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The Emerging Great Power Politics and Regionalism: Structuring Effective Regional Conflict Management

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Abstract

The intensifying rivalry between the leading global powers (the United States and the European Union) on one hand, and the aspiring nations (such as China, Russia, India, Turkey, and others) on the other, creates additional challenges to conflict resolution on the regional scale. The global and aspiring powers often seek to use these conflicts to sap their opponents' resources, discredit their commitments and undermine resolve. As a result, most conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia and some in the Middle East (Syria) and Asia (disputes over China's maritime claims) become 'frozen' or intractable and defy resolution. Existing multilateral alliances and blocs across the conflict ridden regions are engaged in the struggle for members and appear incapable of concerted conflict resolution policies. What is needed to address the intensifying proxy conflict problem is a set of multilateral permanent negotiation fora bringing together the leading global powers and aspiring nations. Despite the manifold challenges to such scheme, the contours of a deal that can be reached within such fora is clear: status elevation for the aspiring nations in return for their good faith engagement with the leading global powers in conflict resolution.

An evolving setting for regional conflict management

Analysis of conflicts in the post-Cold War world traditionally focused on the needs, interests, strategies, and tactics of the parties on the ground and a limited number of directly involved 'outside' players. With the demise of superpower rivalry, proxy conflicts became rare for more than two decades. The stakeholders could afford to pay less attention to external influences on the conflicts in regions, such as the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, or Southeast Asia. Proposed solutions were usually technocratic in nature; even when force was used in quest for a solution, such as was the case in the former Yugoslavia throughout the 1990s, the result was predetermined by the significant edge in power resources that the intervening nations had over the actors on the ground. In such 'slam dunk' situations, conflict mediators did not feel the need to manage the uncertainty arising from disagreements with other 'external' stakeholders.

However, with the onset of a new round of great power rivalry, in which the United States could no longer rely on its unique status to ensure favorable outcomes and was faced with increased resistance by aspiring regional competitor nations, many international and civil conflicts acquired a new dimension. Such resistance imposed tangible constraints on the conflict resolution options. Even if these constraints did not directly affect developments on the ground, they reduced the freedom of even very powerful stakeholders to choose the ways of ending hostilities and reaching definitive settlements. Conflict resolution again became a matter of politics understood as 'the art of the possible', with all its uncertainty and unpredictability.

This article explores the global roots of regional conflicts and options for their management in the era of great power rivalry. For empirical material, it draws upon ethnopolitical conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia under way since the late 1980s, the conflict in and around Syria since 2011, and China's potential and actual disputes in East and Southeast Asia.

Scholars and experts recognize that the 'unipolar moment' is increasingly giving way globally to great power politics in which balancing behavior becomes widespread (Allison, 2018; Kofman, 2018; The Economist, 2018; US National Security Strategy, 2017). The phenomenon of the new aspiring powers and their impact on international politics has received close attention by academics for more than a decade (Hampson and Troitskiy, 2017; Nau and Ollapally, 2012). 'Aspiring power' is usually defined as a nation dissatisfied with its position in the world order. An aspiring power need not necessarily be 'rising', or experiencing rapid economic growth and working to enlarge the group of its allies and sympathizers, but it must have a substantial amount of power resources and harbor clear ambitions to resolve any serious external challenges it faces, and to expand its freedom of action recognized by other nations. For many such nations, the core perceived challenge is rooted in their relations with the world's leading powers: the United States, the European Union, and, to an extent, China (which itself is usually regarded at the same time as an aspiring and rising power).

Most aspiring nations are concerned with the leading powers' policies toward the aspiring nations' neighborhoods. To consider a few examples: China works to limit US support for Taiwan and freedom of navigation in the surrounding seas; Russia argues that the US and the EU seek to undermine Russia's special security interests in post-Soviet Eurasia; India is concerned with China's partnerships with states in their shared neighborhood; Iran positions as the archenemy of the United States in the Middle East; and in the face of China's rise, Japan is torn between strengthening its alliance with the US and shedding the restrictions imposed on Tokyo's defense policy in the wake of World War II. In their turn, the leading global powers have various reasons to be interested in the contested regions: trade and investment, security concerns (usually understood as containing the influence of aspiring regional powers on their respective smaller neighbors), diasporas, expert communities, and other pressure groups with strong views about global powers' policy towards those regions.

