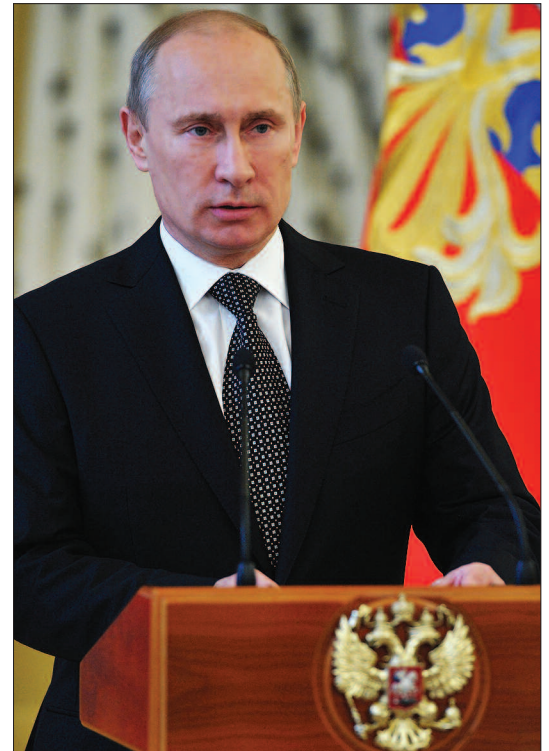


Resurgent Russia

Is Moscow trying to recreate the Soviet bloc?

Russia is growing more assertive on the global stage, having regained its economic strength following the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union. It has been most active in its own region, where a tug-of-war has broken out between Russia and the European Union (EU) as each tries to draw the nations of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus into their orbit. Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich recently reneged on an EU trade deal, reportedly after pressure from Moscow, touching off violent pro-EU protests throughout Ukraine. Russia's efforts to maintain influence over the former Soviet republics have fed speculation that President Vladimir Putin wants to reconstitute the Soviet bloc, which Russian officials deny. Meanwhile, Russia's relations with the United States have deteriorated, although the two countries are cooperating on hot-button issues such as Iran's nuclear program and Syria's civil war. Russia's relations with China are relatively good, however, even though the Chinese have eclipsed Russia economically in recent years.



Russian President Vladimir Putin faces criticism for Russia's human rights record and is seen by many experts as browbeating neighboring countries into forging closer economic ties. His attempts to influence former Soviet republics, notably Ukraine, have fed speculation he seeks to reconstitute the former Soviet Union. Meanwhile, Putin and the United States are cooperating on Syria's civil war and other global security issues.

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Resurgent Russia

BY BRIAN BEARY

THE ISSUES

On a visit to Moldova in September, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin did not mince words. “Energy supplies are important in the run-up to winter,” he told his hosts. “I hope you won’t freeze.”

Rogozin’s words were a veiled threat, say experts on the region, implying that if the former Soviet republic signs the major pacts that it had just negotiated with the European Union (EU), Russia might cut off its gas supply.¹

Moldova, a small, poor country in southeastern Europe, depends heavily on Russian natural gas. Nevertheless, Moldova is refusing to cave to Russian pressure — for now. But its far bigger neighbor to the north, Ukraine, also an ex-Soviet republic, is heeding Moscow’s warnings. In November, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich decided not to continue pursuing closer ties with the EU, just days before he was due to sign an accord with the EU at a much-heralded summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, capital of yet another ex-Soviet republic. In Ukraine, ongoing mass protests against Yanukovich’s move have led to the prime minister’s resignation.

Still reeling from Yanukovich’s abandonment, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, whose country is one of the 28 EU members, predicted that Ukraine’s decision would lead it “not west or east, but down,” adding, “it’s a fairly brutal game being played” by Russia.²

The tug-of-war between Russia and the EU over Moldova and Ukraine has



AFP/Getty Images/Viktor Drachev

Demonstrators in Ukraine’s capital, Kiev, protest on Dec. 7, 2013, after President Viktor Yanukovich backed out of a trade deal with the European Union, reportedly under pressure from Russian President Vladimir Putin. Moscow wants Ukraine to join the Eurasian Economic Union, a Russian-dominated free-trade coalition. Clashes in Ukraine between police and protesters have turned increasingly violent, and fears are mounting that the country may be on the brink of civil war. On Jan. 28, the prime minister and cabinet resigned, and restrictions on political protest imposed weeks earlier were rescinded.

been going on since 2008, when the EU began enticing Russia’s neighbors into its economic sphere via its Eastern Partnership initiative. The new program promised Eastern European countries access to Western Europe’s huge market if they first made their governments more efficient, democratic and less corrupt. Although the EU did not offer them full membership, it didn’t exclude the possibility.

Russia was always suspicious of the Eastern Partnership but began to ramp

up its opposition in late 2013, apparently after realizing that newly concluded EU trade pacts with Russia’s former neighbors could pull the post-Soviet nations irrevocably into the EU’s orbit. “Moscow has rediscovered the real nature of the EU: the prospect that one day Ukraine [along with the other ex-Soviet Union countries] . . . could begin to work its way up the rankings of corruption or doing business and, with time, even outdistance Russia,” according to Olaf Osica, director of the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw, Poland.³

The Russians are especially wary of the EU initiative because in 2004 and 2007, 10 former Central and East European communist nations joined the EU, and many of them now have strained relations with Moscow. In fact, several of those nations are the most ardent supporters of the Eastern Partnership. And nations such as Poland and Lithuania have painful memories of Russian domination during the Cold War era. Having fought so hard for independence from Russia, they now look at Russia’s economic revival and growing geopolitical activism with unease. Such

strained relations are the clearest illustration of Moscow’s simmering tensions with the West that are being triggered by the increasingly assertive stance that Russia is taking in its neighborhood and beyond.

Russia strongly denies that it pressures its neighbors. Alexey Drobinin, senior counselor at the Russian Embassy in Washington, says, for instance, that a recent Russian ban on imports of Moldovan wine and spirits is justified on “very hard evidence” that it’s needed to

Russia's Neighbors Lean Toward Europe or China

Several former members of the Soviet bloc say Moscow is pressuring them to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a free-trade coalition patterned after the European Union (EU) but dominated by Russia. Protests broke out in Ukraine in November after its government reneged on a commitment to sign trade pacts with the EU, reportedly after Russia pressured Ukraine to join the EEU instead. Russia denies pressuring its neighbors, but experts say the EEU is designed to keep Russia's former satellite states out of EU's economic grasp.

Economic Coalition Membership of Russia and Its Neighbors



* Has security agreement with Russia and energy agreement with EU

protect Russian consumers from unsafe food products. "There was no political calculation involved," he says.⁴

But Moldova's government sees things differently. "This is a crucial time for my country," said Moldovan Foreign Minister Natalia Gherman. While her governing party wants to join the EU, the Communist Party — the main opposition — sides with Russia, she said. The communists prefer that Moldova reject the EU and instead join the new Russian-sponsored Eurasian

Economic Union (EEU), a free-trade and economic coalition similar to the EU, but which would be dominated by Russia.

Gherman dismissed the EEU as "economic and political nonsense." The EU's market of 500 million people is far bigger and better than anything Russia could offer with its nascent free-trade zone, she said.⁵

Gunnar Wiegand, a senior EU diplomat, said it was "regrettable" that Russia has wrongly concluded that the

new EU trade pacts would harm Russian interests. "It has become almost an obsession" for Russia, said Wiegand, who negotiated many of the accords.⁶

While Russia is no longer a superpower, it remains a significant international economic force, with its strength heavily concentrated in the energy sector. It is the world's top exporter of natural gas, No. 2 in oil and No. 3 in coal.⁷ In fact, the EU gets about 30 percent of its oil, gas and

coal imports from Russia. But Russia relies even more on the EU: The European Union buys about 80 percent of Russia's gas exports, 70 percent of its oil exports and 50 percent of its coal exports.⁸

"We are more dependent on the EU than the EU is dependent on us," said Mikhail Kalugin, head of the economic section at the Russian Embassy in Washington.⁹

Beyond Europe, Russia has elevated itself from the marginal player it became after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 to a power that is now increasingly shaping events in geopolitical hotspots, notably the Middle East. For instance, Russia brokered a deal in September to avert a U.S.- and French-led military strike on Syria after Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad allegedly launched a gas attack on his own people in the Syrian civil war, killing some 1,400.¹⁰

