



THE UKRAINE CRISIS AND THE RESUMPTION OF GREAT-POWER RIVALRY

Dmitri Trenin



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About the Author

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Summary

The Ukraine crisis that erupted in early 2014 has brought an end to the post–Cold War status quo in Europe. Russia, feeling betrayed by its Western partners because of their support for regime change in Kiev, has stepped forward to protect its vital interests—which the West saw as aggression by a revisionist power. The ensuing conflict will last long and have an impact far beyond Europe.

Great-Power Competition Is Back

- The Ukraine crisis has ushered in a period of U.S.-Russian rivalry, even confrontation, reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Great Game, a fight for supremacy between the Russian and British Empires. The competition is asymmetrical and highly unequal.
- This conflict is being waged mainly in the political, economic, and information spheres, but it has military overtones as well. It differs from the Cold War in that human contact, trade, and information flows are not completely shut off, and there is a modicum of cooperation.
- Russia is focused on post-Soviet integration in Eurasia, while the United States has initiated a series of measures to restore a “holding line” against Russia in Europe.
- The U.S. approach toward Russia reflects traditional concerns, even phobias, and is not based on an adequate understanding of the country, in part because Russia has ceased to be a focus of U.S. foreign policy.
- The international system is becoming more balanced, and Washington needs to prepare for this by developing policies that account for the interests of major players, including Russia.

Global Implications

- Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will be the battleground in the U.S.-Russian fight for influence. A number of other countries and territories, including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian North Caucasus and Crimea, and the Baltic states, may also be affected by this competition.

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- In Central Europe, Poland, which has been most directly involved with the crisis over Ukraine, has toughened its attitudes toward Russia.
- Western Europe's relations with Russia have changed significantly since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. The period of cooperation and mutual understanding ushered in by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's agreement to Germany's reunification is over.
- Faced with an increasingly hostile West, Russia is visibly turning East. In particular, China and Russia have become closer, signing a historic gas deal, conducting joint naval exercises, and increasing trade.
- Russia's hardball policies in Ukraine and its defiance of the United States have won it increased credibility in the Middle East.

Introduction

The political crisis that erupted in Ukraine in early 2014 has ended the period in Russian-Western relations that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.¹ The crisis marks the end of a generally cooperative phase in those relations, which even included a failed effort at Russia's integration with or into the West on its own terms. Instead, the Ukraine crisis has opened a new period of heightened rivalry, even confrontation, between former Cold War adversaries.

On the face of it, this new period is broadly reminiscent of the Cold War, but it differs from it in important ways. Today's situation has a values component to it but is not nearly as focused on ideology as the conflict between communism and liberal democracy was. It has a traditional military dimension too, but this aspect is not—as yet—dominant. The current crisis has global implications, but, in and of itself, it is not central to the global system. Most importantly, unlike the Cold War, the present crisis is not the organizing principle of either world politics or even the foreign policies of the conflict's main contestants, particularly that of the United States. If historical analogies are of any use, parallels to the nineteenth-century Great Game for supremacy between the Russian and British Empires would be more to the point, except, of course, that the present U.S.-Russian rivalry is asymmetrical.

The severity of the crisis came as a surprise to many, in Ukraine itself, Russia, the European Union (EU), and the United States. Not that the gestation of the crisis and the steadily worsening environment in Russia's relations with the West had been overlooked. Rather, many Ukraine watchers who continued to believe that “the more the country changes, the more it stays the same” were caught off guard by the dynamics on the ground. In late February 2014, Ukraine moved too far and too abruptly to the West and lost balance. Just before that, U.S. policy in support of democratic change in Ukraine had steered past safe limits. Russia felt cornered, and its reaction surprised many Russians, not to speak of Ukrainians and Westerners.

This new battle for influence is very real and will have major ramifications beyond just Ukraine. The confrontation will take some time to lead to an outcome, and neither the time frame nor the result can be clearly foreseen at this point. What is clear, however, is that the Euro-Atlantic region has entered a different epoch.

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Origins of the Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis was immediately preceded by competition between the EU and Russia for the future geoeconomic orientation of Ukraine. The roots of the crisis lie in the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which ended the prospect of enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) for both Georgia and Ukraine, and in the beginning of the global financial crisis, which seemed to give more credence to regional economic arrangements. Then, the EU and Russia drew different conclusions from the war and the crisis. The Europeans, through the Eastern Partnership program the EU launched in 2009, looked to associate Ukraine, along with five other former Soviet republics, economically and politically with the EU.² Rather than a step toward future EU enlargement, however, this initiative was an attempt to constitute a “zone of comfort” to the east of the union’s border and enhance these countries’ Western orientation.

The Russian Federation, for its part, tried to attract Ukraine and most of the rest of the former Soviet Union to its flagship project of a customs union, also energized in 2009, which led by May 2014 to the signing of the treaty establishing a Eurasian Economic Union.³ Rather than re-creating the Soviet Union, as suspected in the West, Moscow began building a Russian-led community in Eurasia that would give Russia certain economic benefits and, no less important, better bargaining positions with regard to the country’s big continental neighbors—the EU to the west and China to the east. Including Ukraine into the scheme, which Russian President Vladimir Putin had been trying to achieve since the 2003–2004 project of a “single economic space,” was designed to give the new compact the critical mass of 200 million consumers, of which Ukraine would supply almost a quarter. Yet at the same time, Putin remained wedded to his master concept of a “Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok,” which he first outlined in 2010 and has reiterated since.

Thus, Brussels and Moscow each saw Ukraine as an important element of their own geopolitical project. The Russians have also made an effort to explore the possibility of associating Ukraine with both economic units and in this way keeping the country’s international and domestic balance. Yet, for the Europeans there was no chance of talking to a third country about Ukraine’s association. Eventually, both Russia and the EU came to see Ukraine’s choice as a zero-sum game and worked hard to influence the outcome.

Ukraine itself, ruled from 2010 to 2014 by the then president Viktor Yanukovich and his supporters from the eastern region of Donetsk, was habitually maneuvering between the EU and Russia, always in search of a better deal. Yanukovich, for domestic political reasons, raised high hopes for the EU link, on which he was ostensibly working. However, the Ukrainian president was never able to secure reasonable financial relief from Brussels to compensate for the severe blow to Ukrainian industry that would have resulted from closer

economic association with the EU. In the run-up to presidential elections originally due in early 2015, the need for such a cushion became crucial.

At the same time, Yanukovich had to factor in the pressure exercised by Russia. Moscow first showed Ukraine, in the form of trade barriers, what it would lose from choosing the EU over Russia and, later, in the form of an aid package, what it would gain if it made the “right” choice. As a result, Yanukovich in November 2013 suddenly suspended a political and economic association agreement that Kiev had been due to sign with the EU. The following month, he instead accepted a generous financial and economic package from Russia’s Putin.

The November 2013 decision led to mass protests in central Kiev, which almost immediately turned into a permanent standoff on the capital’s Independence Square. Most protesters were ordinary people who suffered from poverty and were deeply incensed by runaway official corruption, including in Yanukovich’s family. To those people, EU association appeared as a way out of this undignified situation, and the abrupt and unexpected closure of that door produced a painful and powerful shock.

