

There Goes the Neighborhood: The Limits of Russian Integration in Eurasia

Paul Stronski | July 2020

Summary

Since 2014 the Kremlin has redoubled efforts to build a sphere of influence, operating frequently under the flag of Eurasian integration. The Kremlin's undeclared war in Ukraine and hard ball tactics vis-a-vis other neighbors demonstrate the lengths to which Russia is willing to go to undermine its neighbors' independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. Russia has pushed hard to expand the membership and functions of the EurAsian Economic Union (EAEU), the formal vehicle for cross-regional integration of political and economic activity. However, Moscow's limited economic resources, its lack of soft power appeal, engagement with the region by other outside powers, including Europe, China, Turkey, and the United States, as well as societal change in neighboring states are creating significant long-term obstacles to the success of Russian neo-imperialist ambitions and exposing a large gap between ends and means.

Moscow's ambitions in Eurasia are buffeted by a number of unfavorable trends that are frequently overlooked amid widespread worry about new waves of upheaval and regional conflict triggered by heavy-handed Russian behavior: e.g.,

- Belarus is too dependent on Russia to break with it outright, but it has successfully resisted Russia's push for closer integration and expanded its ties to the West. The vast majority of Belarusians now oppose outright unification with Russia.
- Long one of Russia's closest allies, Armenia has been redefining that relationship in the wake of the 2018 Velvet Revolution in which civil society activists overthrew a Russian-friendly regime. Today the public increasingly resents Russian control over key industries and has doubts about Moscow's reliability as an ally.



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- China continues to rapidly expand its important economic presence in the region, not only in Central Asia, but in other parts of the Eurasia as well.
- New generations of leaders and citizens throughout Eurasia no longer look to Russia as an attractive geopolitical, cultural, or economic center. They have much wider horizons—in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.
- Although the EAEU is the most influential Russian-dominated multilateral institution in the region, Moscow has not been able to attract new members since the union was launched in 2015. The EAEU suffers from internal discord, and Moscow has not been able to impose its will on its members.

Russia nevertheless remains an unpredictable and aggressive power in Eurasia. Squeezed between Russia and China, Eurasian states have to tread carefully, and chart their ties with the West, which Russia especially considers a threat to its interests, with caution.

The United States should remain engaged in Eurasia and develop tailored strategies for engaging with Russia's neighbors, aware that some are more able to engage in a constructive partnership with the West than others because of their dependence on Moscow. The United States should recognize that Russian malign activities and influence are just one source of instability in Eurasia. State fragility is the other. The United States should pursue strategies that prioritize working jointly with allies and partners to help Eurasian states deal successfully with both challenges.

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Introduction

Restoring influence in the countries of the former Soviet Union has been a top priority for Russian foreign policy virtually since the day the Soviet Union broke up. Russia has relied on all instruments of national power—Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic (DIME)—in pursuit of that goal. In the wake of its aggression against Ukraine, Russia has intensified these efforts, attempting to draw a sharp “us vs. them” line between its desired sphere of influence around its periphery and to undermine neighbors that seek closer ties with the West.

Yet, in the six years since the start of Russia’s war with Ukraine, the gap between Moscow’s neo-imperial ambitions and its ability to fulfill them has become more conspicuous even as worries about Russia throughout the region have multiplied. That gap is growing. The collateral costs of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine are proving to be unexpectedly high, often hampering Russia’s ability to achieve more than symbolic gains. Across Eurasia, governments and societies were shocked by the war against Ukraine. The Kremlin’s rhetoric and thinly veiled threats stirred fears that Ukraine’s fate may befall Russia’s other neighbors. Keenly aware that geography limits their ability to break free from Russia’s orbit, most of its neighbors have nonetheless tried to hedge against the threat of Russian aggression. They have quietly reinvigorated ties with partners in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, taken steps to diversify their economic ties, and developed strategies to reduce Russia’s cultural and media influence inside their borders.

Russian ambitions have been kept in check not only by its limited resources and its neighbors’ quiet resistance, but by under-appreciated changes in the demographics and geopolitics of Eurasia. Generational change, fading memories of shared Soviet past, access to information and cultural and educational resources in Europe, the United States, and Asia have been gradually

transforming these post-Soviet countries. The entry into the vast region of actors other than Russia—most notably, China, Europe, the United States, and Middle Eastern states—has expanded the range of options for diversifying their foreign policies. In short, Russia’s reach in Eurasia far exceeds its grasp.

This paper explores the evolving relationship between Russia and its neighbors. It examines Russia’s ambitions, the toolkit it has relied on in pursuing these ambitions, as well as actions taken by its neighbors to resist it. The paper puts the spotlight on the changing demographics of Eurasia and its expanding diplomatic and geopolitical horizons. It concludes with implications for U.S. interests and policy recommendations.

