatism, and selective engagement—to address longstanding and emerging challenges such as arms control, the Iran nuclear deal, and climate change.

Implicit in all these ideas, however, is the primacy of the bilateral US relationship with Moscow, over an alternative of a more direct engagement with the post-Soviet regions on Russia’s peripheries. Since the Cold War, this fixation on Moscow has overburdened the US-Russia relationship, as the axiom that all roads to Eurasian stability converge on the Kremlin has remained largely unquestioned. That inclination reflects a combination of Cold War inertia, avoidance of the unfamiliar, the ebb and flow of US interests in post-Soviet states, and a perceived lack of alternatives. Senior US policymakers’ perceptions have been shaped by frequent feelings of disillusionment with intermittent attempts to cultivate one or another favored, but ultimately unreliable, ally along Russia’s periphery.

American strategic thinking toward the regions around Russia (the Baltics, Central Asia, South Caucasus, and the Ukraine-Belarus-Moldova frontier in Eastern Europe), parts of which comprise the entirety of the NATO-Russia line of contact, has paled in comparison to the multifaceted US approach to the regions on China’s boundaries in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In the former Soviet Union, US foreign assistance, mostly bilateral in nature, has had a negligible impact on democratic promotion by many accounts. Many scholars have argued that geopoliticized approaches favoring security policy and strategic orientations among the post-Soviet states, often at the expense of democratic institutional development in recipient countries, have diluted the systemic impact of US assistance in the post-Soviet space, often empowering illiberal regimes.

These problems have been compounded by predominantly bilateral structures of foreign aid, with little regard for the multilateral connectivity between civil society actors across neighboring states. Such bilateral and state-centric approaches to democracy promotion did little to capitalize on regional opportunities. This would entail cultivating regionally-embedded social networks to create regional capacities and support systems to defend democratic institutions from the ground up; establishing regionally-structured security orders to provide geopolitical stability for nascent democratization processes to mature; and growing regionally-wired market institutions to incentivize trade, to support small farmers as well as small and medium entrepreneurs, thereby creating stakeholders for deepening democratization and market economies. Strategic region-building would have created conditions favorable for democratic
breakthroughs without geopoliticizing democratic institutions and polarizing them as a result.

The vast territory around Russia is the principal target of its expansionist ambitions and thus the principal area of antagonism between Russia and the West. Therefore, containing an antagonistic Russia will remain an uphill battle without a strategy of cultivating and supporting indigenous regional security and economic orders on Russia’s periphery. The Western approach to building regional security in these spaces has been advanced either by extending or dangling the possibility of NATO membership to new states. NATO membership promises catalyzed security links with the bloc, often diluting the value of more immediate regional security orders between the neighboring post-Soviet states.

Strategically leveraged, today’s new realities in these regions present potent and underexplored opportunities for advancing US priorities in Eurasia in cooperation with allies and partners, more effectively and at lower cost. The periphery matter, and a new look at Russia from the ground up and from the margins inward is long overdue. This article discusses the limitations and strategic costs of Kremlin-centric Russia policy as advanced in Washington since the Soviet collapse. It highlights how this approach has empowered authoritarianism while failing to capture the strategic opportunities for democratic breakthroughs in Russia’s security orbit. The article then explains regionalization of that policy as an alternative, advocating for region-building as a necessary albeit not a sufficient condition for democratic consolidation and economic development. The paper concludes by calling for a more regionalized US foreign policy engagement, drawing examples from post-war Balkan reconstruction.

The Pitfalls of a Russia-Centric Policy

For most of the past three decades, US policymakers have largely eschewed a regional approach in favor of a selective bilateral embrace of favored local allies. Thus, Tbilisi has become more closely tethered to Washington and Brussels than to Yerevan or Baku; reformers in Kiev look across the Atlantic before they engage with the likeminded in neighboring Chisinau, Bucharest, or Warsaw. These one-off geopoliticized preferential ties may have kept some of these states outside of Russia’s formal and firm embrace, but they have done so at the expense of undermining these nations’ democratic consolidation prospects at home.

One reason is that under such conditions, nascent, indigenous democratic transitions and Western-supported national reform programs become prematurely and needlessly vulnerable to the broader US-Russia rivalry (and to other
destabilizing external forces). For Russia, they begin to resemble Cold War-era alliance politics, instigated by the West instead of Moscow. For the nations on Russia’s periphery, divisions between Russia and the West bleed into domestic politics and undermine reform and democratic consolidation.