This essentially civic protest, which became known as the Maidan, was joined by nationalist groups, hailing mainly from western Ukraine, who always insisted on a Ukrainian national identity that was clearly separate from, and even inimical to Russia. To them, Yanukovich, an easterner, was hijacking the country to merge with Russia, which many in the country’s west viewed with deep suspicion and outright hostility. Finally, the Maidan protests were supported, funded, and exploited by Ukraine’s oligarchic clans, which were unhappy with Yanukovich and his Donetsk allies wielding too much power and aggressively expanding their business interests at other oligarchs’ expense. To them, the Maidan was a means to force early presidential elections and unseat Yanukovich.

In the United States, the top echelons in the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama were not initially focused on the Ukrainian developments. Ukraine was not a foreign policy priority for the U.S. president, who was heavily preoccupied with wars and revolutions in the Middle East, Iran’s nuclear program, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, America’s relations with China, and developments in East Asia. However, the United States had long supported pro-Western democratic movements in Ukraine, for both ideological and geopolitical reasons, and it looked with a wary eye on the Kremlin’s attempts at Eurasian integration. Washington abhorred the idea of Ukraine becoming part of the Russian sphere of influence. To stymie that, it was working on helping pro-Western opposition leaders hold on to power in Kiev and openly encouraging them in their efforts.

In mid-February 2014, the situation in central Kiev degenerated into violence and reached a denouement. It first appeared that Yanukovich was resolved to win by using force to disperse the Maidan, which by that time

had formed a capable fighting force built around a nationalist organization called the Right Sector. However, Yanukovich stopped the police advance in its tracks and opened talks with the opposition leaders. Those talks soon became negotiations about the concessions his government was prepared to make and ended on February 21, 2014, with the president's de facto capitulation, which was to be delayed by a few months. The foreign ministers of EU member states France, Germany, and Poland co-signed an agreement with the Ukrainian government and opposition leaders to that effect. No sooner than it had been signed, the deal was rejected by the Maidan, whose more radical members demanded the president's immediate resignation. Yanukovich fled from Kiev, the police disappeared from its streets, and the Maidan revolution could celebrate victory.

Russia's Policies

These dramatic developments were most traumatic for Moscow. From a Russian perspective, Ukraine had for two decades been a weak, fragile, and often unreliable state, chronically creating problems for Russian energy giant Gazprom's transit to Europe. However, to most Russians, the country was anything but foreign. Now, Ukraine was suddenly turning into a country led by a coalition of pro-Western elites in Kiev and anti-Russian western Ukrainian nationalists. This shift, in the Kremlin's eyes, carried a dual danger of Kiev clamping down on the Russian language, culture, and identity inside Ukraine and of the country itself joining NATO in short order. Putin reacted immediately by apparently putting in motion contingency plans that Moscow had drafted for the eventuality of Kiev seeking membership in the Atlantic alliance.

Russia's Ukraine policy, which until then had been publicly low-key and heavily focused on top-level interaction with the Ukrainian president, immediately went into high gear. Defense and maneuvering stopped, to be replaced by a counteroffensive. The main goal became to keep Ukraine from joining NATO and, ideally, to win back the country for the Eurasian integration project, whose core element is the reunification of what Moscow sees as the "Russian world." In pursuing its new, proactive approach, Russia had two main objectives.

The first was to make Crimea off limits to the new post-Yanukovich authorities in Kiev. This was executed by means of Russian special forces physically insulating the peninsula from mainland Ukraine, neutralizing the Ukrainian garrison in Crimea, and helping Crimea's pro-Russian elements take control of the local government, parliament, and law enforcement agencies. Russia also encouraged those elements to hold a referendum on Crimea's status and pursued an all-out campaign in favor of Crimea's reunification with Russia. The vote, held on March 16, 2014, overwhelmingly endorsed such a union. Two days later, a treaty was signed in Moscow to incorporate Crimea and the city of Sevastopol into Russia.

Moscow's second objective was to achieve a new federal settlement in Ukraine, which would forestall complete domination of the country by Kiev and western Ukraine and thus make any move toward NATO structurally impossible. On March 1, 2014, Putin had already sought and received powers from the Federation Council, the upper house of the Russian parliament, to use Russian armed forces inside Ukraine. Russian forces began exercising along the Ukrainian border, appearing ready to invade, but no crossborder invasion happened. The Kremlin was putting pressure on the new authorities in Kiev, making them nervous and indecisive; deterring Washington and Brussels from intervening by dramatically raising the stakes; and encouraging Moscow's political friends in the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine.

Indeed, in the largely Russophone eastern and southern Ukraine, mass rallies began to demand regional autonomy, including rights for the Russian language. These rallies were later followed by reasonably well-organized militant groups seizing government buildings, arming themselves, and taking over towns. In the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk, the militants held regional referendums in early May and proclaimed their own "republics" independent from Kiev. Moscow did not hide its sympathy and support for these separatists, but it refrained from either recognizing them or sending the Russian forces to protect them.

However, Russia failed in rousing resistance to Kiev across the entire south-east of Ukraine. The hope that predominantly Russian-speaking Novorossia, "New Russia" encompassing Ukraine's entire south-east, would break away from the new revolutionary authorities and form a federation, did not materialize. Only Donetsk and Luhansk held referendums in support of regional sovereignty. The key cities of Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odessa, and Zaporizhia, however, remained under the central government's control. Moreover, the interim government launched an "antiterrorist operation" in Donetsk and Luhansk, which led to numerous casualties on both sides, and provoked a humanitarian crisis. Moscow gave the militants there moral, political, and material support but stopped short of recognizing their "people's republics" and outright military intervention.

Moscow refused to recognize the Maidan-backed government as legitimate, even though it dealt with its officials. It also branded the revolutionary regime in Kiev as ultranationalist, even "fascist," with reference to the role the Ukrainian radicals had played in the ouster of Yanukovich. The United States, by contrast, gave well-publicized political support to Kiev, as evidenced by the visits there by Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan, and a number of other U.S. officials. Russian media claimed that Washington was directing the Ukrainian authorities' actions.

Russia attempted a number of diplomatic steps to manage the crisis next door and achieve its goals. However, telephone diplomacy between Presidents

Putin and Obama produced no solution, and the channel between Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary Kerry yielded little. The Geneva statement of April 17, 2014, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's road map of May 8 were stillborn. Moscow got far more attention by sending forces to the Ukrainian border for military drills, which looked like a preparation for invasion. The idea was to deter Kiev from going too hard against its opponents in eastern Ukraine and to raise the stakes in Washington by demonstrating Russia's resolve to defend its vital interests.

On May 25, 2014, Ukraine successfully held early presidential elections that led to the clear victory of Petro Poroshenko, an oligarch and the principal sponsor of the Maidan. The radicals received little support, just like Yanukovich's former party. Putin decided he could not ignore the choice of many millions of Ukrainians and agreed to resume top-level contacts with Kiev. With the move, the Kremlin, which knew Poroshenko well, was likely getting ready to reengage with the Ukrainian elite, albeit under new circumstances.

