

RUSSIAN-U.S. FLASHPOINTS IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE: THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

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Russian-U.S. relations are at their worst since the end of the Cold War. The only predictable dynamic in this relationship is that it is likely to be worse tomorrow than today. On both sides, there are multiple explanations for this state of affairs.

On the Russian side, the country's top leadership became disillusioned with the so-called reset of Russian-U.S. relations and was spooked by mass protest rallies in 2011 and 2012. By the time Vladimir Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012 to serve his third presidential term, he and key members of his entourage had become convinced that the United States was seeking to promote regime change in Russia. The only feasible countermeasure for the Kremlin was to actively push back and use all means at Russia's disposal. The Kremlin's new pattern of thinking viewed offense as the best defense; Russia would exploit various opportunities around the world to weaken its Western opponents and undercut their interests.

As Moscow embarks on this activist foreign policy, the number of flashpoints around the world where Russian and U.S. interests can clash is on the rise. Much attention has been paid to the Middle East and Europe as the top potential hotspots for incidents and conflict between the two powers. Russia intervened boldly in Syria to support the regime of President Bashar Assad and increased its cyber activities against the United States and European countries. There has also been a dramatic rise in Russian military aircraft encounters with civil and military planes in close proximity to the airspace of U.S. allies in NATO or Asia.

The post-Soviet space, however, is probably the most fertile ground for potential flashpoints between Russia and the United States. The risks of miscalculation and misunderstanding between Moscow and Washington in the republics of the former Soviet Union may be graver than in other hotspots because of the Kremlin and White House's asymmetry in capabilities and sensitivities in the region. Managing these flashpoints will require special attention from decisionmakers on both sides.

THE NEAR ABROAD COMES FIRST

Despite the attention on Russia's campaign in Syria and interference in Western politics, the post-Soviet space remains the Kremlin's most important foreign policy priority. It is no coincidence that, when it comes to actual using instruments from Russia's "old and new" geopolitical toolkit, the former Soviet republics were the first testing grounds for the Kremlin's information warfare and use of trade and energy flows as political tools, as well as targets for Russian military actions. These instruments are most effective in the republics of the former Soviet Union that have a geographic proximity to Russia (thus Moscow's ability to project force more efficiently), economic and resource dependency on their giant neighbor, and a local population susceptible to the influence

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of Russian state media (not RT but Russian TV networks like First Channel). The overconfident way that Moscow uses these tools also shows the importance of these former Soviet republics, which are called in Russia the “near abroad.” Their importance to the Russian leadership can be attributed primarily to three factors: emotional ties, security considerations, and national prestige.

On the emotional side, Russian leaders of Vladimir Putin’s generation have never fully adapted to the post-1991 reality, when former Soviet republics became independent nations. For people who were born, brought up, and rose through the ranks in the Soviet Union, its dissolution was never fully accepted. This is particularly true in their attitude toward large Slavic countries like Ukraine and Belarus, where a majority of the population is culturally close to Russia and speak Russian at home. Putin has publicly said on numerous occasions that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people.”¹ Policy toward Ukraine has been coordinated not by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs but by the President Administration’s Department of Internal Politics.² It acts as if Ukraine is one of Russia’s regions.

Security considerations are another reason for Moscow to maintain close ties with the former Soviet republics. For historical reasons, Moscow believes that Russia needs a buffer zone around it to feel protected from its adversaries. During the Soviet era, the communist states of Eastern Europe played this role vis-à-vis NATO forces in Europe. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and dissolution of the Soviet Union, Moscow sees the former Soviet republics as its new buffer zone, a security belt around Russian territory that provides the country “strategic depth.” The states that belong to the buffer zone, in the Kremlin’s view, should be aligned with Russia and form a Moscow-centered military bloc—that was the idea behind the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) established in 1992. If Moscow was unable to persuade a post-Soviet country to enter the CSTO, it required that the country shouldn’t join an alternative military alliance. Current members of the CSTO include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. The Baltic states, however, were recognized as part of the West.

Moscow views military threats from the West as part of its history going back centuries, and there is the legacy of NATO

as Russia’s primary enemy during the Cold War. This history led Moscow to secure the alignment or, at the very least, neutrality of Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, and the three republics of the South Caucasus—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Central Asian states worried Russia less throughout the 1990s. However, Moscow became concerned with U.S. military deployments in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, and it sought to have U.S. military facilities removed from the region.

