

INSTABILITY IN THE NEW IMPERIAL PERIPHERY: A CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE “TURBULENT FRONTIERS” IN THE CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

Since the emergence of the United States as the world's only superpower, the Caucasus and Central Asia, traditionally conceived as the Russian “Near Abroad,” have increasingly made their way up the U.S. foreign and security agenda. From debates on NATO expansion to pipeline diplomacy, basing policy, “train and equip” programs, as well as suspected support for ‘color revolutions’, and bilateral cooperation agreements, Washington has tried to mark a presence in these regions. These moves have generated concerns in Russia, where the U.S. expansion to the “Near Abroad” is perceived as a prelude for a new Cold War-style confrontation. Nonetheless, while this “big picture” of a renewed great powers competition holds some truth, it, however, should not hide the importance of local political dynamics, in particular territorial and ethno-nationalist conflicts, as well as clan politics and domestic unrest. Both the international and regional/domestic interplay have mutually conditioning and provocative impacts. This essay proposes a conceptual reflection linking local and global power plays to understand the political dynamics in the Caucasus and Central Asia conceived as a new imperial periphery. The essay aims at a theoretical formulation to explain this dynamic in any geopolitical context characterized as an imperial periphery in the current unipolar systemic structure. It deliberately is not an empirical study of the Caucasus, Central Asia, or the U.S.-Russian relations.

Keywords: ‘Turbulent frontier’, regional security complex, imperial periphery, local-regional level interaction.

Introduction

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence in the international arena of fifteen independent states, which initially became known as the Newly Independent States (NIS), the Eurasian continent entered a phase of geopolitical uncertainty. The Russian Federation, which inherited the status of the former Soviet Union and occupied the same chair in the U.N. Security Council, did not lose time in redefining its foreign and security policy. Following the consensus, in turn, of the new Constitution, which the

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Duma approved in 1993, the place and the role of Russia in the post-Cold War world was defined in terms of a nuclear world power and a regional power with a special interest in its Near Abroad, a concept that designed the former Soviet space.¹

The Russian special interest in the Near Abroad was argued primarily for security reasons. The rationale of this argument notwithstanding, the ‘hard power’ component of the statement, and strong suspicions of a continuity of centuries-old imperial projection did not make Moscow’s efforts to stabilize the region easy. Even before the fall of the Soviet Union, and while the frozen nationalities question was reemerging from the Caucasus to Central Asia and in the European regions of the multinational state (Carrère d’Encausse 1991), Moscow, and the military in particular, was already intervening in the conflicts. Moreover, when the Yeltsin government launched the initiative of a Commonwealth of Independent State (CIS), Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan, among others, showed reluctance and even resistance in joining the project. In fact, even after signing up to it, emergence of the Georgia-Ukraine-Uzbekistan-Azerbaijan-Moldova (GUUAM) alliance in the late 1990s, not mentioning the publicly admitted intention of some of these countries to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), proved how difficult it was for Russia to reassert its position as a regional hegemon.

With the fall of the Soviet Union, hence, the Near Abroad, or the former periphery of the Soviet imperial state structure, developed a proper political dynamic appropriate to the historical process of the emergence of the nation-state, including war, economic transition and institutional building. By the mid-1990s, the initial conflictive phase of defining territorial limits, the primary accumulation of capital and the internal power struggle to dominate the state structures came to completion. While none of the conflicts found its final solution and the emerging power structures were extremely weak, the situation since then has been frozen.

The Near Abroad, hence, has entered a phase of turbulence, which seems more of a domestic than inter-state nature - albeit some aspects of this turbulence, such as the so-called “color revolutions,” projected a power struggle that potentially went beyond the internal logic of the events. The turbulence in the periphery, on the other hand, indicates the irrelevance of the CIS as an institutional structure.