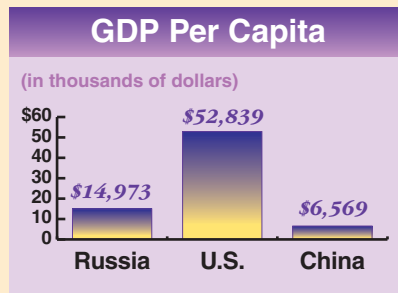
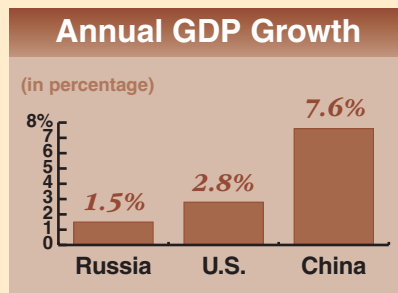
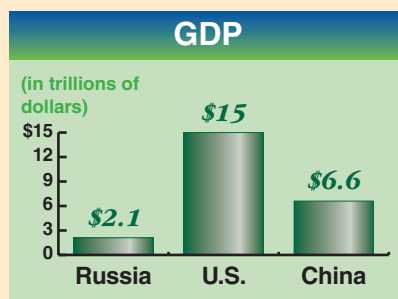
President Obama, who is reluctant to involve the United States in another military conflict, welcomed Russia's efforts.¹¹ But U.S.-Russian relations today are far from rosy. In addition to supporting the EU in the struggle for Eastern Europe, the United States has condemned Russia's worsening human rights record under President Vladimir Putin, including a new law banning "homosexual propaganda." Putin also has irked Washington by giving temporary political asylum to Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency (NSA) contractor who last summer revealed that the NSA was conducting mass surveillance programs on U.S. and foreign citizens' phone and email records as well as on the communications of foreign heads of state.¹²

The eruption of militant Islamist violence in the Middle East following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings — including in Syria — has spurred Russia to become more assertive in the region, given that its own southern border is a hotbed of Islamist-inspired terrorism, both inside Russia (in Chech-

Russia Trails U.S., China on Growth

Russia's total output of goods and services — its gross domestic product (GDP) — and its GDP growth rate in 2013 trailed those of the United States and China. However, Russia's GDP per capita was about twice that of China's. Much of Russia's wealth comes from exports of its abundant natural gas.

Economic Data for Russia, U.S. and China, 2013



Source: "World Economic Outlook," International Monetary Fund, October 2013

nya and Dagestan) and in nearby countries such as Uzbekistan. And with the United States preparing to withdraw most of its troops from Afghanistan this summer, Russia is boosting its military presence among its southern neighbors that flank Afghanistan, fearing that Afghanistan will again become a haven for global jihadists.¹³

Meanwhile, the world's eyes have been on Russia as it has prepared to host the Winter Olympic Games in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi. Fears of terrorist attacks are high following suicide bombings, carried out by suspected Islamist terrorists, of a train station and trolley bus in the Russian city of Volgograd in December that killed 34 people and wounded many more.¹⁴ President Putin has ramped up security, determined to avoid any more embarrassing incidents or attacks.¹⁵

Russia's spotty human-rights record is also coming under scrutiny. In a not-so-subtle jab at Russia's new anti-gay law that equates homosexuality with pedophilia, Obama has put two openly gay athletes in the delegation representing the United States in the opening ceremony on Feb. 7.¹⁶

Russia's relations with China, which had grown frosty during Russia's communist era, have greatly improved since they both embraced capitalism. The two giant nations are trading more manufactured goods and raw materials and have resolved longstanding border disputes.

Fiona Hill, director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the centrist Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, says China has eclipsed Russia in industrial output and wants Russian raw materials for its manufacturing sector. China is busy increasing trade and investments in Central Asian markets that were once part of the Soviet Union, especially Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, retain close ties to Russia as well.¹⁷

Russia Faces Backlash Over Immigration Policies

Millions of migrants from former Soviet republics fill low-skilled jobs.

Thousands of Russians took to the streets of Moscow last October in violent anti-immigrant protests sparked by the fatal stabbing of a Russian man by an allegedly illegal immigrant from Azerbaijan. Immigrants' stores were looted, more than a thousand rioters and 200 illegal immigrants were detained and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin called for "radical decisions" by the Russian government to address immigration policy.

Russia may no longer have a political union with its neighbors as in the Soviet era, but that has not stopped several million workers from the former Soviet republics from flocking to Russia in search of higher-paying jobs.¹

Many ordinary Russians resent the immigrants. An opinion poll last summer found that 53 percent want tighter immigration laws.² And anti-immigrant sentiment is on the rise. For example, 70 percent oppose migrant workers taking catering jobs, up from 54 percent in 2006.³

But with a relatively low birth rate, high death rate and an unemployment rate of about 5 percent, Russia has a labor shortage. To fill jobs, it relies on labor from poorer nations in the former Soviet Union. Because of their historical ties with Russia, these workers can enter the country and find work, many without an official work permit.

Chinese employers investing in Russia have brought in thousands of Chinese workers, who, unlike Central Asian migrants, require visas to enter the country.⁴

Many Central Asian women have taken fast-food jobs that

Russian students previously held. And central Asian men from countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan fill thousands of construction jobs. Armen Sahakyan, executive director of the Washington branch of the Eurasian Research Analysis Institute, a new Armenia-based think tank, says many workers employed to build facilities for the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi were non-Russians.

Russia also has experienced an influx of ethnic Russians from other regions, especially Central Asia. They are mainly descendants of people who emigrated there in the 1700s and 1800s, when the Russian Empire was expanding southward. When the republics where they live emerged as independent nations in the early 1990s, the new countries made their native languages, not Russian, the official tongue. This has made it harder for Russian-speaking residents to prosper — notably in government, where the native tongue is often required.⁵

Some migrants come from countries that have strained relations with Russia. A prime example is Georgia, which fought a war with Russia in 2008 over Georgia's two separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Russia supports. Of a total population of 5 million Georgians, an estimated 1 million work in Russia, says Archil Gegeshidze, the country's U.S. ambassador. Most went to Russia in the 1990s when the Georgian economy was failing. Many began trading agricultural products. "Georgians in Russia tend not to assimilate as easily as some other groups," Gegeshidze says. "They like to keep their ties to Georgia."

Meanwhile, China's economic influence in Russia's vast Siberia region is growing as Russian residents emigrate westward and China boosts its investment in the region, often bringing in Chinese migrant workers in the process. China has provided \$25 billion to extend Russia's Eastern Siberia Pacific Ocean pipeline to Asia in return for guaranteed supplies of Siberian crude oil.¹⁸

To the south, Russia and energy-hungry India are strengthening economic ties. The two countries are collaborating on Russian projects to export liquefied natural gas to India. Russia also is selling military equipment to India, while India is selling generic pharmaceuticals to the Russians.¹⁹

In addition, Russia is forging closer links with Brazil, with joint projects

planned on cybersecurity and space technology. Brazil also is planning to buy Russian air defense systems.²⁰ And in Southeast Asia, Russia is emerging as an important supplier of military goods, notably to Myanmar and Vietnam, and is an investor in offshore oil and gas exploration projects.²¹

As Russia increasingly asserts itself in its region and beyond, here are some key questions being debated:

Is Russia trying to recreate the Soviet bloc?

The Russian government strongly denies that it aims to revive the defunct Soviet Union. Drobinin at the Russian Embassy says unequivocally: "No. It is not possible to recreate what existed 25 years ago, and there is no

intention to do so."

Lee Feinstein, U.S. ambassador to Poland from 2009-12 and now a fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, says, "Circumstances today are completely different than in Soviet times. Putin is no democrat, and he is consolidating his power, but Russia is not a Stalinist totalitarian state. There is greater scope for individuals" — for instance, to travel and do business.

Drobinin says that since Putin was re-elected president in 2012 (he was president from 2000-08 and prime minister from 1999-2000 and 2008-12), he has actively promoted the Eurasian Economic Union. "We see our closest neighbors as our closest partners," Drobinin says. "We treat them as equals and do not interfere in their domestic affairs."

Fiona Hill, director of the Center on the United States and Europe at the Brookings Institution in Washington, sees similarities between Russia and the United States in that migrant workers in both countries tend to come from poorer regions and take manual jobs. For example, landscaping is a niche for migrants in Russia as it is for Latino migrants in the United States.

But Hill is quick to highlight one major difference. “Russia is more strategic than the U.S. in the way it uses immigration in its foreign policy,” she says. For example, she says, Russia uses migrant workers’ remittances — money they send back home — to advance its geopolitical goals. As petty revenge against Georgia and Moldova for aligning themselves with the European Union (EU) and NATO, Russia has threatened to block Georgians and Moldovans from using the banking system to wire money home, Hill says. Russia distrusts NATO and wants the former Soviet republics to reject the EU to join Russia’s nascent free-trade zone, the Eurasian Economic Union.