Under such circumstances, and very much as in the Cold War era, regional and local conflicts are often seen by the aspiring powers as opportunities to advance their own agenda, distract other major powers (primarily the United States) or strengthen their bargaining position. The conflicts that attract the attention of the global and regional powers are usually ethnoterritorial in nature. In post-Soviet Eurasia, their root cause is attempt of a newly independent nation to consolidate control over its territory and engage in a nation building process. Such a process is viewed with suspicion by the bigger aspiring power (Russia in the case of post-Soviet Eurasia) which seeks to obtain leverage over the government of a newly independent state, such as Georgia, Ukraine, or Moldova, by enabling separatism or at the very least supporting minorities in the newly independent state. The global powers, the US and the EU in post-Soviet Eurasia, usually consider themselves stakeholders in this struggle for self-determination of post-Soviet republics out of belief that the newly independent nations should be given help in their quest for sovereignty and independence from the bigger neighbor.

In the case of the Syrian conflict, the stakes of both the global and aspiring powers are defined mostly by security and status considerations. While Russia sought to prop up the friendly regime of President Bashar al-Assad and reduce the influence of the rival external players on the ground in Syria, the United States built a coalition that worked to reduce the influence on Syria, a strategically important country, of Russia and Iran and to alleviate the humanitarian catastrophe in and refugee flows from Syria that had major repercussions for the Middle East and Europe.

In a similar vein, in the potential conflict over the status of Taiwan, the United States as global power has sought to demonstrate the credibility of its commitment to formal and 'informal' allies in Asia by discouraging China from applying political, economic, or military pressure to Taiwan which China essentially considers its breakaway province. Washington has been seeking to assert the freedom of navigation principle by rejecting China's claims of special rights to the surrounding seas. In order to constrain China's ambitions, the United States has been reaching out to smaller states in Southeast Asia that have been experiencing pressure by Beijing.

While such conflicts have not yet become proxy wars, as they are not directly leveraged against rival powers as often as it happened during the Cold War, aspiring nations are usually able to prevent definitive resolution of these conflicts, making sure that the conflicts drag on and that the diplomatic and material resources of the rival powers are sapped by those conflicts and attempts to resolve them.

In addition to the leading and aspiring powers, a regional conflict chessboard usually includes such pieces as defensive alliances, trade blocs, negotiation and monitoring platforms, arms control and confidence building agreements, as well as other regional or external players, such as NGOs or expert and consultant communities with a commitment and a certain record in conflict mediation. Two sets of institutions are usually pitted against each other: (1) those led by the United States through NATO in Europe and Eurasia, and bilateral alliances in Asia; and (2) by a regional aspiring power, through the Russian led Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union in Eurasia, and China's Belt and Road Initiative and a web of free trade arrangements in Asia. The picture is complemented with multilateral platforms to discuss security, humanitarian issues, economic cooperation: Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Council of Europe, ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Summit, and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Simmering controversy between the leading and aspiring powers create additional obstacles to the resolution of conflicts that in an earlier less competitive setting could have been resolved using a low profile process based approach. As powerful players weigh in, usually citing their national interests, the business as usual process of conflict prevention, mediation, and resolution is suspended. As a seasoned Ukrainian diplomat observed with respect to ethnopolitical and territorial conflicts in post-Soviet Eurasia,

> [t]he history of the last 25 years has demonstrated the truth of a simple rule: If a state in between [Russia and Western-led institutions] wants to enter a geopolitical or geoeconomic alliance with either side when the great powers do not have consensus about the issue, then such a state will be partitioned. The only question is how, where, or when the partitioning would happen (see the examples of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine). While all of the separatist entities in these countries at least in part grew out of genuine grievances of local populations, these grievances—and the resulting territorial disputes—have since been instrumentalised for geopolitical purposes (Chalyi, 2018, p. 40).

