1 Introduction: understanding conflict in the former USSR

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This book evaluates the nature, causes and implications of conflicts in the geographical space formerly occupied by the USSR. It does so in the context of current debates in the international relations literature regarding the role of power, interests, technological forces, and normative issues as major drivers of contemporary political violence. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has attempted to maintain a sphere of influence on what was once the territory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Whether in the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict; the wars in Chechnya; struggles over resources with Ukraine; disputes in Central Asia over ethnicity; or in latent conflicts that are aided by terrorism and corruption, the former Soviet space remains an underevaluated area in the literature on contemporary conflict. With new issues such as energy security and transnational crime gaining in saliency, and older tensions between East and West deepening once more, it is vital that security specialists pay closer attention to this region of the world.

Following the end of the Cold War many specialists on conflict – mistakenly, we argue – shifted their attention away from Russia as a primary area for analysis. At the turn of the twenty-first century George W. Bush suggested upon coming to power that the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia would be major focal points of the new Republican Administration's foreign policy.[1] Yet the strategic shock of 9/11 had the immediate impact of redirecting US attention to the 'war on terror', with an increasing focus on the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. Many in the field of international relations also then turned their attention to issues of global terrorism and the threat of rogue or failing states gaining weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Insofar as the former republics of the USSR figured in these new security concerns, it was in relation to their position in the wider war on terror; oil and gas

[1] J. Gittings, 'Bush claims Russia and China as allies', *Guardian*, 22 October (2001). Available at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/22/china.afghanistan

resources in the Caspian region; pipeline routes; and as potential allies who could facilitate access to bases in Eurasia.

One of the serious consequences of such a narrow focus has been to ignore, or at least to misperceive, Russia's own interests in its immediate geostrategic environment. This can be contrasted with the era of bipolarity, when there was a strong appreciation of Russia's interests and of the importance in Moscow's calculations of relations with its immediate neighbours. The tendency to discount Russia's position occurs despite the many unresolved conflicts in a fragile security environment that threaten the stability of many recently independent states that are now Western allies.

In an attempt to address these issues, this book reveals some unusually common ground amongst its contributors. Certainly, the specific perspectives of each author vary considerably. We are agreed, however, on many of the core challenges facing the former USSR. First, we find that conflict has arisen from problems of state building, sparked by ethnic, economic and structural factors. These are not adequately explained by traditional approaches. Second, we find that institutions are, by and large, poorly equipped to deal with both the traditional and non-traditional conflicts that have broken out on the territory of the former USSR. Third, the region is also experiencing major strategic realignments. Central Asian states, Russia and the Caucasus are all now becoming sites for rivalry. This involves a rising PRC, the West and a resurgent Russia. Finally, while we may disagree on whether conflict has been prevalent or not in specific areas of the former USSR, we are all of the opinion that the triggers for war, whether traditional or transnational, have largely not been ameliorated. Here, rapidly changing patterns of interests and interaction amongst actors in the former USSR compel policymakers to rethink their ideas about conflict and insecurity, and to learn quickly as a result.

Twenty years after the USSR: renewal meets instability

Some two decades after the collapse of the USSR it is difficult to find many commentators prepared to lament the passing of Soviet communism. Of course, this was not always the case. During the mid-1990s rampant inflation within many newly independent states quickly became coupled to the rise of financial oligarchs. Uneven transitions to democracy and the institutionalisation of organised crime became the norm. Many of those in the West who closely studied Russia, the largest of the former Soviet republics, watched with increasing unease as a stalled

democratisation effort, the rise of a 'red-brown' axis, and domestic consensus over a more assertive and muscular foreign policy took shape. Russia's two wars in Chechnya, its opposition to North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion and Western intervention in former Yugoslavia, and its persistent meddling in the affairs of the so-called 'near abroad' – especially in Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus – all seemed indicative of deep structural weaknesses in the Russian state, with worrying implications for those states surrounding it.

Whilst numerous problems remain, it is fair to say that the social and economic malaise experienced across the former USSR during the 1990s was slowly alleviated after the turn of the century. In Ukraine, an economic collapse (that in 1999 had seen United Nations [UN] estimates place some 63 per cent of its population below the poverty line) gradually eased.[2] The 'coloured revolutions' of 2003–5 were seen as flowering symbols of benign Georgian and Ukrainian national identity, which in turn prompted enthusiasm that democracy and free will would become more strongly rooted as the decade progressed.

