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Losing Ground: Russia and Its Neighbors in Times of War

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Summary

Russia's war against Ukraine has altered the landscape in Eurasia in significant ways, as states in Central Asia and the South Caucasus seek to diversify their economic, diplomatic, and security relationships to hedge against Russia's imperial ambitions. As a result, Russia has lost influence in its neighborhood. Nevertheless, owing to its control of key transportation routes and vast economic resources, Russia remains a major power in its claimed sphere of influence.

- In the zero-sum game of Eurasian geopolitics, the signs point to a decrease in Russian influence, as China's influence in Central Asia is increasing. The situation is noticeably different in the South Caucasus: while Russia is preoccupied with Ukraine, Armenia is rethinking its reliance on Russia as the key partner, Azerbaijan is strengthening ties with Turkey, Georgia is adrift, and no outside power is willing or able to step in as the region's security partner.
- The Kremlin's efforts to shape public opinion and attitudes toward its war against Ukraine have met with some success in its neighborhood, where it benefits from its legacy relationships, domination of the airwaves, and Russian's role as regional *lingua franca*. However, the most important factors determining public attitudes toward Russia have been local populations' experiences dealing with it and access to a wide range of media sources.
- Russia's role as the region's main military power and security manager has been declining for a long time, and its preoccupation with the war against Ukraine has accelerated this trend. Moscow's prioritization of its own security interests and failure to aid its allies and partners in times of crisis have caused its neighbors to question their reliance on Russia. The war has also undermined Russia's position as the premier weapons provider to its neighbors. Turkey and China have moved to fill the void.
- Historically one-sided economic relations favoring Russia at the expense of its neighbors are rebalancing. Western sanctions have made Russia dependent on its neighbors for deliveries of critically important goods. These lucrative trading opportunities, along with an influx of skilled Russian professionals fleeing mobilization and regime oppression, have unexpectedly given a major boost to their economies.
- The South Caucasus is at risk of renewed conflict due to many unsettled, contentious issues between Armenia and Azerbaijan, a brittle ceasefire, and the lack of an effective peacekeeping force. Turkey's influence in the region is mostly limited to Azerbaijan, while other major powers that have intervened in past flare-ups—Russia, the United States, and the EU—are focused on the war in Ukraine.

Introduction

Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has resulted in a fundamental shift of its foreign policy. The break with the West has acquired the quality of an irreversible, long-term antagonism. It also put an end to efforts to salvage what remained of the post–Cold War security order in Europe. Russian President Vladimir Putin's ultimatum entailed a set of obviously deliberately impossible conditions—effectively a roll back of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to the status quo before the alliance launched the first round of post–Cold War enlargement in 1997. The Russian leader's demand for the alliance never to admit Ukraine was a reiteration of former president Dmitri Medvedev's 2008 claim of a “privileged” sphere of influence comprised of former Soviet states along the periphery of Russia.¹ The shock of the invasion and the continent's fundamentally transformed security landscape have made Ukraine the fulcrum of European and Eurasian security.

The Russian vision, encapsulated in Medvedev's 2008 claim and Putin's 2021 demands, is a return to nineteenth century-style European politics, when the major powers—Austria, France, Great Britain, Prussia, and Russia—carved up the continent in accordance with their security and dynastic preferences. The 1815 Congress of Vienna system is as far removed from the 1990 Charter of Paris as the Romanovs' absolute monarchy is from the open, democratic system that spread across Central and Eastern Europe just after the Cold War.²

However, Putin's assault on Ukraine has failed to achieve its goals of a fundamental revision of the European security system and of securing Russia's hold on its former empire. Instead, NATO has been reinvigorated as a military organization after nearly three decades when the prospect of Europe whole and free seemed to have banished the idea of major war from the continent for good.³ And, after a decade of Russia rebuilding its military and showing off its capabilities in Syria, Crimea, and Donbas, and boasting about fielding advanced weaponry ahead of the United States, its armed forces have failed on the battlefield and suffered catastrophic losses.⁴

Russia still holds considerable sway over its neighbors, though, even as its war against Ukraine is consuming vast amounts of resources it could be deploying elsewhere to maintain its sphere of influence. Geography alone is enough to position it as a uniquely influential actor on the vast Eurasian landmass. Moreover, the Kremlin's wartime mentality and the “us vs. them” prism through which it tends to perceive developments in the international arena—especially what happens along its periphery—make it more, not less, dangerous to its neighbors should they cross a Kremlin red line in pursuit of a “multi-vector” foreign policy.⁵

Nonetheless, the war has created a time of opportunity for some of Russia's smaller and weaker neighbors. They mix deferential engagement with Russia with pursuing more actively expanded ties

with China, Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. They have also sought to capitalize on Russia's isolation from the West, which has resulted in a beneficial increase in ties between them. The net effect has been Russia's loss of influence and the rebalancing of its bilateral ties in its neighborhood.

This study examines Russia's relationships with its former dominions since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Its geographic scope is limited to Central Asia and the South Caucasus. It does not deal with the other two members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—Belarus and Moldova. Each represents a special case, different from the rest of the CIS. Belarus, under its longtime ruler President Alexander Lukashenko, has chosen the path of ever-closer integration with Russia.⁶ Moldova, owing to its geographic position and ethnic-cultural ties with Romania, has chosen the opposite path of European integration.⁷

The study first provides a brief overview of the long-term drivers of Russia's policy toward its neighborhood and an assessment of its relations with its former dominions prior to February 2022. It then examines how those relationships have changed since then, looking at their diplomatic, information, military, and economic dimensions. The study concludes with an assessment of Russia's performance in maintaining its claimed sphere of influence and the outlook for the future.