Interactions among the institutions led by rival powers as well as within the multilateral fora have also become competitive as the tensions between a leading global power (mainly the US) and the regional aspiring power have been

growing. A 2018 RAND Corporation study noted: 'The functioning of multilateral diplomacy depends to a significant extent on a basic level of comity among the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council' (Charap et al., 2018, p. 2). Indeed, great powers seek to keep any institutional conflict resolution leverage under control, restraining the freedom of action and limiting the mandate of any entities designed for conflict prevention or monitoring. A vivid example is the attitude of Russia, an aspiring, status thirsty power in Eurasia, towards the OSCE conflict management bodies. As was noted by a known Russian foreign policy expert, since the early 2000s,

> abandoning or even amending the consensus rule and expanding the freedom of action of OSCE institutions has been a taboo subject in Moscow, as reflected in the debates since 2009 over the possibility of expanding the mandate of the OSCE institutions to allow for early action in areas of evolving conflicts. Instead, since 2004, Russia has proposed OSCE reform, including the need to underpin it by a statute (a constituting document), aimed at curbing autonomous operations of the OSCE institutions by making them subject to consensus in the Permanent Council (Zagorski, 2018, p. 85).

Amid controversy between Russia, the United States, and other influential member states, the OSCE plunged into a protracted crisis, unable effectively to fulfill most of the aspects of its mission, from supporting a conventional arms control regime in Europe to monitoring zones of violent conflict to preventing such conflicts from unraveling altogether.

Given the challenge of great power politics being projected on a variety of conflicts, a return to a hard headed intergovernmental approach to conflict resolution may be necessary. However, some low key process based options may still be on the table if the stakeholders prove capable of adapting them to the new environment of great power politics in the era of continuing globalization.

Options for regional conflict resolution

Proxy wars were widespread during the era of US-Soviet confrontation. They intensified in Africa, Latin America, South and Southeast Asia in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Resolution of these conflicts could not make progress before the two superpowers had decided to rebuild their relationship on the basis of cooperation and to end the proxy wars. In the late 1980s, Moscow and Washington jointly searched for solutions, if only interim ones in some cases, for Nicaragua and Angola, Cambodia and Afghanistan. At the height of the end of Cold War optimism, progress was also achieved in managing the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the Madrid conference making the 'land for peace' formula the cornerstone of an attempt to find a lasting solution. In its good faith mediation efforts, the Soviet Union was driven by the need to normalize relations with China. About a decade later, Moscow worked closely with Beijing to defuse any potential territorial conflicts in Central Asia, ensuring a relatively smooth agreement on the borders between China and its post Soviet northern and western neighbors.

By the mid-2000s, the positive momentum that drove the successful mediation of proxy conflicts in the late-1980s dissolved into thin air. Moscow reacted acrimoniously to the NATO interference in the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo and developed fears of a similar intervention into Russia's neighboring post Soviet republics. In 2003, a Russia sponsored plan for settling the Transnistrian conflict collapsed because of the opposition by the US and the EU (Hill, 2018), and very soon Russia and the West found themselves at odds over Georgia's effort to bring the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into Georgia's fold. Those tensions came to a head in 2008 when Russia engaged in armed conflict with Georgia over the fate of those republics and recognized them as independent states. The tug of war between Russia, on one hand, and the United States, the EU, and NATO, on the other, over the foreign policy orientations of states in post Soviet Eurasia became severe as the conflict around Ukraine unfolded in 2014 (Hampson and Troitskiy, 2017). Ukraine's Donbas region became another arena for a frozen conflict fueled by great power confrontation. Russia's main stated concern over the last two decades has been the mooted membership of post Soviet Eurasian states in NATO. At NATO's 2008 summit in Bucharest, the alliance issued an unequivocal pledge to accept Georgia and Ukraine into its fold without specifying the timeline. Ukraine's putative quick rapprochement with NATO after the overthrowal of the supposedly pro Russian president in 2014 became one of the officially cited reasons for Russia's forceful action with regards to Crimea and Donbas (President of Russia, 2014).