In Russia itself, democratisation was shunted into a more patriotic and limited form of 'sovereign democracy' under Vladimir Putin, which also empowered a close circle of *siloviki*, much as the old *nomenklatura* system had done under communism. This was accompanied by a massive turnaround in Russia's economic fortunes, built on the back of its burgeoning energy trade, which saw it become an energy superpower.[3] Of course, Russia's use of energy for strategic purposes against former communist states was also an area of concern, especially since it prompted fears of vulnerable European overdependence on Russian gas. But as the countries of the former USSR entered the second decade of the twenty-first century, the crippling internal problems they had experienced just ten to fifteen years earlier had improved in many cases. People living in former Soviet republics were, by and large, better off than they had been toward the end of the Soviet era.

But a puzzling aspect of this is that increased economic security has not translated into enhanced physical security. Indeed, few analysts of security affairs in the former USSR would regard the regional environment as having become more secure since the Soviet collapse. On the contrary, one can make the argument that strategic geography has

[2] United Nations Development Program, *Human development report, 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

[3] For a full discussion, see M. Sussex, 'The strategic implications of Russian resource diplomacy' in R.E. Kanet and M.R. Freire (eds.), *Russia and its neighbours* (New York: Routledge, in press), chapter 9.

become much more significant than it was formerly. During its existence the USSR enforced order upon what are today recognised as numerous ethnic, religious and geostrategic trouble spots. Once communism fell, radical terrorism cropped up in the Pankisi Gorge, in Dagestan and in Chechnya; squabbles began between Moscow, Baku and Tbilisi over ownership of energy infrastructure; and the treatment of ethnic Russians in South Ossetia and Abkhazia eventually prompted Russian military intervention in 2008. To the west and south, the 'gas wars' between Russia and Ukraine, Russia and Georgia, and even Russia and Belarus were other permissive factors for conflict. Additional factors included a declining demographic curve in Russia itself as well as social unrest in Central Asia.

In addition to these problems, the former USSR has once again become a site for great power competition. Much of this revolves around what Michael Klare refers to as the 'new geopolitics' shaped by energy,[4] but such notions can be traced back in time to Halford Makinder's notion of the Eurasian Heartland.[5] Far from simple geographic determinism, the region from the Volga to the Yangtze remains fundamentally important to global security, and it is once again deeply affected by economic and strategic balances of power based on material capabilities. With energy, ethnicity and economics decoupled from the controlling order imposed by the USSR, it is not surprising that a rising PRC, European Union (EU), United States and even a growing India have become influential players in the security order of the former Soviet space. For some actors, like Kazakhstan, this has led to new opportunities, giving Astana the chance to launch what is often referred to as a 'multi-vector' foreign policy. This has been based on acquiescing to Russian power via Kazakhstan's participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), but at the same time it has sought to develop deeper economic relations with the PRC and the United States in its energy sector. Its new flexibility in its foreign policy thus permits a search for external security as well as the prospect of internal economic balancing through cooperation with extra-regional great powers.

For others, however, the search for security has been constraining. In Georgia, the prospects of being locked out of formal NATO membership have presented the (somewhat erratic) Mikhail Saakashvili with

[4] M.T. Klare, *Rising powers, sinking planet: the new geopolitics of energy* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), p. 7.
[5] H. Makinder, 'The geographical pivot of history', *The Geographical Journal*, April (1904).

unpalatable choices: either rely on continued US pressure on Russia, or commit to détente with Russia largely on Moscow's terms. During the presidency of Barak Obama, US diplomacy on the issue of Georgia has fallen under the broad rubric of 'hitting reset' in the bilateral relationship between Washington and Moscow. In this context the United States has used both carrots and sticks. On the one hand it has linked expectations of Russian good behaviour to continued American support for Moscow's accession to the World Trade Organisation. Here, Michael McFaul, who became Senior Director of Russian and Eurasian Affairs at the US National Security Council, has championed that push.[6] But, on the other hand, the United States has also issued an implicit caution that it would not sit idly if Russia attempted to convert its diplomatic recognition of Ossetian and Abkhazian sovereignty into territorial aggrandisement.[7]