And as a result, reforms and democratization have faltered. Georgia is a case in point. The democratic transition there in the wake of the 2003 Rose Revolution quickly became geopoliticized, as Russia-US divisions seeped into domestic politics. Georgian political elites relied heavily on Western political, and later security, assistance to advance their reform agendas. Billions of dollars of US aid buttressed the local economy but did little to deepen state capacities to lock in democratic gains or to ground economic development more regionally and sustainably. A decade later, the results of comparable US policies in Ukraine, in the aftermath of the Euromaidan revolution, have been dishearteningly similar.

In Georgia and Ukraine, accountable governance and functioning institutional channels for managing political discontent have remained compromised by opportunistic politicians exploiting the Washington-Moscow divide. This has heightened domestic polarization and enabled overt and covert Russian interference in both nations. In the absence of robust political parties and institutions to manage this polarization, states become persistently weak. The political turmoil in Tbilisi in 2021 and curbs on political opposition in Georgia are worryingly predictable results. These events threaten to undo years of work in promoting democracy, stability, and good governance.

Current bilateral US policies confront young nations such as Georgia and Ukraine with a perilous moral hazard. Tbilisi’s or Kiev’s dependence on far-away Washington or Brussels effectively disincentivizes them from any diplomatic search for more regionally rooted and sustainable security and economic orders. NATO membership becomes indispensable because there is no alternative, even though it is realistically unattainable. EU membership comes to represent an economic and political sine qua non, even though it is not in the cards either. These processes, in the long-term, pull these regions apart, leaving reform efforts rootless, less resilient, and vulnerable to vagaries in Washington, Brussels, or elsewhere.

That type of alliance politics thwarts regionally-designed engagement in the post-Soviet space. Successive US policies have never reckoned with this reality on Russia’s periphery. Russia’s resurgence in these regions is at least partly attributable to the lack of real, sustainable security or economic alternatives.
for its neighbors. Indeed, the disaggregated state of these peripheries has sustained the sort of Russian presence that evokes historical modes of Russian imperial governance.11

Reconceptualizing Russia’s Periphery

There is a viable alternative. Russia is bounded by four distinct post-Soviet geographies: the Baltics; the European contiguity of Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova; the South Caucasus; and Central Asia. Having folded the Baltics into NATO and the European Union in the early 2000s, US policy toward the other post-Soviet states has been by turns reactive, passive, opportunistic, and ultimately inconsistent. In the 1990s, there was greater focus on transactional issues like accessing the region’s energy resources and creating alternative pipeline routes. The Clinton-era concept of integration was based on an unrealistic expectation that inducements for eventual NATO and EU membership for one or another former Soviet republic might coax progress on much-needed domestic reforms. When various imperatives became more urgent—say, access to military bases and transportation corridors to support the war in Afghanistan after 9/11—some of the region’s most repressive regimes on the planet were courted, while democratization was de-emphasized.12

Such disjointed and short-term thinking has contributed to the fracturing and internal polarization of these already weak states as well as a growing sense in both Washington and European capitals that the post-Soviet space was not worth it—that Moscow would always care more than Western powers about what happens there.13 Decades of dysfunction on Russia’s peripheries—beset by territorial conflicts, poor governance, and repressive elites—have afforded Russia a distinct but increasingly tenuous control over these expanses, some on NATO’s doorstep. And none of these states can individually resist Russian power absent significant US bilateral security or multilateral transatlantic US-NATO support, neither of which is forthcoming.

The Biden administration has inherited the prevailing post-Cold War view that the regions in Russia’s peripheries are destined, at least in the foreseeable future, to remain vulnerable to Russian manipulation. Russian policy, especially under Vladimir Putin, has exploited and aggravated intraregional fractures and institutional immaturity across all these regions.14 The Kremlin has worked to support pliable autocratic leaders, often directly through political and military support, or indirectly through economic pressure and corruption.15

But 30 years on, the view of Russia as omnipotent in its periphery or pursuit of neo-imperialist goals fails to capture current realities. The challenges that Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova; Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan; or the
Central Asian states have encountered in their state- and nation-building efforts or their failure to coalesce into minimally effective regional spaces of governance cannot be laid solely at the Kremlin’s door.