Remittances from migrant workers comprise about 12 percent of Armenia’s gross domestic product (GDP), Sahakyan says. Tajikistan, a small, poor former Soviet republic, has some 900,000 migrant workers in Russia. Their \$3.6 billion in remittances in 2012 accounted for half of Tajikistan’s GDP that year.⁶

Some Russians want immigration policies to give preference to ethnic Russians and warn that allowing so many migrants from overwhelmingly Muslim Central Asia into the country could foment Islamist terrorism.⁷ But for now, economic imperatives seem to be driving Russia’s immigration policy.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said last summer that immigrants from the former Soviet Union were able to assimilate. “On the whole,” he said, “our policy in the migration sphere should be more flexible, certainly ensuring the rights of our indigenous citizens, but it should be more flexible so to attract labor resources at least.”⁸

— Brian Beary

¹ “Illegal migrants may be banned from entering Russia for 10 years,” Xinhua General News Service, April 4, 2013, <http://en.ria.ru/russia/20130404/180446936.html>.

² “More than half of Russians support toughening of immigration laws in relation to citizens of CIS — research,” Central Asian News Services, Aug. 15, 2013, <http://bnews.kz/en/news/post/153656/>.

³ “Russians develop hard feelings towards immigrants — poll,” Central Asia General Newswire, Aug. 1, 2013.

⁴ Evgeny Kuzmin, “Migrant Workers Finding Opportunity in Russian Far East,” Inter Press Service News Agency, Aug. 6, 2013, www.ipsnews.net/2013/08/migrant-workers-finding-opportunity-in-russian-far-east/.

⁵ See sidebar on ethnic Russians of Central Asia in Brian Beary, “Emerging Central Asia,” *CQ Global Researcher*, Jan. 17, 2012, pp. 29-56.

⁶ “Ratification of Russian military base deal provides Tajikistan with important security guarantees,” *Jane’s Intelligence Weekly*, Oct. 2, 2013, www.janes.com/article/27898/ratification-of-russian-military-base-deal-provides-tajikistan-with-important-security-guarantees.

⁷ “Russian analysts: immigrants, guest workers fertile ground for radical Islamism,” Interfax News Agency, May 14, 2013, <http://interfaxreli.customers.ru/?act=news&div=10454>.

⁸ “Putin says Russia needs more flexible approach to immigration,” BBC Worldwide Monitoring, June 11, 2013.

Andrey Slepnev, trade minister at the Eurasian Economic Commission (the EEU’s rule-making body), has also sought to dispel what he called an “urban legend” that “we are trying to reconstitute the Soviet Union.” The EEU is an economic rather than a political initiative, Slepnev said during a recent visit to Washington.²²

A Russian journalist who asks not to be named because his media outlet bars him from giving on-the-record interviews, says, “Russia does not wish to be a military superpower again. But it would like to play a bigger role in the world than it did in the 1990s,” particularly in its immediate neighborhood. “Russia is behaving no differently than the U.S. does in Latin America” when Washington concludes

trade agreements with countries that include provisions not directly linked to trade, he argues.

But Archil Gegeshidze, the Georgian ambassador to the United States, believes Russia goes way beyond what countries typically seek through trade agreements. He says Russia is trying to create various groupings of former Soviet republics, with Russia as the center of gravity. Whether it is the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a group of nine former Soviet bloc countries set up in the dying days of the Soviet Union to retain some form of ties between those nations, or the newer EEU initiative, “the idea is the same,” and “it is always a political project.”

Georgia, which was the last country to join the CIS, did so under pressure,

Gegeshidze says, and formally left the CIS in 2009 shortly after a Georgia-Russia war fought over control of Georgia’s secessionist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. (See sidebar, p. 132.) The two countries have not had diplomatic relations since then.

Asked if Russia is resurrecting its past political union with its neighbors, Brookings’ Hill, a British national who has lived in Russia and speaks Russian, says, “It depends what you mean by the Soviet bloc. If you mean a rigid political and security bloc, the answer is no. But Russia does want to retain its influence in the Soviet region.” For instance, she says, Russia is insisting that its neighbors not join any other economic or political bloc such as the EU Eastern Partnership. Russia argues

Europe, China Are Key Russian Trading Partners

Despite trying to steer its neighbors away from the European Union trading alliance and into its Eurasian Economic Union, Russia remains heavily dependent on trade with Europe. Germany is Russia's second-largest supplier of imports (behind China), which totaled \$314 billion in 2012. Machinery and transportation equipment, chemicals and agricultural commodities top its list of imports. The Netherlands, Germany and Italy are among the top four biggest buyers of Russian commodities, with natural gas and other fuel, metals and chemicals comprising the biggest shares of Russia's \$525 billion in exports in 2012.

Russia's Top Trade Partners in 2012

(Percentage share of \$314 billion total)		(Percentage share of \$525 billion total)	
China	16.5%	Netherlands	14.6%
Germany	12.2	China	6.8
Ukraine	5.7	Germany	6.8
Japan	5.0	Italy	6.2
United States	4.9	Turkey	5.2
France	4.4	Ukraine	5.2
Italy	4.3	Belarus	4.7
South Korea	3.5	Poland	3.8
Kazakhstan	2.7	Japan	3.0
Poland	2.4	Kazakhstan	2.9
		U.K.	2.9

Source: Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation

that being part of both trading blocs simultaneously is incompatible because of how trade agreements work, such as having a common customs code.

Armen Sahakyan, founder and president of the Eurasian Research Analysis Institute, a new Armenia-based think tank, cites Russia's neighbor Belarus as evidence that Russia is not trying to create a new political union. Belarus for years has been pushing the idea of a reconfigured Soviet Union, but Putin has shown little interest in the concept, he says. "Russia wants something more similar to the EU," he says.

But Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, a Polish member of the European Parliament, believes Russia is trying to create a "closed economic union" similar to the Comecon, the Soviet trading bloc that existed during the Cold War between

the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern European nations. The new EEU will be "very protectionist" with high tariffs and nontariff barriers against the rest of the world, he predicts. "But in the next stage Russia will go for a political union just like the USSR," he says.

If Russia really does intend to recreate the Soviet Union, the growing economic might of China could derail its plans. "When the Russians look eastward they are fighting a losing battle if they are fighting at all," said the late Alexandros Petersen, an adviser at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. Peterson edited a Web forum on China's presence in Central Asia until he was killed in the Jan. 17, 2014, Taliban bombing of a Lebanese restaurant in Kabul, Afghanistan.²³ China is concluding mul-

tipale trade and investment deals with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, including roads, railways, pipelines, power plants and refineries. Such deals are "completely changing the game in the region," Petersen said.²⁴

By contrast, Russian investment in Central Asia is "almost nothing," Petersen said. Leaders in Central Asia tend to prefer deals with China, he said, because China is more respectful of their sovereignty than Russia. The five Central Asian republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (the so-called 'Stans) — were fully integrated into the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991.

Is Russia helping to bring peace to the Middle East?

Russia unquestionably is taking a more active role in the major Middle Eastern conflict zones — Afghanistan, Egypt, Iran and Syria. But experts disagree on whether Moscow is trying to bring peace to the region.

The Russian Embassy's Drobinin insists that it is. Russia has been "very cooperative" with the United States on Syria and Iran, he says. "We have played an important role in creating the conditions to settle the issues in both cases." Russia is motivated by "our opposition to the rise of violent extremism," he adds, and while "we do not take sides" in the three-year Syrian civil war, Moscow believes the Assad regime "is a legitimate government."

Russia's pivotal role in brokering the September 2013 deal that persuaded Assad to give up his chemical weapons shows that "we have achieved something," he argues. And Russia, along with the United States, is the key mediator in the "Geneva II" peace conference that began in Switzerland that aims to end the brutal civil war in Syria, which has killed more than 100,000 people and created millions of refugees.

But Saryusz-Wolski, of the European Parliament, says the chemical weapons deal that Russia cobbled together is "a

trap” that gives “a free hand to Assad to continue in power.” He rejects the idea that Russia wants peace in the Middle East. Moscow’s true goal is to “keep things boiling” so oil and gas prices remain high, which suits Russia, being that it is such a big energy supplier, he argues.

