

Europe's New Arc of Instability in the 21st Century

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Global Research, June 03, 2014

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#), [US NATO War Agenda](#)

The old post-cold war order is now forever over. A quarter century after the fall off the Berlin Wall, a new and highly volatile geopolitical landscape is emerging in Europe. Its contours and content are not yet clearly evident, however. But in this tumultuous year of 2014 (marking a hundred years since the start of the "Great War", and two hundred years after the Congress of Vienna) global events as in the past, are again (and with a vengeance) re-shaping or determining the way the map of Europe might look like in the coming decades. The extremely violent ructions in Ukraine showcase such a trend.

This "semi-autonomous" and relatively stable former Soviet republic was once known as the "bread basket" of the USSR. It's today just an impoverished basket case, left for the IMF to pillage and plunder in the name of "freedom and democracy". Since declaring its independence in 1991, "The Ukraine" has gone from being a notoriously kleptocratic and corrupt state, to a fragmented and failed state. The incipient civil war there, which the world is now witnessing, disturbingly resembles the post-colonial conflicts (or prolonged proxy wars) of the 1980s fought in Angola and Mozambique.

Whereby its western half is being wrenched away from its eastern half by foreign and a corporatist interest, its eastern half is immersed in a secessionist struggle. The western backed pro-EU and US coup, has resulted in a head on collision with Russia's traditional or historical (post imperial and post-Soviet) geo-strategic imperatives. Ukraine's eastern part or its Russo phone "borderlands" (Dnieper Lowlands) are being Balkanized as a result of the US-EU orchestrated "Maidan revolution", and in the aftermath of Crimea's re-unification (or some say "annexation") with "mother Russia". This is the first time since the break-up of the former Yugoslavia (followed by a NATO led air war against Moscow's staunch ally Serbia) in the 1990s, that a territorial implosion of such magnitude is taking place in Europe.

Back to the Future for Europe: spheres of influence and *cordons sanitaires* are back in style

The outcome of this Ukrainian territorial tussle is unknown. However, further destabilisation is likely whatever happens. Meanwhile, a buffer zone or *cordons sanitaires* is being delineated or established between the EU and the US on one side, and a remerging (some say belligerent) Russia on the other. This swathe of land runs from Kaliningrad (the non-contagious Russian enclave) in the Baltics region, along the Crimean peninsula (now once more Russian territory) on the Black sea, and ends down in the Russian Caucasus or around Georgia. Ukraine is the biggest land mass in the middle of this fractious corridor. It is thus seeing its territory being dismembered, as part of a re-alignment or "great game" being played out by foreign powers vying for influence in the region.

Amid this shifting of geo-political tectonic plates, the inchoate central government in Kiev is

in turmoil. It has neither the military wherewithal in terms of manpower, equipment and intelligence; nor the legitimate authority (despite the recent presidential vote) it needs to control the centrifugal forces which are tearing the country apart.

Without doubt, there is an “arc of instability” running across the continent. This developing danger zone is potentially a grave threat to peace and stability for all of Europe. Moreover, much smaller states such as Moldavia and Georgia belong nowhere right now; that is neither to Russia’s sphere of influence nor the west’s. In view of Ukraine’s plight they are seeking a safe haven for themselves, apparently in western structures such as NATO and the EU. Hence, this week the EU has called on along with Ukraine, for the two aforementioned states to also join its club. The EU’s clear intent is to increase its overextended membership or shift more to the east, no matter what the costs might be to the trade bloc’s already austerity constrained budget. As for bi-lateral EU- Russia ties, they will likely be negatively impacted by such pronouncements. Washington for its part seems to have put its plans to expand NATO ever closer to Russia’s borders temporarily on hold. A wise move indeed.

The re-alignment between the US and EU on one side, Euro-Asia and China on the other

As a backdrop to these upheavals, this week the signing in Astana, of a Eurasian Union comprising Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus is another shift in the balance of global power. This economic alliance (modeled on the EU) is obviously meant to counterbalance the rising influence of the European Union, in what Moscow considers to be its “near abroad”. Additionally significant is Russia’s recent pivot towards Asia or more specifically China. The most obvious example of this is the signing of a major energy (in the oil and gas sector) agreement between Moscow and Beijing. Jointly these two BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) nations are now a formidable compact which forms a significant counterweight to the EU- US duo. Meanwhile, both Brussels and Washington, in the midst of these global re-alignments, are busily finalizing an EU-US free trade deal of their own. The transatlantic trade pact is most certainly meant to rival the new Euro-Asia and China strategic, military and commercial alliance in the making. In other words, more trade and regional wars will likely fashion or determine the future of Europe in the 21st century.

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