Phantom Pains of the Old Empire

In his annual address to the nation in 2005, Putin uttered one of his most frequently cited and controversial remarks—he referred to the breakup of the Soviet Union as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”⁸ He shocked much of the world with his nostalgia that seemed so out of place in the twenty-first century, but he was speaking to the audience in Russia with whom this idea had long been popular.⁹ Since February 2022, Putin has reframed the loss of the empire as the loss of “historic Russia.”¹⁰ He has thus portrayed the war against Ukraine as a just cause and the old empire not just as a sphere of influence but also as Russia's legacy, integral to its identity. This expansive view of what is Russia has not been lost on its other neighbors.¹¹

Claiming the whole of post-Soviet Eurasia as Russia's birthright may be a new twist in Putin's propaganda, but the idea is not new. Neo-imperial sentiment did not take long to manifest itself after the Soviet Union was dissolved at the end of 1991. For example, in 1992, the chairman of the Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee claimed that Russia was “something greater than the Russian Federation in its current borders.”¹² Others claimed that Russia had special rights throughout the former Soviet Union.¹³ Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov, often mentioned in the 1990s as then president Boris Yeltsin's potential successor, embraced the irredentist idea of returning Crimea to Russia.¹⁴

The idea of reasserting or maintaining the Kremlin's hold over the old empire has been an enduring feature of Russian foreign policy since then. In 1992 Moscow established the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which effectively positioned Russia as the region's security manager.¹⁵ The Yeltsin government promoted the creation of the Russia-Belarus "community" in 1996, followed by the establishment of "a union state" in 1997.¹⁶ During this period Russia opposed the construction of Caspian pipelines that would bypass its territory and thus dilute its influence in the South Caucasus. Moscow also supported separatist movements in Georgia and Moldova.¹⁷

Upon taking office in 2000, Putin showed his determination to reconstitute Russian influence in the former Soviet Union. As Russia regained its strength, he found himself in a position to pursue a more aggressive policy toward the former Soviet states. The Kremlin's blatant meddling in Ukraine's politics during the presidential election and failed attempt to install a Moscow-friendly leader in 2004 triggered a popular uprising. In 2008, the war against Georgia was intended to draw a red line for NATO to keep out of Russia's neighborhood.

The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014 was intended to consolidate Russia's economic hold on its neighbors.¹⁸ The Kremlin was no longer content simply to voice misgivings about the European Union's attempts to draw countries like Ukraine into far-ranging economic and political relationships. It wanted to build an entire architecture of Russia-centric institutions and mechanisms to thwart EU and NATO inroads.

The annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of the insurgency in Donbas in 2014 were something else entirely. They were drastic moves in response to an unanticipated spontaneous street revolution in Ukraine in 2013 and a manifestation of Moscow's fears that its long-term influence in the former Soviet space was dwindling.

Taken together, these steps highlight the enduring nature of the key drivers of Russian foreign policy—the quest for strategic depth through the acquisition of new territory to ensure physical safety from external threats, the insecurity that stems from the requirement to then secure that territory, and the adversarial relationship with the West. These preoccupations have endured through centuries, from the wars with Poland in the seventeenth century to the Russo-Turkish wars and the conquest of what is now southern Ukraine in the eighteenth century, to the expansion of the empire to include Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War.¹⁹ Europe has always been by far the most important geographic theater for Russia in this pursuit.²⁰ Even the conquest of Central Asia, initially undertaken in the name of territorial expansion and securing Russia's southeastern frontier, ultimately became a competition with the British Empire.

These enduring drivers of its foreign policy help explain Russia's zero-sum approach to its neighborhood as well as its uncompromising stance toward NATO and the EU as the preeminent

European institutions. Keeping them out as agents of instability that spread democratic values and instigate “color revolutions” became a sine qua non of Russian foreign policy. The same does not apply to China, whose economic and, increasingly, political footprint in Central Asia and other parts of the former Soviet empire has grown dramatically over the past three decades. In fact, the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 enabled Russia to form a partnership with China for, in addition to other issues, countering the spread of Western influence in their shared neighborhood.

This single-minded preoccupation with countering the United States and Europe, and preventing the expansion of NATO and the EU, has obscured the fact that, as the Kremlin has focused its attention on the war against Ukraine, its neighbors have actively pursued engagement with other prospective partners near and far. Russia’s weakened hand as a result of the war has given them greater leverage against the old imperial power. This changing correlation of forces has manifested itself across all four elements—diplomatic, information, military, and economic—of Russia’s national power.

Diplomacy Undercut by War

Nowhere outside Ukraine have the shockwaves of the war been felt more acutely than in Russia’s immediate neighborhood. The giant, vastly more powerful, and unpredictable country has been the main threat to Russia’s neighbors’ existence for over three decades. This explains their cautious reactions to Russian actions. Yet, if Putin had expected strong expressions of support from the countries in Russia’s supposed privileged sphere, he must have been sorely disappointed.

Central Asia—Russia Losing Ground

The behavior of Kazakhstan, Russia’s biggest CIS neighbor, must have been particularly frustrating for Putin, especially considering the events immediately prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In January 2022, Kazakhstan experienced major unrest and President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev had to ask the CSTO to intervene to quell it.²¹ Russia quickly dispatched a rapid reaction force to help restore order, prompting speculation about its possible role behind the unrest.²² Tokayev, widely thought to be consumed by the internal struggle to get out from under the shadow of his predecessor, was perceived to be indebted to Putin as a result. Nonetheless, Tokayev turned down Putin’s request to join the fight against Ukraine,²³ while his foreign minister declared that the “question of recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk peoples’ republics would not even be considered.”²⁴ In a similar show of disapproval of Putin’s war, Kazakhstan formally abstained in the March 2022 UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russia’s actions.²⁵

For Kazakhstan, the war in Ukraine is a particularly sensitive issue. Its long border with Russia and ethnic Russian minority of 3 million, prone to occasional separatist outbursts along with the occasional territorial claims against Kazakhstan raised in Russian far-right nationalist circles, have made territorial integrity an extremely touchy point in bilateral relations and in Kazakhstan's politics.²⁶ The Kremlin's seizure of Ukrainian territory has met with consistent, firm, and unambiguous rejection in Astana.²⁷

In their initial responses to the full-scale invasion, the four other Central Asian countries, which do not border Russia, have navigated carefully the new geopolitical currents.²⁸ They have taken outwardly friendly or at least neutral positions toward Russia, and they have avoided siding with Ukraine openly. Their leaders had telephone conversations with Putin in the days and weeks following February 24, 2022, and expressed "understanding" of Russian actions.²⁹ But these countries also formally abstained or did not vote in the March UN vote. In subsequent UN votes critical of Russia and demanding its immediate withdrawal from Ukraine, they again either did not vote or formally abstained. None voted with Russia.

