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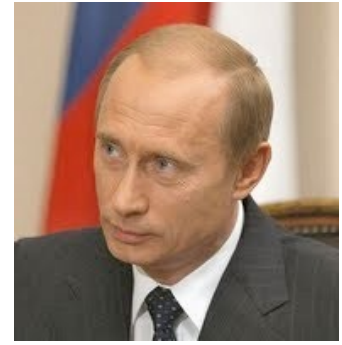
RICHARD WEITZ

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# With Eye on Moldova, NATO Must Shore Up Southeastern Front

By Richard Weitz  
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The standoff in eastern Ukraine between Russian-backed separatists and the central government in Kiev is far from resolved. But whatever its outcome, NATO needs to take urgent measures to deter Russian military intervention in Moldova and reinforce its security guarantees to NATO members Bulgaria and Romania. These two countries are no less vulnerable to Russian pressure than the NATO members to their north, namely Poland and the Baltic states. In addition, Bulgaria and Romania's strong support is needed to advance Western goals in the Balkans, the Caspian region and Central Asia. Ideally NATO would reassure Moscow that Moldova will not soon join the alliance while augmenting NATO's collective ability to defend Bulgaria and Romania from external aggression.

The conflict in Ukraine has once again highlighted the security dilemma faced by Moldova, perhaps the most pro-Western country in Europe that remains outside both the NATO alliance and the European Union. Moldovans face serious impediments to deepening ties with both organizations. As with Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow manipulates Moldova's separatist movement to influence the country's foreign policy. In particular, Russia keeps more than 1,000 soldiers in the breakaway region of Transnistria, one of several "frozen conflicts" that date back to the breakup of the Soviet Union.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—the largest multinational security institution in Europe with 56 members, including all NATO countries as well as Russia and other former Soviet republics—is the lead organization responsible for resolving the Moldova situation. Since 1993, the OSCE has had a mandate from its members "to promote a resolution of the conflict based on Moldova's territorial integrity." Since 2005, the OSCE has joined a multilateral conflict-negotiating framework for Moldova that includes the two Moldovan parties—the Republic of Moldova and Transnistria; the three international mediators—Russia, Ukraine and the OSCE; and the U.S. and EU as observers. However, the so-called 5+2 process has made little progress; the talks have occurred irregularly, involved only some of the parties and often proceeded on an informal basis, without the authority to make binding legal commitments.

The parties have reviewed means by which Transnistria would receive special legal status while preserving Moldova's sovereignty and territorial integrity. They have also debated mutual confidence- and security-building measures to include the removal of Russian troops and munitions from Moldova. Recent discussions have focused less on securing an enduring solution to the conflict and more on overcoming its negative consequences, such as increasing the freedom of movement for people seeking to move from one region to the other. Even so, an unbridgeable gap has remained: Whereas Moldova is ready to offer Transnistria only increased autonomy within a new federation, Transnistrian nationalists insist on equal legal status between both entities, with Transnistria having veto powers over constitutional changes.

The declared purpose of the Russian military presence in Transnistria is to secure the extensive arms stockpiles on its territory. Soviet weapons from Transnistria have indeed been trafficked throughout the world by various black marketers, but the main effect of the Russian troops has

been to prevent renewed conflict by shielding the Transnistrian separatists.

Now the Ukraine crisis has renewed concern that Moscow will “unfreeze” this conflict as it has done in the Crimea and in Georgia in 2008. The Transnistrian separatist government has renewed an appeal to the Russian government to either annex the territory to the Russian Federation or recognize Transnistria’s independence and grant its inhabitants the right to live and work in Russia.

Thus far, Russian President Vladimir Putin has not shown much interest in formally integrating the region into Russia. That is no real comfort, since he showed a similar lack of interest in annexing Crimea until a few days before its absorption occurred. Yet, Russia might still prefer to keep the Transnistria card latent rather than play it immediately. By leaving open the option of recognizing Transnistrian independence, the Russian government can more effectively influence Moldova’s policies. To avoid prompting a harder line in Moscow, NATO should respect the Moldovan people’s decision, affirmed through elections as well as in opinion polls, to remain militarily neutral and independent of Romania even as they develop deeper ties with NATO and the EU.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria and Romania are watching events in Moldova closely. These two NATO members have strived to participate in important alliance operations and see enlarging the alliance to include the Balkans as critical for realizing their potential as states connecting Europe with the Caspian region and its energy riches. Heavily dependent on NATO to bolster their weak militaries, and having recently experienced a record number of Russian air incursions and heightened Russian scrutiny regarding their military activities in the Black Sea region, they share the general unease in Eastern Europe about the inability of the U.S. and its allies to avert Russian military aggression.

Romanians are especially sensitive to the security of Moldova, a former Romanian territory currently inhabited by millions of Romanian-speakers. With Romanian encouragement, many Moldovans have acquired Romanian, and hence EU, citizenship. But a formal Moldovan move to join Romania or NATO as a full member would likely meet a more critical reaction in Transnistria and Russia. Moscow might even resist steps toward EU membership, as it did with Ukraine.

Yet, while seeking to downplay tensions with Russia over Moldova by not pressing it to join NATO soon, alliance leaders need to augment the military strength of Bulgaria and Romania, whose armed forces are weaker than those of many other NATO members. NATO has taken some steps toward this end by sending AWACS surveillance missions over Romania as well as Poland. NATO has also dispatched a U.S. warship to the Black Sea, and the U.S. has also sent 175 more Marines to Romania to augment the U.S. soldiers on rotation there.

But NATO could do more to bolster its collective defense capabilities in this critical region as well as counter Russia’s recently displayed skill at catching the alliance off guard. This means keeping more intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in the region and encouraging local governments to spend more to renew their defense capabilities. NATO should also pre-position assets to ensure that any forces rushed to their defense will hit the ground running. NATO also needs to increase its air transport capacity to rapidly move troops to the region as well as station ship-borne and ground-based air defense systems to protect these transport planes.

Moscow is unlikely to engage in a military conflict with a NATO member for fear of activating the Article V mutual defense clause of the North Atlantic Treaty. But these deterrence-enhancing steps will discourage Russian military action against Moldova and provocative actions against other countries; reassure Romania and Bulgaria, as well as NATO members to their north; and shore up Western interests in the Balkans and Caspian region. NATO would do well to put them into action before the alliance is once more overtaken by events on the ground. □

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*Photo: Russian President Vladimir Putin (photo by the website of the president of the Russian Federation).*

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