The Russian military sees two major security risks from the potential accession of any of the former Soviet republics into NATO: the decreased flight time for NATO missiles targeting Russian territory, and a shift in NATO’s favor in the balance of power in conventional forces. At the same time, the Federal Security Service (FSB) views the territory of the post-Soviet republics as susceptible to U.S. efforts to sow separatism and instability in Russia. The fear is that such influence could lead to regime change and the possible breakup of the country through the exploitation of ethnic tensions.

National prestige is the third reason for Moscow to maintain close ties with the former Soviet republics. The Kremlin views Russia as one of the poles in the emerging multipolar world order. One of the attributes of a global power, in Moscow’s view, is having a group of dependent countries that constitute a “sphere of privileged interests” of this power.³ To be on par with the United States or China, Russia needs to have a sphere of influence, which should ideally be structured around a Moscow-led security organization and trading bloc. The former Soviet republics are candidates for inclusion in the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Aside from Russia, the EEU includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. For Moscow, keeping these countries in its orbit has become part of its effort to position itself as a great power.

Other factors for Moscow’s interest in the former Soviet republics include Russian business interests (including economies of the former Soviet Union as primary overseas markets for Russian products or important transit roads for Russian mineral exports to Europe), joint production chains connecting Russia with plants in the former Soviet republics, and the interests of Russian and Russian-speaking diasporas. When explaining why Moscow wants to secure the post-Soviet space

as a sphere of influence, these factors are secondary to the emotional ties, security considerations, and national prestige.

With Putin almost certain to be reelected to serve another six-year term as Russia's president in March 2018 (his last term, according to the current constitution), Moscow's policy toward its neighbors is unlikely to undergo any dramatic changes. The Kremlin will continue to push for deeper economic integration within the EEU. It is also likely to engage more actively with Uzbekistan, trying to entice that country into the EEU. In Eastern Europe, Moscow's top priority will be to keep Ukraine a failed state by providing military support to the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in eastern Ukraine.

AGREEMENT TO DISAGREE?

The United States doesn't recognize the republics of the former Soviet Union as Russia's sphere of influence because this concept is foreign to official U.S. foreign policy culture, which is centered around the idea of U.S.-led international liberal order.⁴ The publicly stated goals of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Soviet states was not to decrease Russian influence, but to help sustain these countries' independence and provide them with alternative options other than dependency on Russia.⁵ On issues such as former Soviet republics joining NATO or the EU, Washington has supported the principle that countries are free to choose their alliances and partnerships. This approach challenges the Russian vision for the post-Soviet space, creating the potential for a Russian-U.S. rivalry.

In practice, however, Russian-U.S. competition in the former Soviet Union wasn't preordained, and it took various forms and levels of intensity over the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia has been steadfast in its policies toward the near abroad. The only variable over the years has been the resources at the Kremlin's disposal to support its vision. The key driver for Russian-U.S. competition in the post-Soviet space has been the shifting priorities of various U.S. presidential administrations. This region occupied different spots on the priority lists of presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, but was never placed very high. For a variety of reasons—including geographic remoteness from the United States, the lack of major U.S. commercial interests, and no sizable domestic constituency in the United States that cares about the region—the post-Soviet space has never

been high on the list of U.S. national interests. Washington's engagement with these countries was limited and frequently driven not by a desire to shape the region but by other challenges of the day. For example, if not for the post-9/11 war on terror, the United States wouldn't have deployed troops to Central Asia in order to support U.S. efforts in Afghanistan.

The United States became more seriously engaged in these regions under Bush, when Washington supported the civic movements in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan that resulted in so-called color revolutions, and also supported the provision of NATO Membership Action Plans (MAP) for Kiev and Tbilisi. Under Obama, policy made a U-turn and the post-Soviet space was deprioritized. Decreased U.S. presence in this part of the world was a natural consequence of the Obama doctrine,⁶ with the White House focusing on both reducing the Iraq and Afghanistan military campaigns as well as strategically engaging in a rebalance toward Asia. Other priorities for the Obama administration included improving relations with Cuba and negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran. Until Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Washington's role had been more reactive than active. Under President Donald Trump, the situation has not changed much. It doesn't look like the Trump administration is particularly interested in the post-Soviet space beyond managing the current conflict in Ukraine and maintaining symbolic support for principles of U.S. policy toward these countries.⁷ It is very difficult to imagine that any U.S. administration will be ready to commit more resources to address the challenges facing the post-Soviet space. The only exception might be Ukraine, as it is the most acute security crisis in Europe. But even there, one shouldn't expect any administration in Washington to devote substantial foreign aid or military assistance to Kiev or to enforce the implementation of the Minsk Agreement.