At the same time, several years into its civil war that began in 2011, Syria became another arena of great power confrontation, with numerous mediation attempts running amok due to the absence of agreement among the United States, Russia, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and other stakeholders on the contours of plans for peace and post conflict reconstruction.

Looking at the regional context in Eurasia at the end of 2010s, Ukrainian expert Oleksandr Chalyi concluded:

> Today it is evident that the problem of the states in between [Russia and Western-led institutions] has triggered the start of a new cold war in Europe'. Getting out of the stalemate is no easy task: A large package of principles, norms and ad hoc policies will be needed to solve the problem. Only such an approach would make it possible to turn from confrontation to cooperation between the West and Russia regarding the states in between. The approach requires measures at three levels:
>
> 1. the Great Powers (West and Russia)
> 2. states in between
> 3. OSCE and Council of Europe (Chalyi, 2018, p. 38).

Relations among the great powers will be crucial in determining the course and outcome of many smaller conflicts in various regions of the world. Several types of dynamic of great power relations over the next five to ten years can be extrapolated from their current path and logic.

Under the first scenario, in Eurasia where the global-regional power divides are more pronounced than anywhere else, NATO and the EU overcome any internal difficulties and disputes and successfully recruit more new members from among post Soviet countries. Not only European, but also Eurasian security order consolidates around those organizations that attract further membership applications and are capable of fending off criticism of and resistance to their continued expansion. In Southeast Asia, the United States works with Japan to overcome Beijing's bid to change the rules of navigation and natural resources development in the seas around China. Beijing stops construction of artificial islands and refrains from pushing any further its territorial claims vis à vis Japan and smaller ASEAN nations. While such dynamic is possible, the end result may not hold for too long because of the mounting resistance that could take the parties into the second scenario.

Such a scenario pivots around the intensifying integration dilemma: disenfranchisement of and pushback by influential players that are being left out of prestigious groupings of states (Charap and Troitskiy, 2013). While a superpower led comprehensive institution, such as NATO, enlarges or promises enlargement, disgruntled regional powers, such as Russia, do their best to stop the expansion and manage at least to delay, if not fully to derail it. In Eurasia, Ukraine and Georgia did not make substantial progress on the way toward joining NATO over the ten years since the NATO Bucharest summit statement of 2008: Ukraine and Georgia 'will become members of NATO'. Ukraine's association agreement with the EU, signed in June 2014, came at a very high price for Kiev, in part, because of Moscow's resistance. In a similar way, tightening US led alliances and partnerships in Asia and toughening the US position on the South China Sea may lead Beijing to up the ante and subject Taiwan to increased pressure while doubling down on artificial islands. If China stands firm, the US and its allies may find it difficult to raise the stakes even further in order to roll Beijing back.

A third scenario takes this trend even further to suggest that the offshore superpower may choose to stay aloof as the aspiring powers impose their own solutions on the respective regions, either directly or through biased mediation. In Eurasia, Russia ensures recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as of the accession of Crimea to the Russian Federation. Ukraine reverts to its earlier policy of not participating in military blocs, while in Syria the regime of Bashar al-Assad recaptures all of the country and secures funding from international donors to rebuild it. In the meantime, China secures highly preferential conditions of trade and investment with most ASEAN nations and begins actively to challenge freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, especially access into it by foreign warships.

Opposed to the above zero sum scenarios is a group of imaginable positive sum trends in the resolution of conflicts involving the world's leading powers and aspiring nations. One such scenario can be built around good faith mediation by the aspiring powers, for example, Russia and China on North Korea, Russia on Transnistria, or Turkey on Syria. Such mediation would imply agreement on goals and a blueprint for a definitive settlement of the conflict, for example, making sure that North Korea forgoes its long range nuclear weapon capability (or nuclear weapons altogether). There is a record of concerted good faith mediation by Washington and Moscow: in the early 1990s they jointly convinced Ukraine to forswear any ambition to gain the status of a nuclear weapon state; over the last 25 years, Russia has also been applying a balanced mediation approach to the conflict over Nagorny Karabakh (while the US usually competed with Russia in that mediation effort, both sides were relatively close in their vision of opportunities for and contours of a final settlement). The role of the leading global powers, the US and the EU, in this conflict resolution scenario would be instrumental. These players would be responsible for pushing the conflicting sides towards an agreement or, as the in the case with North Korea, coordinating their positions with those of the mediating regional powers.