Fear Spreads in Eurasia

The shock of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine in 2014 raised concerns about its neo-imperial ambitions throughout a vast and highly diverse neighborhood. A long list of countries—Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, as well as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—found themselves on the list of potential targets of Russian military incursions or destabilization efforts. A given country’s proximity to Russia, the presence of minority ethnic Russian populations, and the status of unresolved regional conflicts, including some directly involving Moscow, made it vulnerable to Russian aggression in one form or another.¹²³

Putin’s embrace of expansive nationalism at home to justify the Crimean annexation and the use of irregular proxies to destabilize Ukraine were deeply troubling. During his previous terms as Russia’s president, Putin’s popularity had largely rested on a track record of economic growth and rising living standards. But with Russia’s economy slowing down, Putin’s intervention in Ukraine provided the regime with a new source of political legitimacy at home, while raising fears among Russia’s neighbors that he might need similarly audacious “wins” to sustain it.⁴ The fact that the illegal annexation of Crimea caused Putin’s popularity to soar to over 85 percent

from just over 60 percent, where it had been for years, was widely seen as validating this assessment.⁵

In Georgia, still reeling from the consequences of the 2008 war with Russia, Russian aggression against Ukraine prompted renewed concerns of another conflict with a vastly more powerful neighbor.⁶ In 2015, Russia signed the Treaty of Alliance and Integration with South Ossetia.⁷ Russian militarization of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the other Russian-backed breakaway region of Georgia, is a permanent threat to the security of Georgia.⁸ There were similar concerns in Moldova, where Russia's military presence in the breakaway Transnistria region was seen as a potential lever the Kremlin could use to destabilize the rest of the country. Russian support also facilitated the victory of the pro-Russian Igor Dodon in the country's 2016 presidential election.⁹ He has since emerged as a leading EU-skeptic and advocate of closer ties with Russia.

The annexation of Crimea also rang alarms in Kazakhstan. Like Ukraine, the country received security assurances—not guarantees—from the signatories of the 1994 Budapest Memorandum in return for giving up parts of the Soviet nuclear arsenal located on its territory.¹⁰ The West's unwillingness to defend Ukraine left Kazakh political elites and some members of the public questioning their country's relationship with Russia.¹¹ Given the significant Russian population in northern Kazakhstan and a history of Russian meddling there, Kazakhs worried their country could be an easy target for the Kremlin's next phase of neo-imperialist expansion.¹² Putin added to these concerns in the summer 2014, when he publicly commented that Kazakhstan was an artificial state created after the USSR's collapse on "territory where no state ever existed previously."¹³

Back to the USSR?

Moscow's desire to regain its hold on Eurasia is not a new phenomenon. Having barely retreated from Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia in 1991, it almost immediately launched a new campaign to regain the lost terrain. In 1991, right after dissolving the Soviet

Union, Moscow established the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—a loose association of former Soviet states. In 1992, it created the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)—a Russian-dominated military alliance that over time became the Kremlin’s counter to NATO. Moscow instigated or took advantage of a host of regional conflicts to shore up its leverage and security influence. In 1996, it launched a “union state” with Belarus.

Moscow has also sought to sustain and expand economic ties with the former Soviet states starting with the Customs Union Agreement in 1995. That agreement launched the Kremlin’s long quest to establish a Russian-dominated trading zone that gradually evolved into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Putin personally took ownership of that project beginning in 2012. His stated goal for the EAEU was to create a Russian-led trading bloc and counterweight to the European Union (EU). The competition between the EU and the EAEU led to Armenia’s 2013 decision, under Russian pressure, to pull away from signing its already-negotiated association agreement with the EU. A similar decision by then-Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich ultimately led to the 2013 “revolution of dignity” in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea.¹⁴

The Kremlin continued its efforts to breathe life into the EAEU in late spring 2014, as it stepped up military pressure on Ukraine. With the West levying sanctions and curtailing contacts with Moscow, it needed a diplomatic win to demonstrate that the West’s efforts to isolate it were failing. The Kremlin pushed both Belarus and Kazakhstan to sign the EAEU Treaty. Although Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko and then-Kazakhstani president Nursultan Nazarbayev pushed back to strip away any hint at political integration from the draft treaty, including Russian calls for a common parliament, border force, foreign policy and currency, the Treaty came into force on January 1, 2015. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined later that same year.

The EAEU has emerged as a symbol of Moscow’s ambitions that no former Soviet state can afford to ignore. But Russia has not been able to add new members to the EAEU. Moldova, which signed a political and trade agreement with the EU, and Uzbekistan, Central Asia’s most populous state, continue to resist Russian pressure to join and remain EAEU “observers.”¹⁵ Even

Tajikistan, highly dependent on remittances from labor migrants in Russia, has repeatedly deferred joining the EAEU.¹⁶

Russia and Kazakhstan, the two economic heavyweights in Eurasia, have derived some economic benefits from preferential trade agreements. But much poorer members—i.e., Armenia, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan—have not fared as well. Moscow has offered discounted energy sales, access to labor markets, and other economic enticements to these countries to join the EAEU. But these benefits have been often lost to corruption schemes, raising questions among member state publics about the inherent advantages that accrue from EAEU membership.¹⁷ The EAEU suffers from disagreements among its members over trade and regulatory regimes, which Russia often seeks to exploit in one-sided fashion. Heavy-handed Russian attempts at closer integration create self-reinforcing cycles of resistance and foot-dragging from other members. While the EAEU has become an established actor in the region, it is far from a happy union.¹⁸