Ironically, this deep-seated asymmetry provides some room for easing tensions between Russia and the United States in the post-Soviet space. The importance that Moscow attaches to the republics of the former Soviet Union far outstrips Washington's interest in this region, as does Russia's resolve to impose its vision or at least to prevent worst case scenarios from happening. The Kremlin operates with a far bigger toolkit in this region, including the military, and is ready to use it when it feels that Russian national interests are about

to be undermined. In theory, that may allow both powers to find a *modus vivendi* in the post-Soviet space. However, this vision could occur only under the assumption that decisionmakers in both Moscow and Washington are rational in their understanding of the costs that a possible confrontation would entail and would choose pragmatism over blind support of principles. Another important assumption is that both powers are on the same page when it comes to understanding each other's motives, as well as developments in the region. The reality, however, is different. The principle risks for Russian-U.S. relations in the post-Soviet space come from the different analytical perspectives found in Moscow and Washington.

UNDERSTANDING . . . BUT REALLY MISUNDERSTANDING

On the Russian side, poor understanding of U.S. foreign policy and domestic politics results in grave miscalculations and appears to be the major risk factor that increases the potential for Russian-U.S. clashes, including in the post-Soviet space.

In particular, Moscow appears to be systematically misinterpreting U.S. policy goals. The Kremlin and wider groups in the Russian bureaucracy as well as in the analytical community appear to believe that the United States has a long-term strategy to dominate the post-Soviet space. According to this view, Washington wants to push Russia out of the region and create a string of Western-oriented regimes on Russia's borders that will contain Moscow, and can be used as a springboard to sow chaos in the country. Various moves by the United States are interpreted steps in a strategic plan to "steal" the country from the Russian regime, while in fact they might be just an ad hoc reaction to a crisis of the day or a small step that symbolizes adherence to U.S. principles but doesn't have any real follow-up.

Russian analyses of the events that led to protests in Kiev in the fall of 2013 and later to the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine are good examples. Multiple in-depth interviews conducted by this author with Russian diplomats, security officials, and bureaucrats dealing with economic aspects of relations with Ukraine show that the Russian side was fully convinced that the protests on Maidan Square in Kiev were part of a sophisticated Western operation. The United States, according to the narrative, was humiliated

by Russia's diplomatic victories of 2013—Ukraine's reversal toward signing a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the EU and the Russian diplomatic intervention in Syria that led to Syria giving up its chemical munitions. The view in Moscow was that Washington wanted to pay Moscow back by stirring unrest in Ukraine, overthrowing then president Viktor Yanukovich, and then swiftly bringing Ukraine into the Western camp. Public statements by Western leaders, high-profile visits from U.S. and EU officials supporting the protesters, and private conversations intercepted by Russian intelligence were seen as proof of an existing Western conspiracy. Senior Russian officials view the annexation of Crimea and instigation of hostilities in eastern Ukraine as defensive actions. This view is widespread among various echelons of the Russian state, and is dominant in the expert community.⁸

The misunderstanding of U.S. policies in the post-Soviet space is part of broader phenomena: the degradation of area expertise in Russia, and the increased confirmation biases in the top leadership. According to interviews, fewer alternative voices are reaching the Kremlin now and, after 2014, the problem of getting analysis right has become more acute because of post-Crimea consensus in the Russian expert community. Voices that challenge the main analytical lines, such as the perpetual hostility of the United States toward Russia and Putin's regime, are marginalized. There is self-censorship in the government too, with many knowledgeable analysts and high-level officials deliberately hiding their real opinions and instead working to confirm the preexisting views of their bosses. This political trend is amplified by negative trends in the Russian expert community, including in U.S.-watching. Fewer people are going abroad to interact on a serious level and bring back an accurate picture of the decisionmaking process in the United States.

The result is that the Kremlin is getting a distorted picture of U.S. foreign policies where intelligence agencies and an anti-Russian "deep state" are calling the shots. In this worldview, every limited action and every statement of the United States is put in a context that alarms conspiratorially minded Russian decisionmakers and provokes a reaction.