Russia’s policy toward its neighbors has too often been viewed through an overly simplistic, binary lens as the product of either villainous revanchism or misunderstood victimhood. Such perspectives fail to appreciate more nuanced Russian interests and limitations on its periphery, rooted in its multinational imperial and Soviet pasts. The regions around Russia have been viewed by Washington for too long as extensions, rather than independent factors, of Russian policy.

The absence of Western efforts to promote a regionally-grounded policy is also creating openings for other non-Russian players: China, Turkey, and Iran, all illiberal powers, are making significant inroads through the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) just as the West seems to be backing away. This has further splintered these regions by corroding already weak regional ties and activating extra-regional alliances that do little for regional resilience among these states, jeopardizing core US priorities in Eurasia. For example, the 2020 conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh showcased NATO-member Turkey, as patron of Azerbaijan, coordinating an offensive war against neighboring Armenians. The war ended with a Russia-brokered agreement that wedged Russian peacekeepers deeper into the region. It was a major victory for Azerbaijan and Russia, establishing a peacekeeping presence that will only deepen authoritarianism inside Azerbaijan, while complicating the democratization pathway in both Georgia and Armenia. It also created conditions for a proxy war which may yet ignite between various regional powers, pulling in Turkey and Iran, with Russia as a perennial stakeholder in this region.

Is there a practical alternative for US policy toward the region that might avoid repeating the many disappointments and miscalculations that have unfolded over the past three decades? The immediate challenge is to refocus US efforts away from the current moment’s overly narrow focus on containing Russia or countering its malignant influence. While there is plenty to admire about such strategies, they are, by design, open-ended and require US policymakers to make frequent determinations about whether Washington is prepared to overmatch the Kremlin or to fight an endless game of whack-a-mole on turf where Russia often enjoys a homefield advantage.

To break out of this unprofitable cycle, Western policymakers ought to focus on cultivating effective, regionally-defined political, security, and economic...
orders on Russia’s periphery. Such an approach would entail incentivizing and supporting intraregional connections and institutions across individual states and societies; this would support the contiguous states within each region in order to aggregate the power of individual states in them. It recognizes the agency of these political peripheries. Crucially, however, it does not inevitably entail their explicit incorporation into formal Euro-Atlantic structures or geopoliticized democratization in these states, often understood as and coupled with Euro-Atlantic orientation.

**Unrealized Openings for Regionally-Wired Politics**

The United States, often in concert with allies and partners, has pursued bottom-up, regionally focused strategies elsewhere in the world in places as diverse as Southeast Asia, postwar Western Europe, and the Balkans. In the post-war Balkan region, for instance, with lingering political tensions and social trauma in the backdrop, a range of region-wide associations and networks developed. These included The Balkan Society of Geometers, the Balkan Women’s Coalition, the Balkan Alliance of Hotel Associations, the Association of Balkan Athletics Federation, and the Network of Education Policy, to name a few.20

The recent experience of Europe in crafting regionally-wired policies to stabilize the Balkans in the EU-led Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) is particularly informative, with a clear lineage of policies dating back to the Marshall Plan era. Headquartered in Sarajevo, RCC is the successor of the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe, a peacebuilding tool launched in 2008 to support the South-East European Cooperation Process. Strongly supported by established European powers, its implementation has nonetheless demonstrated that region-building requires deliberate top-down and strategic support from extra-regional powers, in parallel with tactical flexibility and bottom-up network cultivation by intermediating regional organizations, such as RCC. 21

Despite the financial and political backing for the Regional Cooperation Council, the organization faced serious pushback from national governments in the region as it tried to mobilize regional networks in the Balkans on such varied issue areas as forestry, tourism, higher education, and security cooperation. To a question as to how the RCC succeeded in cultivating regional networks in the Balkans even amidst uncooperative national governments and outstanding political tensions, in 2012 Deputy Secretary General of RCC Jelica Minic explained her strategy of “guerrilla struggle” in building regional networks within a politically unfavorable region: “We are used to live and operate [sic] in these circumstances of unresolved political issues … For us, it is normal. It is
how we breath. You have to overcome the political tensions on a daily basis. … You have to make a living body/corpus of cooperation and then you can put on the crown. You cannot put on the crown and then develop the body.”

