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POLICY BRIEF

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Understanding the International Order of the Post-Soviet Region

by Rigina Syssoeva

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The policy brief is dedicated to the theorization of current international relations in the post-Soviet area.¹ The author comes to the conclusion that international order in the region can be characterized as a “Non-hegemonic cooperation” model, developed by the American political scientist Robert Keohane. The model refers to a system which does not need to be maintained by any hegemon. Instead of being controlled by only one actor, it is regulated by a framework of institutions and cooperation regimes. This model is the best characterization of the region, as currently there is no hegemon in the area able to control its international order. Instead of this, there are five important regime-making actors in the region that create the rules of cooperation. The author finds that the situation of the “Non-hegemonic cooperation” is convenient to all former Soviet states because it is in line with their foreign policy priorities, and further maintenance of this system is beneficial for all members.

Dr. Rigina Syssoyeva, from Nur-Sultan (Kazakhstan), received her PhD degree in “International Studies” at the University of the Basque Country (Spain) in 2015, after obtaining her BA and MA degrees in “International Relations” at the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Kazakhstan) and studying as an exchange student at the University of Lapland (Finland) and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies (South Korea). She currently works at «Astana International University» and the Embassy of Cuba (part-time). Her research interests include theories of regional integration, development of the Eurasian Economic Union, international cooperation in the post-Soviet area, internal politics of members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, cooperation in the Arctic region and conflict in Afghanistan. Rigina speaks Russian, English and Spanish languages.

¹ By post-Soviet area, the author implies 12 post-Soviet states except Baltic countries (i.e. Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan).

Challenge: looking for a theoretical model of the international order in the post-Soviet area

International political order has been constantly changing. This refers to the global community in general and to regional systems in particular. The aim of this policy brief is to characterize the international order in which the current post-Soviet space has been developing. The author finds² that the model which better characterizes the post-Soviet area is the model proposed by Robert Keohane,³ the founder of political economy and developer of liberal institutionalism.

Keohane's institutionalist understanding of international order is a very new approach, different from traditional realist and liberal views, which does not reject their ideas but tries to embody their main points.⁴ The key to Keohane's understanding of world order is the concept of cooperation. Present-day cooperation is described in terms of high level of interdependence, quantity of actors engaged, and institutionalization of interstate interactions. According to Keohane, world politics is organized in a way that the country's notion to forge partnerships with others is not just a decision; it is its compelling need, whose original roots are difficult to find, because cooperation has become an indispensable condition of the successful running of all spheres of international relations from joint manufacture and division of labor to the world financial system. Keohane has named this current cooperation model as a "Nonhegemonic" one. Cooperation is "non-hegemonic" now because there is no "hegemon" – no single state or power – that is able to control the world system and

rules of interactions.⁵ Cooperation does not necessarily need to be ruled by only one power nowadays, it is rather maintained by international regimes and institutions. By regimes, Keohane understands a scope of rules of cooperation and interactions created by interstate agreements and international organizations. They cover different spheres of states' interactions from trade and collective security to protection of World Heritage Sites, but the main condition that they are based on is a "mutual adjustment of policies"⁶ and reciprocity. In that context, regimes can be compared to a floating exchange rate, where a state's course is fixed by other countries' demands.

Response: post-Soviet world as an example of the "Non-hegemonic cooperation" model

Keohane's "Non-hegemonic cooperation" model, summarized above, can be applied to the post-Soviet region. There are five key players that promote their own rules of cooperation in the post-Soviet space, and all of them use regimes and institutions to strengthen their positions in the region and secure long-term presence in the area. These players are Russia, China, EU, Turkey, and USA.⁷ Positions of these five key players, their tools and approaches are summarized below.

² This was one of the findings of the PhD thesis of the author. See R. Syssoyeva, "Eurasian Integration as a Way to Respond to Global Challenges", PhD thesis, University of the Basque Country (2015), <https://addi.ehu.es/handle/10810/15842> (accessed June 24, 2020).

³ R. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press (1984).

⁴ M. Suhr, "Robert O. Keohane: a Contemporary Classics", in I. NEUMANN and O. WÆVER (Eds.), *The Future of International Relations*, London and New York, Routledge (1997): 102.

⁵ R. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press (1984): 244.

⁶ R. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press (1984): 194

⁷ Existence of these five regime-makers does not deny the fact that former Soviet partners also try to create new regimes. Examples of these intentions are integration initiatives in Central Asia (for instance, Organization of Central Asian Cooperation) or GUAM Organization for Democracy and Economic Development. However, this policy brief is dedicated to the main regime-makers in the region that succeeded to create successful independent institutions. As for "own" institutions, integration initiatives in Central Asia were not successful. As for GUAM, this organization does not have "independent origins" because it was primarily created to demonstrate the pro-European and pro-NATO choice of its members.