The discontent of Central Asian leaders with Putin's war and their resentment of his attempts to corral them into supporting it have manifested themselves. In October 2022, at a meeting with them in Astana, Putin was subjected to a humiliating rebuke from Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, who complained about his Russian counterpart's lack of respect for Russia's smaller neighbors, their culture, and their sensitivities. "We want respect," said Rahmon, "we want to have equal treatment with African countries," which Putin has actively courted.³⁰

Appearing at Putin's flagship economic forum in St. Petersburg in June 2022, Tokayev restated Kazakhstan's position and refused to recognize the Russian-sponsored Luhansk and Donetsk "peoples' republics" in Ukraine as independent states.³¹ He referred to them instead as "quasi-state territories" and warned that there would be "chaos" in the world if the principle of territorial integrity were not respected.

Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's stance on the war has not been as bold as Tokayev's, but it is hard not to see his unease about the war through his smiles and pledges of goodwill toward Russia.³² Adherence to independent Uzbekistan's long-standing policy of not deploying troops abroad and not joining any military blocs has insulated Mirziyoyev from possible requests from Russia to join the war against Ukraine. Shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion, Uzbekistan's then foreign minister Abdulaziz Komilov reaffirmed its support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and non-recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk "peoples' republics."³³ The government also formally warned Uzbek citizens that fighting as members of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine could expose them to more than ten years in prison for "mercenary" activity.³⁴

The newly complicated geopolitical dynamics and Russia's reduced standing in the region was demonstrated vividly in May 2023. After Putin had visited all five Central Asian countries in 2022, their leaders assembled in Moscow on May 9 to join him in commemorating the anniversary of victory in the Second World War. They reportedly accepted his invitation only reluctantly and apparently at the last minute.³⁵ Rejecting his invitation would have been a slap in the face for Putin, but their presence against the backdrop of the absence of leaders from countries other than the handful of Russia's former dominions only underscored his international isolation. On May 18, the five Central Asian leaders assembled again in China for a summit with President Xi Jinping. They were treated to a magnificent performance on a grand stage during a welcoming ceremony befitting an imperial court. They signed \$22 billion worth of contracts for dozens of projects and pledged "enduring" friendship with China.³⁶

Coming on the heels of their almost perfunctory appearance with Putin in Moscow, the summit with Xi sent a powerful signal of China as the dominant power in Central Asia. Beijing and Moscow had long managed their policies in Central Asia as an informal condominium, respecting each other's interests, even if it was obvious to all that China's influence was growing, and it was displacing Russia as the principal economic partner to the region. But increasingly, and especially since the start of the war in Ukraine, Beijing's enhanced stature in the zero-sum game of Central Asian geopolitics has come at Moscow's expense. Preoccupied with its war against Ukraine and beholden to China as its principal international partner, Russia has little leverage to alter the dynamics and restore its position in this part of its claimed sphere of influence.



Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, China's President Xi Jinping, Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov, and Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimukhamedov pose for a group photo during the China-Central Asia Summit in Xian, in China's northern Shaanxi province on May 19, 2023. (Photo by FLORENCE LO/POOL/AFP via Getty Images)

Aside from Russia being unable to compete with China's financial resources, Putin must have heard the clear message when Xi, while on a visit to Kazakhstan in September 2022, pledged that China would "resolutely support Kazakhstan in protecting its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, firmly support your ongoing reforms to ensure stability and development, and categorically oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country."³⁷ Notably, Xi's visit and declaration of support for Kazakhstan came shortly after inflammatory remarks by Medvedev calling Kazakhstan an "artificial state" and claiming northern Kazakhstan as Russian territory.³⁸

The South Caucasus in Flux

Russia's influence in the South Caucasus has ebbed since the start of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. But this process began with the geopolitical shift resulting from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war that ended with Armenia's major defeat by Azerbaijan, which regained control over the enclave. The war in Ukraine has accelerated the erosion of Russia's position in the region. But whereas in Central Asia the vacuum resulting from Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine has been filled by China, in the South Caucasus no such major power has stepped in to fill the void.

Changes in Russia's relationship with Armenia—long its most loyal partner and only formal treaty ally in the South Caucasus, as well as a country where it maintains two military bases—are the best indicator of the shifting geopolitics in the region. The 2020 war was a big test of this relationship, which Russia failed. Its lack of enthusiasm for supporting Armenia was evident throughout the crisis. Appearing at the annual gathering of foreign academics and journalists in October 2020 at the height of the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Putin was asked whether Russia would side with Armenia against Azerbaijan and Turkey.³⁹ “What does the [Nagorno-Karabakh] conflict have to do with this?” he replied. He continued: “Russia has always had special relations with Armenia. But we have always had special ties with Azerbaijan as well. . . . Armenia and Azerbaijan are both equal partners to us.”