The Western Response

Within a few weeks, measures taken in response to Russia's actions abruptly reversed the twenty-five-year-old trend toward expanding contacts between former Cold War adversaries. Moscow's policies met with immediate, strong negative reaction from the United States and its allies. Seen as an aggressor, Russia was effectively expelled from the G8 group of leading industrialized nations, which returned to being the G7. The EU downgraded its relations with Russia, while NATO froze its cooperation with Moscow. Western leaders suspended their bilateral summits with Putin, even though they soon started to make exceptions. In a United Nations (UN) General Assembly vote on the Crimean referendum in late March, 100 nations refused to recognize the outcome, against only eleven that did.⁴ Faced with near-universal condemnation, Russian delegates had to suspend their participation in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Russia's accession process to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was also put on hold. High-level international meetings in Russia, such as the annual security conference in Moscow and the economic forum in St. Petersburg, lost many Western delegates.

In material terms, the United States led its allies in imposing sanctions against Russian officials, companies, and potentially whole sectors of industry. The goal is to hurt Russia so much that it backs down on Ukraine, ideally creating enough pain within Russia to effect a regime change—that is, Putin's ouster, either as a result of a palace coup or through a popular revolt. Successive waves of sanctions, in conjunction with efforts to isolate Russia politically, immediately caused a deep plunge of the Russian stock market, a massive capital flight out of Russia, and a further weakening of the ruble. Potential

new investors were turned off. Even though the energy relationship between Russia and Europe is too vital to many EU economies for it to be wound down immediately, there is now a much stronger trend toward energy diversification away from Russia. High-technology imports by Russia became more difficult. Russian finance was also put on notice about the potential dire consequences of a deepening confrontation with the United States.

In military terms, Russia has been redesignated as an adversary of the West. NATO is becoming reenergized around its original late-1940s mission of “keeping the Russians out.” The temporary deployments of relatively small Western contingents in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states are likely to turn into a permanent basing of NATO’s forces—including U.S. troops—along the alliance’s eastern border. NATO’s ballistic missile defenses, which are now being installed in Europe, will be openly targeting Russia’s nuclear forces. Neutral countries such as Sweden and Finland are considering joining NATO and would be welcome there should they decide to pursue membership. A major NATO summit in September 2014 in Wales is thus likely to present a “new old face” of the alliance. Barely out of Afghanistan, NATO is pivoting back to Russia.

In political, economic, and military terms, the European continent is again divided—with Russia to the east, NATO and the EU to the west, and the “lands in between” of Ukraine, Moldova, and the countries of the South Caucasus as the battleground. Great-power war in Europe, thought to be safely consigned to the history books since the start of the 1990s, has made a stunning comeback as a possibility, however remote. Economic sanctions, a political equivalent of war, have again been applied. Information warfare has been in full swing. Even though Russia and the United States had a close brush with confrontation in 2008 in Georgia, that episode was too brief, too peripheral, and very soon overshadowed by the global crisis and the change of administration in Washington to leave lasting traces. Georgia did not change post-Cold War history. Ukraine did.

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A History of Unsuccessful Rapprochement

The sharp turn in Russian-Western relations comes after a quarter century of halfhearted efforts on both sides to build an inclusive relationship. Early on, during Mikhail Gorbachev’s last two years as Soviet leader, Moscow hoped for a “common European home” and a joint global leadership with the United States.⁵ Both notions soon turned out to be illusions. Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, then tried to fully integrate the country by joining NATO and forging a direct alliance with the United States. This did not work either.

Putin, soon after succeeding Yeltsin in the Kremlin, privately sounded out the West about Russia’s NATO membership, announced a de facto alliance

relationship with the United States, and publicly proclaimed Russia's European choice—in a 2001 speech in the German parliament, delivered in German.⁶ Russia's third president, Dmitry Medvedev, with Putin's support, called for a European security treaty,⁷ suggested a joint defense perimeter for Russia and NATO, and actively sought “modernization alliances” with the advanced economies of the West.

These efforts by the last Soviet leader and Russia's first three presidents have fallen far short of their expectations. Western leaders showed no real interest in integrating Russia. They had good reasons for this. Russia was too big for such an exercise—particularly in terms of the economic assistance it would have needed to bring it closer to Western European levels. Russia, despite the loss of its superpower status, was also too independent-minded, with a huge nuclear-weapons arsenal and an elite that still reasoned in great-power terms and craved equality with the United States. As such, it would have made a strong-headed and thus awkward ally for Washington. Finally and crucially, there was no outside threat to the West that made it imperative for Russia to be secured to the U.S.-led alliance system.

Rather than integrating Russia within its own international system of institutions, the West tried to help Russia establish domestic political, economic, and social institutions that would make it closer to the West in qualitative terms. Western governments supported programs to relay democratic and market practices to Russia, hoping that it would soon become part of a globalized open society. Before Russia defaulted on its domestic debt in 1998, the country had been on life support from the International Monetary Fund for six years. Western advisers functioned at many levels in the Russian government, particularly its economic wing. Western governments backed Yeltsin at crucial moments, such as during a violent conflict in 1993 with the Russian parliament and his controversial reelection in 1996.

Yet, Russia disappointed the West. Its economy only started to pick up after the default, buoyed by the rising oil prices, and then it became dependent on them. Its political system was first chaotic, then dominated by the oligarchs, and later turned authoritarian. Its society absorbed the shock of dramatic changes, survived misery, and even acquired a taste for affluence, but it did not generate a powerful demand for democracy. Instead, the people came to appreciate stability and, having had enough of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, embraced Putin. Liberals, the only opposition in Russia that the West cared about, remained a small, even if vocal minority. Most important, Moscow insisted on keeping its great-power status, which many in the West considered obsolete.

Russia was by no means isolated; it was welcome to become a junior partner of the United States, the EU, and NATO. It was allowed to keep the Soviet Union's seat on the UN Security Council in 1991, and it was granted membership in the Council of Europe in 1996 and in the G8 in 1998. A NATO-Russia Council for military cooperation was established in 2002, and Moscow was

engaged in a close partnership with the EU, which was reinforced in 2003 by the concept of four “common spaces.”⁸ Moscow was accepted into the World Trade Organization in 2012 and was put on track to join the OECD. Successive Russian leaders held frequent and often quite informal meetings with their U.S. and other Western counterparts.

At the same time, there was no chance that Russia would be recognized as a “co-equal” of either the United States or the EU. The Russian Federation was certainly viewed in the West as a lesser international actor, whose power and importance were also declining. There was absolutely no question of letting Russia enjoy any special postimperial privileges such as a zone of influence, particularly in the former Soviet Union. Moscow’s policies in its neighborhood, for example toward the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, the South Caucasus countries, and Central Asia, were closely inspected for elements of “neoimperialism.” Since the early 1990s, the West has watched Moscow’s handling of the separatist region of Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasus as an indicator of human rights abuses, potential relapse into colonial-era practices, and the excessive influence of the Russian military and security services.

Russia was also expected to accept the decision of its former Warsaw Pact allies to join NATO. This was particularly hard for Moscow for two reasons. One was that Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, which joined in 1999, and Slovakia, the Baltic states, Romania, and Bulgaria, which acceded in 2004, were allowed to do something from which Russia was expressly barred. The second reason was that the enlargement of NATO ran counter to what many Russians believed were promises by Western leaders to Gorbachev in 1990 that they would not expand the alliance after the end of the Cold War if a reunited Germany were able to stay in NATO. (East Germany was integrated into NATO as it was reunified with West Germany in 1990.) Western governments, however, never accepted those claims and treated the Russian protests against NATO enlargement as evidence of Moscow’s phantom imperial pain or even surviving designs on Central and Eastern Europe. In retrospect, NATO enlargement constituted, in Russian eyes, a major breach of faith on behalf of the West.