The fall of the Soviet Union opened the way to the expansion of U.S. influence in the Eurasian landscape. Cautiously, during the Bush senior and Clinton administrations, Washington never denied Moscow its right to mark a presence in the former Soviet space, including as a factor of stabilization. Gradually, however, Washington’s interests in the region started to take shape, leading to a competitive phase of U.S.-Russian relations. The reemergence of the Caspian as a new ‘Black Gold’ Eldorado gave birth to a political dynamic of pipeline diplomacy, with Washington pushing for a Mediterranean route to world market for the oil, whereas Moscow remained eager to maintain export routes under its control.

¹ Aron, Leon , “Foreign Policy Doctrine of Postcommunist Russia”, in: Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), “The New Russian Foreign Policy”, Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, DC. 1998.

Clinton's foreign and security policy, conceptually defined along the guidelines of the Engagement and Expansion doctrine, contemplated the reformulation of NATO's role and its eventual expansion to the East. The Russians never lost the opportunity to express their hostility to this initiative, and perceived it in terms of a zero-sum game. Diplomatic arrangements were eventually made for both issues, which, nevertheless, ended up marking an increasing U.S. presence on the former Soviet territory outside Russia.

The end of the post-Cold War era on September 11, 2001 and the following declaration of the War on Terrorism of the Bush administration strengthened this presence and gave it a military aspect. The Republican administration in the White House soon endorsed a hawkish vision of world affairs and emphasized the military engagement, conceptualized in the so-called Bush Doctrine of preemptive strikes, the cornerstone of the new American Grand Strategy. With a major geopolitical shift of the conflict arena from Europe to the Middle East and Central Asia, Washington developed a basing policy for the war on terrorism, which consists in creating military bases in and close cooperation with countries considered of strategic importance in the war.²

With the creation of military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the waiver of the embargo on US foreign aid to Azerbaijan imposed by section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, and the extension of the Train and Equip program to Georgia, for the first time in its history the United States became a Eurasian power. Moreover, after the military intervention and occupation of Iraq, Washington pushed for the inclusion of former Soviet republics, including Armenia, Russia's strategic ally in the Caucasus, in the forces of the Coalition. Though reluctant, the U.S. nevertheless had emerged as a world empire unique of its kind.³

After September 11, 2001, therefore, the Near Abroad has become a new imperial periphery, albeit structurally different from what it was during the Tsarist and Soviet times. Adopting a realist position, the then-President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, did not object to this new U.S. military presence in the former Soviet periphery. In fact, Moscow looked for close cooperation with Washington in the War on Terrorism. Nonetheless, the U.S.-Russian competition did not come to a close with this cooperation. Quite the opposite: Putin's Realism became ever more present in the cost-benefit calculations in defining the terms of cooperation and those of competition. The U.S.'s more assertive presence in the new imperial periphery has added a novel element to the turbulence. Whereas Washington is more active in its bilateral relations with the peripheral states, it cannot ignore the Russian factor in the making and the breaking of regional balances in Eurasia.

² Johnson, Chalmers, "The Sorrows of Empire. Militarism, Secrecy, and the End of the Republic", (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

³ Bacevich, Andrew J., "American Empire. The Reality & Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

This essay focuses on the nature of the instability of the new imperial periphery to frame the interaction of the global and local dynamics. I use the concept of “turbulent frontier”, which John S. Galbraith coined in 1960 to describe the factors that caused the British expansion in the 19th century, to analyze the impact of the U.S.-Russian relations of cooperation and competition on the local processes of the new imperial periphery.⁴ I sustain that while a political confrontation between Washington and Moscow facilitates, if not creates, turbulence, the local processes deeply rooted in the ethno-nationalist confrontation for territorial gains, clan politics, and social exclusion as a consequence of the free market economy transition are factors that independently can maintain and perpetuate the peripheral instability. The main danger of a regional conflict, therefore, is inherent to the political process of the Near Abroad, and not necessarily from a U.S.-Russian confrontation. The current approach of maintaining the status quo of the fragile balance of power in the periphery, and the secret eagerness of using the conflict-prone situation in the dynamics of their cooperative-competitive relations on behalf of Moscow and Washington is highly risky for the future of a region crucial for its geopolitical location and the oil and natural gas reserves.