Armenian scholar Sahakyan suggests a different motivation behind Russia’s support for Assad. “Russia is still a naval power and would like a base in the Mediterranean,” he says. Syria’s western coastline is on the Mediterranean, and Russia has maintained a naval facility in the port city of Tartus since the early 1970s. While Russia’s role in the Middle East had been decreasing until recently, he adds, Russia now wants to stem its waning influence in the region.

Georgian Ambassador Gegeshidze agrees with Sahakyan that Russia’s primary interest in the Middle East is neither peace nor stability but “access to the warmer seas,” namely the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean, which he notes has been Russia’s desire since tsarist times (1547-1917).

Putin has sent mixed signals in his dealings with arch enemies Iran and Israel. Despite historically having been more aligned with Iran, Putin for most of 2013 tried to improve relations with Israel, promising to support its professed right to retain nuclear weapons to deter any potential attack from Iran. But in September he seemed to reverse course, calling on Israel to dismantle its nuclear arsenal. The Israeli news magazine *Jerusalem Report* suggested that Putin’s U-turn was him pandering to “Russia’s allies in the Shi’ite axis [to] convince them to remain loyal.”²⁵

Many experts say Russia’s opposition to Islamist militancy in the Middle East is sincere and stems from the instability generated in Russia by terrorist attacks by militants from the Caucasus region. Separatist wars in Chechnya in the 1990s caused the death, injury or displacement of 150,000 people, including 8,000 Russians.²⁶ Russia has been very willing to help neighboring

governments in Central Asia to suppress radical Islam — for instance by clamping down on groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

“Yes, Russia wants peace and stability in the Middle East. It does not want the blowback from the Sunni uprisings that stemmed from the Arab Spring,” says Brookings’ Hill. Moscow would like “strong, secular, authoritarian leaders” who serve as a “nice lid to put on” social tensions and conflicts in the region.

“They see democracy as messy and being at the root of all the problems there [in the Middle East] today,” she adds. That explains why Russia has welcomed the overthrow of Egypt’s democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government in a coup last July and has been concluding new arms deals with the Egyptian military junta that deposed Mohamed Morsi, the Islamist leader.

According to Feinstein of the German Marshall Fund, Russia’s role across the region has been “mixed.” Sometimes, he says, Russia has been “a very clear impediment to addressing regional concerns.” In Syria, Moscow has gone “from being very obstructionist to being pragmatic.”

Despite the chemical weapons deal, for which Russia was widely praised by the West, during most of 2011-13, Russia had been strongly criticized for blocking U.N. Security Council sanctions against Assad.²⁷ Meanwhile, Russia has been “cooperative” in Afghanistan, Feinstein says, by providing a corridor for NATO to move troops and supplies into the war-torn country. And in Iran, Moscow “has been pragmatic so far,” he says, by supporting a deal brokered by the EU in November that will ease international sanctions on Iran in return for Iran suspending uranium enrichment in its nuclear program.

Russia’s overall strategy, Feinstein says, is that “it wants allies to the extent that it can have them” to maintain influence globally.

Should the United States take a tougher stance with Russia?

Views are sharply divided on how the United States should respond to a Russia that is increasingly flexing its muscles on the global stage, in particular in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

According to Sharyl Cross, a Russian foreign policy scholar and director of the Kozmetsky Center at St. Edward’s University in Austin, Texas, “we should scale down our expectations” of the relationship. It is wrong to “look at everything as a new chapter in the Cold War,” she said, because it remains unclear what direction Russia is actually taking.²⁸

She advocated a pragmatic approach in which the two powers collaborate closely in the big regional hotspots such as the Middle East. Cooperation on defense policy is even possible, she maintained. For instance, the West “should take more seriously” former President Dmitry Medvedev’s proposal for NATO and Russia to jointly conclude a pan-European Security Treaty, she said. First floated in 2008, the proposal has gained little traction in the United States.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also calls for pragmatism. “Russia and the U.S. are in full agreement on a number of points” in the Syrian peace talks, he said, specifically that “there isn’t a military solution.” Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed that al Qaeda-linked rebel groups in Syria had no place at the “Geneva II” peace talks, which restarted in January.²⁹

Armenian scholar Sahakyan says it does not make a lot of sense for the United States to get tougher with Russia. Imposing economic sanctions “would make little difference because there is so little U.S.-Russian trade,” he says. On the other hand, he says, Russia can help the United States fight Islamist extremists in the Middle East.

In Europe, however, Russia has opposed NATO plans — in the works since 2009 — to install missile interceptors and radar equipment across Europe in such places as Poland and

Romania, which were once part of the pro-Soviet bloc. Sahakyan says NATO should realize that “there will be a backlash” if it ignores Russia’s opposition to the NATO plan. Russia responded already, placing missiles in Kaliningrad, a small Russian region wedged between NATO member states Lithuania and Poland.³⁰ “I don’t think taking a tougher line with Russia will achieve much,” Sahakyan says.

But Saryusz-Wolski, the Polish member of the European Parliament, strongly disapproves of America’s current pragmatic approach toward Russia, accusing Obama of moving “too much into the realm of *realpolitik* in dealing with Russia and away from a values-based policy.” Referring to Obama’s so-called strategic pivot to Asia, he says, it would be better if the United States “stopped withdrawing from Europe.” However, he concedes that the prevailing view in Washington “that Europe should count on itself more . . . is in a way right, but it makes Europe feel less comfortable.”³¹

Recent Russian military maneuvers in Europe worry Urmas Reinsalu, Estonia’s minister of defense, who noted that Russia has doubled its strategic weapons in Europe during the past four years. He urged the United States to hold onto the nuclear weapons it still keeps in Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and Turkey as a deterrent to Russia.³²

Georgian Ambassador Gegeshidze also is in the get-tough-with-Russia camp. “In Georgia, we have been watching Russia for centuries, and our experience prompts us to think that Russia only listens to tougher language,” he says. “Russia can never be a genuine strategic partner of the U.S. because, for that, you need to share values,” whereas Russia is growing increasingly authoritarian.

However, “the U.S. does not have a lot of carrots and sticks to use” with Russia because its relations are primarily security-based, rather than trade-based, says Brookings’ Hill. “The only way for the U.S. to get tough with Rus-

sia is to get closer to the EU, because the EU does a huge amount of trade with Russia.” The U.S. is negotiating a free-trade agreement with the EU, which is its biggest trade partner.³³

Hill says the EU and United States can and should together take a tougher stance against Russia for bullying its neighbors into joining the EEU. And the United States does have at least one sanction at its disposal, she says, namely visa bans. There has been a massive increase in the number of special “government official” passports issued by the Russian government in recent years, she says. Moscow is very keen for Russians to attain visa-free travel wherever possible, so the West does have some leverage in that regard, she says.

The United States could also object to what Hill calls Russia’s misuse of World Trade Organization (WTO) food safety rules to punish its neighbors by banning their products from Russian markets. For instance, shortly after Moscow banned Moldovan wine and spirits, and just days before the EU summit in Vilnius, Russia threatened to ban Polish fruit and vegetables, again on food safety grounds. Poland is one of the leading EU members supporting the free-trade deals the EU has negotiated with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine.³⁴

Hill categorically rejects as “a complete sham” Russian officials’ claims that these bans are justified on public-health grounds. Food safety standards are quite poor in Russia, she argues, citing the numerous severe bouts of food poisoning she suffered during the years she lived there. ■

BACKGROUND

Russia’s Rise

The first Russian state, based in Kiev, the capital of modern Ukraine, emerged in the ninth century.³⁵ Origin-

nally a Viking settlement, Kiev was situated on a trade route from Scandinavia to Byzantium, now Istanbul.³⁶

In 988 Prince Vladimir, the ruler of Kiev, adopted the Byzantine form of Christianity, planting the seed for Orthodox Christianity to become the dominant religion among Russians. Kiev developed into a major center of Christian learning in the 1000s and early 1100s. Meanwhile, two other Russian city states, Novgorod and Moscow, began to develop as economic centers.

During the Mongol invasions of Russian territories in the early 1200s, the army of Batu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, plundered Kiev. The Mongols quickly established dominion over the Russians and were referred to as The Golden Horde.

During the 1300s Moscow eclipsed Kiev as the dominant Russian principality, and in 1478 Moscow’s ruler, Prince Ivan III, conquered Novgorod. Moscow grew increasingly powerful in the 1500s. Defended by semi-autonomous soldiers called Cossacks, Moscow introduced an efficient tax collection system and instituted serfdom, a system of feudal dependency that forbade peasants from moving away from their lord’s estate. In return for protection, some land to sustain themselves and some autonomy over their daily affairs, peasants were obliged to perform hard labor and pay taxes and were at times subject to military service.