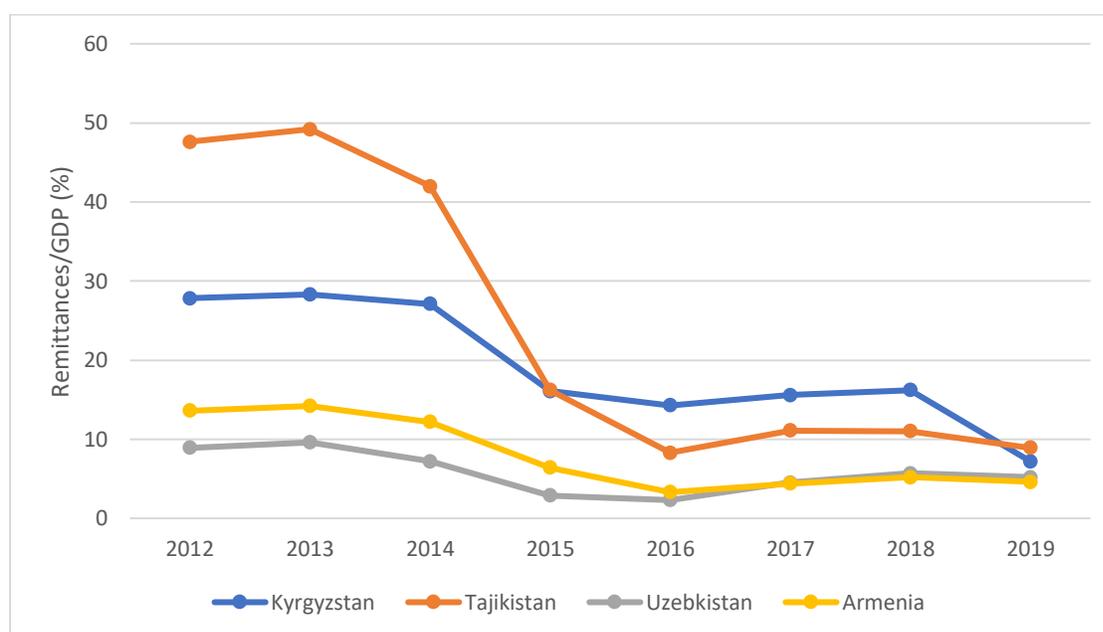
Russia's Integration Toolkit

The slow burn conflict in eastern Ukraine is presently the only instance where Russia continues to rely on its military as the primary means of projecting power and influence. Elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, it uses a combination of diplomatic engagement, cultural links, and economic and energy ties.

Russia sees its interests in the region as secure for now. Moscow's war against Ukraine has made clear to neighbors and regional powers alike that it is willing to use force to protect its equities. Since then, Russia has not faced any destabilizing political crises in the region that could threaten its core interests. Even when the 2018 Armenian Velvet Revolution toppled a Russia-friendly government, Moscow opted to remain on the sidelines, calculating correctly that it had enough economic and security influence in Yerevan to keep Armenia's new democratic government from aligning too closely with the West.

Russia has relied on discounted energy and weapons sales, debt relief, debt-for-asset swaps, and migrant labor to sustain its sphere of influence.¹⁹ As Figure 1 demonstrates, most former Soviet states are still dependent on remittances from migrant laborers in Russia. In the run-up to the Ukraine conflict, Moscow threatened to cut these countries' access to the Russian labor market in order to get their governments to align more closely with it. Russia's isolated and impoverished neighbors have few other options, and Moscow is not shy about exploiting their predicament. However, Russia's own sluggish economy and relatively modest resources act as a brake on its ambitions. The reliance of the region's poorest states on remittances from Russia as a percentage of GDP has fallen sharply since 2014.

Figure 1: Remittances from Russia as part of a country's GDP (2012-2019)



Sources: Central Bank of Russia, World Bank, Ministry of Economic Development and Poverty Reduction of Uzbekistan, National Statistical Committee of Kyrgyzstan, National Statistical Committee of Armenia, Agency for Statistics under the President of Tajikistan

Belarus—Disunion in the Union State

Belarus is the most striking example of a former Soviet country that has tried, often times with remarkable success, to keep Russia at arm's length. Since 2014, after many years of acrimony between Belarus and the West over accusations of the former's poor human rights record and the latter's meddling in the country's internal affairs, the country's long-serving president Aleksandr Lukashenko launched a *détente* with the West. He publicly called the annexation of Crimea a "bad precedent" and offered Minsk as neutral ground for mediation and negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.²⁰

Lukashenko welcomed to Minsk then-National Security Advisor John Bolton in 2019 and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in 2020.²¹ These visits paved the way for Minsk and Washington to exchange ambassadors for the first time in a decade—clear signs of the post-2014 effort to expand the range of the country's diplomatic options.²²

The Belarusian economy remains heavily dependent on subsidized Russian energy to keep its outdated Soviet-era industries going. A transit state for Russian oil and gas to Europe, Belarus also earns roughly \$2 billion annually from refining and re-exporting Russian oil.²³ That dependence on cheap Russian hydrocarbons gives Moscow leverage over Minsk, which the former has exploited for almost two decades to entice the latter toward deeper integration.²⁴

However, Lukashenko has been quite successful in resisting Russian pressure for a closer union. Russian-Belarusian disagreements over oil and gas prices have become a permanent feature of the countries' bilateral relationship, resolved periodically with the help of frequent Lukashenko-Putin summits. In a clever political ploy intended to shore up his domestic political standing, since 2014, Lukashenko has positioned himself as the champion of Belarusian independence and sovereignty in the face of growing pressure from Russia.