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Like NATO’s enlargement, the color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005) performed the task, in Western eyes, of expanding the space of freedom and democracy in the former Communist world. To the Kremlin, by contrast, the uprisings constituted a political challenge of regime change at home atop the geopolitical challenge of reducing Russia’s influence beyond its borders. Moscow’s concerns were heightened when, in 2008, Ukraine’s “Orange” government and Georgia’s “Rose” leadership asked NATO for a Membership Action Plan, a program of advice and assistance for countries wishing to join the alliance. In February 2014, the fear was exactly

the same: that the Maidan would revive antigovernment protests in Moscow that had died down after a spike in 2011–2012, and that the victorious revolutionaries in Kiev would lead Ukraine into NATO. To the West, the Kremlin's authoritarianism was offensive, and its attempts to include neighboring countries in the Moscow-led integration scheme smacked of an effort to restore the Soviet Union.

These opposing interpretations do not suggest a misunderstanding between the West and Russia. The West was maximizing its spectacular success at the end of the Cold War and securing its new position, hedging, as necessary, against a potential resurgence of Russian power. It did not feel it really needed Russia outside the energy field and, except for a few Eastern European countries with a difficult history of relations with czarist or Soviet Russia, no longer feared it. To most elites in the United States and Western Europe, Russia had been yesterday's news since the mid-1990s. Russia had to be managed, certainly, but did not deserve to become a priority again. As a consequence, Russian expertise was no longer in great demand, and Russian studies stopped attracting the best and the brightest across the Western world.

As for Russian elites, they also soon became disillusioned, and even rather cynical, about the West. They learned how to use the Western countries for their own personal interests, but integration into or with the West was no longer on the Kremlin's agenda. Russian leaders, however, for a long time remained interested in fashioning a relationship with the United States and Europe that would give Russia the “co-equal status” that the country coveted. That status would mean Western noninterference in Russian internal affairs and would eliminate the threat of highly unequal military confrontation. With each unsuccessful “docking” with the West, the Kremlin grew more skeptical about the chances of its desired settlement—even as it became convinced that the heyday of U.S. hegemony and global Western dominance was over.

The Wider Geopolitical Context

Seen from Moscow, the unipolar “new world order” ushered in by former U.S. president George H. W. Bush in the Gulf War of 1990–1991 lasted roughly until the routing of Iraqi forces under another U.S. president, George W. Bush, at the beginning of the Iraq War. Soon thereafter, U.S. global hegemony began to wane. Neither of the two wars started by Bush, Jr.—Iraq, in 2003, and Afghanistan, in 2001—has led to a strengthening of the U.S. global position. The presidency of Bush's successor, Obama, has become a period of U.S. global retrenchment, with more attention paid to the home base, a shift that the global crisis of 2008–2009 made imperative. The crisis essentially drew a line under the brief period of unchallenged U.S. world dominance after the end of the Cold War and the disappearance of the Soviet Union.

The Russians also watched as the EU, at the same time, entered its most serious crisis since its foundation. The union has had to deal simultaneously with debt and financing issues, a lack of leadership and a crisis of confidence, and an enlargement overstretch. The EU finds itself beset by a multifaceted identity crisis, with traditional European values—religious faith, nuclear family, national identity—weakened or discarded, and new values like multiculturalism finding the going hard. The success of the Euroskeptic and nationalist parties in the May 2014 elections to the European Parliament has reflected this malaise. As a result, the European project is in serious need of reenergizing, and failure to do so is fraught with the risk of unraveling.

These developments allowed Moscow to conclude that, from the late twentieth century, but particularly since the beginning of the twenty-first, the global balance had started to shift in favor of non-Western societies. China, India, Brazil, Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, and Indonesia have all surged ahead, with a number of other emerging market economies following them. Most of these countries shun direct confrontation with the United States, but most of them also want to rebalance the global order in their own favor and away from the West. The G20 group, born out of the global crisis, has begun to appear more important than the G8 (or the G7). A number of ordinary Arabs, Persians, Pakistanis, Latin Americans, and others would want to pin their hopes on someone with the courage and stamina to stand up to the power of the United States and check it.

In 2012 and 2013, Putin, now back in the Kremlin, made some stunning moves. On the Syrian civil war, he refused to simply help Washington ease Syrian President Bashar al-Assad out of power in Damascus in return (perhaps) for keeping the Syrian arms market. The lesson of Libya, where Moscow's abstention at the UN Security Council in 2011 had allowed a NATO-led humanitarian intervention, which resulted in a regime change and a loss of Russian interests in the country, was learned. Instead, Putin offered his own calculus of the Syrian situation—namely, that Assad was stronger than his opponents and that the strongest among his opponents were the jihadis, so the choice was essentially between the two, of which Assad was obviously the preferred option. That assessment proved to be more realistic than the calculus of Obama's advisers in the White House.

Even as the United States supported the fickle and quarrelsome opposition in Syria and watched its Gulf allies arm and bankroll the jihadis, Putin did not waver in his careful and calculated support for Damascus. In May 2013, Moscow offered Washington a chance to jointly lead the process of political settlement in Syria, but the United States tried instead to use the process in a futile attempt to get rid of Assad. With his "redlines" on Syria openly challenged in August 2013 by the perpetrators of a chemical weapons attack near Damascus, Obama found himself on the verge of ordering military strikes against Syria—contrary to his own wishes. At that moment, Putin masterfully

used the situation to stay the U.S. president's hand by offering a deal to get rid of Syria's chemical weapons. From Putin's refusal to accept the U.S. game plan to his impudence in suggesting an equal partnership with Washington in dealing with Syria to his de facto prevention of the U.S. use of force against Assad, the irritation with him and with Russia in U.S. political circles mounted.

It did not help that the need to come up with a joint U.S.-Russian plan to rid Syria of chemical weapons led to arguably the first eye-to-eye discussions between U.S. and Russian representatives since the downfall of the Soviet Union. In discussions in Geneva, Switzerland, Russia essentially won back the diplomatic parity with the United States that it had lost in the early 1990s. This was stunning: Russia's resources were a fraction of America's, and its influence in Syria—not to speak of anywhere else in the Middle East—was hardly dominant. And yet, Moscow was able to perform a spectacular feat by both preventing a U.S. attack against another country and making a notoriously closed regime give up its sole deterrent in the form of weapons of mass destruction.

In mid-2013, Russia demonstrated its temerity on another highly sensitive issue, when Edward Snowden, a former U.S. National Security Agency contractor, opened a campaign of revelations of the U.S. government's global spying. During Snowden's search for asylum that followed his flight from the United States and the revocation of his passport, Russia emerged as the only country willing to stand up to the U.S. government and take its full wrath. China was quick to hand off Snowden; the Latin American leftist regimes who had promised him asylum soon ducked under U.S. pressure; and U.S. allies in Europe actually cooperated in grounding Bolivia's presidential plane after a tip-off that Snowden might have been on board. Putin, however, allowed

the fugitive contractor stay in Russia, fully aware that this would materially damage relations with Obama. In response, Obama canceled a summit in Moscow, the first such cancellation in the history of U.S.-Russian relations since a summit in Paris was aborted by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev in 1960.