Then-Secretary General of RCC Hidajet Bilićević also spoke of the “pebble effect” in cultivating regional networks in varied issue areas, stone by stone, which he argued transformed grassroots connectivity in the region, while creating a push for its formalization at the inter-governmental level against continuing resistance from the governing elites.

All in all, the experience of the Regional Cooperation Council in the Balkans makes plain that incentives for regional connectivity cannot be taken for granted, that serious pushback from national governments should be expected, and that regional connectivity should be cultivated tactically and strategically by institutions that can intermediate between the national governments in the region and extra-regional powers. The lessons to be drawn from the Balkans are extensive, and include strategies to overcome hesitancy of individual governments, promote the economic logic of trade and interdependence, and lessen destabilizing extra-regional intrusions from Russia or elsewhere.

Resilient regional institutions around Russia can be developed, through which American interests can be advanced without explicitly threatening Russia—perhaps even in cooperation with it and at significantly lower political and financial costs than the approaches tried thus far. A large and growing body of research has documented the potency of such regional approaches for stimulating both security and economic development. We now know that democracies strengthen regionally; developing economies are especially sensitive to those of their immediate regional neighbors; conflict management strategies work better within regional forums; and persistent regional fracture, such as that in Russia’s vicinities, erodes the quality of state governance and derails democratisation. We now know that such strategies can generally work, but questions about when, where and how remain.

**What Happened in Armenia?**

Democratic breakthroughs and democratic consolidation, key engines of state-building in post-Soviet spaces, are more likely to succeed in regions where geopolitical great power rivalry is managed. And one way to manage such great power competition in post-Soviet spaces by smaller states is to decouple their geopolitical orientation from a democratic breakthrough, as manifested in Armenia’s
Velvet Revolution in 2018. This case illustrated the significance of the deeply grassroots origins of the people’s power in improving regional conditions for democratization. While deeply geopoliticized, Georgia’s democratic breakthrough in 2003 had improved Armenia’s chances for a similar path in 2018.

All eyes were on Moscow when, in 2018, the popular Velvet movement led Armenia’s peaceful transition to a democratic system from a soft semi-authoritarian one, earning it the distinction of the Economist magazine’s “Country of the Year.” Surprisingly, Moscow reacted with restraint, in contrast to its violent reaction to the 2014 Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine. The Trump administration’s reaction amounted to little more than a geopolitical shrug of the shoulders. While US assistance to Armenia grew, largely under the radar, no high-level intraregional engagement transpired.

With that, the United States missed a significant opportunity to buttress the democratic cluster in the South Caucasus as Armenia joined Georgia as two emerging democracies. Low-cost, low profile, issue-based, technocratic, and bottom-up programs are needed to support democracy regionally. If the Balkan experience is any indication, brick-by-brick networks of regional cooperation can help to create “vibrations of regional cooperation,” as expressed by one respondent from RCC to this author. This is necessary to consolidate regional connectivity down the road, and the changes of democratic consolidation in individual states. Cross-country investments in programs and institutions to promulgate best practices and learning in areas such as judiciary and public administration reforms, civic education, and minority rights protection, coupled with economic inducements for expanded cross-border development, would have yielded outsized benefits for solidifying a regional pathway toward democratization and open markets. Georgia and Armenia, as still nascent and struggling democracies, today represent a unique island of openness amid an expanse of illiberalism—one that is strategically compelling but within which liberal regional spaces can and should be cultivated. Investing in regional capacities in electoral monitoring, security cooperation, hydropower resource management, and reforestation are some examples of possible regional pathways of governance.

Focus on Regional Grassroots

US policies toward consolidating the Georgian and Armenian democratic transitions, if pursued through regional rather than national paths, hold the promise of cultivating cross-border grassroots civic and societal coalitions which would foster an ultimately self-sustaining ecosystem of reform and good governance. Targeted support for small and medium enterprises, for instance, would deliver outsized benefits for deepening market structures in the region, and in the
process generate a political boost for liberal democracy as a political system. Such regional and multilateral approaches would not only be more effective and efficient for the United States but would also help to insulate these initiatives against unnecessary geopoliticization in light of inevitable Russian wariness. Geopoliticized development assistance at the national level has polarized domestic institutions and societies in these states; regionally-wired and technocratic assistance, focused on developing and deepening democratic institutions and administrative structures, could help in deepening democratic governance from the bottom-up.