A few days later, with fighting continuing, Putin turned down the formal request for “urgent consultations” on providing aid to Armenia when Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan asked for Moscow's help.⁴⁰ Instead, Russia's Foreign Ministry declared that it would give “all necessary assistance if clashes take place directly on the territory of Armenia.”⁴¹ But the war was being waged in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is recognized internationally as part of Azerbaijan, not Armenia. This contrasted starkly with Turkey's major role in Azerbaijan's victory that included deliveries of weapons and training, as well as reportedly direct involvement by Turkish military personnel. Ankara and Baku did not have a formal alliance then.⁴²

The deployment of Russian peacekeepers following the signing by Armenia and Azerbaijan of the Russian-brokered cease-fire agreement in November 2020 seemed like an important move by Russia that would enhance its role as the key actor between Baku and Yerevan, as well as its overall influence in the region.⁴³ However, Russia's half-hearted performance of its peacekeeping duties has proved deeply disappointing to Armenia. During the repeated clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russian peacekeepers did little to stop Azerbaijani troops from seizing key sites in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁴⁴ When major clashes broke out in September 2022, which left more than 200 Armenian and 80 Azerbaijani soldiers dead, and the fighting spilled over into Armenia's territory, peacekeepers again did little to prevent it or to keep Azerbaijan from seizing additional territory.⁴⁵

The sense of betrayal during and since the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War has led Armenia to question the wisdom of its close association with and reliance on Russia.⁴⁶ The war in Ukraine has only intensified that conversation among Armenians. “We are not Russia’s ally in the war with Ukraine,” Pashinyan stated in June 2023.⁴⁷

Opinion polls show changing Armenian attitudes toward Russia. In a May 2019 survey, 88 percent of respondents described relations between the two countries as good, 78 percent said Russia was the most important political partner for Armenia, and 62 percent that it was the country’s most important economic partner.⁴⁸ After the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, in a December 2021 poll, the percentage of those who described relations with Russia as good had fallen to 64 percent.⁴⁹ The percentage of those who considered Russia to be the country’s most important political partner had dropped to 57 percent. However, the share of respondents who considered Russia Armenia’s most important economic partner remained virtually unchanged at 61 percent. The poll also introduced a new category—that of the most important security partner, which 64 percent of respondents still considered Russia to be.

Attitudes toward Russia deteriorated further in 2023. In a January–March poll, 50 percent of respondents described relations with it as good and 49 percent as bad.⁵⁰ Russia slipped to fourth place, behind France, Iran, and the United States, in the ranking of Armenia’s most important political partners. It also slipped to third place, behind Iran and France, as Armenia’s most important security partner. And 50 percent of respondents put Russia in third place as a source of political threat, behind Azerbaijan and Turkey, the two countries Armenians have long viewed as the source of existential threat. The view of Russia as the country’s top economic partner remained at 61 percent, though. There can be little doubt that the outcome of the 2020 war and Moscow’s failure to come to Armenia’s rescue have been the principal reasons for the change in attitudes toward Russia. But the war against Ukraine must have also been a significant factor.

In an attempt at geopolitical rebalancing, Armenia has sought to improve relations with Turkey. In an unexpected twist, the 2020 war paved the way for better ties with a country that had refused to normalize relations with Armenia in solidarity with Azerbaijan and helped the latter’s war effort.⁵¹ In a series of in-person and virtual engagements, Pashinyan and Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have been negotiating such issues as the



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (center) poses for a photo with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (second from left) and Armenian Patriarch Sahak II Mashalian (far left) prior to dinner at Cankaya Mansion after Erdoğan’s inauguration in Ankara on June 3, 2023. (Photo by Murat Kulal Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

opening of the border, which would lead to expanded trade and better links to the outside world for tiny and landlocked Armenia.⁵² In a further sign of warming relations, Pashinyan traveled to Ankara in June 2023 to attend Erdoğan's inauguration.⁵³ Polls show that Armenian attitudes toward Turkey have improved dramatically from prewar days—in October 2019, 1 percent of respondents described relations with the country as good, in December 2021 that figure was 4 percent, and in March 2023 it rose to 23 percent.⁵⁴

Azerbaijan

The outcome of the 2020 war has had an even greater impact on the relationship between Turkey and Azerbaijan. The “one nation, two states” term, coined by former Azerbaijani president Heydar Aliyev, aptly describes the new quality of Turkish-Azeri relations.⁵⁵



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his wife Emine Erdoğan in Shusha, Azerbaijan, on June 15, 2021. (Photo by TUR Presidency/Murat Cetinmuhurdar/ Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)

As soon as the cease-fire agreement was signed, Erdoğan traveled to Azerbaijan to celebrate its victory with his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev. As part of the cease-fire agreement, Turkey and Russia agreed to establish a joint center to monitor the truce between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁵⁶ In June 2021, Aliyev and Erdoğan signed the “Shusha Declaration on Allied Relations between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Republic of Turkey,” a document committing Azerbaijan and Turkey to support each other in the event of an attack by a third country.⁵⁷ In addition, Ankara has cemented its position as Baku's premier partner with pledges of economic support and reconstruction projects in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijan's ever-closer ties with Turkey have encountered no obvious opposition from Russia. Little in the trilateral Russia-Azerbaijan-Turkey relationship is visible to outside observers, leaving them to speculate about each side's motives. Russia's relaxed attitude toward the seemingly limitless Turkey-Azerbaijan partnership is likely due at least in part to Putin's courtship of Turkey in an effort to drive a wedge between Ankara and its Western allies and Aliyev's deft diplomacy with Putin. Turkey's 2019 purchase of the S-400 air defense system from Russia with little regard for U.S. warnings not to do so caused a serious rift between Turkey and the United States and other NATO allies.⁵⁸ The United States retaliated by imposing sanctions on Turkey in December 2020, shortly after the signing of the cease-fire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁹

Turkey and Russia have shared economic interests that likely also tempered Russia's reaction to Turkey's new high profile in the South Caucasus. Turkey's long-standing goal of establishing a gas hub is key to its ambition to position itself as a major energy and geopolitical player in Europe.⁶⁰ The establishment of a gas hub in Turkey would also serve Russia's interest in developing an alternative route for Russian gas bypassing Ukraine.⁶¹

The idea of a gas hub in Turkey predates the February 2022 escalation of the war in Ukraine. But it has become even more attractive to Russia, as many European countries have cut back their consumption of Russian gas, and Russia has lost a significant portion of its European gas customer base. Without its Nord Stream pipelines and with the future of the transit agreement with Ukraine highly uncertain, Russia has a strong interest in developing an alternative route to its remaining customers in Europe.⁶²

Following the February 2022 attack on Ukraine, Russia has a lot at stake in stable relations with Turkey. Turkey has not joined Western sanctions against Russia. It has positioned itself as an important diplomatic and economic intermediary with open channels to Moscow, Kyiv, Brussels, and Washington.