Ivan IV, who reigned from 1533 to 1584 and was known as Ivan the Terrible, became the undisputed leader of Russia through his strong, harsh leadership and adopted the title of tsar (from the Roman word caesar).³⁷ Paranoid about plots against him, he was unusually cruel in suppressing perceived dissent, according to one historian, sending soldiers out on “black horses, each carrying a dog’s head and a broom . . . to sniff out treachery and sweep it away. Supposed traitors were tortured or murdered.”³⁸

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Chronology

988-1917 *Russia emerges as the world's largest country, ruled by powerful tsars.*

988

Prince Vladimir, ruler of the Russian city state of Kiev, converts to Byzantine (Orthodox) Christianity. His conversion leads to Orthodox Christianity becoming Russia's dominant religion.

1547

The ruler of Moscow, Ivan IV, known as Ivan the Terrible, is crowned tsar, marking the culmination of Moscow's emergence as the dominant Russian power.

1703

Tsar Peter the Great establishes a new capital, St. Petersburg, on the Baltic Sea.

1917

The last tsar, Nicholas II, is deposed and later murdered as the communist Bolshevik party seizes power.

1918-1991

Russian-dominated Soviet Union industrializes and becomes one of the world's two superpowers, along with the United States.

1922

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) is formed as a multi-ethnic, atheistic, communist state in which Russia is the largest and most powerful republic.

1928

Soviet leader Josef Stalin launches the first of several five-year plans, which transform the USSR from a mainly agricultural to a predominantly industrial country.

1945

USSR emerges as a victor in World War II, resulting in an expansion of its territory and influence in Eastern Europe. The expansion marks the onset of the Cold War, a rivalry for global dominance between the United States and USSR.

1955

Eight communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including the USSR, sign the Warsaw Pact military alliance, bolstering Soviet sway over the region.

1985

New Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev initiates a policy of greater openness called *glasnost* that encourages the Warsaw Pact nations to realign themselves westward geo-politically.

1991

USSR is dissolved after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall and two years of protests in former Soviet republics. Fifteen sovereign republics emerge from the former Soviet Union.

1992-2014 *After an initial period of economic and political turmoil, Russia stabilizes economically and becomes more assertive on the global stage.*

1992

Russian lawmakers privatize state-owned-enterprises, resulting in the country's rapid transformation from communism to capitalism.

1999

Vladimir Putin, a senior adviser to President Boris Yeltsin, is appointed prime minister of Russia, marking the beginning of his ascent to power.

2004

European Union (EU) and NATO expand to Russia's western border, and former communist bloc nations join the pro-Western economic and military alliance.

2008

Russian opposition to Georgia's bid to join NATO triggers a war that ends with Russia tightening control over Georgia's secessionist republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

2010

Russia signs a new nuclear weapons reduction treaty, START, with the United States.

2012

Russia joins the World Trade Organization. . . . Putin easily wins re-election as president amid accusations from international observers that the result was pre-determined.

2013

Russia's relations with the EU deteriorate over EU plans to conclude free trade and association pacts with several former Soviet republics, including Ukraine. . . . Armenia announces it will join a Russian-sponsored customs union instead of signing a trade pact with the EU (September). . . . To avoid a U.S.-French crackdown on Syria, Russia brokers a deal whereby Syria will give up its chemical weapons arsenal. . . . Ukraine ditches its planned EU deal amid Western accusations of Russian intimidation (November).

2014

Russia hosts the Winter Olympics in Black Sea resort town of Sochi, casting a spotlight on the country's human rights record (February), even as Islamist terrorist attacks in the weeks preceding the games feed concerns about security at event.

Russia Plays Leading Role in Separatist Conflicts

Moscow sees itself as a protector, but others view it differently.

When the word “separatist” is mentioned in relation to Russia, it usually conjures up the conflict with Chechnya, the predominantly Muslim republic in Russia’s mountainous Caucasus region that tried unsuccessfully to secede in the 1990s.

But Russia is a pivotal player in four other so-called “frozen” separatist conflicts — in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Transnistria in Moldova — which remain unresolved after erupting when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.¹ In each case, Russia provides some support to the separatists — military, diplomatic, economic or a combination — a thorn in the side of the countries from which the regions have seceded.

Russia was devastated to lose Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and 11 other republics when the Soviet Union was dissolved. Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, and in retaliation Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries in their secessionist dispute with Georgia. Russia also maintains about 1,000 troops in Transnistria, even though Russia does not share a border with Transnistria as it does with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.²

Georgia’s U.S. ambassador, Archil Gegeshidze, says “two competing narratives” explain Russia’s role in the conflicts. In the pro-Russian view, people in the breakaway republics align themselves with Russia because of their common histories, and Russia supports them as a “moral obligation,” Gegeshidze says. Russia’s opponents, he adds, say it “always uses these conflicts as a lever over the former Soviet republics to prevent them from jumping out of the Russian orbit.”

While media reports often refer to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in one breath, Gegeshidze says they are different. Most South Ossetians speak Georgian and are culturally close to Georgians, but South Ossetia is too weak economically to be a self-sustaining country, he says. By contrast, the Abkhazians “have more choices” about whether or not to go it alone, he says, because their land is more fertile, they have access to the sea and Russian is the dominant language. Still, Gegeshidze says, ethnic Abkhaz control the government but are outnumbered by ethnic Armenians and Georgians in Abkhazia. So the Abkhaz are glad to have Russia’s protection.

Svante Cornell, director of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, has argued that Russia uses the frozen conflicts to keep the countries within its sphere of influence.³ For instance, Cornell pointed out that Russia has already warned that if Moldova continues to forge closer ties with the European Union against Russia’s wishes, Russia would support separatists in Moldova’s Transnistria region.

Russia can do the same with Nagorno-Karabakh, which is officially part of Azerbaijan but populated by ethnic Armenians who would welcome Russia’s protection, Cornell said. Regional experts believe concern about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh was a major factor in Armenia’s sudden decision last September to abandon a trade agreement negotiated with the EU and instead join the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

Armen Sahakyan, founder and executive director of the Washington office of the Eurasian Research Analysis Institute, a new Armenian-based think tank, says Russia’s goal in the frozen conflicts is “to preserve the status quo” because doing

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A series of weak leaders succeeded Ivan, with the next similarly strong tsar emerging in the late 1600s. Peter I, who became known as Peter the Great (1682-1725), captured the Baltic provinces from Sweden in 1709 at the Battle of Poltava. Peter established the most extensive diplomatic relations with European governments Russia had ever had until that point. He imported the best military technologies from Europe, established a new capital city, St. Petersburg, on the Baltic, and created Russia’s first permanent army.

Catherine II (1762-1796) — known as Catherine the Great — conspired

with Austria and Prussia to dismember Poland in the late 1700s, leading Russia to annex parts of modern-day Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine. She also instituted a new legal code that greatly improved the effectiveness of the Russian government and introduced a new system for consulting her subjects over proposed laws, in which an expanded array of social groups was involved in the process.

In 1807 a pact with French Emperor Napoleon I gave Russia control of Finland. By this time Russia had grown into the world’s largest country, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea and all the way to the Pacific Ocean. In the

1800s Russia extended its territory and influence in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and the Balkans through various wars against the Ottoman Empire, which was slowly disintegrating. Around the same time, it gained control of the mainly ethnically Turkic peoples of Central Asia, wrenching the local mini-kingdoms called khanates from the British and Persians, a tussle referred to by historians as “The Great Game.”³⁹ In the 1860s Russia expelled between 1 and 2 million Circassian people from their native western Caucasus.⁴⁰

The completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1903 boosted Russia’s expanding industrial sector, which was

so allows it to retain influence. As for Georgia, Sahakyan suggests Moscow might give Abkhazia and South Ossetia back to Georgia if it agreed to join the EEU. And it could do the same with Transnistria, he says.

The key other player is the 28-member European Union. In November, Georgia and Moldova defied Russia's warnings by initialing comprehensive free-trade and association agreements with the EU. But it is unclear how these accords will be applied in the frozen conflicts.

Gunnar Wiegand, a senior EU diplomat, said the visa-free regime the EU is offering Moldova would apply to Moldovans living in Transnistria. And Transnistrians also would benefit from lower import tariffs under the EU trade pact, since most of Moldova's heavy industry is in Transnistria.

