

Russia's Neighbors and the West

An ever-more assertive Russia spells trouble for the region



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Alexander Motyl | As the West's relations with Russia worsen, both sides have reverted to a kind of geopolitical thinking that is anachronistic today. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought into existence a plethora of post-Communist states with specific interests and identities. Their stability is critical to both the West and Russia.

It was probably inevitable that relations between formerly imperial Russia and its ex-satrapies would be rocky. Russia's neighbors wanted maximum independence from their former master; they wanted to define their states and identities as different from, if not in opposition to, Russia. Russian elites, in contrast, wanted to retain as many of the old ties as possible and to continue to exercise influence in the near abroad. Complicating relations was the continued economic dependence of most post-Communist states on Russia—in terms of trade and, especially, energy. Of course, Russia also possessed nuclear weapons. Not surprisingly, many former Eastern Bloc states sought membership in NATO and the European Union as the best safeguard against a resurgent Russian empire.

For much of the 1990s, relations between Russia and its neighbors were unpredictable—sometimes tense, sometimes warm. These states were primarily concerned with enlarging their economies and reestablishing some degree of order at home. With the onset of the twenty-first century, that uncertainty began to change. President Putin succeeded in reestablishing strong central control in Russia and, as he moved toward full-fledged authoritarianism, he began to invoke nationalist and great-power rhetoric in order to provide his rule with legitimacy. Both found resonance among Russians looking for an escape from the trauma of imperial collapse.

But fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, Russia's neighbors have become self-confident, au-

onomous states. The east-central Europeans and Baltics have joined NATO and the European Union. But even farther east non-Russian populations increasingly identified with their new states. Effective political institutions were beginning to take root, and economies had recovered, in some cases fueled by the development of energy resources. The irony was that Russian great-power ambitions began to revive just as the post-Soviet states were least inclined to welcome them.

A New Cold War?

The West's relations with Russia, while hardly without difficulties in the 1990s, began deteriorating with the start of the new millennium for several reasons.

First, Putin explicitly pursued an agenda of centralizing power, strengthening the Russian state, and reestablishing Russian authority in the near abroad. Putin stoked Russia's nationalism, and revived a variety of great-power policies toward the non-Russian states. It became increasingly difficult to argue that Western interests could intersect with those of a muscle-flexing Russia willing to use energy as a weapon in the promotion of its interests.

Second, the Bush administration's mismanagement of Iraq worsened America's relations with its western European allies. Moscow was thus able to pursue its traditional Cold War policy of encouraging European autonomy vis-à-vis the United States.

Third, the colored revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan exposed the fragility of authoritarian political orders and of Russian political dominance in the former Soviet

states. The desire of Georgia and Ukraine to join Europe also confronted the Europeans with an acute dilemma. France and Germany had no choice but to welcome Georgia and Ukraine's democratic and European aspirations, but they desperately did not want to incorporate such poor states into an over-stretched European Union or to offer them the next-best alternative, membership in NATO, for fear of annoying Russia.

Finally, the rise in oil prices allowed Moscow to exploit its energy resources and play an increasingly assertive role in world politics. Russia, feeling its new clout, began to resist American hegemony and extend its influence into western Europe and the near abroad.

The upshot of all four factors is the emergence of an assertive Russia, a chastened America, and a fearful Europe. Not surprisingly, the United States and Europe have become increasingly concerned with Putin's leadership. The Americans are generally less willing to accommodate Russia's interests than the Europeans. Part of the reason for this difference may be political-cultural—with Americans being from Mars and the Europeans from Venus—but most can be persuasively explained by Europe's geopolitical proximity and energy dependence.

But a new Cold War is impossible. Russia is still a very weak state. Putin has encouraged hyper-nationalism, neo-imperialism, and xenophobia, but these are features of a leadership inclined to talk loudly while carrying a

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small stick. Such a Russia could cause trouble, but only if other states allow it to do so.

A cold war is also impossible because the West is no longer monolithic, and it is no longer under the undisputed leadership of the United States. France and Germany have very different interests from those of the United States—at least at present. Finally, a

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cold war is impossible because the United States, western Europe, and Russia are no longer the only players in Eurasia. The other post-Communist states have now come into existence, and who they are and how they behave will have an enormous impact on US-European-Russian relations.

The Indispensable Nations

The post-Soviet states are central to the West's relations with Russia for six reasons.

First, they serve as buffer states between the West and Russia. Their geopolitical location means that the security interests of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine and the security sensitivities of Poland and the Baltic states must be taken into account in any effort to promote stable security relations between Russia and the West. If the states in between are neglected, or slighted, they will respond by pursuing their security interests without regard for the impact on Russian-Western relations.