Contemporary scholarship on conflict, war and the former USSR

The literature on war has grown exponentially since the end of the Cold War, but especially since the events of 11 September 2001. In many respects 9/11 had a refocusing effect on the discipline of international politics that centred academic attention squarely on the United States, just as it also led to a mad scramble amongst international relations scholars to also become experts on transnational terrorism – much to the consternation of those who had already made it their speciality. To an extent it is understandable that much contemporary writing on war centres upon the power and policy preferences of the United States, given that the symbols of American power were the target of the 9/11 attacks, and the United States enjoys an enviable (if declining) position as the global hegemon. As noted above, however, focusing too heavily on US power neglects other regions where conflict threatens global stability. In this case, the former Soviet territories encapsulate many of the struggles over resources, territory, culture and ethno-religious transnational tensions that are commonly found in studies of contemporary war, but in a region less often acknowledged in the overall literature.

[6] P. Craft, 'Stanford Professor Michael McFaul pushes for "Democracy in Russia" proposal', *Stanford Review* 17 April (2009).
[7] F. Weir, 'Hilary Clinton slams Russia over Georgia: why Russia shrugs', *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 July (2010). Available at www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2010/0706/Hillary-Clinton-slams-Russia-over-Georgia-Why-Russia-shrugs

More generally, writing on war has been very much informed by Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War*, especially concerning the diminished significance of Clausewitzian trinitarian warfare.[8] A similarly important contribution was made soon after the end of the Cold War in the form of Kalevi Holsti's *Peace and War*, which sought to build a typology evaluating how war has evolved over time.[9] This has been extended by the 'new wars' literature epitomised by Mary Kaldor's 2001 book on contemporary conflict in the former Yugoslavia, *New and Old Wars*, with a second edition published in 2006.[10] Also notable in this context is Kaldor's *Human Security*, published in 2007,[11] and the work of Martin Shaw and others concerned with understanding the impacts of globalisation upon war, with particular reference to the role of global norms in resolving conflict.[12]

Yet a consequence of the scholarship on so-called 'new wars' is that – to an extent – it has become captured by a specific normative project: the pursuit of global cosmopolitanism and international law as the most reliable means to legitimately resolve contemporary conflict. This imposes an unnecessary restriction on understanding wars which can arise, unfold and be resolved due to a variety of forces, ranging from pure material factors to cultural and ideational considerations. This book, then, does not extend the 'new wars' literature to encapsulate conflicts in the former USSR for a particular prescriptive purpose. Nor is it our intention to make such a contribution. Instead, the volume offers what we feel is a balanced account of conflict, utilising debates in the theoretical literature as well as new developments in the conduct and nature of conflict as ways to illuminate and contextualise the contributions of individual chapter authors.

In addition to a very large body of scholarship on war, there is an established literature on Russian politics and foreign policy that the chapters in this volume engage with, both in their theoretical foci and their case studies. There were many books on various aspects of Russian foreign policy published during the 1990s and at the start of

[8] M. Van Creveld, *The transformation of war* (New York: Free Press, 1991).
[9] K. Holsti, *Peace and war: armed conflicts and international order*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge University Press, 1991).
[10] M. Kaldor, *New and old wars: organised violence in a global era* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001; 2nd edn 2006).
[11] M. Kaldor, *Human security: reflections on globalisation and intervention* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).
[12] See, for instance, M. Shaw, *War and genocide: organised killing in modern society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003); and M. Shaw, 'War and globality: the role and character of war in the global transition', in H. Yeong (ed.), *The new agenda for peace research* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 61–80.

the twenty-first century, with some providing a general overview, such as Robert Donaldson and Joseph Nogee's *Foreign Policy of Russia*,[13] and others focusing on Russia and the West,[14] as well as Russia and terrorism.[15] Still others deal with Russia's relations with the PRC.[16]

Whilst there are few single volumes dealing with Russia's role in the conflicts in the former Soviet territories, some texts have covered Russia's engagement in the wars in the Caucasus. The best of them include John Russell's *Chechnya: Russia's War on Terror*,[17] Richard Sakwa's edited collection *Chechnya: From Past to Future*,[18] John Dunlop's *Russia confronts Chechnya* and Anatol Lieven's *Chechnya: tombstone of Russian power*.[19] Other books have dealt with Russia's relations with Eurasia with a particular focus on Great Power competition in the Central Asian states.[20] The standout is probably still Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot's *Russia and the new states of Eurasia*, published in 1994.[21]