Moscow has other problems. The government is poorly equipped to understand the post-Soviet countries. Part of

the reason is the perception of these countries as not fully sovereign states. Another reason is the deceptive simplicity of understanding these countries for a Russian-speaking diplomat, intelligence operative, or expert: Russian is the lingua franca in the former Soviet Union and many people, particularly in senior government positions, share the Soviet cultural code, so it's all too easy to think that this is sufficient and one doesn't need to study the local language or non-Russian version of local history in order to understand local dynamics. As a result, Moscow doesn't properly understand many developments on the ground, and it ties events that it views as hostile to actions of the United States. The Kremlin's view of the Maidan protests as a Western-sponsored attempt at a color revolution instead of a locally driven protest against Yanukovich that united various actors with different motivations is a good illustration. Since Moscow is poorly equipped to fully grasp the transformation on the ground, it is doomed to misunderstand and misinterpret these developments in a logic that increases prospects for Russian-U.S. conflict. Moscow may become hostage to events beyond its or America's control without being fully aware of that, and driving wrong conclusions followed by a wrong set of countermeasures.

Finally, the internal changes in Russian foreign policy making are creating additional risks. Since 2014, the role of the Russian intelligence community and the Russian military in the formulation of foreign policy is on the rise, and this is true for Moscow's policy toward the post-Soviet space as well. The FSB and military intelligence, the GRU, have become increasingly important in assessing the situation in the near abroad as well as framing policy. These institutions have a culture of deep-seated anti-Americanism, as well as bureaucratic interests to create an oversized threat perception by the senior decisionmakers in order to combat the U.S. threat. On the U.S. side, the current political environment is providing fertile ground for small symbolic moves like support for local liberal NGOs, meetings with local authorities by State Department or Pentagon officials, accompanied by statements that the U.S. will not allow Russia to dominate in its neighborhood. These statements and steps can be purely political stances without much strategic thinking or any follow-up actions or resources, but they still can be interpreted by Russia as part of a plot to undermine Moscow's position.

FLASHPOINTS

Which parts of the post-Soviet space have the most potential to become new flashpoints in the Russian-U.S. rivalry or exacerbate preexisting tensions?

The single most important and dangerous region is Ukraine. The eastern part of the country is controlled by Russian-backed rebels, and Ukraine's overall political and economic situation is still very fragile. The peace process centered around implementation of the Minsk Agreement is stuck, which creates a potentially explosive environment. The government of President Petro Poroshenko cannot and will not be able to fully implement its part of the agreement, because many demands of the Minsk document (such as amnesty for the rebels that took part in the hostilities) are unacceptable to Ukrainian society. Moscow and the rebels in turn will not rush to implement their part of the agreement, including return of control of the border to Ukrainian authorities. Ambiguity and lack of progress in implementation of the Minsk Agreement has led to ongoing hostilities in the conflict zones and casualties. Trying to lower the number of casualties while at the same time not implementing its obligations under the agreement, Moscow has proposed a UN peacekeeping mission to the conflict zone. This proposal, however, is likely to be rejected by Kiev and the West because of its narrow mandate.

The impasse in Donbas could lead to a new spike in hostilities at any time. Moscow is in a precarious situation. The senior leadership doesn't want to increase hostilities in eastern Ukraine because blame for that may be put on Russia and lead to additional sanctions. However, the dominant fear in Moscow is that there are many players in Ukraine that might be interested in intensified violence and provoke an increase in violence. According to this widespread view, many of Ukraine's volunteer battalions have their own agendas, while the central government may want to provoke new tensions to distract the West's attention from its lack of progress in a variety of domestic reforms. Growing political tensions inside Ukraine may also tempt Poroshenko's team to distract Ukrainian society by rallying the population around the flag.

In this toxic atmosphere, U.S. moves can be interpreted as very disruptive. The Trump administration's December 2017 decision to approve lethal weapons sales to Ukraine is viewed

in Moscow with increased concern. The Russian government's reaction so far has been dispassionate. However, the current dynamics of the Ukrainian crisis suggest that future small-scale sales of U.S. arms and other symbolic measures demonstrating support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and ability to defend itself might stir tensions with Russia. Many actors inside Russia, particularly the military and the security services, will be tempted to portray these moves as yet another indication of U.S. hostility toward Russia that deserves a policy response from Moscow, either in Ukraine or elsewhere.

Developments in Ukrainian domestic politics constitute another potential flashpoint for Moscow and Washington. Presidential elections in Ukraine are scheduled for March 2019, and the intense fighting between Petro Poroshenko and his domestic opponents is increasing, as mass protest rallies in December 2017 have shown. Moscow doesn't have a candidate to support, but it might be tempted to destabilize the situation further. At the same time, the possibility of mass opposition rallies resulting in a serious political crisis in Ukraine, including possible street violence, remains high. Given the very low trust between the Russian and U.S. governments, an unpredictable situation in Ukraine may lead to further aggravation of Russian-U.S. ties.