The Ukraine crisis, when it came, was thus not an isolated spat or a tragic misunderstanding, but rather the last straw—for both sides. Essentially, the failure to achieve an acceptable post-Cold War settlement produced an unanchored relationship between the West and Russia. Absent a sustained and serious effort to improve it, that relationship

was prone to deteriorate under the weight of differing interests, conflicting views and values, and layers of historical mistrust. The resulting conflict has far-reaching implications for Eastern Europe and beyond.

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The Implications of the Ukraine Crisis

The Ukraine crisis has led Russia to openly challenge the post–Cold War, post-Soviet settlement in Europe, which Putin has now openly come to reject. Moscow has already changed Russia’s borders by adding part of a neighboring state—after a referendum, to be sure—to the Russian Federation. Putin has publicly adopted the thesis of a divided Russian people, which sends a signal to countries with significant ethnic Russian or Russophone populations. Russia has become drawn into the domestic Ukrainian conflict, backing certain elements within Ukraine, insisting on constitutional reform there, and refusing for months to recognize the interim authorities in Kiev.

As a result, the post–Cold War status quo in Eastern Europe and, to a degree, in Europe as a whole is a thing of the past. Russia is focused on post-Soviet integration in Eurasia and is increasingly shifting its attention farther eastward, with implications for rising China and other states in Asia. Against the background of mounting tensions in the East and South China Seas and between Beijing and Washington, as well as the arrival of more nationalist leaders in Tokyo and New Delhi, a revisionist, resurgent Russia may not be an outlier, but part of an emerging trend of great-power competition succeeding the post–Cold War period of U.S.-dominated world order.

Post-Soviet Regions

With Crimea back in its hands, Russia has made a big step toward restoring its dominance in the Black Sea area. Rather than just a small stretch of the sea’s eastern shoreline, Russia now occupies the strategically strongest position in the area. The Russian Black Sea Fleet, with Sevastopol as its main base, will now grow and modernize faster, which will enhance Moscow’s capability to project power, including to the Eastern Mediterranean. By contrast, the Turkish Navy, which became the strongest force in the Black Sea after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has lost its primacy.

As the domestic Ukrainian conflict intensifies, Russian involvement in Ukraine also increases. However, Russia has been very careful to operate below the West’s radar screen, leaving few, if any, fingerprints. Rather than sending military units or groups of agents and operatives, it relies on local militants in eastern and southern Ukraine, as well as genuine volunteers and activists from around Russia, including ethnic Ukrainians, who vow to prevent Ukraine from being “hijacked” from its natural prominent place in the “Russian world” and turned into a Western-dominated backyard of the EU and NATO.

Ukraine is likely to be unstable for a relatively long time. Violence, currently at the level of a regional insurgency, can still potentially expand into a multiparty civil war and provoke a conventional military conflict, complete with guerrilla warfare. Even if that extreme scenario is forestalled, social upheavals and political infighting will be difficult to avoid. That may lead to one of the

following potential outcomes: first, a unified country (minus Crimea, which will stay with Russia) heavily supported by and leaning toward the West; second, a loose federal state with a neutral status between the West and Russia; third, a partition of the country into two or several units, each of which will lean toward the EU or Russia. The first outcome is favored by the West, the second one by Russia, and the third one by neither because it would probably mean a full-scale civil war, yet it should not be ruled out. Each of these outcomes would significantly change the geopolitical balance in Eastern Europe. Amid this discussion of eventualities, one thing is clear, however. Post-Soviet Ukraine is history.

The conflict in Ukraine has implications for other post-Soviet regions. Above all, the crisis affects neighboring Moldova, a country that effectively broke up in 1990 when the region of Transnistria became de facto independent even before Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union. In June 2014, Chişinău's pro-EU governing coalition concluded an association agreement with the EU. However, at parliamentary elections in

Post-Soviet Ukraine is history.

November 2014, the incumbent center-right government will face a challenge from the Communist Party, which favors Moldova's integration with the Moscow-led customs union. Landlocked Transnistria has long been openly seeking integration with Russia, while the small and isolated Turkic-populated region of Gagauzia also leans toward Moscow. However, these entities depend on the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Odessa for communications with Russia, and Kiev's assertion of control there following May 2014 clashes between pro- and anti-Russian demonstrators that involved a deadly public building fire shuts off that route.

Chişinău's hopes now are pinned on Kiev's cooperation in isolating Transnistria physically and making it bow to the harsh realities of geopolitics. However, Moldova is not very stable politically, and its failure to "regain" its breakaway regions could put its own sovereignty in doubt: Transnistria will remain outside its writ, and the Gagauz enclave will become restive. That could lead to the eventual folding of the entire country, which has been called a "second Romanian state,"⁹ into Romania proper, to which it belonged from 1918 to 1940 and again from 1941 to 1944. Influential elements in Bucharest would welcome such a development and the reconstitution of *România Mare*, or Greater Romania.

Georgia, another signatory of an EU association agreement, has so far remained unaffected directly by the Ukraine crisis. Moscow has clearly decided not to punish the current government in Tbilisi for its pro-Western orientation to avoid undermining it, which would let former president Mikheil Saakashvili's supporters back in power. In Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which broke away from Tbilisi in the early 1990s, a precarious truce with Georgia has prevailed ever since Russia recognized the two territories' independence

following its 2008 war with Georgia. Abkhazia is a functioning, if heavily subsidized, state with its own vibrant politics, which led in June 2014 to the ouster of its president under circumstances reminiscent of Kiev's Maidan. Moscow was surprised, but not threatened, as all political factions in the tiny country remain pro-Russian. The Kremlin successfully mediated among the Abkhaz to avoid violence as power changed hands. South Ossetia, by contrast, has held a well-managed parliamentary election, but it is hardly a viable country.

Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, however, are already incorporated into the Russian or Eurasian economic space. Yet whereas Abkhazia is jealously protective of its independence, which puts a limit on the scale of its integration, South Ossetia longs for a union with its sister, the much bigger Republic of North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation. So far, Moscow has refused to budge: the political and financial costs of Crimea's incorporation are high enough.

In the future, should Georgia return to the vociferously anti-Russian policies of Mikheil Saakashvili, Ossetian reunification might become a reality, bringing Russia's border within an hour's drive of Tbilisi. Alternatively, Russia can propose the option of a "confederacy," which would restore links between Tbilisi and the Abkhazian and South Ossetian capitals, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, provided that Georgia chooses the Eurasian economic and political vector over the current European one. This, however, is increasingly unlikely after Georgia's signature of an association agreement with the EU.

