

# In Search of a Solution to Russia's Strategic Problem

by George Friedman - October 13, 2020

Russian President Vladimir Putin described the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe in history. Though it may not be true of all of history, it is certainly true of modern Russian history, because it cost Russia what it needs most: strategic depth. Until 1989, Russia's western border was effectively in central Germany. The Caucasus shielded Russia from the south. Central Asia was a vast buffer against South Asia and potentially China. The Russian heartland, in other words, was secure from every direction.

The fall of the Soviet Union pulled its western border back behind the Baltics, Ukraine and Belarus. Russia retained the North Caucasus but lost the South Caucasus – Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Central Asia broke down into independent states. This contraction of Russia represented not only a diminution of size but a decreased distance between potential enemies.

Russia inevitably sought to redraw the borders before a serious threat emerged. That no serious threat existed gave Russia some time. But for a country like Russia, insecurity can manifest quickly. Germany went from being a national wreck to an existential threat in less than a decade. The Russians had to increase their strategic depth, but they had to do so without triggering the attack they feared before their depth was increased.

We have seen three events in recent months – one in Belarus, one in the South Caucasus, one in Kyrgyzstan – that together encompass portions of the borderlands Russia lost. To be clear, it is always possible to see three disconnected events connected by logic, and to assume that this logic has anything to do with Russia's strategic problem. Coincidences abound in history and these three events do not even constitute a perfect coincidence. Even so, where coincidences are accidents that appear to be deliberate, it is easy to dismiss deliberately connected events as simple coincidence. The answer to this is to simply note that a coincidence has occurred, and that regardless of intent by anyone, a coincidence could have the same consequence as an intentional event.

In Belarus, a key buffer on the North European Plain, longtime President Alexander Lukashenko was reelected in what many describe as an illegitimate election in August. Protests against the results have gone on more or less ever since. Russia's relationship with Lukashenko is complicated

– he tries to balance between Russia and the West when he can – but Lukashenko could hardly be described as pro-West. He and Moscow have their differences, but Moscow has always been very influential in Minsk and thus has always had an imperfect solution to its strategic dilemma to the west. If Lukashenko were replaced with someone more antagonistic toward Russia or more sympathetic to the West, it could effectively move NATO, Poland and the Americans farther east, relegating cities such as Smolensk to border towns.

In Kyrgyzstan, which sits between Russia and China, there is similar political unrest. Here, too, an election has resulted in claims of fraud and large-scale demonstrations. The Russians have some military facilities there, but the most important point is that it provides a buffer between Russia and China. Russia and China are not currently at odds, but they fought each other as recently as the 1960s. Though that was 60 years ago, geopolitics tends to repeat itself, and whatever current interests might guide them, both are old hands at the shifts of history, and neither wants the other to have an advantage. It's unclear whether the Belarusian playbook will work here, but Moscow has a stake in what happens, and given the likelihood that an arbiter will be needed, involvement would not be surprising.

In the South Caucasus, a war has broken out between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, a disputed enclave governed by ethnic Armenians inside Azerbaijan. Broadly speaking, Azerbaijan is backed as before by Turkey, a country with whom Azerbaijan has an ethnic affinity, while Armenia is supported by Russia. But the conflict is much more complicated than that. For one thing, Azerbaijan has important relations with Russia that it cannot afford to sever. For another, Russian intelligence would surely have been aware of war preparations in Azerbaijan and so would have advised them to back off given Moscow's relations with Armenia. That didn't happen. Last, Russia has noted that the treaty it has with Armenia does not include Nagorno-Karabakh and that therefore Moscow has no obligation to intervene militarily on Armenia's side. The Russians are clearly using the war to increase their influence with Azerbaijan, the most powerful and wealthy country in the South Caucasus. (Moscow helped to broker a cease-fire, but it quickly fell apart.) Without Russia, Armenia has few options. Georgia, which was invaded by Russia in 2008, won't be much help, and the United States, which helped Georgia in said war, will likely choose to abstain.



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By appearing to shift their support from Armenia to Azerbaijan or, more precisely, bringing them both into the Russian orbit, the Russians solve a vital strategic problem. First, it helps to secure the South Caucasus, which, second only to Eastern Europe, is the path most likely taken by potential invaders. Second, by increasing control of the South Caucasus, the North Caucasus are made more secure. Of course, Russia already controls the North Caucasus and maintains a strong line of defense there, but Chechnya and Dagestan are home to militant Islamist movements, which Moscow claims are supported by the U.S. through intermediaries from the South Caucasus. True or not, Moscow isn't taking any chances.

So we see events in Russia's western and southern frontiers playing out in such a way that the geopolitical catastrophe Putin spoke of is being rectified. There are no tanks rumbling in either direction, but the politics of the situation appear to be heading that way. Of course, all of this may be coincidence. But it's interesting to note the process that coincidence or calculation seems to have

put in motion. But the Russians aren't fools, and with Armenia and Azerbaijan aligning with Russia and Turkey excluded from the game, Georgia is isolated, and a repeat of 2008 would undermine the subtlety of the Russian move.

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