The rest of the post-Soviet space, as seen from Moscow, appears to be far less threatening in the next six years when it comes to competition with the United States. Nevertheless, developments in two other countries that are moving closer to the West are a constant source of attention in the Kremlin. The first is Moldova, which is scheduled to have parliamentary elections in fall 2018. Tensions between Moldovan strongman and chairman of the Democratic Party Vladimir Plakhotnyuk and Moscow are growing. In August 2017, the Moldovan government declared Russian Vice-Premier Dmitry Rogozin *persona non grata*,⁹ and, in December, Russia retaliated by issuing an arrest warrant for Plakhotnyuk for allegedly preparing to kill Moldovan businessman Renato Usaty.¹⁰ Plakhotnyuk is positioning himself and the government of his loyalists as a pro-Western force that is battling the pro-Russian camp of President Igor Dodon. The parliamentary elections will be centered around this narrative of geopolitical competition between Russia and the West. Moscow is interested in weakening Plakhotnyuk's grip on power and might

be willing to help the opposition by throwing compromising materials in the public domain or supporting opposition rallies. Moscow doesn't expect massive involvement in Moldova from Washington, at least under the Trump administration.

The second country on the frontline between Russia and the West is Georgia. However, the situation there appears to be more stable than in Moldova, and thus raises less potential to fuel a new rift between Moscow and Washington in the near future. The most powerful and the richest person in the country, businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, controls the ruling coalition, Georgian Dream, that won 115 of 150 parliamentary seats in the 2016 elections. Tbilisi's policy toward Russia has become more pragmatic compared to the previous government under former president Mikheil Saakashvili. The country has signed a DCFTA with the EU and enjoys a visa-free regime with Europe, but deeper military integration with NATO is not in the cards for now. Implementation of its association agreement with the EU has not brought immediate benefits for the bulk of the population. The Russian leadership is ready to live with a Georgia that, while slowly drifting away from Russia, is not coming under the EU or NATO's umbrella any time soon. The situation is stable in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia recognizes both as independent states, and they are heavily dependent on Moscow for security and economic development. Georgia will elect its president in 2018 but, unlike Moldova, this election will not be a battleground for pro-Russian and pro-Western candidates.

Two other states of the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, are unlikely to become major flashpoints for Russia and the United States in the near future. The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh remains one of the frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space that has the largest potential to unfreeze,¹¹ illustrated by the spike in fighting between Armenian and Azeri troops in 2016. Moscow and Washington are not directly taking sides in this conflict and are not interested in escalation. Beyond Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation in these two countries looks to favor Russia more than a decade ago. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the United States has supported the development of hydrocarbons in Azerbaijan and the wider Caspian region, as well as the construction of oil and gas pipelines from this region that bypass Russia. The

rivalry over transit routes for hydrocarbons in what the EU has dubbed the Southern Corridor has been an important flashpoint for Moscow and Washington during the last two decades. Baku, with its growing ambitions due to increased flow of oil money, wanted to distance itself from Russia and build closer ties to the West. However, these ambitions are diminished and Baku, with authoritarian tendencies on the rise, has become increasingly suspicious of the United States and the EU. Interest in this region is also weaker both in the United States and Europe as a result of the shale oil and gas revolution, and the slump in commodity prices. The Azeri leadership doesn't embrace Russian entreaties for deeper integration under an EEU umbrella, but also keeps the West at arms-length for alleged interference in its domestic affairs.

Armenia faces an unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan and has tense relations (and a closed border) with Turkey. Russia remains Armenia's key security and economic partner and, though Yerevan may not be fully happy about its dependency on Russia, the country has few viable options. Moscow appears to be satisfied with the status quo, since Armenia is formally a member in both Russian-led integration institutions. The Kremlin successfully exercises its veto power over Yerevan's foreign policy choices like the signing of the DCFTA with the EU in 2013, which was cancelled at Moscow's request. Over the last couple of years, Armenia has continued to hand over control of the country's key economic assets to Russian entities, fortifying Moscow's grip on the country in the near term (though this is a source of discontent among young and educated Armenians, which will harm relations with Russia in the longer run).