Lukashenko is increasingly audacious in how he deploys the Belarusian nationalist card to deflect Moscow's renewed push for closer integration. In response to Russia's halting oil exports

to Belarus in early 2020, he pledged to become less dependent on Russian oil and replace it with imports from Norway, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.²⁵ These efforts at diversification and the undercutting of Russian leverage likely come too late to truly reduce the country's dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, but Minsk will likely continue looking for alternatives. Lukashenko has also reached out to China, securing \$15 billion in credits to the Belarusian Development Bank and a \$500 million loan from the China Development Bank in 2019.²⁶ In May 2020, Secretary Pompeo touted the first shipment of U.S. oil to Belarus.²⁷

In 2019, Lukashenko authorized anti-Russian protests and detained bloggers and journalists, including employees of Russian media outlets, for allegedly insulting the Belarusian nation.²⁸ In 2018, the Belarusian government commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Belarusian People's Republic declaration of independence from Russia.²⁹ Ahead of presidential elections scheduled for August 2020, Lukashenko publicly blamed Russia, rather than his usual suspects in the West, for fomenting discontent.³⁰

Armenia—Straddling the East-West Divide

Unlike in Ukraine, the government of Armenia's decision to back away from the EU and join the EAEU did not immediately provoke large-scale protests in the country. Constantly on the brink of war with Azerbaijan (allied with Armenia's historical enemy Turkey), the country has little choice but to maintain strong ties with Russia, its traditional, but not always reliable, ally and protector.

While this broadly shared realization helped cushion the blow of walking away from the deal with the EU, the damage to the reputation of the country's leadership among the general public was done. Two years later, Armenian public attitudes turned against Russia, as Russian goods flooded Armenia, increasing competition for local producers. Negative attitudes toward Russia were further fueled by the brutal murder of an Armenian family by a Russian soldier in 2015 near the Russian base in Gyumri. The incident contributed to growing doubts in Armenia about the benefits of the Russian military presence in the country.

Moreover, continuing Russian arms sales to Azerbaijan are a constant source of disagreement between Moscow and Yerevan. Many Armenians blame the country's territorial losses in the 2016 short war with Azerbaijan on Russian arms sales to Baku. Against this backdrop, in 2017, then-president Serzh Sargsyan quietly re-engaged with Brussels and signed a "Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement," a somewhat diluted version of the original trade and cooperation pact he rejected four years earlier.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution in Armenia was driven largely by domestic factors, but the outsized presence of Russia in the country's economy also played a role. For years prior to the revolution, Armenia had experienced protests against high prices consumers had to pay for gas and electricity from Russian-owned utilities. These protests helped lay the groundwork for the ouster of Sargsyan and Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan, a former Gazprom executive with close ties to Moscow.

However, the revolution did not resolve the complicated relationship with Russia or its role in Armenia's energy supply. In April 2020, protesters once again took to the streets to demonstrate against the high prices that Russian-owned utilities charge. Armenia's disputes with Russia over oil and gas prices continue. The latest disagreement in the spring of 2020 was triggered by Russian demands that Armenia buy gas at pre-COVID-19 prices offered to EAEU members, which are significantly higher than the market price after the pandemic caused global energy prices to plummet. Armenia, along with Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, both in a similar situation, has raised the dispute to the EAEU agenda. To reduce Russian leverage, Armenia has been trying to diversify its energy supply, seeking to attract Chinese companies into the sector and reaching out to Iran and Georgia.

The Chinese Are Coming

The increased Chinese presence across Central Asia and other post-Soviet lands underscores the limited nature of Russia's appeal as an economic partner. As is the case in many other parts of the world, the economic and geopolitical dynamics of the former Soviet states have been affected

significantly by the emergence of China as a major trade, investment, and diplomatic actor. China's expanding economic footprint in Eurasia has forced Russia to be increasingly mindful of Beijing's equities, particularly given its own growing dependence on China.

China's economic presence is most visible in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as other investments in infrastructure, energy, and mining. As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, China is now the essential trade and investment partner for Central Asia. The European Union is a significant player as well, especially in Kazakhstan.³¹

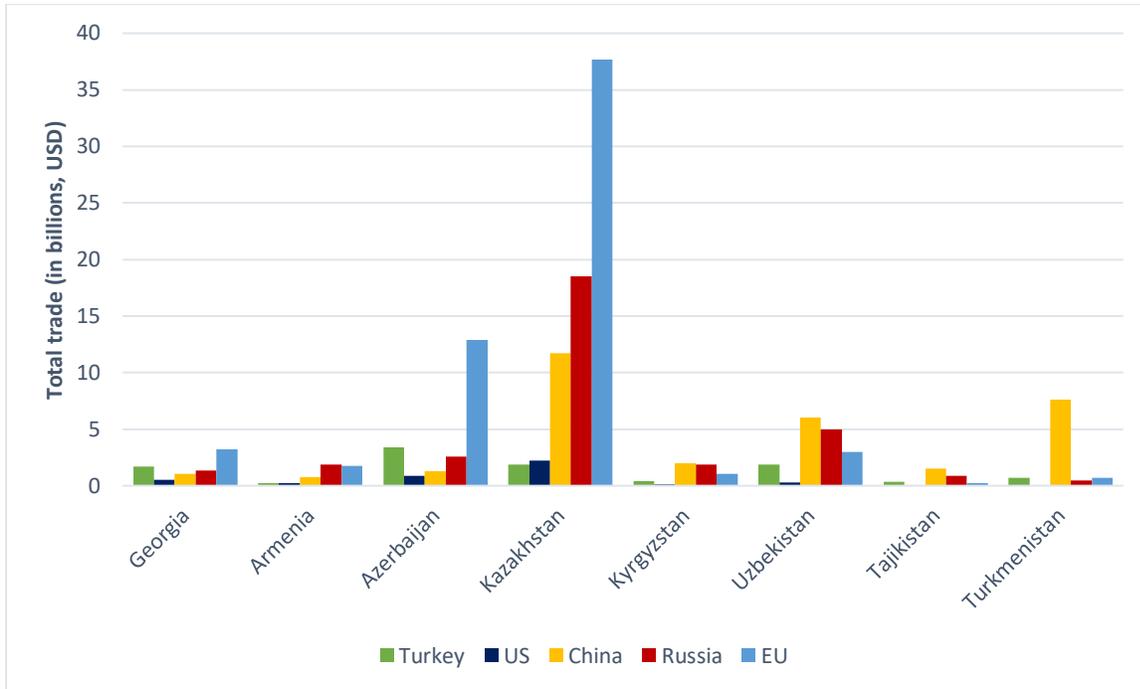
With at least \$8 billion in loans, Beijing is Turkmenistan's largest creditor.³² 94 percent of Turkmen gas, the country's primary export, goes to China. Ironically enough, gas sales to Russia now represent a diversification strategy for Ashgabat.³³ China holds roughly 50 percent of Tajikistan's \$2.8 billion foreign debt.³⁴ It is telling that Kyrgyzstan turned first to Beijing, not Moscow, for debt relief as the COVID-19 pandemic devastated the country's economy. The Export-Import Bank of China holds \$1.7 billion of the country's \$4 billion external debt.³⁵