In the rest of the South Caucasus, the tug-of-war with the EU over Ukraine stimulated Russia in September 2013 to draw Armenia more actively into the Eurasian project. As a result, Armenia requested membership in the Eurasian Economic Union and has entered the accession process. The incorporation of Crimea into Russia in March 2014, which Armenia endorsed in the UN General Assembly vote on the subject, evoked parallels in Yerevan with the issue of the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Russia, for its part, has been demonstrating its support for the Armenians, including the diaspora in Syria, and in the matter of the Armenian genocide in 1915. By 2015, Armenia vows to become part of the Eurasian Economic Union. By contrast, Azerbaijan, due to its oil wealth and crafty diplomacy, is the only country in the South Caucasus to have remained essentially neutral in the struggle for influence between Russia and the West.

Russia's nominal allies and principal integration partners, Belarus and Kazakhstan, have used the Ukraine crisis to stress their own sovereignty. As Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko put it in a televised interview on March 23, 2014, "Belarus must become a state . . . an independent state . . . not under anyone's thumb." At the UN, Belarus voted with Russia to endorse the annexation of Crimea, and Minsk hosted Russian warplanes to counter increased NATO deployments and activity in Poland and the Baltic states. At the same time, Lukashenko established a direct line to the new leadership in

Kiev and pressed Russia for more economic concessions: typical opportunistic maneuvering. Moscow tolerates such behavior to the extent that Lukashenko follows in the wake of Russia's general course toward the West.

Kazakhstan, unlike Belarus, abstained in the UN vote on Crimea. Some Kazakh officials were probably shaken by Putin's thesis of a divided Russian people. Northern Kazakhstan, across the border from Russia, has long been home to ethnic Russians and other Slavs—in a country whose political elite is virtually all Kazakh. Russian novelist and thinker Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, much revered today by Putin, wrote in a famous 1990 pamphlet about the need to reunite the Eastern Slavic lands of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and northern Kazakhstan within a "Russian union." In light of developments in Ukraine, some in Kazakhstan probably see Solzhenitsyn's article as the writing on the wall for the Kazakh state.

Yet, from the Kremlin's logic, Kazakhstan is safe as long as it remains a secular state, interethnic peace prevails there, and the country is linked institutionally to Russia in economic and strategic areas. However, Kazakhstan's continued relative stability is guaranteed primarily by its founding President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled the country since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The transition to a new leader, which is likely to happen within the next several years, will be a highly sensitive process, potentially fraught with enormous consequences. A more nationalist leadership in Astana could undermine the unwritten compact that keeps ethnic Russians happy in Kazakhstan and ensures Moscow's benign attitudes.

At the other corner of the former Soviet Union, the Baltic states feel vindicated in their strong historical mistrust of Russia and its intentions. Two of the three countries, Estonia and Latvia, are particularly concerned about Moscow's renewed resolve to protect ethnic Russians abroad. Both countries have sizable ethnic Russian populations, and many ethnic Russians still lack citizenship of their country of residence, while those who have been admitted to the citizenry often stay outside the integrated local nations as defined by ethnic majorities. Tallinn and Riga fear not so much an outright Russian invasion—Estonia and Latvia have been members of NATO and the EU since 2004—but Moscow's support for increased political activity of ethnic Russians in their own countries. Lithuania's concerns are mainly about its high degree of energy dependence on Russia. All three countries have requested a more permanent NATO presence in their territory.

Central and Western Europe

In Central Europe, Poland, which has been most directly involved with the crisis over Ukraine, has toughened its attitudes toward Russia. The historical reconciliation between Warsaw and Moscow that was attempted in 2009 and led, on the Russian side, by none other than Vladimir Putin, was fatally damaged by the death of the then Polish president in an airplane crash in 2010, and ties

are now frozen. For Warsaw, the Ukraine crisis has become a test of maturity and leadership. Poland is emerging as one of the EU's leading member states—perhaps in tandem with Germany—when it comes to the new Eastern Europe and Russia. The Ukraine crisis has also made Poland a NATO frontline state facing Russia and its ally Belarus. A recently announced U.S. military presence in Poland is likely to be symbolic, but quasipermanent. To counter this strengthened U.S. connection, Moscow has opted for discussing the Ukraine crisis mostly with Berlin and Paris, pushing Warsaw to the sidelines.

It is Western Europe's relations with Russia, however, that are witnessing the most serious change. The happy period of cooperation and mutual understanding ushered in by Gorbachev's 1990 agreement to Germany's reunification has come to an end. The close personal ties between Russian and German leaders, which flourished under German chancellors Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schröder, are no more. The hopes that the current chancellor, Angela Merkel, had once pinned on Medvedev suddenly evaporated as early as 2011, when Putin decided to return to the presidency. Beginning in earnest from the trial of Russian punk rock protest group Pussy Riot in 2012, the Putin regime was demolished and Putin himself demonized by the leading German media. What remains is essentially a business relationship, which, as a result of the Ukraine crisis, is under major threat as Germany basically follows the U.S. sanctions agenda. As a result, the German-Russian political relationship is not broken, but it is no longer "special."

Russia's attitude to Germany has suffered on its eastern end as well. The inability of the supposedly close partners to resolve the Ukraine crisis as it was gathering momentum has effectively turned Ukraine into a match between Russia and the United States. Frequent comparisons in Germany—including by a senior cabinet minister—of Moscow's handling of the Crimea issue with Adolf Hitler's policies of the Austrian *Anschluss* and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia have provoked an angry riposte by the Russian foreign ministry. More important, anti-German sentiments, virtually nonexistent for decades after World War II, have begun to spread. What used to be referred to as "Nazi" or "fascist" is now often called "German" in Russia's state-run media. If continued, that trend risks undoing a key element of the European peace order: the German-Russian post-World War II, post-Cold War reconciliation and understanding.

Another historically important relationship in Europe, that between Russia and France, had palpably decayed even before the Ukraine crisis. Unlike their predecessors François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, former president Nicolas Sarkozy and particularly the current leader, François Hollande, apparently did not attach any special significance to relations with Russia. Against this background, the Ukraine crisis threatened a complete political estrangement between Moscow and Paris. Waking up to this, President Hollande attempted

**The German-Russian political relationship
is not broken, but it is no longer "special."**

summit diplomacy by inviting Putin to the D-day anniversary celebrations in Normandy in June 2014. This, however, has changed the overall situation only at the margins. All that remains is essentially the commercial relationship, which still matters: despite all its criticism of Russian policies in Ukraine, France decided not to halt the building and delivery of two warships, one of them named *Sevastopol*, for the Russian Navy.

Russia's relations with the EU as a whole reached their peak in the early 2000s with the agreement on building EU-Russian "common spaces," in which the union would share with its neighbors "everything . . . but institutions"—that is, everything bar Russia's membership in the EU. Now, that relationship is being reduced to the technical level, with its content filled with managing conflicts over EU energy policies, Gazprom's operations in EU countries, and Russian gas transit across Ukraine.

It needs to be recalled that it was the EU's Eastern Partnership that was at the origin of the Ukraine crisis. The union's insistence on the exclusivity of its relations with Ukraine left little room for compromise with Moscow on the issue. The last EU-Russia summit, held in January 2014 in Brussels—that is, in the middle of the Ukraine crisis and just before the EU formally suspended such contacts—has demonstrated the utter dysfunction of the top-level relationship. However, the appointment of Jean-Claude Juncker, prime minister of Luxembourg from 1995 to 2013 and one in good standing in Moscow, as the new head of the European Commission may lead to a better connection between the commission and the Kremlin.