As for the broader question of who will govern the four regions in the long term, the stalemate has become so entrenched that the answer remains unclear. With the EU adopting its trade incentives "carrot" approach, in contrast to Moscow's "stick" approach, Russia's attraction for the region's residents remains its "hard power," while the EU's attraction remains its "soft power," Cornell says.

— Brian Beary

¹ For a full account of these conflicts, see Brian Beary, *Separatist Movements* (2011).

² David M. Herszenhorn, "Russia Putting a Strong Arm On Neighbors," *The New York Times*, Oct. 22, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/europe/russia-putting-a-strong-arm-on-neighbors.html?_r=0.

³ Cornell spoke at an event titled, "Pushback to Putin's Eurasian Dream? The Looming Facedown between China, the EU and Russia," at the School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C., Dec. 4, 2013.

Separatist Conflicts Fester in Russia's Southwest

Russia provides some support for separatist movements in three former Soviet republics on its southwestern border near Sochi, site of this month's Winter Olympic Games. The four so-called "frozen" separatist conflicts are in Georgia, where Abkhazia and South Ossetia want to secede; Azerbaijan, where separatists are active in Nagorno-Karabakh; and Moldova, where the breakaway region of Transnistria is located.



Source: Brian Beary, various open sources online.

producing a growing urban working class, from which developed socialist-oriented political parties, including the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. A humiliating defeat for Russia in a war with newly emergent Japan in 1904-05 stymied Russia's ambition of gaining influence over Korea, Chinese Manchuria and the Far East.

That loss also helped to trigger a revolution that forced Tsar Nicholas II (1894-1917) to set up a parliament, called the Duma. During World War I (1914-1918) Russia fought on the side of France and the United Kingdom against the German-Austro-Hungarian-Turkish alliance. The Russians suffered

massive casualties, leading to two revolutions in 1917 in which Nicholas was deposed and later murdered and Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin came to power. He established a "dictatorship of the proletariat," as advocated by the founders of Marxist political ideologies, including Karl Marx himself, laying the foundation for the multi-ethnic Soviet Union. Many non-Russian peoples who lived in the defunct Russian Empire tried to establish independent republics, but Lenin suppressed such moves. In 1922, they became part of the new, Russian-dominated Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The Soviet Era

Lenin, who died in 1924, was succeeded by Josef Stalin, a high-ranking Georgian-born official who in 1922 had become general secretary of the Communist Party. Stalin boosted industrial production through a series of five-year plans, which began in 1928, and forced the collectivization of farms.

When middle-class farmers from Ukraine and Kazakhstan resisted, Stalin brutally repressed them, with millions murdered or deported to labor camps in Siberia. Stalin also devised an elaborate system of keeping files on Commu-

nist Party members, which he used to devastating effect in the late 1930s, when he conducted wide-scale purges, eliminating anyone he viewed as a potential threat.

During World War II (1939-45), the Soviets joined France, the United Kingdom and United States in defeating the German-Japanese alliance. Some 27 million Soviet soldiers and civilians were killed — or 14 percent of the population.⁴¹ The war enabled Stalin to regain territories ceded to Germany in World War I, notably the three Baltic nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and parts of modern-day Belarus. In addition, Stalin pushed Central and Eastern European nations, including East Germany, into the Comecon economic union, as well as a military alliance, the 1955 Warsaw Pact. In 1946 Britain's former wartime prime minister, Winston Churchill, famously described the alliance as creating an "Iron Curtain" between Europe and the region.

The period between 1945 and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 became known as the Cold War, in reference to the intense geopolitical rivalry that existed between the Soviet Union and the United States, the world's two superpowers. Among the tensest episodes were the 1948-49 Berlin Airlift, in which the U.S. military flew supplies into West Berlin to foil a Soviet blockade; the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis in which the United States threatened war if the Soviets did not remove missiles they had placed in Cuba; and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which sparked a U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games.⁴²

When Stalin died in 1953, he was succeeded by Nikita Khrushchev, who denounced Stalin's extreme political repression but retained his socialist policies. Khrushchev made some economic adjustments, though, such as giving Russian families their own apartments and expanding state welfare benefits. Abroad, Khrushchev kept a firm grip on the Soviet satellite states,

notably sending troops to quell an anti-communist uprising in Hungary in 1956.

After the Soviet politburo peacefully ousted Khrushchev in 1964, the new leader, Leonid Brezhnev, deployed troops to Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress the so-called Prague Spring, a movement to introduce democracy and liberalize personal freedom. High oil prices in the 1970s enabled Russia to maintain its status as a military superpower, but its economy stagnated and its public finances deteriorated accordingly.

A new chapter began when Mikhail Gorbachev became the Soviet leader in 1985. He dramatically improved relations with the West, signing major disarmament treaties with President Ronald Reagan. Gorbachev adopted a so-called *glasnost* policy to allow greater freedom of speech, a policy that reverberated throughout the Warsaw Pact nations. East European countries began to throw off Soviet domination, beginning with Poland, which held partly free and fair elections in June 1989.

The toppling of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 marked the end of the Cold War as Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Romania quickly joined Poland in abandoning communism and becoming free-market democracies. Lithuania's declaration of independence from the Soviet Union in March 1990 marked the beginning of the end of the USSR, which was officially dissolved on New Year's Eve in 1991, and all 15 Soviet republics emerged as independent countries.

Chaos and Resurgence

After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia plunged into trauma and chaos. Economically, it embraced a model of unfettered capitalism that enriched a relative few but slashed the living standards of many ordinary Russians. Price controls were relaxed and state-owned enterprises privatized.

Russia also had to deal with an internal war in the early 1990s, when Chechnya, a southern republic in the mountainous Caucasus region, tried to secede. Russian troops eventually suppressed the uprising, but violence in the region persists.

Boris Yeltsin, Russia's president from 1991-1999, struggled to keep order at home while trying to build good relations with the rest of the world. In the mid-1990s Russia, Ukraine and the United States agreed to begin eliminating their nuclear arsenals, resulting in Ukraine becoming a nuclear-weapons-free country.

Yeltsin appointed Putin as his prime minister in 1999, and Putin took over the presidency from Yeltsin in 2000. Higher oil prices in subsequent years gave Putin sufficient revenues to cement his grip on power. In addition, he placed control of the giant energy company Gazprom back in government hands, further strengthening his political power.⁴³ In foreign policy, Putin was far less friendly than Yeltsin toward the West. He opposed the U.S.-led Iraq War in 2003, the NATO-sponsored secession of Kosovo from Serbia in 2008 and the U.S. plan to install a missile defense system in Eastern Europe in the mid-2000s.

Putin also resented NATO's expansion to his doorstep in 2004, when Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the Western military alliance. In addition, he viewed with unease the European Union's expansion in 2004 and 2007, when it accepted as members eight former communist nations from Central and Eastern Europe.⁴⁴ The new EU member states were staunchly pro-American and eagerly contributed troops to the U.S.-led Iraq War.

Constitutionally limited to two consecutive terms, Putin handpicked his prime minister, Dmitry Medvedev, to succeed him. Medvedev was elected in March 2008 with 70 percent of the vote.⁴⁵ With a softer style, Medvedev helped to warm Russia's relations with the West. A major achievement was

conclusion of a new nuclear arms reduction treaty (START) in 2010.⁴⁶

Medvedev was aided by Obama's election as president in November 2008, especially after the Obama administration vowed to "hit the reset button" and work to improve U.S.-Russian relations. The two cooperated in combating militant Islam in Afghanistan, with Russia granting the NATO mission there access to transport corridors that allowed NATO military personnel and equipment to travel from bases in the Baltic through Russia.

During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, Russia chose not to veto a U.N. Security Council move to deploy a NATO military mission in Libya. That mission led to the removal from power of Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi in the summer of 2011. Meanwhile, the United States backed Russia's bid to join the WTO, giving it enhanced access to world markets for trade and investment purposes.⁴⁷

Tensions ran high, however, when Georgia and Ukraine made bids to join NATO, which the United States supported but Russia firmly opposed. The situation was a contributing factor in the Russia-Georgia war that erupted in summer 2008, which ended with Russia tightening its control over Georgia's two secessionist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

U.S.-Russian relations soured in 2012, as the two countries could not reconcile their competing plans to develop new missile-defense systems in Europe.

As the United States began withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan in 2011, Russia began boosting its military presence in Central Asia. For instance, in September 2012 Moscow persuaded Tajikistan to allow Russian military bases there to remain open until 2042 by extending its existing lease.⁴⁸ Putin, who had been prime minister under Medvedev, was easily re-elected president for six more years in May 2012. His return to the presidency quickly led to a chilling of relations with the West,

due both to Putin's more confrontational style as well as Western criticism of his human-rights record, for instance on freedom of the press.

