

A REGIONAL ORDER FOR PEACE?

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A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia. Ed. by S.Charap, J.Shapiro, J.Drennan, O.Chalyi, R.Krumm, Yu.Nikitina, G.Sassen. – Santa Monica (Calif.): RAND, 2019. 117 p.

The multinational team of authors of *“A Consensus Proposal for a Revised Regional Order in Post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia”* claims that relations between Russia and the West are at the lowest point since the end of the Cold War (p. 9). The current status quo is insecure and fosters instability, with little hope of improving if the status quo remains the same. To remedy this, the authors put forth their proposal for a revised regional order to address three components: the regional security architecture, economic integration, and regional conflicts (p. 3). The authors argue that the root of the tensions between Russia and the West is the competition and desire for influence over what they refer to as “in-between states,” and disagreement on the regional order. These are the countries that are geographically located between them: Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (p. 1). This competition causes the current regional order to be one of insecurity and dysfunction, especially and even for the in-between states. There is rivalry between NATO member states and Russia, with the in-between states caught in this contest. The big issue is that the in-between states are faced with a binary choice: loyalty to one side or the other. The proposal is designed to provide a solution that would give those states more agency and restrain the competition between the West and Russia, in order to provide more stability to the region (p. 9).

The authors stress both the importance of addressing all three components of the proposal, and the necessity for mutual consensus among participants. They write, “It is important to note that these three components of the regional order must be addressed in parallel to achieve the outcomes described. If one piece falls away, the others will fall with it. They are interlinked components of the current dispute, and, therefore, the solutions must be interlinked” (p. 86). The authors argue that any progress towards economic integration would be limited unless regional security and regional conflicts are also addressed. The same refers to security and regional conflicts. Progress made on only one aspect does not suffice. It only makes sense if all three components are not mutually exclusive, and progress along all three tracks would lead to the best outcome.

The authors also describe the importance of mutual cooperation. One of its main tools is regular, transparent consultations between the states involved, to allow for broader participation of in-between states and less domination by major powers. They write, “The fundamental difference between the pain-reduction measures present today and those to be implemented according to our proposal would be that they would be agreed to by all the relevant parties by definition” (p. 67). Much attention is paid to the need to reach consent and consensus before any solutions are put in place. This is obviously important if we are to see any improvement, but it should also be considered what it takes for consensus to realistically be achieved. Much will rest on the participants’ willingness to cooperate to see improvements in the status quo.

This proposal appears as a useful plan to promote regional security and foster improved relations between Russia and the West. It covers multiple aspects in detail and would provide the in-between states with more agency. The drawback to consider is that while this is a very thorough plan which contains lofty goals, it would involve an extremely long process and require immense commitment from all interested parties. If

the proposal is not followed through, would the relations backslide again? The authors do acknowledge the difficulties that would go along with implementing the plan and realize stability is not easy to achieve. According to them, "The changes in the regional order that we propose would not be easy to implement and would entail costs. Indeed, our proposal is likely to be highly politically charged. But the situation today is suboptimal for all parties. All relevant capitals need to start the process of thinking about alternatives. The proposal offered here provides one vision for a way forward. The most important change required today is to begin to have an open discussion about these thorny issues. Barring that, an already bad situation will only continue to deteriorate" (p. 86).

Much of the success of this proposal seems to rest on the willingness of the parties involved to cooperate and compromise, in order to create a more secure region. For example, in the section addressing regional conflicts, the proposal suggests that the major powers should pledge significant funds to pay for reconstruction as part of conflict management processes (p. 76). This raises a question of whether the major states are willing to pay for this. The answer comes down to a deep cost-benefit analysis for all parties. More generally, a decision would have to be made to either continue to live with the current status quo or invest into this proposal. But as the status quo continues to deteriorate, the point may come when the benefits greatly outweigh any costs, and it becomes a necessity. It is at that point that this proposal could provide an acceptable solution to be put in place. It is important to point out that the authors acknowledge that their regional security plan could not take hold in the current environment, but is rather designed for future implementation: "We deliberately avoided suggesting steps for policymakers to take in the current environment. Instead, our proposal is geared toward a future window of opportunity. Therefore, by definition, the proposal contained in the following... chapters is not intended to be implemented today" (p. 6).

This proposal is about resolving the disputes between major powers over, and involving, the in-between states by proposing an order to improve the status quo through security measures, economic integration, and management of regional conflicts – as the status quo is currently not making the region more secure or economically prosperous. This proposal is designed to reduce the competitive nature that exists between Russia and the West and to provide the in-between states with more agency than merely a strictly a binary choice. It also aims at improving the perception that the sides have about one another. The extreme mistrust leads to the belief that either side is out for total domination and hegemony of the region. In contrast, the proposal is centered on mutual consensus, and the authors realize that all three components must be addressed if there is to be progress. This proposal also builds upon the institutions that already exist, which is more realistic than trying to create new institutions to deal with the problem from the ground up.

This would be a long and difficult process, as parties would have to engage in systematic, formal cooperation that has not been in place for a long time. The authors also stress that this proposal is designed for the future and is not meant to be put in place at the present time. All parties involved (Russia, the Western states, and in-between states) would have to analyze the costs and benefits, but also realize that the status quo is only deteriorating. In sum, the report provides a thorough layout of solutions to address regional concerns, to implement when the time is right.

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