Second, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary serve as transit corridors for Russian and Azerbaijani energy to Europe. Azerbaijan, Kazakh-

stan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have large energy resources that could fetch high prices on world markets. These states therefore have substantial leverage vis-à-vis Russia and the West. Thus far, they have not taken advantage of that leverage, preferring instead to pursue cooperative or quiescent policies. But, if their security interests continue to be neglected, if they get increasingly nervous, they may use their pipelines or their energy to their own advantage.

Third, some of the post-Communist states are brittle and, if destabilized, could have threatening consequences for Russia. Belarus may be most fragile, having experienced the least systemic change and being ruled by a dictator whose legitimacy may be eroding. Sooner or later, Belarus will experience some kind of turmoil and Russia will feel the effects. Turkmenistan has thus far survived the death of the Turkmenbashi, but it would be unrealistic to expect such an unabashedly totalitarian state not to experience some sort of instability in the aftermath of a great leader's demise. Once that happens, Russia's own gas supplies, which depend greatly on purchases from Turkmenistan, will be disrupted. Moldova and Georgia are wracked with secessionist tensions—in no small measure due to Russia's meddling—and the last thing Russia needs is more intractable Chechen-like conflicts.

Fourth, the more stable and secure Russia's neighbors are, the more stable and secure Russia will be itself. The Baltic states achieved stability and security by joining NATO and the European Union. Ukraine and Kazakhstan are growing economically and main-

taining inter-ethnic amity. As a result, Russian populations in all these states face secure futures, and Russia's relations with these states can be built on mutually advantageous principles. Georgia offers a cautionary example of why instability is bad for Russia. Not only are Moscow's efforts to destabilize Georgia breeding ill-will, but it is not at all clear just how a destabilized Georgia could possibly enhance Russia's own security—especially in a region that is already beset by regional conflicts and interethnic violence.

Fifth, Russia's instability could affect non-Russians, both because Russia is more likely to be unstable and because its size would produce far greater ripple effects. A seemingly strong leader such as Putin does not, despite his assurances to the contrary, translate into a strong state. The experience of other authoritarian leaders with unrealistic dreams of glory suggests as much. Worse, this weak and potentially unstable Russia appears to have decided that it actually has the power to impose its will on post-Soviet states. But overreach—talking loudly while carrying a small and increasingly smaller stick—would not just destabilize Russia by entailing a massive expenditure of resources that it just does not possess.

The sixth and final reason why the West should show interest in the post-Soviet states is that these countries are beginning to define their own historical and cultural identities. The more Russians and their elites identify themselves as a great power destined to rule over the near abroad, the more the non-Russian nations in the near abroad will define themselves in opposition to Russia. Even Belarus's dic-

tator, Alexander Lukashenko, who has placed union with Russia at the top of his foreign policy agenda, has adopted nationalist language and reinvented himself as a defender of Belarusian sovereignty in response to Gazprom's heavy-handed renegotiation of energy prices.

The Challenge for the West

The United States and Europe would do well to appreciate the following realities:

They must understand that encouraging Russia to play an assertive role will only promote Russia's overreach and, thus, destabilization.

They must also understand that the post-Communist states hold the key to stability and security in Eurasia and thus to stable and mutually beneficial Western relations with Russia. An increasingly authoritarian, nationalistic, and brittle Russia needs a stable and peaceful neighborhood. And that neighborhood can be stable and peaceful only if the security interests of the non-Russian states are taken into account and they themselves are stable and peaceful.

Since Russia cannot be counted on to promote stable and secure relations in its neighborhood, the United States and Europe have no alternative but to promote stability and security in those parts of the former empire where their influence still matters.

There are several ways in which the West can promote stability and security in the non-Russian states without needlessly aggravating Russians. First on the list is the development of a unified European energy

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policy framework that would integrate the post-Communist energy-producing and energy-transporting states. Europe's energy security depends on theirs, and vice versa.

Second is energy diversification. Europe must become less dependent on Russian energy, but so too must Russia's substantially more vulnerable neighbors, both those that use

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Russian oil and gas and those that rely on Russian transport corridors for exports of

their own oil and gas. Only a Europe united by and committed to a European energy policy framework will have the resources to build trans-Caspian pipelines to circumvent Russia.

Third is keeping the door to eventual EU membership open to such critical countries as Ukraine.

In all these respects, the Europeans must either take the lead or, at the very least, play a proactive role. The strategic disaster in Iraq has un-

dermined the legitimacy of US leadership. US ability to exercise influence will be in doubt as long as that legitimacy remains low. Ironically, a weaker, chastened America will actually be better positioned to nudge its European allies in the right direction. Such an America will also make it more difficult for its detractors in the post-Communist states to argue that Russia has no choice but to resist American hegemony. And such an America will make it far easier for its supporters in the post-Communist states to claim that their countries' security can only be enhanced by closer integration into the West.

Russia's neighbors played a central role in overthrowing Communism. They can again play a role in liberalizing and democratizing Russia today. They can make Russia both stable and secure. But for that to happen, the West—Europe and the United States—must help make them stable and secure.