Russian-U.S. relations became further strained last summer after NSA contractor Snowden was granted political asylum in Russia after disclosing details

especially after Russia last September banned Moldovan wine and spirits, officially due to public-health concerns.

Last fall, Ukraine became an even bigger battleground between Russia and the EU, when the EU urged Kiev to sign an association and trade agreement. However, the EU also demand-



An Armenian soldier in the self-proclaimed republic of Nagorno-Karabakh guards the border with Azerbaijan near the town of Martakert. Nagorno-Karabakh is officially part of Azerbaijan but populated by ethnic Armenian separatists, who would welcome Russia's protection. Concern about the future of Nagorno-Karabakh is seen as a major factor in Armenia's sudden decision last September to abandon a trade agreement negotiated with the European Union and instead join the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union.

of the NSA's mass surveillance programs of U.S. and foreign citizens.

"It's not our fault that he found himself in Russia," says the Russian Embassy's Drobinin. He insists that Moscow was legally required to examine Snowden's claim for asylum and could not send him back to the United States, since the two countries do not have an extradition treaty.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere in Eastern Europe began heating up as the EU and Russia competed for influence in the region. Moldova has aligned itself more closely with the EU since 2009, when a strongly pro-Western government was elected, replacing the ruling communists. This caused tension in Moldova's relations with Moscow,

ed the release from prison of Ukrainian opposition leader Yulia Tymoshenko for medical treatment in Germany — something the Ukrainian government refused to do.

Meanwhile, on Sept. 3, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan announced Armenia would join the Russian-backed EEU instead of signing trade and association pacts it had concluded with the EU.⁴⁹ The decision came as a shock: Even Armenian diplomats in Washington were blindsided by the sudden shift that occurred after conversations between Sargsyan and Putin.

The European Parliament passed a resolution on Sept. 12, condemning Russia's behavior toward its neighbors as "unacceptable." ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Tensions in Ukraine

Ukraine is in a state of serious political turmoil since President Yanukovich's refusal to sign the trade and association agreements with the EU. Popular protests focused around Independence Square in Kiev have snowballed since the Vilnius summit, in a movement dubbed Euro-Maidan in Ukrainian, or "Euro-Square." Clashes between the police and protesters have turned increasingly violent — and even militant — with widespread arrests and several deaths and beatings reported.

Fears are mounting that the country may be on the brink of civil war. On Jan. 28, the prime minister and cabinet resigned, and restrictions on political protest imposed weeks earlier were rescinded.⁵⁰ Obama, in his State of the Union speech on Jan. 28, said, "In Ukraine, we stand for the principle that all people have the right to express themselves freely and peacefully, and have a say in their country's future."⁵¹

By contrast, media coverage in Russia of the protests characterizes the demonstrators as violent rioters. Voice of Russia, the government-owned broadcaster, alleges that the protests are being spearheaded by "well-organized radical groups — mainly, football ultras, professional raiders and militants who have undergone special training."⁵²

The backlash in Ukraine has soured Russia's relations with the rest of Europe. An EU-Russia summit did go ahead as planned in Brussels on Jan. 28 and was attended by President Putin, EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso and EU Council President Herman Van Rompuy. However, given the

dire state of their relations, the meeting was confined to a working lunch between the leaders. In the post-summit press conference, President Van Rompuy said the European integration offers to Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova were "fully compatible" with Russia's interests. Putin said, "We would most likely abolish [our] preferential measures for Ukraine if it signs the [EU] association agreement."⁵³

The Russian Embassy's Drobinin insists "it was Ukraine's decision taken in their national interests" not to sign the EU deal and that it is "misleading" to claim that Russia exerted pressure on Kiev.

Drobinin concedes that the EU-Ukraine deal would, however, have hurt Russia's economy by causing EU goods to flood duty-free into the Russian market through Ukraine, after being stamped with a "Made in Ukraine" label.

But Judy Dempsey, a scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said "Putin is desperate to hold on to [Ukraine], knowing full well that if Ukraine goes over to the EU, Russia's own bulwarks against the EU's creeping democratic influence will crumble."⁵⁴

The U.S. administration is intensifying diplomatic efforts to persuade the East European countries to align themselves with the EU. Secretary of State Kerry, for instance, visited Moldova in December, and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland has made numerous trips to the region in recent weeks.

"The United States stands with you in search of . . . the European future that you have chosen and you deserve," Nuland said, addressing the media in Kiev on Dec. 11 after meeting with Yanukovich. "It is still possible to save Ukraine's European future," and "the world is watching."⁵⁵

The Vilnius summit debacle, where Yanukovich decided at the last minute he would not sign the trade deal with the EU, has made EU leaders bolder and blunter about their feelings. EU

leaders Van Rompuy and Barroso have said jointly that they "strongly disapprove of Russia's position and actions" regarding Ukraine.

The U.S. Senate responded similarly, passing a resolution on Jan. 7 referring to "Russian economic coercion" in Ukraine and urging U.S. and EU leaders "to continue working together to [move] Ukraine toward a future in the Euro-Atlantic community."⁵⁶

Welcoming the resolution, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Melia said, "I believe the embers that sparked the protests in late November are still burning and will not be easily extinguished."⁵⁷ Nuland, his State Department colleague, added, "There is, also, a good deal of disinformation in Russia about the effect that the EU's Eastern Partnership could have on its economy and arrangements with neighbors."⁵⁸

Meanwhile, Georgia and Moldova, which at the Vilnius summit initialed their EU trade deals — a preliminary step before signing the accords — seem more determined than ever to conclude them despite or perhaps because of the harsh warnings from Moscow. Armenian scholar Sahakyan says Georgia and Moldova may have less to fear from Russian economic retaliation than Ukraine because they are less economically dependent on Russia.

Nevertheless, he says, heavy-handedness from Russia is "not smart" because it hurts Russia's relations with the West. Armenia's government, he points out, could still turn back to the EU if Russia does not provide it with the security guarantees it wants.

Hot Spots and Winter Games

As NATO continues to wind down its presence in Afghanistan, Russia is moving in to fill the security vacuum. Its new extended lease on a military base in Tajikistan means that 7,000

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At Issue:

Should the United States take a tougher stance with Russia?



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With the U.S. Olympic team now in Sochi and Washington engaged in intensive talks with Moscow on the Syrian cease-fire and Iran's nuclear program, this is good time to examine the U.S.-Russia relationship.

The Obama administration's ballyhooed Russian "reset" was an abysmal failure. There is no shared threat assessment and no mutual understanding between the United States and Russia on how to deal with the changing geopolitical environment. Instead, Russia's anti-U.S. foreign policy tilt prevents diplomatic cooperation. Because Russia still views America as a "principal adversary" — a Cold War legacy — it wants to constrain America's diplomatic and military maneuverability.

Flush with oil cash, Putin has chosen to build up Russia's military power, launching a \$700 billion rearmament program, including massive nuclear missile modernization. Meanwhile, he has nearly eliminated U.S. missile defenses in Europe. He also has successfully confronted the Bush and Obama administrations over Iran, effectively saved Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and supported a "deal" over the future of Iran's atomic program that brings Tehran to the threshold of nuclear statehood.

Moscow wants to see U.S. power diminished in Eurasia, the Middle East and Europe. Putin's vision includes domination over the former Soviet bloc as an independent pole in a "multi-polar world." Russia's pressures on Ukraine and Georgia continue unrelentingly, aimed at bringing Kiev and Tbilisi into Moscow's fold, most likely through the Eurasian Economic Union, a post-Soviet satellite state system not unlike the Warsaw Pact.

President Obama should ask the National Security Council to conduct a bottom-up review of Russia policy. He also should strengthen ties with former Soviet bloc countries concerned about their independence, such as Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan, and provide economic advice and political-military cooperation if requested. That would be particularly timely, since the United States plans to withdraw troops from Afghanistan later this year.

Russia's intransigent foreign policy will require the administration to provide global leadership and consistent, robust pushback when U.S. interests are at stake. Disagreements over security concerns and geopolitics hinder U.S.-Russian cooperation in counterterrorism, nonproliferation, global security and business. Moscow's anti-U.S. approach means tough times for U.S.-Russian relations. But when engaging Moscow, the United States must guard its national security interests, not engage in a self-deluding, feel-good policy exercise.



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When discussing the question of taking a tougher stance with Russia one must bear in mind two important questions. First, what is the trigger to adopt such a policy? And second, will the policy lead to any favorable outcomes for the United States?