Aliyev for his part has been careful to demonstrate goodwill toward Russia. He traveled to Moscow on February 22, 2022—two days before the start of the Russian offensive against Ukraine! He signed a cooperation agreement with Putin, including provisions on military cooperation, and declared that it brought relations between the two countries “to the level of an alliance.”⁶³

Georgia

Russia's relations with Georgia too have been affected by the war in Ukraine, but in unexpected ways. Given the lasting legacy of the war Moscow launched against its southern neighbor in 2008, it is not surprising that in a September 2022 poll, 89 percent of respondents described Russia as the “greatest political threat” to Georgia, up from 79 percent a year earlier.⁶⁴ Nor is it surprising that, unlike Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia has voted repeatedly at the UN to condemn Russia's aggression.⁶⁵ Georgians also overwhelmingly support Ukraine, and they strongly and consistently favor membership in NATO and the EU.⁶⁶ In one 2022 poll, 76 percent said they favored joining the EU even if it meant losing access to Russia as a market,⁶⁷ which remains a key trading partner for the tiny Georgian economy.⁶⁸

Given the long shadow cast over Georgian attitudes toward Russia by the legacy of the 2008 war, Georgia does not appear like a target of opportunity for Russia to expand its diplomatic reach. Although Georgian and Russian diplomats continue to meet in Geneva to discuss issues arising from

the 2008 war and the separatist entities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, these diplomatic efforts have no prospect of resolving the conflicts that have an existential quality for Georgia.⁶⁹

And yet, Georgia—a NATO and EU aspirant country—has taken a surprisingly lenient stance toward Russia since it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In May 2023, Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili triggered a controversy when he appeared to blame NATO for Russia's attack on Ukraine.⁷⁰ Moscow has courted Georgia with restoration of direct flights between Moscow and Tbilisi and visa-free travel.⁷¹

In recent years, the government, led by the Georgian Dream party founded by former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, a prominent businessman who made his fortune in Russia, has been accused of being pro-Moscow.⁷² Specific charges include its refusal to sanction Russia and introducing legislation similar to the Russian legislation targeting civil society organizations, which the Georgian Dream party was forced to withdraw after massive protests. While Georgia's refusal to join Western sanctions against Russia is no different from that of other South Caucasus and Central Asian states, none of which has followed the EU and the United States (see more on this further below), its stance is at odds with its declared desire to join both NATO and the EU. With respect to the anti-civil society legislation, the Georgian Dream party is just as likely to be motivated by its own interest in suppressing domestic political opposition as by an alleged desire for closer ties with Russia.⁷³ Still, the legislation was at odds with Georgia's pursuit of NATO and EU membership.

Georgian Dream's actions could have a negative effect on the country's prospect of obtaining the EU candidate status, given a general souring in perceptions of Georgia in key European capitals.⁷⁴ Russia would welcome it, always positioning itself as the alternative and attempting to bribe Georgian public opinion with economic concessions.

The Georgian government's posture toward Russia since the start of the invasion is out of step with public opinion, and Russian concessions are unlikely to alter the fundamentals of relations between the two countries. With Georgians overwhelmingly pro-Ukraine and anti-Russia, and a host of irreconcilable differences between the two countries, no Georgian government would likely be seduced into formally joining the Russian camp. But a gradual erosion of the Georgian public's pro-Western orientation could pave the way toward a rebalancing of Georgian foreign policy with Russia filling the resulting vacuum.

I Is for [dis]Information

Russia has long used information and disinformation in its campaign to keep its post-Soviet neighbors in its orbit. A shared historical and cultural legacy and the fact that Russian remains the

lingua franca in much of Eurasia three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union have facilitated these efforts. The Kremlin's efforts to shape their public opinion and attitudes toward its war against Ukraine have met with some success.⁷⁵

In Central Asia as a whole, a recent study of media consumption showed that 55 percent of respondents preferred to get their news in Russian. In Kazakhstan, the figure was 75 percent, the highest for the region; the lowest—34 percent—was in Uzbekistan.⁷⁶ The study's authors note that “the strong presence of Kremlin-sponsored media outlets inside of Kazakhstan . . . is having a significant impact on the population,” and that there is a similar situation in Kyrgyzstan, where major Russian television channels are widely available.⁷⁷ Russian television channels remain an important source of information across the entire region, even reportedly in Turkmenistan, although measuring news consumption there is difficult due to the closed nature of the regime. Russian television channels account for 11 percent of international news consumption in Uzbekistan, 22 percent in Tajikistan, 24 percent in Kyrgyzstan, and 27 percent in Kazakhstan, where ethnic Russian population numbers 3 million.

The results of this Russian presence in Central Asia's information sphere are easy to see. According to another recent survey, in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan sizeable segments of the public blame the war in Ukraine on Kyiv and Washington.⁷⁸ In Kazakhstan, 28 percent blamed it on Russia, but 19 percent and 10 percent blamed Ukraine and the United States respectively. In Kyrgyzstan, 14 percent blamed Russia, 36 percent Ukraine, and 13 percent the United States. In both countries, more respondents said they preferred to get news about Ukraine and Russia in Russian rather than in their local languages.⁷⁹

Other factors also contribute to Russia's influence in Central Asia's information domain. These include the region's distance from Europe and the United States, from where people could access alternative, accurate narratives; its economic underdevelopment and high poverty rates; and often poor or hard-to-access educational opportunities.⁸⁰ Moreover, the authoritarian nature of Central Asian governments and their policies designed to limit their populations' access to a variety of alternative sources create additional barriers to the free flow of information into the region.⁸¹ The fact that equally autocratic China is the other big neighbor as well as economic and geopolitical partner of the Central Asian countries compounds the problem.

