

THE UKRAINE CRISIS AND THE RESUMPTION OF GREAT-POWER RIVALRY

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

Great-Power Competition Is Back

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

Global Implications

- Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia will be the battleground in the U.S.-Russian fight for influence. A number of other countries and territories, including Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the Russian North Caucasus and Crimea, and the Baltic states, may also be affected by this competition.
- In Central Europe, Poland, which has been most directly involved with the crisis over Ukraine, has toughened its attitudes toward Russia.
- Western Europe’s relations with Russia have changed significantly since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis. The period of cooperation and mutual understanding ushered in by Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s agreement to Germany’s reunification is over.
- Faced with an increasingly hostile West, Russia is visibly turning East. In particular, China and Russia have become closer, signing a historic gas deal, conducting joint naval exercises, and increasing trade.
- Russia’s hardball policies in Ukraine and its defiance of the United States have won it increased credibility in the Middle East.

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