A sub-scenario would have the aspiring regional powers and the global powers cooperate through the institutions that they lead. For example, NATO gets on board with Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization to build peace in Afghanistan through concerted multilateral mediation, extensive sharing of information, and even joint operations. In the meantime, Moscow and Brussels find a way to align EU's association agreements with Russian led free trade arrangements in post Soviet Eurasia. That could take some pressure off such countries as Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, or even CSTO member Armenia that have been looking for ways to avoid paying a heavy price in their economic relations with Russia for developing ties with the European Union. In their turn, China and Russia in a positive sum scenario manage to avoid contradictions over the alignment of the countries in Central Asia by reconciling Russia's bid to remain the exclusive security provider in the region, on one hand, with China's increased economic footprint in Central Asia, on the other.

Finally, all major powers may delegate resolution of the conflicts that raise the biggest controversy among those powers to the existing nonpartisan and relatively low key institutions. The OSCE and the UN could then be put 'in charge' of the eastern Ukraine conflict, Beijing could recognize the authority of the UN arbitration mechanisms over its maritime disputes, while the Chemical Weapons Convention apparatus could be allowed to make consequential rulings on the cases of chemical weapons use in Syria. It is unlikely, however, that any of the great powers would acquiesce to unfavorable decisions and actions by the de-politicized process based institutions, so the delegation agreement would not hold long enough.

Making positive-sum scenarios work

The logic of the security dilemma or of an open and irreconcilable quest for dominance, depending on one's conceptual preference, makes it difficult for the cooperative scenarios to materialize. Balancing behavior in a low trust environment, a major root cause of conflict, prevents coordination between a global and an aspiring power that usually do not have sufficient incentives to forswear leveraging regional conflicts against each other. Moreover, the understanding of security among aspiring nations evolves as they build up their clout (irrespective of their domestic economic trends that can well be negative). Given the nervous reaction by the global powers to the growth of aspiring powers' capabilities, the aspiring powers seek to enlarge their 'strategic depth', whether in South China Sea or in post Soviet Eurasia, and become increasingly preoccupied with foreign policy orientations and loyalty of the leadership of their neighbors. As a result, the tensions between the global and aspiring powers are likely to rise.

The existing level of comity between the United States and its allies, on one hand, and China or Russia, on the other (for example, in the field of arms control or in addressing global challenges, such as climate change) may not be sufficient to alleviate tensions in East Asia, Eurasia, or the Middle East because of the aspiring powers' strong commitment to allies and proxies in their neighborhood as a means of putting additional pressure on the leading global powers. In a similar vein, the existing cobweb of institutions, economic interdependence, and diplomacy may be enough to prevent great power wars, but as the historical record has shown, those institutions and interdependencies may not cope with defusing conflicts among smaller nations or separatist groups within the contested regions.

The existing security regimes, with NATO at the core in Europe and US led bilateral alliances in Asia, were designed and implemented at the time when little or no challenge could be mounted by the currently aspiring powers. Present at the creation of those regimes, Russia and China either did not have a distinct view of their interests and future roles in the emerging regimes, or did not have the capacity to alter the course of events. Having developed its perspective on the desirable structure of security arrangements in Europe, Moscow moved to demand a vote and the right of veto in the European security architecture by the late 1990s, while Beijing became more assertive in relations with its neighbors in Asia and the United States around 2010, looking to achieve unequivocal regional primacy.

As a result, the US and the EU as leading global powers are faced with a dilemma: can they afford and should they seek to accommodate the aspiring powers in order to ensure their cooperation in mediating and settling regional disputes? Without such accommodation, the regional powers will often work to sabotage mediation efforts, including those implemented through comprehensive multilateral institutions, such as the OSCE, while the superpower will find that its interest in mediation is limited and will eventually disengage.