China's clout is growing in the South Caucasus too, where Armenia and Georgia both see their relationships with China as a key partnership and an opportunity to expand the geographic and geopolitical range of their foreign policies.³⁶ The EU and Russia remain Yerevan's main partners, but trade with China has climbed steadily, surpassing \$770 million in 2018.³⁷ China is now Armenia's second largest trading partner overall.³⁸ Eager to gain Chinese cooperation to develop its infrastructure, Armenia joined the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank—one of Beijing's main funding sources for BRI.

For Georgia, Beijing's economic clout provides an added layer of security by raising the potential costs to Russia should it launch another large-scale military intervention. Beijing has repeatedly reiterated its support for Georgia's territorial integrity and takes a dim view of Russian-backed separatism in Eurasia.³⁹ To be sure, China is not likely to become an advocate for Tbilisi in its long-running quest to regain control of its Russian-occupied separatist territories.

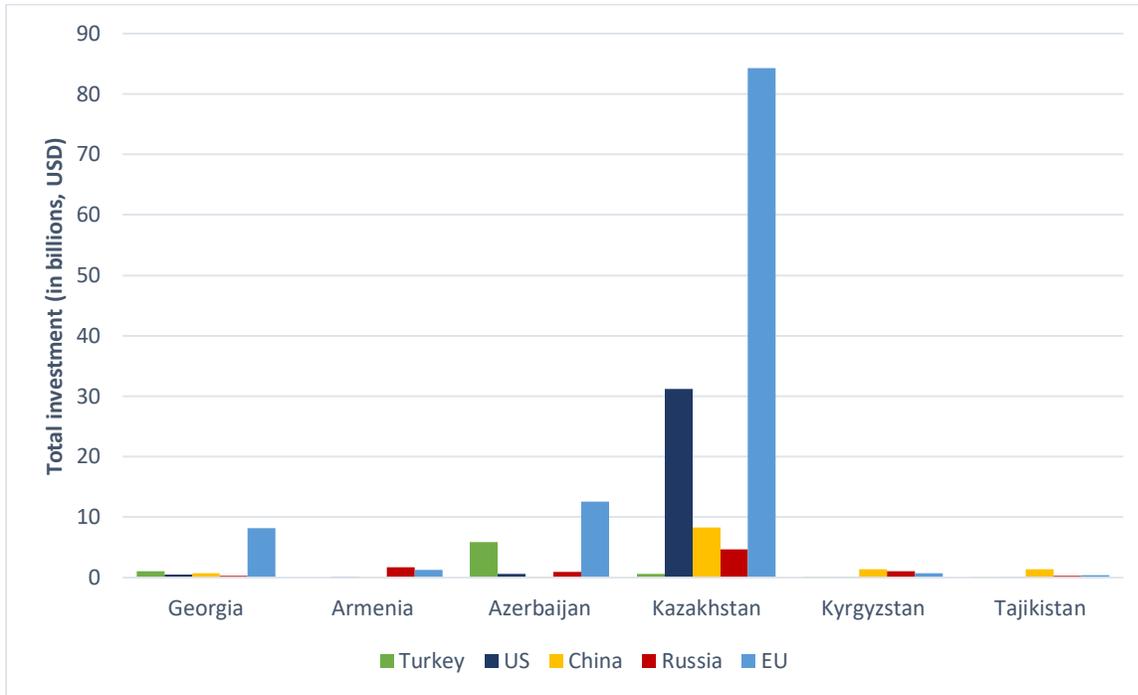
At the same time, the geostrategic importance of Chinese investment flows into finance, infrastructure, tourism, and industrial parks, such as the Hualing Special Economic Zone, can hardly be lost on Moscow.⁴⁰

Figure 2: Eurasian countries' trade turnover with key partners in 2018 (in billions, USD)



Source: World Bank, Observatory of Economic Complexity

Figure 3: Foreign direct investment into Eurasian countries by key partners in 2018 (in billions, USD)



Source: International Monetary Fund

The emergence of China as a major actor in the post-Soviet economic and geopolitical space is undoubtedly a complicating factor for Russia. It dilutes Russia's influence in the region, limits its freedom of action, offers an unfavorable comparison for Russia of what a major economic power can offer its partners, and expands Russia's neighbors' options for geopolitical maneuvering. When presented with no choice in the matter by Beijing, Moscow has no alternative but to accept it. Crucially, it creates for China tangible long-term stakes in regional stability as well as the territorial integrity, independence and sovereignty of Russia's neighbors.