Both Washington and Brussels have a wealth of experience crafting such grassroots regional integration initiatives. Over time, these benefits have been shown to become mutually reinforcing for all participants, as legitimacy becomes rooted regionally instead of tenuously in far-off capitals. And a consolidating democratic pole in the South Caucasus, empowering reform coalitions and constituencies regionally, would have implications for good governance promotion further afield, from neighboring Azerbaijan to Belarus, and to fledgling democracies in Ukraine and Moldova, as well as the Balkans.³³

Yet, such regionalization strategies have been nowhere to be found in the post-Soviet space, despite their proven utility in advancing geopolitical stability and US interests.³⁴ US investment in laying the groundwork for such regional institutions should not be confused with an idealistic promotion of democracy for its own sake. If a core US priority is geopolitical stability on the Eurasian frontier between NATO and Russia, there is little alternative to cultivating good governance regimes in those regions, ones that are genuinely accountable and responsive to their populations. US engagement at the level of the region is empirically the most effective way to do this. In the context of limited US attention to the post-Soviet states, whether in foreign aid budgets or security commitments, regionalizing the existing engagements is optimal, politically and financially. Authoritarian survival and democratic sustainability are both enabled by regionally-wired factors such as trade linkage, cross-border learning, and policy coordination across borders. One study found that regional trade linkages between authoritarian states reduces the likelihood of authoritarian regime breakdown.³⁵ Incentivizing the regional politics between post-Soviet states toward liberalism and economic openness is necessary if nascent democracies are to take root in Russia’s fractured neighborhoods.³⁶
Indeed, poverty and institutional weakness in new states are considered major challenges for democratic consolidation. Strategic cultivation of regional connectivity, a mode of region-building, helps to deepen market institutions and enhance the developmental dividends for nascent democracies. Just as importantly, it strengthens governance processes, adding to state-consolidation that gets underway after democratic breakthroughs. In short, democracy as a political outcome can be a derivative of economic growth and regional governance. As such, regional connectivity can empower citizens as economic stakeholders and guardians of openness—economic, political, and territorial. Harnessing such “people power” from below is necessary for resisting and restraining the often insidious power of the Kremlin in post-Soviet states and regions.

**Fractured Regions Nourish Authoritarian Resilience**

A corollary to this sort of regional fracture, compounded by US policies fixated on Moscow, is the empowerment of repressive and corrupt dictatorships in Russia’s peripheries. National autocrats have long calculated that by exhibiting a degree of anti-Russia posturing, they will be afforded a free pass, or at least less scrutiny, by the United States. The likes of Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus, Viktor Yanukovych of Ukraine, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan have practiced such guile with great finesse, playing the West against Russia to prolong their hold on power.37 Similarly, autocratic rulers in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan have historically succeeded in blunting criticism of domestic repression by touting their role in undercutting Russian clout in the global oil and gas trade. The security interests in getting cooperation from Central Asia on the Afghan war or on nuclear nonproliferation also have been pursued at the expense of advocating for accountable governance in the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

But those regimes are no less brittle than dictatorships elsewhere, and as such pose a threat to European and Eurasian stability and security. Dictatorships become sources of reactionary pushback against regional stability and its prerequisites of accountable governance. Azerbaijan, with its hereditary dictatorship, is an archetypal case, one that is relevant to similar regimes persisting in the post-Soviet space.38 The democratic transitions across its borders in Tbilisi and Yerevan have exacerbated the struggle of Ilham Aliyev, the heir, to consolidate domestic legitimacy in one of the most closed societies in Eurasia.39 Economic stagnation and corruption in an extractive, oil-dependent economy have upped the stakes,40 as the spectacle of its liberalizing regional neighbors in Georgia and Armenia, projected to surpass it in prosperity, strained the regime further before it consolidated power after its victory in the 44-day war in Nagorno-Karabakh last fall.41
Ironically, regionalization can be in the self-interest of such illiberal regimes. Regionally-wired, issue-specific civic and economic networks can serve as safety valves, relieving internal pressure on ruling cliques. On one hand, economic regionalism can advance liberalization, and therefore can threaten the vested interests of patrimonial leaders, as in Central Asia. And there is no shortage of regional organizations, often referred to as “dictator’s clubs,” that form to press for regime survival for governments in such states. At the same time, with global protest activity on the rise worldwide, and with 78% of such protest activity observed in authoritarian and authoritarian-learning states, even autocrats are increasingly hard-pressed to deliver for their people. And China’s Belt and Road initiative has started to deepen continentalism and connectivity in Eurasia, passing through several illiberal neighborhoods around Russia’s borders. Without deepening and formalizing regional connectivity, growing regionalism of trade and transport will be hard to sustain. And in their absence, the alternatives for these institutionally fragile holdouts, particularly in otherwise liberalizing regions, include unpredictable breakdown.