Recently, a widely cited reason has been Russia's ambition to form the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) by Jan. 1, 2015. It is expected to be an economic union of five former Soviet states that will break down internal trade barriers, adopt a common tariff on foreign goods and other such free-trade measures. The United States has long been a proponent of free trade and globalization, yet it is alarmed with the idea of the EEU. The U.S. motive thus becomes questionable and the adoption of a harsher policy toward the EEU would likely hurt the U.S. international image as the torchbearer on free trade. It would be wiser to further develop friendly relations with the EEU states and ensure their continued integration into the world economy.

As for the second question — whether getting tough on Russia will produce a favorable outcome — I see it as counterproductive for the United States, which needs a strong Russia in the region and should be on favorable terms with it, considering the looming pullout of U.S. and coalition forces from Afghanistan.

Russia also has key roles to play regarding the ongoing instability in Syria and the fight against terrorism. As a permanent Security Council member, Russia also is instrumental in matters affecting the entire world. Should U.S.-Russia relations deteriorate, it would be much harder to reach a consensus on a wide range of issues, further destabilizing the balance of power.

Even if we were to disregard all of those considerations, it is doubtful that a tougher policy would be effective, since the United States does not have many "buttons" that it can push to pressure Russia. Russia and the United States do not have the deepest economic ties. The same underdeveloped relations exist on many other fronts, and it is questionable whether economic or other types of pressure would yield any favorable outcomes.

A cost-benefit analysis would show that the United States will be better off by further deepening its ties with Russia, cooperating in anti-terrorism and other areas and facilitating the EEU's integration with other trading blocs, such as NAFTA, the EU and others.

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Russian troops will stay on to help the Tajiks deal with any potential militant Islamist threats. The Tajik government worries about militants crossing the porous borders it shares with Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁵⁹

Russia also is donating \$1.1 billion in military weapons to Kyrgyzstan and paying \$4.5 million a year to lease the country's Kant airbase for use by the Russian military. The United States, in contrast, is closing its Kyrgyz base at the Manas Transit Center.

However, tensions between NATO and Russia continue to mount on the issue of missile defense. Talks to develop a joint system, which began in 2010, have become hopelessly deadlocked. Russia wants NATO's missile defense system to be operationally linked to Russia's, while NATO prefers to limit such cooperation to information-sharing between the NATO and Russian command-and-control centers. NATO also is resisting Russia's demand for a legal guarantee that the NATO missile defense system would not be used against Russia.⁶²

As the world spotlight turns to the southern Russian resort city of Sochi in February for the Winter Olympics, Putin will use the occasion to showcase Russia "as a modern society that he has had a hand in creating," said Kathy Lally, Moscow bureau chief of *The Washington Post*. Russia has spent \$51 billion on the games, more than eight times the amount spent for the previous Winter Olympics in Vancouver, Canada.⁶⁵

With Sochi situated in Russia's Caucasus region, a hotbed of Muslim radicalism, Islamist-inspired terrorists have already warned that they plan to attack the games. Putin is a natural enemy of such groups, being a firmly secular leader whom they view as anti-Islamic, especially given Russia's brutal repression of separatists in the staunchly Muslim Russian republic of Chechnya.

Putin is obviously determined to keep the games secure, since an attack could dent the reputation he has long been cultivating as a competent, firm leader.

Lally pointed out that in the neighboring region of Dagestan, small terrorist bombs explode almost daily but little attention is paid to them. The Sochi games will shed new international attention on such attacks, she predicted.⁶⁶

In efforts to burnish his image in the runup to the Olympics Putin in December released longtime jailed businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky and two anti-Putin activists from the pop band Pussy Riot.⁶⁷

But will the games boost Putin's standing? According to Sufian Zhemukhov, a visiting scholar in Russian and East European studies at George Washington University in Washington who comes from the region, if the Olympics are a failure, it will have a very negative impact on Putin because it will show that his government cannot handle megaprojects. It could even hurt his re-election prospects, Zhemukhov said.⁶⁸

As for potential terrorist attacks, Zhemukhov says security at Sochi "will be very good," but "I'm not sure about the rest of Russia."



Getty Images/Asahi Shimbun

Russian police officers are a major presence at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi, Russia. Sochi lies in the Caucasus region, a hotbed of Muslim radicalism. Islamist-inspired terrorists have said they plan to attack the games. Russian President Vladimir Putin has firmly opposed such groups in the past.

"The underlying political message is that Russia is a more durable security partner than the U.S.," according to *Jane's Intelligence Review*, the security magazine.⁶⁰

In Syria and Iran, Russia is managing to maintain a good working relationship with the EU and United States, as evidenced by the Nov. 23, 2013, deal on Iran's nuclear program that the EU brokered. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace scholars Andrew Weiss and Dmitri Trenin said the United States and Russia are in an era of "purely transactional relations against the background of deep mutual mistrust" and that "this may be the 'new normal' in U.S.-Russian relations."⁶¹

Russia's new short-range ballistic missiles deployed in Kaliningrad could theoretically be used to destroy NATO's planned radar facility and missile interceptor in neighboring Poland. The missiles have a range of about 250 miles.⁶³ Artis Pabriks, defense minister of Lithuania, a NATO member state that borders Kaliningrad, said, "We have followed these events for quite some time, and this is not a surprise for us," but added that "it creates unnecessary political tension and suspicions and reduces mutual trust because we don't see reason why Russians would need such weapons here. . . . I think it's just to show who is the boss in the region."⁶⁴

OUTLOOK

Continuing Tensions

Russia is likely to continue trying to enhance its voice in major international forums. With its WTO membership sealed, Russia now has its sights set on joining the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, a Paris-based coalition of 34 developed nations that works to promote democracy and free markets. In order to be allowed to join, Russia will need to prove to the members, which are almost all advanced economies, that it has a genuinely free market and open economy, one where businesses have confidence they can come and invest in a corruption-free, legally certain environment. Given the well-documented governance problems in the country, convincing them will be no small task.⁶⁹

Russia also is expected to consolidate its historical hold over the Arctic region.⁷⁰ Norway's defense minister, Ine Eriksen Soreide, recently said Russia's increased military activity in the Arctic was "cause for concern" and that NATO and Russia "do not see eye to eye" over joint naval exercises in the Arctic. "Small things can spark tensions," Soreide cautioned, pointing out that Norway shared a 122-mile land border and 466-mile sea border with Russia.⁷¹

As for Russia's ultimate goal regarding the Eurasian Economic Union, "We want to create a common [trading] space from Lisbon to Vladivostok," says Kalugin, of the Russian Embassy in Washington. Thus, the EU is part of Russia's plan as well, with the EU's 28 member states remaining Russia's top trading partners, Kalugin stresses.

Some demographers predict that Russia eventually will lose control of Siberia as Russians continue migrating out of the area and are replaced by Chinese migrant workers. But the

Russian Embassy's Drobinin disputes such predictions. "Siberia is not some kind of promised land," he says. "It is really hard to live there," given its harsh climate and remoteness.

Four former Soviet-bloc countries that are now members of the EU — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland — will be leading the resistance to Russia's attempts to extend its influence into its Soviet-era sphere. "We were under occupation for 50 years," said Vydas Gedvilas, the speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament. "Now we are doing everything in our power to get these countries closer to the EU."⁷²

Similarly, Estonian Defense Minister Reinsalu urged NATO to keep its door open to new members and for the United States to retain a military presence in Europe.⁷³ The State Department's Nuland has urged the EU to leave the welcome mat out for Ukraine, adding that it is important to keep a close eye on the 2015 presidential elections in Ukraine to ensure the vote is free and fair.⁷⁴

Russia's recent arm-twisting "will ultimately lead to disaster" in its foreign relations, predicted Stephen Blank, a senior fellow for Russia at the American Foreign Policy Council, a Washington think tank. Refusing "to recognize the sovereignty and independence" of Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine makes the region "fundamentally unstable" and "under constant threat of war," Blank argued.⁷⁵

Frederick Starr, chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, called Putin's policy "an absurd replay of Alexander III's" eastward expansion of the Russian Empire in the late 1800s, which culminated in the Russian revolution of 1905.⁷⁶

"Everything is possible — both a drift of the former Soviet [countries] toward Russia, combined with the inward collapse of its states and societies," according to Olaf Osica, director of the

Warsaw-based Centre for Eastern Studies, "as well as increasing opposition by the [Eastern Partnership] countries against the Kremlin's conduct."⁷⁷

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