Eurasian Disunion: Russia's Vulnerable Flanks

Commentary by S. Enders Wimbush
The Jamestown Foundation
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1. The analysis of this fine book is based around a single pole, Russia, which is of course the West's most immediate concern. The argument, with which I have no disagreements, is that Russia's efforts to re-create a Moscow-centered strategic universe pose grave dangers to the countries of Russia's "flanks," and by extension to Europe and the West more generally. I like the idea of identifying and analyzing the nature of the threat to the flanks—five identified here—and I have seen no better analysis of how Russia develops and applies the dynamics of that threat to assert its own influence and priorities. Allow me three observations.

My first observation has to do with why analyses like this have become so complicated, based on the notion and character of "flanks." In Soviet times, one could conclude with some confidence that most of the flank areas described in this book were largely immutable so long as Russia was the dominant force controlling all of them. Put another way, Eastern Europe was a flank to the Russian empire and little more; the South Caucasus was a flank to the Russian empire and little more; Central Asia was a flank to the Soviet empire and little more. Being a flank of Russia's remit was about the only thing that defined them strategically.

This bi-directional relationship, of course, no longer exists. Central Europe, the Caucasus, the Balts, Central Europe, and Central Asia are in fact now part of multi-directional forces, not just to the pressures from the Russian center, even if these remain powerful. Two relatively new conditions exist that complicate the center-flank analysis. First, each of the flanks analyzed here is now its own center, and all of them have national foreign policies with set objectives and strategies designed to achieve those objectives. Of course, some of these so-called new centers are more focused on their foreign policies than others. But even those we once understood to have had little experience in the formulation of distinct national objectives and, hence, foreign policy strategies have made great strides. Think Kazakhstan, for example, which is one of the more sophisticated foreign policy actors in the former Soviet sphere. Or Georgia, whose multi-vectored foreign policy and keenly defined national interests are notable. Central Europe is of course now part of another larger corporate entity called the EU, with its own objectives and strategies. We can argue about how focused these new foreign policies are, or about the quality of the strategies devised to pursue them, but that these flanks are now their own centers is undeniable.

Second, each of these new foreign policy centers has its own flanks. Kazakhstan's flanks include Russia, Uzbekistan, China, the Caspian states, and so forth. Georgia's include Turkey, the Black Sea basin, Iran, increasingly China, the North Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Armenia. And, of course, Russia. The Baltic states' flanks…well, you get the idea. I raise this issue because each of the constituent parts of the five flanks analyzed here must factor in the effects of having to deal with an aggressive Russia on its interactions with its own flanks. How can Kyrgyzstan ignore Russia's pressure when dealing with China? How does Azerbaijan calibrate its strategic assets and liabilities in dealing with Turkey when Turkey and Russia are now doing deals? How will the Central Asian flank states relate to Iran, which is reentering Central Asia's multi-sided competition largely with Russia's assistance? How will Central European states resist Moscow's "pipeline" politics when its flank—Germany, primarily—has embraced Russia for precisely this role? This is not to argue that everything is now connected to everything else. But many things are more connected than before, especially in center-flank relationships.

These newer center-flank dynamics create new challenges for strategic analysis that did not exist, or existed only episodically, when there was one center and one periphery. I would argue that we still lack the institutional capacity to understand the complexity of these strategic interactions with any confidence.

2. My second point returns to the core center-flank issue laid out by Janusz and Margarita. Let's consider the core—Russia—for a moment. I believe—as do many others, including many Russians—that Russia is in precipitous decline across virtually every element of its power and authority. Yes, Russia still has a diminished but capable military—probably "good enough" for many things, and declining slower than other Russian capabilities, but declining nonetheless—on which it backstops its imperial ambitions. Russia in decline is something my colleague Elizabeth Portale and I have been studying with the assistance of Russian and European experts, and, of course, with some of America's preeminent specialists. Glen will forgive me—or perhaps he will give me an extra sandwich—for mentioning Jamestown's project on Russia in Decline, about which you can learn a great deal more by visiting Jamestown's website. With regard to this project, we hope that we can join in the success of Eurasian Disunion and bring our findings and recommendations into strategy discussions of the next American administration.

What are the dynamics or Russia's decline? Any serious analysis of Russia today would consider, for example:

- Severe and intractable demographic contraction, including an ongoing and inescapable long-term labor force contraction; a seemingly irresolvable public health nightmare; profound and rapid population aging where "greying" starts at the shockingly young; and other deep dysfunctions in the realm of human resources. And now even physical decline… .
- Ethnic imbalances favoring "population replacement" by non-Russians, especially indigenous Muslim peoples, which is progressively and in some ways fundamentally changing the complexion of Russia's overall population, especially its younger cohorts, and its institutions (e.g., the military)
- One-commodity economy—hydrocarbons—whose volatile global price keeps Russia at the precipice of economic crisis, while the state's dependence on energy prices for public finances deepens the "resource curse"—rampant corruption—which smothers human resource-based development policies
- A remarkably underdeveloped and ineffectual "middle class"

- A seemingly unstoppable brain drain, with hundreds of thousands of the brightest of its younger generation opting to participate in the global economy from countries beyond Russia
- Degradation of “knowledge production” capabilities, caused by the collapse of both elite and mass education and the exodus of skilled talent
- Brittle political system, with few safety valves for dissent, succession planning, and an entrenched stake-holding political elite
- Rapacious leadership, which takes every opportunity to harvest the state’s wealth for personal gain, while parking its profits abroad
- Military decline, and the diminishing technical ability to produce the next generation of weaponry
- More potent and successful competition from other powerful actors, for example China, Turkey, and Iran.