One means of accommodation could be grand bargains: high profile agreements among great powers to delineate geographic 'areas of responsibility' which may effectively read as 'spheres of influence '. They could also work to establish neutral or buffer zones of conflict areas (Hampson and Zartman, 2012). Agreeing upon and implementing such bargains would be difficult given the vocal criticism by assorted pressure groups, including ethnic lobbies, in the United States and EU countries, as well as their smaller partners. Even if the global influence of the United States is in decline, as many policymakers in the aspiring nations are tempted to believe, regional powers may be faced with even more intransigence on the part of smaller nations because nationalism will rise and flourish within those states, making transnational bargains among political elites particularly problematic. To make matters even more complicated, regional powers themselves may be unwilling to strike bargains with the United States, mostly because of their leaders' firm belief in the ongoing and irreversible decline of the United States and the EU (Ratner, 2018).

In addition, conflicts are fueled by the struggle for prospective members among competing multilateral institutions (Chalyi, 2018; Charap and Colton, 2017; Charap and Troitskiy, 2013; Nikitina, 2018). For example, such contest for members is a potent source of conflicts of separatism in post Soviet Eurasia. The Western led and Russian led blocs are supporting their 'clients' in each of the 'contested' nations (Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, perhaps soon even Belarus), so that the position of the proxies is most of the time better that a mutually hurting stalemate that could result in substantive good faith negotiation.

And yet, it should be noted that conflicts developing at the intersection of the interests of global and regional powers are in no way predetermined. Whether they break out or not depends on the strategy and tactic of competitor powers and the peculiarities of their relations with allies and partners (Schweller, 2015). For example, East and Southeast Asia have not seen as many armed ethnopolitical conflicts as post Soviet Eurasia over the last three decades because no major state collapsed in East and Southeast Asia over that period and because China's balancing policies vis à vis the United States in Asia have been far less vigorous than Russia's in Europe and Eurasia.

If neither existing institutions nor immediate great power bargains are likely to become reliable vehicles of conflict resolution, a midway approach could be attempted that would rely on a web of negotiation fora spanning and transcending the spots and regions contested by the global and aspiring powers. Negotiation is commonly understood as giving something to get something (Zartman, 2008), so when engaging in it, one need not compromise the principles by which foreign policies of any players are driven or on which the existing alliances are built. Neither does it imply interference in domestic affairs, which is a growing concern among not only the authoritarian aspiring states but also global leaders.

At the end of the 2010s, some of the requisite negotiation platforms are already in place, for example the OSCE, NATO-Russia Council, CSTO, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and others. Some fora would still need to be created anew. One necessary pillar of a comprehensive negotiation structure must be regular formalized security consultations involving the United States, Russia, China, as well as the relevant stakeholders in post Soviet Eurasia, depending on the issue under discussion. Another crucial component that needs to be built is negotiation on 'free trade zones plus' (whereby trade tariffs are being reduced and capital movement and investment regulations liberalized) with participation of China, the European Union, and states in post Soviet Eurasia, Asia, and Europe that take part in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Such a web of bilateral and multilateral organizations can be relied upon as at least a canary in the coal mine of conflict and a stabilizer of the manifold relationships in Europe and Eurasia.

So far, good faith negotiations in the existing fora have largely stalled because of the absence of a mutually hurting stalemate. Major players' alternatives to negotiated agreements have been good enough for them to avoid negotiation. Three considerations inflating BATNAs of the key players in Europe and Eurasia complicate breathing new life in the existing fora and setting up new platforms. First is the conviction that one's opponents are declining. This idea forms the cornerstone of Russia's policymaking and is also present in China's policymaking vis à vis the United States and the European Union. The US policy community largely views Russia through a similar lens, and China equally does not expect Russia to rise to the ranks of a global power. Such mutual perspectives strongly demotivate agreement: why negotiate and compromise now with a player whose power is declining?

Second, expectations of the future growth of one's own power, both absolute and relative vis à vis potential negotiation counterparts, equally reduce willingness to compromise. If our ability to achieve desired outcomes is not decreasing, then why negotiate now?