In the first section I analyze the concept of “turbulent frontier,” and show its utility to understand the situation in the peripheral region of the Caucasus – with extension to Central Asia. Next, I use the Regional Security Complex (RSC) framework to emphasize the importance of a regional approach to the situation in the above-mentioned geographical areas of the former Soviet Union. Then I combine the conceptual tools of both the metaphor of “turbulent frontier” and the theoretical framework of the RSC to analyze the interaction of the local and global dynamics in the making of the peripheral instability. In the conclusion of the essay I offer some venues of the dangers of the current situation.

“Turbulent Frontiers” in the 21st Century

John S. Galbraith’s 1960 essay focuses on the paradox of a British society reluctant to imperial expansion beyond areas commercially profitable, and the historical fact of an expanding British Empire. Avoiding any simple explanation, the historian advances a cautious thesis about “the pull exerted by “turbulent frontiers” adjacent to the area of Imperial authority and in the wide powers exercised by imperial viceroys in an era of primitive communications.”⁵ He describes the conditions in which there is practically no possibility for a centralized decision with respect to any emergency. “Between two and two and a half years usually elapsed before a Governor General of the early nineteenth century received a reply to even his most urgent communications. Consequently he was required to assume vast authority. His supreme task was the maintenance of order within his area; failure to do so was the one unpardonable sin; and in the prosecution of that objective he was often led to take actions which were not authorized by his instructions,

⁴ Galbraith, John S., “The “Turbulent Frontier” as a Factor in British Expansion”, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 2, No. 2, January 1960.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

indeed, in many cases, in direct violation thereof.”⁶ These conditions explain the dynamics of the British expansion to areas that in them might not have been commercially profitable. The expansion, therefore, often confronted the state authorities with the *fait accompli*, though “every war in India was justified in terms of defense; and the ultimate verdict of the home authorities was usually irrelevant as that of the historian.”⁷

Studying this dynamics in other parts of the Empire, Galbraith concludes: “In India, Malaya, and South Africa, governors, charged with the maintenance of order, could not ignore disorder beyond their borders, turbulence which pulled them toward expansion. This influence was not imperative; some governors resisted it, while others, if they did not welcome the opportunities for the extension of British authority, were strongly susceptible to seduction. Seldom did the London government initiate frontier policy, rather, it reacted to the policies of its governors. ... In India, Malaya, and South Africa, British dominion implied expansion, though anti-expansionists sought to avoid acceptance of the corollary. Governors continued to try to eliminate the disorderly frontier expansion by annexations which in turn produced new frontier problems and further expansion. The “turbulent frontier” consequently contributed to the paradox of the nineteenth century empire that “grew in spite of itself”.”⁸

There are two arguments to consider the “turbulent frontier” metaphor as appropriate to the topic it addresses and not applicable nowadays. First, any emergency situation could reach the decision-makers immediately thanks to the advance of communications technology. Second, imperial expansion in terms of territorial annexations is not a feature that characterizes the dynamics of current international power politics, and less still the peculiar nature of the American “Empire.” Nevertheless, if we consider the increasing weight of the U.S. military in the decision-making process, and if we replace “expansion” or “annexation” by “intervention” then the “turbulent frontier” metaphor could be useful to shed light on certain security dynamics in the post-September 11 world.

Galbraith’s metaphor, for instance, is useful to highlight some features of the current U.S.-Latin American relations.⁹ Accordingly, the so-called “new threats” provide an argument to project military intervention where anti-systemic tendencies are perceived. Any “turbulent frontier” where these “new threats” are perceived raises the potential of becoming a pull factor for intervention; hence, peripheral countries need to be wise enough to avoid becoming a “turbulent frontier”, providing an argument for intervention. Moreover, within the U.S. imperial project, the military commanders have increasingly assumed the role of proconsuls; hence, they are often the ones who take the lead in formulating the argument of a threat which invites the U.S. to intervene. This role is particularly visible for military commanders whose responsibility does not extend to a

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 153.