The situation in Belarus somewhat resembles the state of affairs in Armenia. So far, the country is firmly in Russia's orbit and President Alexander Lukashenko's tactical maneuvering between Moscow and the West can hardly change this fact. Minsk is very uncomfortable with its increased dependency on Russia. This dependency is caused by the poor shape of the Belarussian economy and the strained relationship with the West due to its regime's authoritarian nature. Lukashenko was alarmed by the annexation of Crimea, the war in eastern Ukraine, and Russian politicians playing with the so-called Russian World (Russky Mir) concept. Minsk tried to improve its relations with the EU and the United States, to the extent

that the EU in 2017 revoked some sanctions against Belarus and the president himself in exchange for limited domestic liberalization. In November 2017, Lukashenko, once dubbed Europe's last dictator, was invited to join the EU's Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels. He preferred, however, to snub the event so as not to upset Moscow (he also felt that there would be no economic carrots, only symbolic photo opportunities).¹² Against this background, and with the stability of the Lukashenko regime, Belarus is not an obvious candidate for list of potential Russian-U.S. flashpoints.

Under the Bush and Obama administrations, the five states of Central Asia became one of the hotspots for increased Russian-U.S. rivalry, spurred by the introduction of a U.S. military presence in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to support NATO operations in Afghanistan. There was also geo-economic competition, centered around U.S. and European efforts to unlock Trans-Caspian transit routes for hydrocarbons from Central Asia to flow westward bypassing Russia. Right now, both of these issues are out of the picture and the region doesn't seem to be very high on the U.S. agenda. The shale revolution has significantly lowered the West's interest in Central Asia's hydrocarbon resources, and the current oil price doesn't justify expensive and risky pipeline projects. A flashpoint between Moscow and Washington would emerge if the United States attempted to deploy any troops to the region to support efforts in Afghanistan. However, the new Afghan war strategy announced by Trump in August 2017 doesn't suggest a massive increase in troops numbers and arguably won't require the revival of the Northern Distribution Network.¹³

Conditions on the ground in Central Asia are also not very enticing for the United States. Unlike two decades ago, this region now has a significant new player from the great powers' club—China. At the turn of the century, Beijing was still abiding by leader Deng Xiaoping's mantra of "hiding brightness and nurturing obscurity," and chose to keep a low profile in the region. Back then, China supported Russia in its reaction toward U.S. military deployments in the region. Now, China is the leading investor and top economic partner of all five Central Asian states and is also pushing its Belt and Road Initiative, President Xi Jinping's flagship international project that will fortify China's geoeconomic role in the Eurasian landmass. The five countries of the region increasingly

have to maneuver between Russia as the old hegemon and an increasingly confident China. But on the issue of Washington's presence in Central Asia, both Moscow and Beijing would oppose any plans to locate U.S. troops in the region. The local countries would not take the risk of approving such a deployment fearing joint Sino-Russian displeasure.

Despite differences in local conditions in all five countries, none of them provide an easy inroad for more U.S. influence. Authoritarian Kazakhstan and democratic Kyrgyzstan remain in Russia's orbit; both are members of the EEU and the CSTO. The Kazakh leadership would like to pursue a multi-directional foreign policy and would like to see more Western involvement in the region. However, Astana understands that the resources the United States and the EU can commit to the region are limited and that interest in Central Asia in Western capitals is low. The countries of the region will need to face their two giant neighbors—China and Russia. The authoritarian nature of Kazakhstan's regime also prevents it from moving closer to the West, despite growing concern when it comes to relations with Russia. There was much nervousness in Kazakhstan after Russia's annexation of Crimea. Moscow has skillfully played its military strengths and used the local Russian population in its dealings with Kazakhstan. Kyrgyzstan doesn't have the problem of authoritarianism and has experience hosting a U.S. air base in Manas, but the potential for any meaningful cooperation between Bishkek and Washington is very low.

Tajikistan's relations with Moscow are now increasingly problematic and the list of bilateral grievances is mounting,¹⁴ but the country's authoritarian dictator, Emomali Rahmon, has little of value to offer the United States and his trust in the West is very low. Despite increasing tensions with Moscow, Dushanbe is still part of the CSTO and heavily dependent on remittances sent back home from Russia by migrant workers. The alternative partner to decrease Tajik dependency on Russia is now China, not the United States.