The Region's Open-Door Policy

China is not the only East Asian actor in the region. After the Soviet collapse, South Korea took an early interest in the large ethnic Korean diaspora in Central Asia—the result of the mass

Stalin-era deportation of ethnic Koreans from the Russian Far East.⁴¹ That population has been an important link with South Korea, now serving as a destination for Korean-speaking Central Asian labor migrants.⁴² Korean Airlines operates its transcontinental Eurasia cargo hub in the country, while Seoul and Tashkent signed approximately \$12 billion in investment deals in 2019.⁴³

For Kazakhstan, South Korea is also an important investment, trade, and diplomatic partner. In 2019, trade turnover between the two countries reached \$6.5 billion, according to Kazakhstani news reports.⁴⁴ Given nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula, Kazakhstani officials cultivate ties with South Korea to underscore Kazakhstan's record as a leader in the global non-proliferation movement.⁴⁵

South Korea has ties to Turkmenistan with presidential visits in 2014 and 2019, focusing on the energy, infrastructure and technology sectors.⁴⁶ The Export-Import Bank of Korea, along with the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) financed a \$2.4 billion Turkmen petrochemical factory that opened in 2018.⁴⁷

Japan signed a \$6 billion trade and investment deal with Uzbekistan in late 2019.⁴⁸ Japan's trade turnover with Kazakhstan reached \$2 billion in 2018.⁴⁹ In 2015, the Japanese government agreed to provide \$18 billion in infrastructure funding to Turkmenistan, \$99 million in highway construction support to Kyrgyzstan, \$7.5 million to Tajikistan for border security, water management and agricultural upgrades.⁵⁰

Japanese universities opened doors to young Central Asians, many of whom study in Japan on competitive Japanese government scholarships and programs.⁵¹ Singaporean universities are likewise popular in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, where the country's leadership claims it looks to Singapore as a possible development model and funds scholarships for Kazakhs to study at the city-state's top institutions.⁵²

India, too, has entered the Eurasian geopolitical sweepstakes. New Delhi's engagement focuses largely on security issues in Afghanistan and countering Pakistan, as well as China. India has signed defense and security cooperation agreements with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, and recently has stepped up counterterrorism cooperation with Uzbekistan.⁵³

Turkey, by virtue of its close ties to Azerbaijan and historic antagonism toward Armenia, has been active in the wider Eurasian region, building on its ethnic and cultural legacy there and expanding trade and economic relations.⁵⁴ It is among the top trading and investment partners for Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova.⁵⁵ While its economic footprint is smaller in Central Asia, it remains one of the main transportation links with the region and a destination for its migrant labor. In 2019, Uzbekistan joined the Turkic Council, an Ankara-sponsored regional multilateral organization for Turkic-speaking countries.⁵⁶

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have become key investment partners to several Eurasian states. The UAE's sovereign wealth fund has pledged over \$10 billion in investments to Uzbekistan. Dubai Port World manages Kazakhstani logistics hubs on the Caspian and the Khorgos dry port—a key BRI hub.⁵⁷ The investment activities of Persian Gulf states are less visible in the South Caucasus, but they have a growing footprint in the real estate and tourism sectors across all three countries.⁵⁸

In other words, the opening of Eurasia to the world is a fact of life. Russia has plenty of competition in its quest for influence in its former empire.

Changing Societies

Demographic change in post-Soviet Eurasia has emerged as yet another limiting factor on Russian ambitions. The post-Soviet generation no longer looks to Moscow as an attractive cultural, economic, or geopolitical center of gravity.⁵⁹

Central Asia has experienced significant population growth since 1991 with the population increasing by approximately 25 million people to almost 75 million. The median age in Central Asia is now 27; in Azerbaijan, where the population increased from 7 million to over 10 million since independence, the median age is 32. This new generation of post-Soviet citizens has been educated in the post-Soviet era. It has had far less contact with Russia than its parents' generation.

People elsewhere in the region are looking beyond Moscow. Over 60 percent of Armenians (whose median age is 36) in a 2019 poll had positive views of the EU, placing it far ahead of the EAEU as the most trusted international institution.⁶⁰ That same survey showed that 65 percent of Moldovans—a country where more than a quarter of the population earns its living as migrant laborers not only in Russia, but also in the EU—trusted the EU, compared to 35 percent trusting the EAEU.⁶¹

Even in Belarus, the trust level of the EU is slightly higher (3 percent) than the EAEU. Furthermore, recent polling also indicated that only 8 percent of Belarusians favor full unification with Russia, with 36 percent approving of some sort of shared political institutions.⁶² That leaves roughly half of the country wanting Belarus to remain independent of Moscow.