In the South Caucasus, Russian television is also widely available, but its effect on public attitudes is less perceptible. In Georgia, where the decisive factor shaping public attitudes toward Russia is still the legacy of the 2008 war, the majority of respondents put the blame for the war in Ukraine on Russia or Putin—54 percent and 25 percent respectively.⁸²

In Armenia, Russian television is widely available but so are other sources of information. In a 2021 survey, the internet was the leading source of information for Armenians with 67 percent using it daily, with Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram as the leading platforms.⁸³ Television was the second most widely used source of information at 59 percent.⁸⁴ Russian television is watched daily by 30 percent of the population.⁸⁵ However, it appears to have relatively little effect on public attitudes toward Russia, which, as mentioned, have changed dramatically in the aftermath of the 2020 war with Azerbaijan.

In Azerbaijan's government-controlled media environment, access to Russian television is limited to cable, satellite, or the internet. In a 2020 survey, 68 percent of respondents said they never consumed Russian-language content.⁸⁶

Information and disinformation will remain key instruments of Russian policy toward its neighbors. However, based on this brief overview, its effectiveness is likely to be shaped much more by local conditions than by the scale and scope of the Russian effort.

The Military Fallout

For Russia, having a sphere of influence has meant above all having a monopoly on managing the security affairs of the post-Soviet space. That in turn has meant preventing its neighbors from joining NATO and preventing the alliance from establishing footholds in these countries. To enforce its monopoly, Russia went to war against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014, escalating to an all-out invasion in 2022. And, having tolerated a U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan for over a decade after the terrorist attacks of September 11, it succeeded in ending this in 2014.⁸⁷

Russia has been successful in keeping its Central Asian and South Caucasus neighbors out of NATO and NATO mostly out of those regions, but this is not to say that it has been a successful and reliable security manager there. On more than one occasion, the Kremlin chose to not deploy its military in crisis situations and remained on the sidelines even when requests came for it to intervene. For example, in 2010, as clashes erupted in Kyrgyzstan between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks following a coup that ousted the president, Medvedev turned down the request of the country's interim leader that Russia send peacekeepers.⁸⁸

Border clashes have been a chronic problem between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.⁸⁹ Most recently, heavy fighting broke out between them in 2022, resulting in nearly 100 fatalities and over 100 wounded.⁹⁰ The violence took place as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization leaders gathered for a summit in Uzbekistan. Russia maintains military bases in both countries and all three are CSTO members. Yet, as it has done throughout the history of the conflict, Moscow chose not to intervene

and limited its assistance to an offer to mediate issued through the CSTO.⁹¹ It was a disappointing performance for a major power aspiring to the role of the region's security manager.

Russia's only recent military intervention in a crisis in Central Asia was its brief deployment of troops in January 2022 to help quell the unrest in Kazakhstan.⁹² The operation was seen by some at the time as a win for Putin. However, the extent to which Moscow contributed to the resolution of the crisis is unclear—a perception that is magnified by suspicions that Russia may have had a role in instigating the unrest in the first place.⁹³ The Russian troops were withdrawn quickly, as the invasion of Ukraine was just weeks away.

The most significant example of Russia's hands-off approach to the role of security manager in Eurasia and treaty ally to most of its fellow former Soviet states was its decision not to back Armenia in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. Moscow's handling of the war and its aftermath—during which, as noted above, Russian peacekeepers have largely turned a blind eye to Azerbaijani violations of the cease-fire and encroachment upon Armenian territory—has triggered a backlash in Armenia and raised questions about the country's continuing participation in the CSTO and reliance on Russia as a treaty ally and geopolitical patron.

As mentioned earlier, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War was the pivotal event in shifting Armenian attitudes toward Russia. Russia's war against Ukraine has done little to change that. In November 2022, against the backdrop of Russian forces' retreat from Kherson, at the CSTO summit in Armenia, Pashinyan refused to sign the Russian-led organization's declaration after it failed to condemn Azerbaijan's incursions into his country's territory.⁹⁴ For Putin, who traveled to Yerevan to attend the meeting, it must have been a frustrating moment, as he sought to get the CSTO allies behind him in a symbolic show of solidarity.⁹⁵

Pashinyan's frustration with Russia has manifested itself repeatedly. In January 2023, he criticized its indifference to Armenia's plight during and since the 2020 war and suggested that the Russian troops stationed in the country could actually undermine its security.⁹⁶ He also said that Armenia would not host CSTO exercises on its territory in 2023, directly contradicting a statement from Russia's Ministry of Defense a few days earlier.⁹⁷ In May 2023, Pashinyan raised the possibility of Armenia withdrawing from CSTO.⁹⁸ Regardless of whether Yerevan ever takes this step that would radically alter the course of its foreign policy since



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan holds a press conference in Yerevan on May 22, 2023. (Photo by KAREN MINASYAN/AFP via Getty Images)

its independence, the mere fact that Pashinyan uttered the possibility of pulling out of the alliance that had previously been the backbone of its security policy was a radical move. The war in Ukraine and the Kremlin's preoccupation with it have expanded the room for Armenia to contemplate an independent foreign and security policy course.

The fallout from the war in Ukraine has manifested itself in Russia's security posture in the former Soviet space. Having suffered heavy losses, Moscow has cut back the numbers of its military personnel at bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the occupied parts of Georgia—and, according to some disputed reports, it has shifted some of its troops from Nagorno-Karabakh to Ukraine.⁹⁹

The war has also undermined Russia's position as the premier weapons provider to its neighbors. The widely reported struggles of its defense manufacturers and their inability to fulfill orders for their longtime customers cloud the outlook for their continuing as reliable suppliers.¹⁰⁰ Russia owes Armenia, a longtime buyer of its weapons, hundreds of millions of dollars for orders it has not been able to fulfill.¹⁰¹ Yerevan has turned to alternative suppliers instead and signed a major weapons contract with India.¹⁰² Meanwhile, the major role Turkish drones and other armaments played in Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the ambitious defense and security cooperation program between Ankara and Baku, and the reputational boost Turkish arms have received from their performance in the war in Ukraine have raised doubts about the future of Russia's role as an arms supplier to the oil- and natural gas-rich country.¹⁰³

