



**G**eographers rightly point out that the continental concepts of Europe and Asia are difficult to objectively sustain. Why the low-lying hills of the Urals or the narrow isthmus of the Bosphorus should present dividing lines any more significant than those of the Alps or the British Channel is less a matter of geography than of prejudices and politics. Eurasia is really one vast continent –early 20<sup>th</sup> century British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder called it "The World Island"– with the 'continent' of Europe as its major peninsula. That said, there have been for millennia, splits between East and West, North and South, in and around the peculiar European peninsula. The specific fault lines and regions that straddled them have shifted over the centuries, but there are some areas that maintain the character of frontiers for longer than others.

These are the 'regions in between': geographical, political, cultural or economic areas that have alternately served as barriers or corridors, no-man's land or vital buffers between empires, states and spheres. Regions in between serve both as economic gateways and borderlands, shifting from the dominance of one established power to another. They serve as cultural bazaars in which distinct traditions coexist and/or clash. Most strikingly, however, they serve as battlegrounds for geopolitical maneuvering, whether symbolized by the destruction and refortification of forts and strongholds, or the posturing of alliance membership.

### *Shifting Frontiers*

The Baltics are one such region in between, for centuries occupying a position as trading hub or choice territory between maritime Europe and European Russia – two very different worlds. The greater Black Sea region, overlapping with the

between are passing their duties onward to neighboring spaces unaccustomed to the role of middle-man. The three examples given above, the Baltics, the Black Sea region and the Caucasus, all have this dynamic in common.

The Baltics are the furthest along in this respect. Their near-simultaneous entry into NATO and the EU and relatively well-managed economic and social development have meant that Belarus and western Russia itself are now political, economic and social borderlands. Just southwest of the Baltics, the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad –site of some of the Second World War’s most atrocious



Even Armenia's leadership, closest to Russia in the region since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan during the break-up of the Soviet Union, has begun to frame its rhetoric in terms of NATO military reforms and EU governance standards. The greatest perceived blow to Yerevan's credibility came from Western shock and disapproval following a post-election government crackdown in February. President Serzh Sargsyan is now desperately trying to regain favor in the West.

NATO-member Turkey has trundled through the rigmarole of EU accession far longer than any other state in the region. While its current prolonged political crisis has most to do with societal and economic shifts –expressed through disputes over religion and traditional mores– inconsistent signals from Europe

a major obstacle to a coherent Caspian strategy. Central Asia is simply unfamiliar territory for Brussels. In its engagement of the Caspian, the West has moved beyond the traditional greater Black Sea region in between and contributed to the realization of a new borderland further east. Not since Alexander has Central Asia been institutionally linked to maritime Europe. The East-West frontier has shifted. The broader Caspian is Eurasia's new region in between.

### ***Geopolitical Realities***

On 2-4 April 2008, Bucharest, the former capital of Communist strongman Nicolai Ceausescu, was the sight of NATO's largest-ever annual summit. The leadership of every Alliance country, as well as the presidents of Afghanistan, Georgia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan and Russia gathered in what may always be known as the Ceausescu palace, the second largest building in the world, symbol of Soviet-sponsored tyranny in Central Europe. But, swathed in summit banners, with the Romanian, NATO and European Union flags flying outside, the building represented a great achievement – the freedom of the former Eastern bloc countries, and the expansion of voluntary partnership in security to most of the European continent.



of the EU's Lisbon Treaty only underscored the fact that the geopolitical aspect



combined with a sense that Russia's greatness as a nation, and influence in its so-called 'near abroad' is defined by the West's weakness in areas viewed as being part of Moscow's 'orbit'. This zero-sum outlook clouds shared interests between Russia and the West in reducing transnational threats, territorial tensions and ineffective governance in Eurasia.

But, there are signs that practicality may be winning over emotion. Overshadowed by discord at the April NATO summit was an agreement signed with Russia to provide supply routes over its territory to provision NATO and U.S. troops in Afghanistan. And, despite Russian envoy to NATO Dmitry Rogozin's continued loquacious pillorying of the Alliance, he quietly announced in early July that Moscow intends to propose a wide-ranging joint security system that is to cover all geography from Vancouver to Vladivostok. NATO should be prepared to put forth a united, but receptive front. A joint plan, which addresses the interests of both sides, as well as the sovereign choices made in the regions that straddle Eurasia's shifting frontiers, should be NATO's objective. Russia cannot be ignored, but it cannot halt Western integration of regions in between either. Contrary to popular wisdom, the key to improved relations with Russia lies in greater involvement in Eurasia. Moscow will only respect the regions' shift toward insider status if NATO, the EU and other Western institutions bolster their presence in the continent.

The broader Caspian region is rapidly transforming into the 21<sup>st</sup> century's great region in between. The mantle has been passed eastward as the greater Black Sea region steadily incorporates insider status. This shift of frontiers means increased potential for links further afield. The expanse of eastern China and Central and Inner Asia remains the last great unexploited trade route on the planet. The scope for Western connections to the Far East and South Asia is vast and largely unfulfilled. But, the transcontinental bonds of Eurasia can only be realized through increased understanding of and involvement in the regions in between. So far, both have been necessitated by the region's interest in the fruits of the West: peace, prosperity and good governance. The enlargement of Western institutions and the incorporation of regions in between has been defined by the desire of those regions to shed their 'in between-ness'. Despite resistance from Russia and Western Europe, this momentum will likely continue. The West's premier institutions, the EU and NATO, with an open mind towards involving Russia, would do well to positively engage in the geopolitics of shifting frontiers.