As figures 4 and 5 indicate, ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations have declined across the region in large part due to out-migration of ethnic Russians—long a key lever of Russian influence.⁶³ Russia's weight in demographic and cultural terms is less prevalent in these countries, and Russian language skills are atrophying, particularly outside of urban areas. Vyacheslav Nikonov, Chair of the Russian Parliamentary Committee on Education and Science, lamented this trend when he claimed in 2015 there are 50 million fewer Russian speakers in the world than in 1991.⁶⁴ He attributed the decline to the passage of time with the Soviet-trained generation moving into retirement age and a deemphasis of Russian language in schools across the former Soviet space.

Figure 4: Ethnic Russians in Central Asia

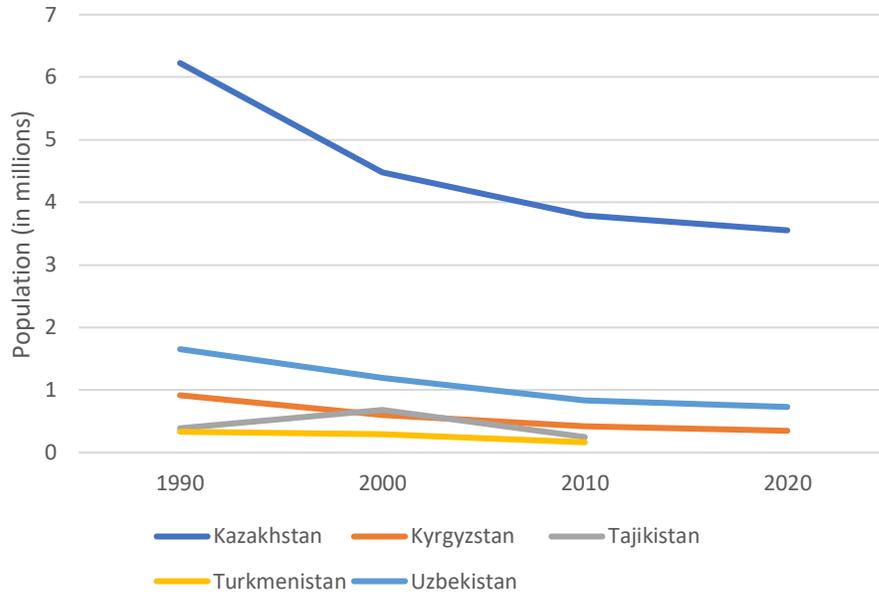
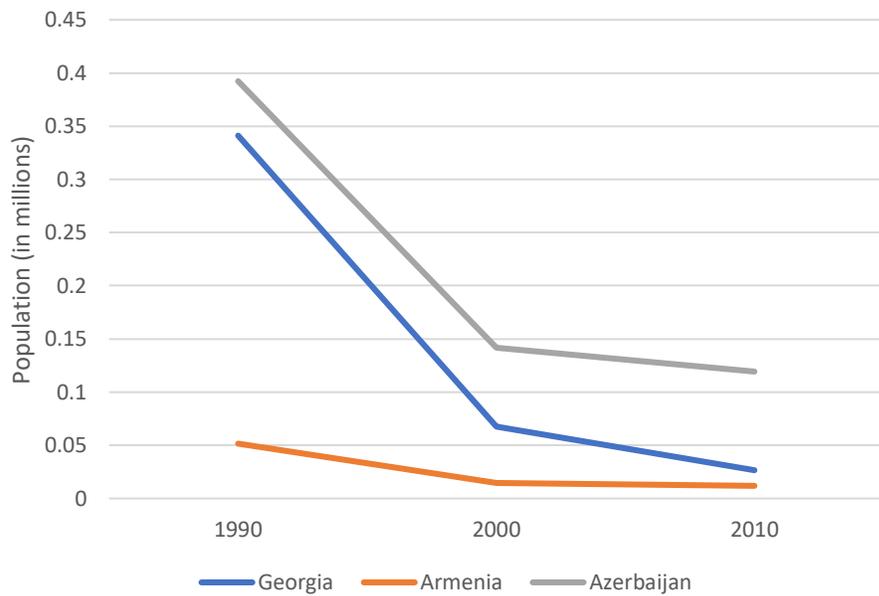


Figure 5: Ethnic Russians in South Caucasus



Sources: Census data and official estimates

The politics of language remains a sensitive issue, particularly as nationalist tendencies grow across Eurasia. Moscow objected to the 2020 decision by the government of Uzbekistan to enforce the use of Uzbek, rather than Russian, in the country’s civil service.⁶⁵ Responding to Kazakh nationalists’ demands for greater use of Kazakh in public life, Kazakhstan’s government agreed to switch the Kazakh language from the Cyrillic alphabet to Latin script by 2025—a move that sparked outrage in Moscow as an attack on Russian culture.⁶⁶ The Armenian government rejected appeals from the Russian Duma to recognize Russian as an official language of the country, with Armenia’s education minister reiterating in 2017 that the “only official language in Armenia is and will remain the Armenian language, since we are an independent, sovereign state.”⁶⁷

In Kazakhstan, members of the Bolashak generation, who studied in Western institutions on prestigious government scholarships, have entered prominent positions in government and public life.⁶⁸ A younger generation is also coming of age in Azerbaijan, where, in 2019, a Duke University alumnus replaced hardline anti-American Ramiz Mehdiyev as Head of the Presidential Administration.⁶⁹ The country’s new Economics Minister was educated in California, while several other young technocrats have entered influential positions.⁷⁰