Uzbekistan is undergoing transformations after successfully transitioning power in 2016 from Islam Karimov, who ruled the country with an iron fist for a quarter century, to President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The death of one of the most brutal dictators in this part of the world didn't produce any challenge to Russia's interests. Tashkent is very carefully

dismantling the isolationist legacy of Karimov, whose ambitions significantly constrained Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbors and great powers alike. Mirziyoyev has placed a visible emphasis on improving relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors. He visited Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan before going to any of the major powers. His first major-power destination was Moscow in April 2017, then the next month he visited Beijing, and in September he made a trip to the United States to attend the UN General Assembly in New York, where he met Trump for the second time (their first meeting took place in Saudi Arabia).¹⁵ On December 19, 2017, Trump and Mirziyoyev had a phone call and, according to the White House readout, discussed "President Trump's South Asia strategy and United States efforts in Afghanistan."¹⁶ However, details of the initial conversations between Washington and Tashkent are scarce, and there is hardly much room for a partnership between the two countries that would endanger Russia's interests. Moscow is actively courting Tashkent trying to revive its full CSTO membership (Uzbekistan quit the organization in 2012) and hopes to attract it into the EEU. However, it is almost certain that Tashkent will prefer to keep freedom of movement, improving its bilateral economic and military ties to Russia but not formally joining Moscow-led blocs since they would limit its maneuvering space vis-à-vis China. Despite these developments, it is very unlikely that the superficial dialogue between the United States and Uzbekistan will cause concern in Moscow.

Turkmenistan is the most isolated country in the whole post-Soviet space. Relations between Ashgabat and Moscow have never fully recovered from the aftermath of the 2009 gas conflict, when Gazprom stopped purchasing Turkmen gas citing a pipeline explosion and then forced Turkmenistan to renegotiate its contract by dramatically decreasing the price and volume that Gazprom was obliged to buy from Turkmen gas on take-or-pay conditions. In 2016, Gazprom stopped purchasing Turkmen gas citing disagreements over the price,¹⁷ and Gazprom later sued Turkmen gas in the Stockholm arbitration court demanding \$5 billion in lost revenues.¹⁸ Putin visited Ashgabat in October 2017, but his talks with President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov didn't result in any agreement on the gas issue.¹⁹ On the military cooperation side, however, Moscow and Ashgabat appear to do better. Russia fretted after Turkmenistan declined Moscow's offer to help the country to

defend its border with Afghanistan, but Russian Minister of Defense Sergey Shoygu's visit to Ashgabat in summer 2016 appears to have eased those tensions—at least, there are no public complaints coming from the Russian side any more.²⁰

TOWARD A MORE STABLE RELATIONSHIP

This brief examination of the post-Soviet space reveals that, despite the increasingly toxic nature of the Russian-U.S. relationship, there are few places where clearly defined sets of interests and policies look like flashpoints for a potential conflict. Despite the principal difference between Moscow's view of the post-Soviet space as a sphere of Russian privileged interests and the United States's support for independence and liberal choice in the former Soviet republics, the relatively low position of these states on the United States's foreign policy agenda and Trump's lack of interest in the region make a conflict less likely in the near future.

The only serious exception is Ukraine, where the conflict between Russian and U.S. security interests is combined with the volatile domestic politics of Ukraine. What makes the situation more dangerous is the two sides' different priority levels regarding the Ukrainian crisis. For Moscow, keeping the status quo and not compromising on the results of the war and Crimea's annexation are key goals, and the Kremlin is ready to tolerate greater pains (both from economic sanctions as well as military confrontation) to sustain its victory. The United States is not happy about the current stalemate around Ukraine, but Washington can live with it because no core U.S. interests are affected. To protect its principles and attach a price tag to Russian behavior, the United States is ready for some small-scale measures like the sale of lethal weapons. While these measures may not ultimately change the situation on the ground, they can be misinterpreted by Russia.

The zero-sum view of regional security in Eurasia and the irresolvable structural differences between Russia and the United States would be less of a problem if two countries were not viewing each other as an increasingly high priority. This is particularly true on the Russian side, but also progressively more on the American side. The most dangerous element now is potential clash of emotionally charged visions that are rooted in a long list of mutual grievances. On the Russian side, these grievances include alleged U.S. attempts to encircle

Russia with enemy states and change Putin's regime. On the U.S. side, there is the alleged crusade of Putin against the international liberal order and Western democracy—which is viewed by some members of the U.S. foreign policy establishment and media as yet another episode in the eternal struggle between forces of freedom and authoritarianism. The misunderstandings and fraught emotions among decisionmakers in both powers are creating a dangerous atmosphere, where both countries start to see the other as the source of all its troubles. Thus, the inevitability of confrontation and conflict becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Against this background, a potential flashpoint may emerge nearly anywhere, and the post-Soviet space looks like very fertile ground for a clash.