If this analysis is correct, then the center-flank dynamics described by Janusz and Margarita are likely to take unpredictable twists and turns and introduce new dimensions as Russia’s decline steepens. I have described elsewhere a Russia that holds a bad poker hand, but it knows that it must play this hand, however bad, for as long as possible to remain competitive. A player with a hand this bad, but an existential need to play it, will bluff, intimidate, coerce, and deny for as long as possible. As these stratagems wear thin, it will take increasingly dangerous risks. The 2008 war against Georgia was an early warning of Moscow’s heightened risk taking; Ukraine in 2013 is even stronger evidence. Neither of these interventions took place at a time when Russia was becoming a stronger country, but the opposite. We should expect more of the same.

I raise this issue because, again, the need for more and constant analysis is evident, in my view. In particular, we require an ability to look into the future with some confidence that we have identified possible contingencies that might result from Russia’s meltdown so that we can devise a range of hedging strategies for those we believe are most probable. One need not possess a crystal ball to do this. The basic tools are available, and the intellectual firepower one can mobilize in a city like Washington is certainly unequaled. But I know of nowhere such analysis take place. Some years ago, several of us were involved in helping our intelligence community set up an alternative futures panel. Does it still exist? The Pentagon could boast its Office of Net Assessment and the redoubtable Andrew Marshall, but Marshall is now retired and that office, although under very capable leadership, is in transition. Does any Washington think tank sponsor the kind of alternative futures research understanding Russia’s vulnerable flanks will require? I am not aware of one.

3. My final point deals with how Russia’s vulnerable flanks affect US and European interests. For me, this is first and foremost a question of getting the optics right; or, perhaps, of layering a new set of optical filters on top of those under which we have long labored. Example: The so-called Russia Re-set reinforced and institutionalized the

notion that America's interests in Eurasia are best understood through Russia's lenses. Its apparent aim was to increase our policy makers' sensitivity to Russia's articulated interests, then seek accommodations where US and Russian interests could be seen or expected to intersect or collide. But the large intellectual conceit that we are uniquely able to understand Russia's concerns and the reasons for them was little more than mirror imaging, which is almost always the wrong starting point for any strategic analysis. Mirror imaging that goes like this: If we had the problem the Russians have, we know how they will deal with it because this is how we would deal with it. Ukraine should have put this naïve notion to rest, and let's hope that it has. But the real danger in the so-called re-set is the underlying assumption that Russia's aches and pains could be alleviated if the United States reduces or abandons its support for whatever irritates Moscow. What irritated Moscow most was mostly on its flanks.

This static view of Russia's flanks flies in the face of what I discussed a minute ago in my first point: namely that these flanks are now centers of their own foreign policies and interests, and that they have flanks of their own, which they must take into account. And so should we. Our interests in many of these flanks is no longer exclusively our concern for what Russia is doing or might do. Yes, Russia is big, but to associate American strategy—to the extent that one can speak of American strategy—with a preoccupation for only big states is to encourage strategic constipation.

Consider for a moment the case of Georgia, which was unquestionably one of the key irritants the Russia Reset was intended to remove. Georgia, which is at the top of just about everyone's list of achievements in Eurasia for stability, democratic practice, free markets, independent media, ease of doing business, human rights observance, and much more, plummeted in Washington after the Reset took effect, becoming a kind of national non-person. And this at a time when because of the dynamics on Georgia's own flanks, it has become one of the key places in Eurasia where a wide variety of America's vital interests intersect. Some examples: Georgia's strategic position as a conduit of energy to Europe is critical. It is the barrier in a potential highway of North Caucasian jihadists to and from the Middle East's battle fields. It borders restive Turkey, an important US ally and NATO partner, and shares with it a strategic alliance that includes equally important Azerbaijan. It's on the flank of both. It is also Europe's borderland, its flank. Georgia is part of any imaginable Black Sea alliance of NATO and non-NATO nations concerned about Russia's aggressive outreach. Its Black Sea ports and borders are the entry point or exit point of much of the New Silk Road that will link Europe and Asia overland across Eurasia. Its resilient and well-trained military has provided troops to NATO operations in Iraq and Afghanistan measured by per capita second only to the United States, and well ahead of lots of European full NATO members who would not fight for various reasons. When Russia's decline reaches critical mass, little stable engaged Georgia will of necessity become part of the outer Eurasian shell that will be needed to contain the mess. It's hard to think of any state that—at the right moment—could play a more positive supportive role to US strategic interests in this region.

I run through this list to belabor my point that we need to continually change or adjust our optics on the character of the challenges to and opportunities for our own vital interests in Eurasia that cannot be seen clearly through the Russia-first optics that dominate today's analytical architectures. This is not to discount the importance of understanding the center-flank dynamics so cogently described by Janusz and Margarita. This is vitally necessary. Rather, it is to plead for yet another layer of analysis through different optical filters that help to put America's pressing vital interests in a fuller perspective. American policy makers must see this larger strategic landscape if they are to make informed choices.