The NATO-Russia relationship reached an intense phase in 2009–2010, when the two parties discussed a strategic partnership and the possibility of building joint missile defenses, but then it languished. After Crimea, ties took a U-turn back toward Cold War hostility. The NATO-Russia Council, which had a mission to avert crises, has been rendered inoperable. Russia is no longer designated a NATO partner, but rather an adversary. This change is likely to be formalized at the alliance's summit in September 2014 in Wales. Meanwhile, NATO is in the process of redeploying its forces closer to Russia's border, which could lead to a restoration, even if on a symbolic scale, of the Cold War Russian-Western military standoff in Europe, only this time much farther to the east.

East Asia

Faced with an increasingly hostile West, Russia is visibly turning east. This geopolitical rebalancing of the country had been under way since 2012, but it accelerated in early 2014. Putin's most important visit since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis was in May 2014 to Shanghai, where Gazprom signed a thirty-year gas contract worth \$400 billion. The deal's importance can be compared with a similar accord concluded in the 1960s that brought Russian gas to West Germany for the first time. Moscow and Beijing vow to more than

double their bilateral trade to \$200 billion by 2020, that is, roughly half of their current turnover with the EU. Putin is scheduled to visit Japan later in 2014 in an effort to keep Russia's technology and investment channel to the country open. And Moscow is expected to reinvigorate ties with India, particularly in the defense technology sphere, under the leadership of newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Putin publicly praised both India and China for their "restraint" during the Ukraine crisis.

In fact, China abstained during the UN General Assembly vote on Crimea. Beijing is certainly not in favor of changing borders, including in Europe. However, China is most vehemently opposed to regime change and interference in other countries' internal affairs. Beijing abhors Maidan-style revolutions, which remind its leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, and is suspicious of U.S.-supported democracy programs. In June 2014, it issued statements reasserting Beijing's sovereignty and overall control over Hong Kong and Macau. China's abstention was thus coupled with a fair amount of sympathy for Russia.

A fundamental deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations carries a series of challenges for China. In particular, Beijing will need to be careful not to lean too much toward either of the rivals and provoke the anger of the other. Yet, China has much more to gain than to lose from recent developments.

China will seek to exploit Russia's alienation from the United States and its estrangement from the EU to gain a better deal in its energy relations with Russia. As a result, Gazprom has probably settled for a lower price for its future gas exports to China. The rise in the cost of Western credit for Russia would allow China to offer Russia cash on terms that would pave the way to China's direct participation in energy projects in Siberia and the Arctic.

In May 2014, China and Russia engaged in joint naval exercises in the East China Sea—the site of territorial disputes between China and Japan—which allowed Beijing to send a message to Tokyo. The Russians, watching Japan's siding with the United States on the issue of economic sanctions against Russia, have not objected to a tougher Chinese stance in the region. The Chinese People's Liberation Army, however, will continue to press Russia to provide more technologically advanced weapons, such as its S-400 air defense system or Su-35 aircraft. Although Moscow's consent is not a given, and the Russia-China relationship is not about to evolve into a military alliance, the alignment between the two powers is becoming closer.

The Western economic sanctions against Russia leave China as the one major economy unaffected by the new measures. China is already Russia's biggest trading partner. Trade between the countries was worth over \$88 billion in 2013,¹⁰ and it is likely to grow as Russia's trade with EU countries, worth about \$410 billion in 2013,¹¹ contracts. The shift in Russia's trade pattern from West to East would lead to a reconfiguring of Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union project. Rather than being an element in Putin's original idea of a Greater

Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok, the Eurasian union may become an add-on to, or even an extension of, China's Silk Road project. If so, "Eurasia" would morph into something that some Russians, a hundred years ago, facetiously called *Asiopa*, making Russia an extension of Asia.

The closer the relationship between Moscow and Beijing, the more Russia will need to take China's interests into account. This situation, in which Russia will depend significantly more on China than vice versa, will give China access to Russia's natural and military-technological resources, a perfectly safe strategic rear, and a position of de facto hegemon in eastern, northern, and central Eurasia. That is something unseen since the days of thirteenth-century Mongol conqueror Genghis Khan and his early successors. The attainment of such a commanding position could lead to a qualitative change in China's foreign policy.

The hope of constructing a strategic relationship between Russia and Japan, and of finally solving their territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands in the process, was rekindled after Shinzo Abe's arrival as Japan's prime minister in 2012. But after Ukraine, that hope faces a tough test. Japan is still interested in a relationship with Russia to partially offset the geopolitical pressure from China, but there is little that can actually be done now, under the circumstances. In its stand-off with Beijing, Tokyo has had to rely increasingly on the United States and, as a trade-off, follow its guidance on anti-Russian sanctions. Moscow cannot ignore this, even as it is itself becoming more dependent on China. The outlook for Russia-Japan final reconciliation is not yet completely hopeless, but it has definitely worsened since early 2014.

Apart from Japan, Russia is interested in maintaining links with other advanced Asian economies, such as South Korea and Singapore. However, both countries are heavily dependent on the United States for their security and will follow Washington on sanctions. To raise the stakes in Seoul, Moscow is expanding political and economic contacts with Pyongyang, hoping for its cooperation on gas and rail links between Russia and South Korea across North Korean territory. In Southeast Asia, Russia's gateway to the region remains Vietnam, but the main target is Indonesia.

India faces a number of challenges in its region that are not dissimilar from Russia's in its own neighborhood. Yet it is not fully clear how the new Indian government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), will approach relations with Russia within its revised foreign policy concept for India. In the 1970s, Indo-Russian relations already survived one shift from a Congress-led government to one headed by the BJP, and Moscow sees no need for change in its attitude toward New Delhi now. There has never been any aversion or reservation toward Modi in the Kremlin of the sort that have been laid out in Western media. The dispatch to New Delhi in June 2014 of Dmitri Rogozin, a deputy prime minister in charge of the military-industrial complex, demonstrates the continuity of Russian priorities vis-à-vis India.

The Ukraine crisis has not much affected Russian-Western cooperation in Afghanistan. Both Russia and the United States generally oppose the Taliban movement and support the Kabul government. However, in a deepening crisis over Ukraine, in particular if it involves Russian military action and U.S. lethal military aid to Kiev, the Russians may have to hit back, including by sponsoring attacks against U.S. troops abroad.

The Middle East

To date, Moscow has not broken ranks with other world powers on the Iranian nuclear issue. Its policy has been fairly consistent over the years. Russia does not welcome a nuclear-weapons-armed Iran and supports a negotiated solution with Tehran. Yet, the fundamental worsening of Russian-Western relations allows Moscow to pursue bilateral relations with Iran with fewer constraints. This refers to nuclear energy, oil and gas, and arms deals, all based on pragmatic considerations: a Russo-Persian alliance is unlikely in view of many differences between Moscow and Tehran and thick layers of mutual suspicion. One particular constraint is Russia's important relationship with Israel, which Moscow will not give up unless Jerusalem drops its neutral stance and joins the U.S.-led condemnation of Russia.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Russia's hardball policies in Ukraine and its defiance of the United States have won it increased credibility. Moscow's ties with Damascus, which it refused to abandon despite pressure from Washington, have strengthened, and its relationship with Cairo is undergoing a renaissance under a new military-backed government. In addition, Russia is reaching out to the conservative monarchies of the Gulf and Jordan. In a spectacular move in June 2014, Russia delivered SU-25 ground attack fighter jets to Iraq to be used against the advancing Islamist extremists. This is not yet an introduction to a regional strategy for the Middle East, but in an area that traditionally respects force and the resolve to use it, Russia has stepped up its stance since the beginning of 2014.