Some have shown that Western democracy promotion policies have unwittingly enhanced autocracy by stabilizing illiberal incumbent regimes. Policies that are myopically focused on countering Moscow have long been justified in Washington as the price for near-term stability. But this coarse “stability versus democratization” calculus undercuts US interest in encouraging the accountable and responsive governance that is an indispensable prerequisite for true and sustainable stability. Turning a blind eye to national dictators is ultimately a Faustian bargain, one that comes at the expense of democratic breakthroughs which could otherwise emerge. In the context of such “stabilitocracies,” as they have sometimes been dubbed, Western policies promoting openness and clean governance can unwittingly and counterproductively embolden autocracy by stabilizing illiberal incumbent regimes.

The Regional Route Remains Unexplored

Regionally-focused foreign policies are not, of course, unknown in Washington. Such strategies, particularly in the context of Eurasia, inevitably evoke US approaches to postwar Europe in the Marshall Plan era. Then, as now, the US self-interest was to stabilize a fractured Europe beset by postwar animosities, weak states, and economic fragility, set against the backdrop of a resurgent Moscow. Indeed, the architects of the Marshall Plan were also chastened by earlier disappointments in bilaterally engaging one or another shaky postwar European government. As such, they explicitly cultivated and celebrated regional coordination and economic integration in pursuit of US interests.
The idea of something approaching a regional Marshall Plan for the former Soviet Union was sometimes mentioned in the 1990s, but in the absence of a genuine Russian threat such proposals found little support. Three decades on, however, and in a very different world, it is time to revisit the strategy, or at least variations on it that would not require nearly as much investment; the key is the organizational design in regionalization. In particular, rewiring foreign aid giving and trade policies in Russia’s vast vicinities can be advanced to incentivize regional connectivity.

Despite recent successful experiences such as the EU-led Regional Cooperation Council discussed earlier in this essay, the administrative challenges of designing and executing regionally-oriented policies remain an obstacle within Euro-Atlantic foreign aid structures. The closest that American and European donor agencies typically come to regionally-focused policies is the simple replication of one policy or program from one state to a neighboring one, without establishing any connectivity between them. Multilateral donors have done little better; the World Bank, for example, has historically committed very little of its overall funding to explicitly regional or multi-country programs around the world.

Absent a coherent US approach to cultivating multilateral regionalism in the areas around Russia, others have stepped into the void. The aspirants include Russia’s own Eurasian integration projects, as well as China’s Belt and Road Initiative, both of which could pose challenges to core US priorities in 21st century Eurasia.

One clear starting point for the United States would be robust, bottom-up political support for regional grassroots actors across the emerging democratic clusters of Ukraine-Moldova-Belarus and Georgia-Armenia. This entails crafting policies and programs that incentivize strategic and decentralized regional collaboration at various levels of governance, from parliamentary cooperation to civil society and market institutions. Specific examples include development assistance to support regional election monitoring, cross-border trade and entrepreneurship, regionally-wired platforms for journalism, and cross-cluster support for civic education and public administration reform. And the lack of regional platforms to manage river basins in the South Caucasus is a particularly glaring gap in regional governance.

**Can Moscow Live with Resilient Regions On Its Periphery?**

Assuming that the US’s regionalization of its foreign policy on Russia would entail building region-wide networks and connections between democratic
forces, some would rightfully object that such a policy would invite backlash from the Kremlin. Indeed, since the Soviet collapse, tactically and in the short-term, the Kremlin has benefited from the fractured state of the post-Soviet regions. Divided regional markets, weak state and political institutions, and protracted conflicts have elevated Moscow’s influence in these regions in more ways than one.