A durable solution would require either (or both) of the sides to change their long-held views. For the United States, the intellectual challenge looks particularly great, since it would require U.S. foreign policy to be divorced from its idealistic and liberal elements and be based on a realist paradigm. The U.S. foreign policy community would need to come to a consensus view on the concept of sovereignty and its universal application to all countries unless otherwise mandated by the UN Security Council. If the United States doesn't recognize sovereignty and promotes its values in other countries disregarding the desires of local governments, it shouldn't be surprised that other powers will do the same in America. The foreign policy establishment will also need to review what forms of democracy promotion and support for local pro-democracy forces actually contribute to building successful democracies in the long run without endangering U.S. security interests. This is particularly true in countries that are close to non-democratic great powers like China and Russia or where these powers have national interests. The United States may come to the conclusion that only its demonstrative example will have transformative effect on other powers. Supporting nominally pro-democracy political forces without conditionality in the post-Soviet space doesn't necessarily lead to the establishment of democracy in these countries, and it only fuels Russian suspicions and adds to tensions with Moscow.

On the Russian side, Moscow needs to fundamentally rethink the foundations of its foreign and security policies, as well as the relationship with its neighbors. The Russian foreign

policy establishment needs to answer two simple questions: Why are countries around Russia trying to hedge their bets and distance themselves from Russia? And what's the benefit of trying to keep the post-Soviet republics in Russia's orbit as opposed to the costs, and could these resources be spent by Russia in a smarter way? Once Russia recognizes the existence of its neighbors as sovereign states—though heavily dependent on Russia as a large and strong neighbor—and the natural desire of local populations (particularly the elites) to be on their own and not follow the Kremlin's command, it will be also easier to understand that these countries can't be reintegrated into Russia and that the costs of trying to do so far outstrip the benefits. Russia must understand that its security can be guaranteed by the technical sophistication of its military (and the need for an innovative economy to support its high-tech arms industry) and that Western societies have an increasingly low tolerance for casualties. Natural resources that previously were part of the reason foreign powers invaded Russia are also changing in value. Last, but not least, challenging the belief that great-power status requires a dependent periphery would also help Russia recalibrate its foreign policy. This type of pragmatic policy would also most likely require changes to Russia's authoritarian political system.

Since fundamental transformations in Russia and in the United States are equally unrealistic, both sides should concentrate on measures that prevent risks from exacerbating tensions. In order to achieve a less confrontational policy toward the United States in former Soviet republics, it is critical that Russia increase its expertise on both the post-Soviet space and the United States.

Moscow should create financial and career incentives for diplomats and intelligence officers to encourage pursuing at least part of their career in the former Soviet republics; make study of local languages and history mandatory; have Russian embassies and intelligence services broaden their list of contacts to include the opposition and forces that are considered anti-Russian; have local embassies increase their interactions with diplomatic missions from the United States and its allies; and broaden its contacts with the U.S. expert community, members of Congress, and their staffers in order to put official government policy in the proper context. Both sides would benefit enormously from Track 1.5-format efforts

dedicated to the post-Soviet space, where the Russian participants would be instructed to be more direct about the real goals and concerns of Moscow, as well try to look for mutually acceptable solutions instead of voicing the party line.

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U.S.-RUSSIA POLICY OPTIONS FOR THE LONG HAUL

With the U.S.-Russian relationship badly frayed, what are the biggest risks for escalation, deterioration, and miscalculation? What, if any, opportunities exist for halting a continued downward slide?

With an eye toward informing the conversation about key issues in U.S.-Russian relations, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace has commissioned a series of analytical papers by leading U.S., Russian, and European experts and practitioners to take a cold-eyed look at these challenges.

Building on the work of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—Chicago Council on Global Affairs Task Force on U.S. Policy Toward Russian, Ukraine, and Eurasia, these papers seek to better inform the conversation about U.S.-Russian relations and to expand the range of

perspectives beyond the relatively narrow confines of the current discussion in Washington and other capitals. The papers highlight the glaring differences between Russian and Western approaches to and perspectives on transatlantic, European, and Eurasian security.

The search for mutual understanding and dialogue is all the more challenging at a time when many of the long-established communication channels between Moscow and the West have been suspended as a result of what is increasingly described as a new cold war. Many of the perspectives in this collection differ, at times fundamentally, from the consensus view held by Western policymakers and analysts. Nevertheless, it is all the more vital for policymakers, analysts, and opinion-makers in the West to be informed about views held by their Russian counterparts, as these views oftentimes reflect and inform official Russian policy. This project is supported, in part, by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.



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