In the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Turkey and China are challenging Russia's position as a weapons supplier. The trend predates the war in Ukraine, but it is poised to accelerate as a result of it.¹⁰⁴ Turkey aggressively promotes its defense industry exports. Kazakhstan, long dependent on Russian arms, has been purchasing Turkish drones and in 2022, agreed to co-produce them.¹⁰⁵ Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have also reportedly been buying Turkish drones.¹⁰⁶

China is also well positioned to compete with Russia in the Eurasian arms market due to a combination of its geographic proximity to Central Asia, its extensive economic ties to the region, and its familiarity with many Soviet and Russian legacy weapons systems that make up a significant portion of the arsenals of Central Asian countries.¹⁰⁷ As with Turkey, this trend predates the war in Ukraine and will likely accelerate as a result of it.¹⁰⁸

Russia's military and security relationships with its fellow CSTO members have been eroding for some time. In Central Asia and the South Caucasus, this began long before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has been driven to a large extent by the states of both regions expanding their diplomatic, economic, and security relationships, especially with China and Turkey. Russia's

preoccupation with the war against Ukraine and commitment of its resources there, combined with the activist posture of China and Turkey, have accelerated this trend, which is expected to continue for at least as long as the war against Ukraine continues.

The Economy—It's Complicated

Russia's trade and economic relations with its post-Soviet neighbors have been undergoing significant changes since well before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's neighbors have been actively seeking to diversify their trading relationships, including with such partners as China, Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states. However, the war has introduced a new dynamic in what has been the most complex and important part of their overall relationship since February 2022. The change has been quantitative and qualitative, and highly consequential for both sides.

The economic relationship between Russia and other former Soviet states has long been one-sided, with Russia seeking to exploit its size and geographic position to gain geopolitical advantage and strengthen its hold on the others. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—which comprises Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia—was created by Russia as a counterweight to the EU and was envisioned by Moscow as a key tool to keep its neighbors in its economic orbit. For example, under heavy Russian pressure, Armenia in 2013 abandoned its plan to sign an extensive association and free-trade agreement with the EU and join the EAEU instead in 2014.¹⁰⁹

For most of its existence, the EAEU's importance as a vehicle for economic integration in Eurasia has been questionable. Its non-Russian members have developed tools to blunt or dilute some of the most aggressive moves by Russia to tighten its grip on them.¹¹⁰ They have relied on bureaucratic procedures, arcane rules, and the fact that Moscow only has a 20 percent share of vote in the organization to slow roll its initiatives. Russia has countered with a carrot-and-stick approach, alternating between offers of deep discounts on key commodities such as gas or access for migrant workers to its vast labor market, and threats to withdraw those benefits.¹¹¹ Overall, however, Russia has been able to dominate the organization by virtue of its size, control of key transportation routes, and the poverty and economic underdevelopment of some EAEU members.

The war in Ukraine has introduced far-reaching changes in this set of relationships. The Western sanctions imposed on Russia have disrupted its long-established trade and economic ties and cut off its access to critical suppliers. None of the other EAEU members, however, has joined the sanctions regime. They have become critical lifelines for the Russian economy.



A line of trucks waits at the Russia-Georgia border south of Stepanzmindia. (Photo via Alamy)

For some of Russia's partners that are plagued by poverty and underdevelopment, such as Kyrgyzstan, their new role as a key conduit between Russia and the global economy, bypassing Western sanctions, has boosted their economic performance. The relatively well-off Kazakhstan has seen a nearly five-fold increase in its exports of machinery and equipment to Russia in 2022.¹¹² Armenia's GDP increased by 40 percent between 2021 and 2022, from \$13.9 billion in 2021 to \$19.5 billion, while Kyrgyzstan's GDP increased by 25 percent, from \$8.7 billion to \$10.9 billion.¹¹³ During the same period, imports of machinery and equipment from the EU to Armenia increased

from €156 million to €603 million, and to Kyrgyzstan from €65 million to €548 million. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's total exports of machinery, though almost certainly most of them to Russia, increased from \$170 million in 2021 to \$300 million in 2022.¹¹⁴ Armenia's total exports of machinery, also most of them to Russia, increased from \$56 million in 2021 to \$695 million in 2022.¹¹⁵ It is no wonder then that while Armenians' overall attitudes toward Russia have deteriorated, it remains their most important economic partner.

The war and the Western sanctions have altered the stakes for Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors in their trading relationships. For the former, it is a critical lifeline to sustain economic performance and defense production.¹¹⁶ For the latter, it is an unprecedented opportunity to boost economic growth and gain leverage with Moscow in relationships that previously were tilted heavily in its favor. Trade and economic relations are the area where they have gained the most agency as a consequence of the war.

Migration and labor flows are another aspect of how Russia's relationships with its neighbors have been affected by the war in Ukraine. The traditional flow of migrants had long been one-sided with the overwhelming majority going to Russia in search of jobs and to fill its labor deficit. Millions of Central Asian migrant workers found in Russia employment and a critical source of income to support their families at home. For example, remittances from migrant workers, mostly from Russia, have at times surpassed 30 percent of GDP in Kyrgyzstan, and in Tajikistan in some years they reached as much as 50 percent of GDP.¹¹⁷ Now the war has changed the situation in two ways.