In the long-term, however, this fractured fabric of connectivity between neighboring states has also become a liability for the Kremlin. These regions have become porous and unpredictable for Moscow as their fragility pulled in other powers and pushed Russia to share its sphere of influence. Despite these risks of fractured connectivity for Russia, the Kremlin is likely to resist the formalized efforts of regionally designed security cooperation formats, fighting hard not to give up its role as an intermediary and a power broker in these neighborhoods. However, more technocratic, issue-specific, and pragmatic regional cooperation formats, which can enhance governance and stabilize Russia’s political peripheries, can be attractive for Moscow. And fears for an overt or covert backlash against such a policy may be overstated for several reasons.

First, enhanced regional connectivity can elevate Russia’s strategic value for China. It can stabilize Russia’s neighborhoods, opening new pathways such as trade and transportation corridors for Russia. China’s strategic preference for greater connectivity in the Eurasian continent puts pressure on the Kremlin to support such objectives. Russia’s vast territory and its contiguity with multiple countries makes it uniquely capable of leveraging its influence for China, with which it has thus far been engaging on highly unequal political and economic terms.

Second, social mobilization in post-Communist states has taught the Kremlin to accept the path of least resistance and learn to live with “people power” as a new factor on the ground. The regional approach to foreign policy on Russia is set to deepen connectivity between issue networks, technocratic professional communities, and civic groups across countries in post-Soviet regions. Such a regional approach can deliver dividends in the form of stronger regional capacities to protect and nourish democratic institutions. This will surely deepen apprehensions in Moscow, and potentially invite a response. At the same time, while democracies are declining, protest activities globally are also on the rise. The traditional neo-imperial instincts of working with unaccountable political elites have become costly for the Kremlin. As evidenced by Russian restraint during and after Armenia’s Velvet revolution in 2018, the Kremlin
often chooses the path of least resistance. Deployed against mass-scale displays at the time, direct and coercive interventions would have backfired.

Third, many Russia watchers are divided over whether the Kremlin’s policies are “colorblind” or whether the Kremlin is actively sabotaging cases of democratic transitions. It is critical to note that democratic systems, particularly in their nascent, tend to be institutionally weaker, with internal divisions and political factions to manipulate. As such, nascent democracies are much more useful to the Kremlin for pushing its agendas relative to working with authoritarian leaders who have a weak hold on power and enjoy little public legitimacy. Unless democratizing countries are opting for a geopolitical jump, the Kremlin will not react, at least not directly and covertly, as it has in Ukraine.

Regionalizing the Future

The current moment calls for a reconsideration of US policy toward Russia and its neighbors in Eurasia. Since the Soviet Union collapsed, an excessively Kremlin-centric approach to those regions has denied their increasing agency and obscured rare opportunities for advancing US priorities multilaterally and more sustainably. As the US advances with its much touted “pivot to Asia”, region-building offers an underexplored alternative to strategic disengagement from the post-Communist world. The focus of US policy should evolve from one over-reliant on a few select partners to one that cultivates regionally-wired and naturally resilient political, economic, and security orders around Russia.

Supporting bottom-up and regionally reinforcing drivers of political and social change would also be a powerful antidote to the detrimental intrusion of US-Russia rivalry into the domestic politics of those nations. The recognition of political openings provided by the budding democratic clusters on Russia’s periphery is overdue, as is an accompanying readjustment of foreign aid and other economic instruments of engagement with democratic transitions. A substantial refocusing of Western development aid, including programming of institutions such as the World Bank, toward more regional integration projects in Eurasia is key to these ends.

A post-Soviet Marshall Plan remains infeasible today and would be ill-advised for a variety of good reasons. But the lessons derived from such strategies, particularly the regional focus of its design—applied most recently in stabilizing the Balkans—may well hold the key to US priorities in Eurasia. Multilateral, regionally-anchored approaches are not only more effective in achieving desired policy outcomes, they are also more economical, efficient, and self-sustaining as the synergistic advantages across beneficiary nations take hold. To the extent that the inspiration for such thinking can be found in Marshall Plan-era notions of regionalization, it is because such approaches work in the right context.
For many of the post-Soviet regions around Russia, the time may well be right for this regional approach today.

Notes


18. Ohanyan, Russia Abroad, p. 20.


22. Ohanyan, Networked Regionalism.


27. Ohanyan, Russia Abroad.


46. Börzel, “The noble west and the dirty rest? Western democracy promoters and illiberal regional powers.”


54. Ohanyan, Networked Regionalism.


56. Calder, Super Continent.