Finally, fundamental lack of trust, for example, believing that one's negotiation counterpart has no track record of compromise with opponents (seemingly, the actual mutual perspectives of the US and Russian policymakers), ruins any possibility of good faith negotiation.

To make matters worse, broad inclusivity may become a major limit on the effectiveness of any multilateral regional conflict resolution process. As RAND Corporation analysts point out, in Eurasian security negotiations, 'the dilemma [. . .] is that inclusivity is often inversely related to productivity' (Charap et al., 2018; p. 16). The same applies to the Middle East and Asia. Overall, artificially inflated BATNAs and broad inclusivity threaten to turn any multilateral negotiation platforms, if they ever materialize, into talking shops and imitation of engagement.

Another obstacle to comprehensive negotiation is that the leading global powers may consider negotiation itself to be a major concession to the aspiring challengers. Cooperative resolution of proxy conflicts was practiced by the United States and the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. However, that period was unique in that the USSR was eager to dismantle the bipolar system while experiencing serious economic overextension, so it sought to do away with the conflicts tarnishing its reputation and depleting Soviet financial resources. At the end of the 2010s, agreement to negotiate may mean unwarranted accommodation. It has been noted that the very fact of engagement in negotiation confers status on the parties that are invited to negotiate (Zartman, 2008). Conceding status may meet with the same kind of domestic impediments as attempted grand bargains discussed above.

However, in certain cases (Schweller, 2015), satisfying status demands through largely symbolic means, such as an agreement to negotiate, could be enough to defuse conflicts that are of a relatively low value for the aspiring nations from the point of view of balancing against the leading global powers. If the value of the negotiation fora is high enough for the aspiring nations (because their status concerns are being addressed), walking out and going it alone will come at a significant cost. Moreover, while conferring status on its participants, a web of negotiation arrangements would be based on diffuse reciprocity (Keohane, 1986). The aspiring powers, whose status is being elevated, would in their turn have to heed the concerns of the global powers in order to keep the valued negotiation fora up and running.

Overall, despite the very serious stumbling blocks, several viable multilateral negotiation fora addressing most of the contentious issues between the aspiring and global powers could bring a number of clear benefits to all stakeholders, including the parties involved in local ethnopolitical and territorial conflicts across Eurasia, East and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. First, sustained negotiation increases transparency of participant intentions, while solutions that were discussed among the stakeholders are regarded as fairer and therefore more acceptable than unilateral ones, even if no definitive agreement on the negotiated solutions was reached. Second, a network of institutionalized negotiation platforms can alleviate the fear of the participants to be left outside of enlarging or consolidating organizations, whether defense alliances or trade blocs. Even if China or Russia face an enlarging alliance, they can still hope to manage the differences between them and the alliance leaders in a negotiation forum that neither side can afford to suspend or ignore because it is part of a network. If one part of it is suspended it may unravel completely, which is contrary to the interests of all parties involved.

In other words, walking away from the negotiation table, disrupting negotiation process, or dismantling negotiation fora altogether once they have been made operational come at a cost to the spoiler. Penalizing obstructionist behavior through formal procedures would be difficult in such cases, but enforcing rules of behavior for great powers has never been easy anyway, and even the highly elaborate UN institutions and procedures have never fully lived up to that task. As the interest in the 'global power of talk' has been growing lately (Hampson and Zartman, 2012), we can expect levels of

commitment to negotiation to increase among the global and aspiring powers as well as any other parties involved in conflicts on the regional scale. A structure comprised of overlapping permanent negotiation arrangements may turn out to be resistant enough to shocks caused by changing intentions of the key participants.

Once established, multilateral fora with participation of all major powers holding de facto veto rights over conflict resolution in their respective regions will reduce the proxy element in the conflict dynamic. That may give direct participants in the conflicts in post Soviet Eurasia (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) more leeway in searching for and implementing mutually acceptable solutions. At the next step, permanent resolution of those and other conflicts would require a joint cooperative effort by global and 'aspiring' powers. The proposed multilateral fora stand a good chance of facilitating such cooperation if they prove capable of accommodating the 'aspiring' powers' quest for status in exchange for their reduced pressure on the global powers and acceptance by the 'aspiring' powers of their shared economic destiny with the global powers.