Russian Federation. Russia's ability to maintain its position in the world arena as a great power largely depends on its positions in the post-Soviet region, in which it remains as the main military power (having military bases in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Tajikistan). Besides that, Russia's strength in the region is based on investments in interested spheres, common history, widespread use of Russian language in the post-Soviet area, geographical proximity, as well as highly developed bilateral and multilateral cooperation links including such multilateral cooperation regimes such as Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organization, and Commonwealth of Independent States.

European Union. Former Soviet states situated geographically close to the EU successfully play the role of a buffer zone of politically friendly countries open to peaceful Europeanization. Institutional basis for this role is large and it constantly has been developing. It was started as the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), and then it was replaced by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), Partnership and Cooperation agreements, and the Strategy for a New Partnership. The most advanced cooperation regime the EU has with those former Soviet republics, are those with whom the Union concluded the Association Agreements and created the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (i.e. Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova).⁸ However, it seems that transformation of these regimes would not change the position of former Soviet republics in their relations with the EU and they will remain being a buffer zone of the Union.

USA. The American approach to the region is more bilateral than multilateral. However, its bilateral approaches to former Soviet republics have many similarities, because all of them imply democratization, promoting of human rights, civil society and free elections – the values, which are very important for any democratic nation. The problem of these

approaches is that they are driven to changes of power in authoritarian (as Washington considers) post-Soviet countries.

China. Similar to the US, for many years the Chinese approach to the region was rather bilateral than multilateral. Beijing has been developing a bilateral approach to relations with each of post-Soviet countries, actively using such tools as economic expansion, energy cooperation with energy-rich countries such as Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia, giving loans, etc. Currently, this policy was enriched with such global projects as Belt and Road Initiative, 21st Century Maritime Silk Road and Silk Road Economic Belt. Besides traditional to Chinese politics instruments of economic expansion, Beijing also started to promote itself as a military actor in the region, becoming an indispensable part of the Afghan peace regulation process.⁹

Turkey. Turkey's position in the region is an example of an ideology-driven expansion politics based on pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism and aimed to create a "wider Turkic world". After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey for a short period was playing a role of a development model for some of newly independent states (i.e. for Turkic-speaking nations: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). However, due to scarce economic capabilities, Turkey did not succeed in its expansionist plans, limiting its cooperation with the republics of Turkic and Islam brotherhood to trade and cultural relations.

Existence of these five main regime-makers and the absence among them of a unique hegemon confirms the hypothesis of the author that the current post-Soviet region is an example of Keohane's Non-hegemonic cooperation model. It is necessary also to highlight that this analysis is not about comparing the weight of power of each of the regime-makers in the post-Soviet region (because these weights and the spheres in which they are applied are very different to each other), but rather it is about demonstrating that there is no a unique

⁸ K. Shyrokykh, "Policy-specific Effects of Transgovernmental Cooperation: a Statistical Assessment Across The EU's Post-Soviet Neighbours", *Journal of European Public Policy* 26, no. 1 (2019): 151-152.

⁹ D. Malysheva, "Post-Soviet States of Central Asia in China's Policies", *World Economy and International Relations* 63, no. 5 (2019): 101-108.

hegemon that can control the region, which reflects the principles of the Non-hegemonic cooperation model by Keohane.

Recommendations

- In spite of its ambiguity, the system of the Non-hegemonic cooperation in the post-Soviet area is convenient for all post-Soviet countries. It is a perfect system that in the case of being used in a right way it can be rewarding and full of opportunities. For Russia, this system allows Moscow to reduce its costs of leadership. The military stability of the region depends on Russia, but not its general development. In thirty years of independence, each post-Soviet country found its position in the world arena and tries to develop it by own means. The presence of external powers in the region supports them in balancing between interests of these powers for pursuing own benefits. To Moscow this situation of Non-hegemonic cooperation gives it freedom of choice to participate in those projects which seem interesting for its self-orientated politics.
- For other post-Soviet states, the system of Non-hegemonic cooperation is also convenient because it goes in line with their politics of balancing between great powers' interests. It seems that all politically stable countries are committed to this policy of maintaining a balance. For instance, in Central Asia, this policy is called multivectoral (for Kazakhstan), or non-alignment (for Uzbekistan). These are just different names for the same policy of balancing among great powers, which is in favor of maintenance of the Non-hegemonic cooperation system. The same can be said for European and Caucasus post-Soviet countries. Even Belarus, known for having the most pro-Russian policy, looks for collaboration with other actors in the region, which is confirmed in the increasing number of its joint projects with

China. At the same time, a politically non-stable country like Ukraine is not committed to this balancing model as it actively denies the institution-making policy of one of the actors of the region (i.e. Russia). This leads to the conclusion that for better future of the post-Soviet area and its political stability, it is recommended for its states to maintain the Non-hegemonic cooperation system of the region. It is also can be recommended that for the better stability of this system, initiatives of other potential regime-makers such as India or Iran should be welcomed by former Soviet states.

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