Turkey

Turkey finds itself in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine. Crimea is home to about 300,000 Tatars, who have the support of a million-strong diaspora in Turkey. The Russian authorities' outreach to the Crimean Tatars before and after the peninsula's independence referendum has not done away with the historic wariness, even hostility, toward Russia among the diaspora. Turkey is also a U.S. ally within NATO, and it picked a different side from Russia's in the Syrian conflict. Yet, Turkey's neo-Ottoman ambitions of a regional power set it apart from the United States and the EU. Turkey also values its economic, particularly energy, relations with Russia. Armenia's accession to the Eurasian union has not been ignored by Ankara, but it came with

an offer to structure an economic relationship between the union and Turkey. Finally, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while the subject of strong criticism in the West, particularly in Europe, is portrayed in Russia as a strong leader and enjoys a working relationship with Putin.

The Arctic

In the Arctic, all of Russia's neighbors are NATO member states. The Ukraine crisis has thus added a northern flank to the western theater of renewed confrontation. In the middle of the Crimea episode, Russian forces exercised in the Arctic Ocean. Of Russia's Arctic neighbors, Canada, with a larger and powerful Ukrainian diaspora and already deeply suspicious of Moscow's policies in the region, has gone furthest, after the United States, in condemning and sanctioning Russia. A slowdown and even a breakdown in Arctic cooperation, which began so auspiciously in 2008, cannot be ruled out in these circumstances. Elements of militarization of the area, particularly on the Russian side, are already evident. At the same time, Moscow uses legal arguments in international forums to promote its claims to an enlarged economic zone in the Arctic.

Conclusion

Russia is openly challenging the U.S.-dominated order, having seen its own vital security interests challenged by U.S.-friendly forces in Ukraine. Moscow will not back off on issues of principle, and Washington cannot be expected to recognize Russia's sphere of influence in Ukraine and elsewhere in Eurasia. The United States will also refuse to treat Russia as an equal. Most importantly, the elements of trust that existed in U.S.-Russian relations in the 1990s and that reemerged briefly in the 2000s have been fundamentally shattered. The relationship has become essentially adversarial, as in the days of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War or, more to the point, the Russo-British Great Game.

Unlike in 2008 in the South Caucasus, the current conflict will not be a bump in the road that will soon lead to a new reset. Russian President Vladimir Putin has scored a huge success domestically by returning Crimea to Russia, simultaneously creating a major obstacle to future accommodation not only with Ukraine but primarily with the United States and Europe. No lasting settlement will be possible without resolving the Crimea issue. Bracketing off Crimea from consideration in the relations between Russia and the West—unlike the successful bracketing off of Abkhazia and South Ossetia during the 2009 reset of U.S.-Russian relations—is unlikely. The eventual Crimea settlement, like German settlement at the end of the Cold War, will be the result of the long competition whose outcome is unknowable at this point.

The Ukrainian situation, despite the country's May 2014 presidential elections, is far from stable and has a potential for social unrest, political upheaval, and territorial fragmentation. It will be years before Ukraine acquires a modicum of stability. Russia's tactics with regard to the country will change, but the goal will remain: at minimum, to keep Ukraine as neutral ground, a buffer, between Russia to the east and the EU and NATO to the west. Such neutrality, however, may have an insufficient number of supporters in Ukraine itself and may be hard to maintain. Ideally, Russia would want Ukraine, which it sees as belonging to the same Orthodox Christian/Eastern Slavic civilization, to join its Eurasian union. This runs counter to the policies aimed at associating Ukraine ever closer with the European Union and the United States. More conflicts in Ukraine will stoke U.S.-Russian confrontation.

To reassure Eastern European allies, Obama has initiated a series of measures to restore a "holding line" against Russia in Europe along the eastern borders of the Baltic states, Poland, and Romania. Sandwiched between these countries and Russia, however, will be Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. These states will be the battleground in the U.S.-Russian fight for influence that will be the essence of the new Great Game. A number of other countries and territories, including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian North Caucasus and Crimea, and the Baltic states, may also be affected by this competition. It will be some time before the geopolitical status and orientation of the post-Soviet states is settled and another period of relative stability begins.

The U.S.-Russian conflict feeds into the global system, where great-power tensions are on the rise. In particular, the confrontation may affect Sino-U.S. relations by creating a highly uneven U.S.-China-Russia triangle in which China, rather than the United States, will be the central player. Since the early 1990s, Western analysts have been routinely dismissing any significant impact of a Sino-Russian rapprochement for U.S. interests, pointing to Russia's evident weakness and its purported fear of China. In the mid-to-late 2010s, with Russia engaged in a confrontation with the United States and more distant from Europe than before, Moscow may grow more dependent on Beijing and become a more pliant partner to it. However, Russia is unlikely to lose its strategic independence to China, having fought for it against the United States. Besides China, Russia will be reaching out to other non-Western players to diminish U.S. global power and influence and to help build a more balanced international system. Great-power concert with Russia part of it, rather than a bipolar world or global domination, remains Russia's foreign policy ideal.

Even if the Western sanctions regime imposed on Russia is not too strict, it will not be lifted soon either, marring the relationship with the United States for a long time. The sanctions will create an atmosphere in Russia of a country

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under constant U.S. pressure. This will stimulate Russian patriotism and nationalism focused on the United States as an external adversary. More sanctions will probably only enhance this feeling and aid the government's mobilization efforts. For the United States and some of its allies, present-day Russia, on the contrary, will embody all the wickedness of the former Communist regime, and worse. The trust needed to start moving toward accommodation and building a new relationship will be unavailable on either side for a very long time. When and how the U.S.-Russian conflict will end is impossible to predict. The powers have entered uncharted waters.

Notes

- 1 The term “Ukraine crisis” is used here to refer to the international relations phenomenon, which is also described as a “crisis over Ukraine.” This is in contrast to the term “Ukrainian crisis,” which is centered on the domestic developments in that country.
- 2 Also Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova.
- 3 Under a treaty signed in May 2014, the Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus will be launched on January 1, 2015, if the treaty is ratified by the three countries’ parliaments. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are also on the way to joining the new union.
- 4 United Nations General Assembly, “Voting Record on Draft Resolution A/68/L.39 Territorial Integrity of Ukraine,” <https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/en/ga/68th-session/plenary-meetings/documents/voting-record/resolution-68262>.
- 5 Council of Europe, “The Common European Home,” speech by Mikhail Gorbachev, July 6, 1989, www.coe.int/aboutcoe/index.asp?page=nosInvites&sp=gorbachev.
- 6 President of Russia, “Speech in the Bundestag of the Federal Republic of Germany,” September 25, 2001, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2001/09/25/0001_type82912type82914_138535.shtml.
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