In the wake of the Soviet collapse there was also a large number of books dealing with the unravelling of empire, the role of nationalism

[13] R. Donaldson and J. Nogee, *The foreign policy of Russia: changing systems, enduring interests* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999; 3rd edn 2005).
[14] A. Motyl, B. Ruble and L. Shevtsova (eds.), *Russia's engagement with the West: transformation and integration in the twenty-first century* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2005).
[15] M. Tsypkin, *Russia's security and the war on terror* (London: Routledge, 2007).
[16] J. Wilson, *Strategic partners: Russian–Chinese relations in the post-Soviet era* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2004).
[17] J. Russell, *Chechnya: Russia's war on terror* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
[18] R. Sakwa (ed.), *Chechnya: from past to future* (London: Anthem Press, 2005).
[19] J. Dunlop, *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 1998); and A. Lieven, *Chechnya: tombstone of Russian power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).
[20] Here, for instance, one can identify the two volumes edited by I. Akihiro, *Eager eyes fixed on Eurasia*, vol. 1: *Russia and its neighbors in crisis* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre, Hokkaido University, 2007); and I. Akihiro, *Eager eyes fixed on Eurasia*, vol. 2: *Russia and its eastern edge* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Centre, Hokkaido University, 2007).
[21] K. Dawisha and B. Parrot, *Russia and the new states of Eurasia: the politics of upheaval* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). A similar book, also published in 1994, is Kremenyuk, *Conflicts in and around Russia*. See also M. Webber, *The international politics of Russia and the successor states* (Manchester University Press, 1996); and R. Menon, Y. Federov and G. Nodia (eds.), *Russia, the Caucasus, and Central Asia* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999). Still others deal with similar issues such as conflict resolution and peacekeeping. These include, for instance, A. Arbatov et al. (eds.), *Managing conflict in the former Soviet Union: Russian and American perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); A. Chayes and A. Chayes (eds.), *Preventing conflict in the post-communist world: mobilising international and regional organisations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1996); D. Lynch, *Russian peacekeeping strategies in the CIS, 1992–1997: the cases of Georgia, Moldova and Tajikistan* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); L. Jonson and C. Archer (eds.), *Peacekeeping and the role of Russia in Eurasia* (Boulder, CO: Westview,1996); and J. Mackinlay and P. Cross (eds.), *Regional peacekeepers: the paradox of Russian peacekeeping* (New York: United Nations University Press, 2003).

and the construction of new nations and states, with some coverage of ethnic conflicts. Perhaps the best of these were the edited volume by Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, *New states, new politics*,[22] and an edited volume by James Hughes and Gwendolyn Sasse that examined the role of nationalism and the problems of state building.[23] Maria Raquel Freire, meanwhile, has provided an interesting historical evaluation of the engagement of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the USSR; at the same time as Ruth Deyermond has assessed the competing conceptions of sovereignty and ownership of post-Soviet assets and territory, focusing upon nuclear weapons, the use of military bases and control of the Black Sea Fleet.[24]

Conflict in the former USSR: five overarching themes

What common analytical threads can be drawn from examining conflicts in the former USSR that might illuminate our understanding of the region, the nature of wars there, and potentially open up ways to chart its future? Whilst many issues can be identified, five interconnected themes recur in this book. They pertain to sovereignty, power and geopolitics – as much as they are important for assessing 'newer' issues like transnational terrorist networks, issues of identity and ethnicity – and structures of patronage and privilege that cut across and between different governance structures.

The first theme is that state building, which was identified immediately after the collapse of the USSR as a core challenge, remains an ongoing process that is centrally important in the region some two decades later. This should not be interpreted as an endorsement of any particular type of political organisation – such as liberal democracy, for instance. Nor is it a prescriptive call to implement any specific polity from the cool remove of a classroom and a whiteboard. On the contrary, some authoritarian regimes – in Central Asia, for example – seem to have been remarkably effective in staving off conflict. But states can change direction rapidly, as demonstrated by the Rose, Tulip and Orange revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine respectively.