Eurasian societies have grown unhappy with low standards of living, poor social services and high rates of corruption. Life as a migrant worker in Russia is hardly a ticket to a more comfortable life or a way out of poverty. Migrants often face racism, exploitation and squalid conditions.⁷¹ Nor does the presence of large populations of migrants foster much good will towards Moscow. As borders closed due to COVID-19 and economic opportunities dried up in Russia in spring 2020, many of these migrants went home, often with stories of abuse by Russian officials.⁷² Moscow has promised assistance to its cash-strapped neighbors to help them through the pandemic, but that aid has been slow in coming. Others—China, international financial institutions, the EU, South Korea and the UAE—have stepped in to fill the void.⁷³ Change in these societies means that Russia is no longer their big fraternal nation it was during the Soviet era.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Fears of Russian neo-imperialism have become a dominant theme in assessments of the security environment in the post-Soviet space. Yet the countries along Russia's periphery are changing in a remarkable and often under-appreciated fashion. As the post-Soviet generation matures, societies across the region are becoming more nationalistic, more connected to the outside world and less exposed to Russia, and increasingly frustrated with the state of their domestic affairs.⁷⁴ Russia's own diminished circumstances, small checkbook, and ham-fisted policies have severely undercut its ability to regather its former colonies within a self-proclaimed sphere of influence.

In its pursuit of Eurasian integration, Russia has to compete with China, whose deep pockets it cannot match, and the EU, which remains an attractive partner to many Eurasian states, not only as an alternative to both, Russia and China, but also as a model of economic development and source of assistance.

Still, the region's security is fragile. Russia is a difficult and threatening neighbor. Russia's wars with Ukraine and Georgia have left a deep imprint on the region's geopolitics. However, focusing on Eurasia only through the prism of Russian reintegration efforts risks overestimating Russian capabilities and underestimating Russia's neighbors as individual actors with agency, dynamic societies, and long histories of managing Moscow.

Preoccupation with Russia also runs the risk of missing other potential sources of instability. The July 2020 fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border highlights how frozen conflicts, territorial disputes and ethnic tensions—which stretch from Eastern Europe to Central Asia, and which Russia has neither the inclination nor the ability to resolve—can flare up at any moment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also laid bare longstanding problems of poor governance, entrenched corruption, unsustainable economic models, and underfunded social welfare systems.

Pro-Western Georgia seems to have had relative success in slowing down the pandemic, but most countries, including Russia, have not. Several have experienced public protests caused by inadequate responses to health and economic crises, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. As discontent grows, it poses new legitimacy and social stability challenges for both Eurasia's autocracies and struggling democracies.

The United States, Europe, Russia, and China have a shared interest in maintaining stability in Eurasia and preventing conflict or state collapse. However, the diversity of the region means that one size fits all approaches will not work. Rather, tailored assistance to help governments and—wherever possible—civil societies improve governance and socioeconomic conditions, advance the health prospects of their citizens, and improve food and water security, are the best way to enhance long-term stability. A focus on building state capacity, including economic and infrastructure development, and on countering threats, such as terrorism, proliferation, infectious diseases, and narco-trafficking, are all areas where the United States can shore up local vulnerabilities, often in partnership with others.

Surrounded by much larger and more powerful neighbors, the states of Eurasia have to navigate carefully around their neighbors' sensitivities and sensibilities. The United States is far away, but Russia and China are near. The smaller and more vulnerable states can ill afford to antagonize Moscow or Beijing by joining U.S.-championed causes. Attempts to enlist countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the current U.S. administration's pressure campaign versus Beijing is a particularly vivid case in point.⁷⁵

By virtue of its location, the United States will never have the same level of strategic interests in Eurasia that China, Europe, and Russia possess. Therefore, the United States should consider a version of offshore balancing, using its political, economic, and—as needed—security tool kit to selectively act as a partner to Eurasian states and help offset the geopolitical weight of the region's immediate neighbors. U.S. allies and partners from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East

can help play a key role in helping regional states balance against Russian (or Chinese) assertiveness.

This is not a call for the United States to disengage from the region, but for a realistic approach that accounts for the role of the region's other partners, as well as the willingness and capacities of Eurasian states to partner with Washington. Central Asia is unlikely to reemerge as a priority region for Western engagement as the United States draws down its military presence in Afghanistan, but the United States and its allies should sustain their engagement in the region's affairs, particularly with Central Asia's economic powerhouse Kazakhstan and its most populous state Uzbekistan. Today, both countries demonstrate willingness to partner with the West. Together, both countries can play important roles in regional stability.

The United States has more interests and more influence in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine should remain priorities to help them advance political and economic reforms, and improve their defensive and deterrent capabilities, including against hybrid tactics. Armenia's new democratic government, too, needs assistance to realize its political and economic reform agenda with the West. Yet, it should be done without any expectations that Yerevan will risk jeopardizing its relationship with Moscow. Given the unresolved war between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, engagement with both, Armenia and Azerbaijan, will enhance the ability of the West to help manage that conflict.

Engaging Belarus and Azerbaijan will be harder given their authoritarian track records and histories of lukewarm relations with the West, although both have shown interest in engaging with Brussels and Washington. Black-and-white, all-or-nothing policy frameworks that force countries to choose between ties to Moscow and the West are hardly a productive path forward.

Eurasia faces enormous challenges with positive change likely coming through incremental rather than revolutionary means. Given competing demands and the growing need to focus on issues closer to home, the United States should reiterate its long-term support for this gradual

change, as opposed to sweeping transformational agendas across the region that are hard to realize and often unnerve multiple stakeholders.

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