⁸ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹ Tokatlian, Juan Gabriel, “Las relaciones Estados Unidos – América Latina: La sombra del Proconsulado, Cartografías del poder. Hegemonía y respuestas”, Anuario CIP 2005, CIP-Icaria, Barcelona, España. 2005.

geographical area which is crucial for the U.S. national security interest. Latin America is not a strategically vital region for the United States in the current international circumstances. Hence, the decision-makers in Washington tend to delegate more autonomy to SOUTHCOM (Southern Command, tasked with overseeing Latin America) in formulating threat perceptions and making the recommendations.

The new imperial periphery in the Eurasian continent is already a U.S. national security interest. The decision to intervene, open a base, or extend military cooperation is made in Washington, according to short, mid and long-term plans of the U.S. global power projection. The “turbulent frontier” metaphor, however, could also be useful to frame the security dynamics and the interaction of the pull and push factors. Yet, the “local” in the new imperial periphery defines more a regional than a single country situation. The Regional Security Complex (RSC) framework, as I analyze in the next section, helps us in understanding the regional dimension of the “local.”

A Regional Perspective of Security for the Imperial Periphery

Since the end of the Cold War, regional perspectives of International Relations (IR) theory started to address issues such as political relations, social movements and security in a limited geographical extension. These approaches often refer to the process of regionalization of international politics in terms of “regional orders,” “regional complexes,” or “security communities”. The regional approaches in IR theory¹⁰ maintain that the regional level of interaction among political units explain far better the outcome of the process than either traditional theories such as Realism, Liberalism or Marxism, or conjectural and case by case analysis. The former are too broad to capture the complexity of the political phenomenon, whereas the latter fails to see how crucial have become cross-border linkages between units for the understanding of the evolution of each one of them.¹¹

The regional perspective of IR Theory posits the existence of regional subsystems relatively autonomous from the global system. A regional subsystem lies between the general tendencies of the global system and the unit-level inter-state interactions. The distinctive feature of a subsystem is the geographical proximity of the component states, a situation which provides a unique dynamic to their interactions based upon power relations and amity/enmity patterns. A regional subsystem, thus, is defined in terms of a “security complex” as an empirical phenomenon with historical and geographical roots. In theoretical terms, they can be derived from both the state and the system levels.

¹⁰ Hurrell, Andrew, “One world? Many worlds? The place of regions in the study of international society” in: *International Affairs*, vol. 83. n. 1, January 2007.

¹¹ See: Lake, David A. & Morgan, Patrick M., “Regional Orders. Building Security in a New World”, (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1997); Solingen, Etel, “Regional Orders at Century’s Dawn. Global and Domestic Influences on Grand Strategy” (Princeton: University Press Princeton, 1998); Helga Hafdenton, Robert O. Keohane & Celeste A. Wallander, “Imperfect Unions. Security Institutions over Time and Space” (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mittelman, James H., “The Globalization Syndrome. Transformation and Resistance” (Princeton: University Press Princeton, 2000)

Looked at from the bottom up, security complexes result from interaction between individual states. They represent the way in which the sphere of concern that any state has about its environment, interacts with the linkages between the intensity of military and political threats, and the shortness of the range over which they are perceived. Because threats operate more potently over short distances, security interactions with neighbors will tend to have first priority. Seen from the top down, security complexes are generated by interaction of anarchy and geography. The political structure of anarchy confronts all states with the security dilemma, but the otherwise seamless web of security interdependence is powerfully mediated by the effect of geography. Unless capabilities for transportation are very unevenly distributed, as they sometimes are, all states will thus tend to be thrust into closer contact with their neighbors rather than those further afield.

Based upon this initial definition of regional complexes, Buzan and Waever deepen the analysis of amity/enmity following the logic of the securitization framework. They define a Regional Security Complex (RSC) “by durable patterns of amity and enmity taking the form of subglobal, geographically coherent patterns of security interdependence.”¹² Within this approach, and along with power relations, durable conflicts and long-term historical rivalries, the security dynamics in a RSC also depends on the way actors, mostly but not exclusively states, construct their identity.