[22] I. Bremmer and R. Taras (eds.), *New states, new politics: building the post-Soviet nations* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[23] J. Hughes and G. Sasse (eds.), *Ethnicity and territory in the former Soviet Union: regions in conflict* (London: Frank Cass, 2002).
[24] M.R. Freire, *Conflict and security in the former Soviet Union: the role of the OSCE* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2003); and R. Deyermond, *Security and sovereignty in the former Soviet Union* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2008).

Even so, 'democratic' revolutions are not immutable, and the history of many former Soviet republics is full of struggles between the prerogative state and the constitutional state, in which the regime (rather than the nation) is often the victor.

A second theme of central importance is that the line between domestic and international politics in the former USSR is extremely blurry. Those students of international relations who seek to make simple 'inside–outside' characterisations based on assumptions about states as unitary actors, the permanency of national interests and the importance of levels of analysis will find it difficult to deliver compelling explanations for state behaviour in the former USSR. The frequency with which leaders and politicians play two-level games, the role of forces associated with globalisation that have facilitated the penetration of the region by business actors, organised criminals and terrorists, and the porous borders of many states in the region make separating the national from the international extremely difficult.

Third, as should be expected, norms and ideas are spongy in Eurasia. When Russia refers to sovereignty it is sometimes using a typical statist model dating back to the Treaty of Westphalia, which discourages outside intervention. On the other hand, when referring to citizenship issues linked to the status of 'ethnic' Russians in former Soviet republics, this becomes a *rationale* for intervention, as the events in South Ossetia during August 2008 demonstrated. Likewise, when the parties to the contest over Nagorno-Karabakh speak of the importance of democracy, peacekeeping and civil institutions, they do not all have in mind the same type of democracy, sources for peacekeeping, or roles for institutions.

Fourth, many of the small and peripheral territories of the USSR – that suddenly became more interesting after the Soviet collapse – have now become fully entrenched as sites of conflict. This has happened for a variety of reasons, from ethnic tension and self-determination campaigns to struggles over material resources. Conflicts in the former USSR also now incorporate a host of new actors previously not present during the communist era. Extra-regional powers have become interested in investing in energy reserves in Central Asia; in playing a role in the mediation of wars; in promoting normative standards relating to human rights and democracy; and in extending their economic and alliance structures to encompass states that Russia regards as falling within its direct geopolitical sphere of interest. So too have institutions and organisations like the EU, which represent the interests of larger states, as well as their powerful normative visions and economic resources.

Fifth, the former USSR represents such a complex mix of temporally shifting alliances, changing power structures and institutions, and contests over ideas – from within and without – that it is difficult to refer to it as a coherent region. To do so would make the mistaken assumption that the actors within the former USSR are more or less static, and that there is relative consensus over the indivisibility of the core problems they face. That each of us in this book uses the term 'region' to refer to the former Soviet space should not be taken as a formal definition. We do so merely for geographical convenience: the term does not reflect any tacit acknowledgments about agents, processes and structures. A mere glance at the different organisations and institutions on the menu in the former Soviet space should be reason enough to question to what extent we can consider the former USSR regionally bounded. For instance, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) may be the largest politico-economic organisation, but not all of the former Soviet republics are members, and not all CIS members participate in the CSTO (as its flagship military-security organisation). The Baltic countries are aspirant EU members, and are alone amongst the former Soviet states in having joined NATO. Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova also seek closer ties to the West, but have had to make do with membership of the Georgia-Ukraine-Azerbaijan-Moldova (GUAM) bloc; whilst the PRC is an active player under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Structure and chapter overview

The themes outlined above are deliberately not examined systematically in this book. Rather, they serve as broad common threads drawing the various contributions together. Instead, the book first traces the role of the main actors and structural processes shaping the former USSR, before moving to evaluate specific case studies of conflict occurring at the national, international and transnational levels. The final part examines the lessons that might be drawn about how we understand war as a result of conflict in the former USSR. It ends by evaluating the potential for future conflicts in the region.

The book therefore begins in what should be fairly logical and familiar territory: the foreign and security policy of the Russian Federation. It is logical because Russia is physically the largest state that emerged from the breakup of the USSR, it has the largest military (including a sizeable nuclear arsenal), and it possesses the largest economy. Russia is also the state that inherited the mantle of regional leadership from the USSR. It is the chief architect of the major institutional arrangements