Status accommodation may narrow down the scope of possible solutions for the conflicts in post Soviet Eurasia, East Asia, and the Middle East because the newly endowed status could be used by the 'aspiring' powers to block alliances or even security cooperation between smaller actors (such as Ukraine, Georgia, or Taiwan) and the global powers. However, status accommodation will cut both ways so that the global powers can make sure their security interests are equally honored by the 'aspiring' powers, and smaller nations, whose voice will also be heard in the negotiations, will gain enough status to maintain sovereignty and autonomy of foreign policy decision making. Overall, the more stable solution is found within the negotiation fora for mutual status accommodation among the global powers, 'aspiring' powers, and smaller stakeholders, the faster and more effectively the regional proxy conflicts will be settled.

To illustrate the usefulness of negotiation fora in preventing at least open conflict, one may note that NATO-Russia relations in Eurasia began to slide as soon as the sides stopped talking directly to each other about their mutual concerns (Istomin, 2017). That happened around the years 2004-2005 against the backdrop of demands by Georgia's new reformist government that Russia pull out its troops from and cease support to Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Before 2004 NATO-Russia relations remained difficult and at times contentious, but complete rupture was avoided even as NATO set out to accept two waves of new members from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s and carried out two bombing campaigns in the former Yugoslavia. Once the dialogue on security matters between the US and NATO, on one hand, and Russia, on the other, nearly came to a halt, the downward spiral dynamic set in, led to a major conflagration over Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, and has not fully recovered ever since.

Conclusion

Conflict resolution under rivalry between the established global powers and their aspiring would be peers turns out to be difficult, as the last decade and a half has shown. However, the situation is not as hopeless as it was when the proxy wars ravaged the globe from the 1950s until the late 1980s. While the superpower comity of the end of the Cold War period is long gone, stakeholders now stand a fair chance of resolving conflicts instead of freezing them, reaching definitive solutions for the already 'frozen' conflicts, and preventing a number of controversies from escalating to armed hostilities. What is needed, and can realistically be achieved despite the ongoing shifts in the distribution of power across the globe, is continued good faith negotiation on a variety of existing and prospective platforms that include the global leading powers of the United States and the European Union and the aspiring powers, such as China, Russia, India, Turkey, and others, with due participation of other, smaller stakeholders. Reenergizing the existing comprehensive negotiation platforms and introducing new ones will be easier if policymakers in the stakeholder nations adhere to the following recommendations.

1. **Be bold when thinking about the negotiation agenda**. At the same time, do not be carried away by concepts of immutable, eternal, and irreconcilable rivalry with any other actor, the ideas about impossibility of a compromise, even if they are popular among commentators. Because policymakers can change the course of events, they can afford not to be constrained in their actions by any grand theories of international conflict and cooperation.
2. **Give priority to multilateralism over bilateralism and apply concerted pressure to the actors whose participation in multilateral negotiations is essential**, but that are still reluctant to join in. For example, Russia could pitch China's readiness to engage in arms control negotiations, especially to address the thorny issue of China's ground based intermediate range missiles in the situation when the US and Russia are not allowed to have them.
3. **Do not act out of conviction that your opponent is in the state of imminent decline.** Think twice about your opportunities to be more prosperous and secure in a world where your opponent, be it the United States, the EU, Russia, or China, has been decisively weakened.
4. **Do not seek absolute immunity from interference in domestic affairs** as this would severely complicate any negotiation. Interference is inevitable in a certain form in a globalized world, so attempts at complete insulation are harmful economically. That said, targeted operations to influence elections should be forsworn. Making good on such commitment by itself could serve as a powerful signal of nonaggressive intentions and build up trust essential for negotiation on sensitive issues.

The aspiring powers have successfully negotiated their way into a number of core multilateral institutions, such as the World Trade Organization or the Council of Europe. There is no reason why such experience of overcoming hurdles to mutual accommodation cannot be replicated. The main beneficiaries of this accommodation could be all those suffering in conflicts that are now leveraged by major powers to inflict additional pain on one another.

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