The RSC framework specifies four interrelated levels of analysis: (a) the domestic order in terms of stability and vulnerabilities that define its security fears; (b) state-to-state relations; (c) the region’s interaction with neighboring regions, a level that is relatively limited except when major changes of security interdependence are underway; and (d) the role of global powers in the region. These levels in turn define the essential structure of an RSC that embodies four variables: (a) boundary, which differentiates the RSC from its neighbors; (b) anarchic structure, meaning that the RSC should be composed of two or more autonomous units; (c) polarity, or the distribution of power among the units; and (d) social construction, or the definition of patterns of amity and enmity among units. Finally, there are three possible evolutions open to any RSC: (a) maintenance of the status quo; (b) internal transformations in either the distribution of power among interacting units or the patterns of amity/enmity; and (c) external transformations, which occur when the boundaries of an RSC changes by contraction or expansion.

The RSC Theory defines also types of security complexes based upon variations in polarity and in patterns of amity/enmity leading to either standard or centered ones. The former “is broadly Westphalian in form with two or more powers and a predominantly military-security agenda.”¹³ Whereas centered RSCs come in three, and maybe four, main forms. “The first two forms are the special cases in which an RSC is unipolar, but the power concerned is either a great power (e.g., Russia in the C.I.S.) or a superpower (e.g., the United States in North America), rather than just a regional power.”¹⁴ The third

¹² Buzan, Barry and Waever, Ole, “Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

type of centered RSCs involves “a region integrated by institutions rather than by a single power,”¹⁵ as is the European Union (EU). The distinctive feature of these centered RSCs is its high level of institutionalization and the development of a security community, whereas though competition persists among units, it avoids balance of power behaviors. In its highest level, which in today’s real world empirically does not make much sense, a security community defines a common identity. Buzan and Waever, furthermore, study cases that do not fit within these types, arising from a number of global powers scattered through the system. “The more such powers there are in the system, the less room will be for standard RSCs; the fewer, the more room. Having great powers scattered through the international system creates two possibilities other than centered complexes: *great power regional security complexes*, and *supercomplexes*.”¹⁶ The former is a bi- or multipolar complex with great powers as regional poles, whereas the latter expresses a strong interregional level of security dynamics arising from great power spillover into adjacent regions.

Based upon their detailed conceptualization of the RSC Theory, Buzan and Waever consider the “post-Soviet space” as one of the three parts of the supercomplex of the “Europes” –the other two, according to the authors, being the EU, and the Balkans and Turkey. Within this approach, the whole post-Soviet space is a constellation, with Russia as the great power and the other fourteen former Soviet republics grouped in four different subregions: the three Baltic states –Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia; the three western group of states –Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova; the three South Caucasian republics –Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; and the five Central Asian states –Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. “For most of the states, security concerns relate mainly to other states in the subcomplex plus Russia. What define the wider RSC, grouping them all together, are the unifying factors, first, of Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.) and, second, that a coalition attempting to rein in Russia necessarily cuts across the regions.”¹⁷ Historically, the debate on Russian identity construction evolved in terms of its pro-European or pro-Eurasian orientation; nevertheless, “the global arena is today much more important than Europe for Russia’s attempts both to secure a larger role outside its region and to legitimize its regional empire.”¹⁸ Thus, in addition to the EU, China and Japan and their respective RSCs in Asia are increasingly active in the evolution of the security dynamics in the post-Soviet space.

Interestingly, the authors downplay the role of the United States in this dynamic. “In contrast to most other regions of the world, the one superpower, the USA, plays less of a role in this region, although a question mark has emerged in Central Asia and the Caucasus, mostly due to oil interests and, after September 2001, the war on terrorism.”¹⁹ Even before September 2001, the U.S. impact in the formation of the post-Soviet space

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 397.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 398.

¹⁹ Ibid.

has been notable, let alone in terms of the debates that generated the perspectives of the expansion of NATO. The U.S. impact is much more visible, of course, after September 2001 with the installation of military bases in Central Asia, the “Train and Equip” program in Georgia, the participation of some former Soviet republics in the Coalition forces in Iraq and the support of ‘color revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine. Hence, when considering the security dynamics in the post-Soviet space the role of the United States as the global superpower in the post-Cold War gains much more importance than Buzan and Waever assign to it.