First, hundreds of thousands of Russians—perhaps upwards of 1.3 million—left their country in 2022, to avoid the draft or to escape the regime.¹¹⁸ Armenia received as many as 300,000 Russians in 2022.¹¹⁹ Some 100,000 are estimated to currently reside in Georgia, around 80,000 are estimated to have fled to Uzbekistan, and approximately 300,000 are estimated to now reside in Kazakhstan.¹²⁰ This exodus has worsened Russia’s chronic labor shortages and increased the demand for migrant workers. Moreover, the heavy casualties suffered in Ukraine have increased the need for soldiers to keep the war going. Thus, since February 2022, the demand for migrant workers has increased to fill jobs in the civilian economy.¹²¹ The Ministry of Defense has also been recruiting Central Asian migrants to serve in the army.¹²²

Second, the Russian migration to Central Asia and the South Caucasus has had varied effects on different host countries. While the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Russians in countries with inadequate infrastructure and tight housing markets has triggered housing inflation and a backlash against the migrants, these generally well-educated, skilled, and enterprising individuals are well positioned to contribute to their host countries’ economic development—an opportunity that has not gone unnoticed by some governments.¹²³

The war is having a wide-ranging impact on economies throughout the region. Land-locked Kazakhstan, oil-rich but disadvantaged by geography, for over two decades has relied on the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) pipeline from northwest Kazakhstan to the Russian port of Novorossiysk on the Black Sea. The 1,500-kilometer pipeline carries as much as 80 percent of Kazakhstan’s oil exports, or 1.3 million barrels per day.¹²⁴ On several occasions since February 2022, Russian authorities have interrupted CPC operations ostensibly because of environmental violations and storm damage. Kazakhstan’s refusal to endorse Russia’s war against Ukraine is widely believed to be the real reason behind these interruptions.¹²⁵

However, Moscow’s attempts to punish Astana for its independent stance are not the only risks facing CPC stakeholders, which in addition to Kazakhstani companies include ExxonMobil, Chevron, and Italy’s ENI. . In August 2023, Ukraine launched drone strikes against a Russian navy ship near Novorossiysk and an oil products tanker bound for Crimea. Ukraine also declared that it would now consider Russian ports on the Black Sea coast as part of the war zone in retaliation for Russia’s naval blockade of Ukrainian ports. This development has raised the risk of a “tanker war” in the Black Sea.¹²⁶

A tanker war in the Black Sea would probably result in a major disruption or outright shutdown of CPC operations and force Kazakhstani oil producers to urgently seek alternative shipping routes. They would have few options. Kazakhstan has been increasing its oil exports across the Caspian by tanker to Azerbaijan and then via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipelines.¹²⁷ Another alternative is exporting oil via the Russian pipeline system, as well as increasing deliveries to China. None of these

options, however, can replace the CPC pipeline capacity or significantly reduce Kazakhstan's dependence on Russia in the near term. In 2023, 97 percent of Kazakhstani oil exports are projected to be shipped via Russia.¹²⁸

The full effects of this war, including its unintended consequences, have yet to be fully measured and understood, and much will depend on the duration of the war and the domestic political climate in Russia. But, since February 2022, the economic relationship between Russia and its neighbors has departed from its old pattern in ways that few had predicted.

Conclusions

Russia's war against Ukraine has altered the landscape in Eurasia. These far-reaching changes have been felt in significant ways across the diplomatic, information, military, and economic domains. In most instances, its effects have accelerated processes that had been underway prior to February 2022, as Russia's former dominions have long been determined to diversify their economic, diplomatic, and security relationships. Such efforts are a suitable hedge against Russia's neo-imperial ambitions and waning levels of interest from Washington and the European Union.

In the zero-sum game of Eurasian geopolitics, all signs point to a decrease in Russian influence and China as the chief beneficiary in Central Asia. The situation in the South Caucasus is in flux with Russia bogged down in Ukraine for the foreseeable future, Armenia rethinking its strategic orientation, Azerbaijan forging ever-closer ties with Turkey, Georgia adrift, and no outside power willing or able to act as a security partner to the entire region. These trends predate February 2022 and owe a great deal not just to the absence of major powers, but to the agency, including skillful diplomacy, of local actors most notably the governments of Armenia and Kazakhstan. Russia's focus on the war has expanded the room for such actors to pursue their multi-vector diplomacy.

In the information sphere, Russia has benefited from legacy relationships with its neighbors, its long domination of the airwaves, and the role of Russian as the region's lingua franca. Moscow has also been quite successful in some countries in reaching wide audiences with its disinformation campaigns, but the most important factors determining public attitudes toward Russia have been access to a wide range of media sources and local populations' direct experience of dealing with the residual sources of Russian influence and power.

Russia's role as the region's main military power and security manager has been declining for a long

time, and its preoccupation with the war has accelerated this trend. Moscow's prioritization of its security interests and its refusal to aid its allies and partners in times of crisis have been a major sore point in its relations with its neighbors. China and Turkey are filling the vacuum as providers of hardware and training.

In the economic sphere, Russia's relations with its partners in Central Asia and the South Caucasus are being rebalanced. Because of Western sanctions, Russia has grown increasingly dependent on its neighbors. These countries are now key to the development of alternative trading routes and sustainable deliveries of critically important goods and technologies that can no longer be imported directly. They will have to navigate carefully between the threat of Western pressure campaigns and the lucrative trading opportunities with Russia that have unexpectedly given a major boost to their economies.

Whereas in Central Asia proximity and growing ties to China promise to act as a factor for stability, the South Caucasus is at risk of renewed conflict. The fragile cease-fire between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the lack of an effective peacekeeping force, the many unsettled, highly contentious issues (such as the land corridors connecting Armenian and Azerbaijani exclaves to their respective "mainlands"), amount to a very unstable environment. Turkey's influence in the South Caucasus is mostly limited to Azerbaijan, and in the event of renewed hostilities between Baku and Yerevan, Ankara is unlikely to be an effective mediator. All other major powers that in the past have prevented or defused tensions—Russia, the United States, the EU—have to balance their commitment to the region against their preoccupation with the war in Ukraine.

Finally, it is too soon to write off Russia as powerful regional actor in its claimed "privileged" sphere of influence despite the indisputable decline in its overall influence there. Russia's neo-imperial ambitions have not disappeared. Moscow controls key transportation routes, and it still has vast economic resources at its disposal. For some of its post-Soviet neighbors, Russia's war in Ukraine is an opportunity to diversify and expand the reach of their multi-vector diplomacy. For others it is a time of heightened risk. They would be making a mistake, however, if they acted as if Russia no longer was a major actor in Eurasia's diplomacy, security, and economic affairs.

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Eugene Rumer is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Prior to joining Carnegie in 2014, he served for four years as the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council. Earlier in his career, he held research appointments at the National Defense University and the RAND Corporation, and served on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department.

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