Accordingly, in the next section I analyze the local and global dynamics of two of these subregions that have become a potential battlefield for the war on terrorism: the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Local and the Global in the Making of Instability in the Near Abroad

The decade following the dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, defined the new geopolitical dynamics in the Eurasian heartland. This dynamic consisted of the simultaneous and interactive processes of a transition to market economy and the struggle to reach to a new balance of power in the geographical area where the fragmentation of the imperial structure led to the emergence of fifteen independent states. A widely common path consisting of “shock therapy” privatization and liberalization characterized the process of economic transition of all of the former Soviet republics; the domestic and foreign aspects of the struggle for power to consolidate the national borders, and within them a particular structure of hierarchy and domination, however, have been different across three emerging regional division lines in Europe, Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The former Soviet republics, thus, were grouped regionally; only the Russian Federation remained an intervening actor in the three regions. This regional variation in the political struggle ended up determining the contours of the new structure of the balance of power in the formerly Soviet space of Eurasia; which, in turn, strongly conditioned the development of each of the fifteen independent states, albeit in different forms and grade for each state.

Three features, all present to a lesser or greater degree in the two subregions of the Caucasus and Central Asia, constitute the local aspect of the “turbulent frontier.” These three features are the mobilizing force of ethnonationalism in defining the agenda of territorial conflicts; clan politics defining loyalties along certain social lines, often crossing the national contexts; and social exclusion as a result of the transition to free market. The first characterizes mostly the conflicts in the Caucasian subregion. Nagorno Karabagh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and to a lesser degree even Djavakheti and Adjara, are secessionist conflicts calling for territorial redistribution along ethnonational loyalties. Although the clan politics is not absent in the Caucasus, it is more characteristic to Central Asia, and defines dividing loyalty lines not only within a society, but often crossing the national borders. Ethnonationalism in Central Asia is functional for the

competition for regional hegemony between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The social exclusion, finally, refers to the majority of the population in the subregion, as the implementation of the free market through the so-called shock therapies has led to a tremendous concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a minority. True, for now social exclusion is irrelevant for the “turbulent frontier” because of the fragmentation of even arguably the most ethnically homogenous country in both subregions – Armenia. However, social exclusion gains importance when we consider its direct or indirect impact on other processes, such as mobilization for war, or allegiance to the state. All these three features of the “turbulent frontier” can become a pull factor for intervention. They could either be manipulated from outside to justify intervention, or constitute an argument to invite intervention.

Applying the RSC framework, the three features constituting the “turbulent frontier” intervene in the domestic and state-to-state relations levels to allow us to foresee any interventionist trend. The Caucasian and Central Asian subregions are not autonomous enough for any practical consideration of the third level – interaction between neighboring regions- of analysis. The fourth, however, the role of global powers in the region, is an extremely relevant level of analysis, as it might be both a push and pull factor for intervention. In brief, local and global factors interact in the making of the instability of the new imperial periphery. The metaphor of “turbulent frontier” is helpful to see how the three features of ethnonationalism, clan politics and social exclusion interact to create conflictive situations on the domestic and state-to-state relations levels of the RSC framework. These situations, in turn, create push and pull factors for intervention, which, nonetheless, is decided on the fourth level of analysis in the same framework.

Conclusion: The Dynamics of Instability in the Periphery

The combination of the “turbulent frontier” metaphor in its updated variant with the RSC analytical framework shows a multilevel and dynamic game of balance of power, where it is increasingly difficult to determine how control is maintained. In fact, because of the inherent instability of the new imperial periphery, there perhaps cannot be a long-term balance of power enjoying acceptance, albeit never publicly admitted, by all the concerning parties. Therefore, for the predictable future, and as long as the three features of a “turbulent frontier” remain, there will be constant adjustments of the balance of power relations. This, in turn, leaves open the possibility of intervention of global powers.