A New Round in the Great Game Begins

By Rodger Baker

Central Asia was once the prize in the so-called Great Game, a center of competition for the Russians, British, Persians, Mongols and Turks at various times and in various combinations. Sitting at the intersection of the Russian steppes, the western Chinese wastes, the mountain passes into the Indian subcontinent, and the modern Middle East, the region is at once a barrier and a bridge between the powers in its periphery. It is a path for trade and a highway for invasion, a vast strategic buffer and a cauldron of ethnic and national competition and instability. It is a space that its neighbors can afford neither to hold nor to ignore.

But for all its strategic importance, the region is beset by problems. Many of these are holdovers from the Soviet era, when borders were drawn to create pockets of competing ethnic identities in single countries and political dynasties that would brook little opposition or challenge. On top of these challenges, the region's population has nearly doubled since the fall of the Soviet Union, particularly in the Fergana Valley, where swirling borders complicate ethnic and national identities. Declining agricultural output, languishing oil prices, falling remittances from workers in Russia and weak international investment in Central Asia have only added to the stresses on the region's leaders.

In recent months, several events have drawn the world's attention back to Central Asia. A series of small flare-ups have occurred along the contested Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border, and, though not all that unusual for the two countries, the dispute has grown more contentious as the competition increases for dwindling water resources. In Kyrgyzstan, too, an apparent Uighur terrorist attack rocked the Chinese Embassy, raising concerns that Central Asian militants who have trained in Syria may bring their newfound skills home. The Kazakh government, meanwhile, has redoubled its crackdown on militancy — sweeping up its political opponents in the process — following attacks by Islamist militants. And on Sept. 2, longtime Uzbek President Islam Karimov died, leaving his country to undertake its first power transition as an independent state. Despite the fact that the country appears to have a succession plan in place (and that nearby Turkmenistan's first transition a decade ago proceeded relatively smoothly), the new leader will face simmering social problems and clan competition.

None of these events will necessarily be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, nor is their coincidence anomalous in a region rife with small, localized crises. Nonetheless, they recall Central Asia's tenuous grasp on stability and raise the question of what the many powers with interest in the region might do if that hold were to falter.
The Usual Suspects

So how would significant instability in Central Asia be managed? History, geography and military realities all point to Russia as a first line of defense. As the traditional security guarantor for Central Asia, Russia has military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, two of the three regional members (Kazakhstan being the third) of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Moreover, Moscow's concerns over the spread of ethnic unrest and terrorism and its strategic considerations along its periphery compel Russian involvement in Central Asia. But Russia is preoccupied with other problems in other places. Still mired in economic recession, the country has had to re-examine even its sacrosanct defense budget. In fact, it has recently drawn down and reorganized some of its troops in Central Asia. Should the region start to unravel, Moscow will face a strategic dilemma. Given Russia's involvement in Syria and Ukraine, the Kremlin may have to consider allowing China to expand its presence in Central Asia.

China has steadily increased its ties to Central Asia, focusing first on energy and resources, then on trade and infrastructure projects and, more recently, on defense and security cooperation. After all, Central Asia offers a route to Europe far from the U.S.-patrolled seas and a vast buffer from the instability and Islamist militancy of the Middle East and Southwest Asia. But as China's involvement in Central Asia has grown, so too has its dependency on the region, and, in turn, the need to secure its interests there. The attack against the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan was a reminder that Beijing's activity in Central Asia could make China a higher-profile target, not only for members of the Uighur diaspora but also for aggrieved locals. Though China has met similar resistance to its endeavors around the globe, the ethnic and linguistic connections between China's Uighurs and the region present a unique concern for Beijing. If stability in Central Asia breaks down, China could find itself in the nightmarish scenario of having a potential haven for separatist militants just across its border. That prospect could compel Beijing, which has yet to participate in military action in a third country beyond U.N. operations, to action.

Then, of course, there is the United States. The country also has expanded military relations in Central Asia as a means to assist with the war in Afghanistan and to operate in Russia's periphery, much as Russia operates in Europe's. But in many ways, Central Asia is the last place the United States, primarily a maritime power, is prepared to intervene in the event of a major security breakdown. Although the U.S. military is an intervention force, it relies on the seas for transporting troops and supplies, as well as for projecting power. The political complications of running supply lines through third countries and the logistical headache of moving heavy supplies by air or over ground compound the difficulties of distance, as the war in Afghanistan has demonstrated. Notwithstanding the potential for instability in Central Asia and the possibility that another “terrorist haven” could emerge in a chaotic region, the implications of a Central Asian intervention of any significant scale make it unlikely. Furthermore, after years of sustained military engagement in Afghanistan and Iraq, and with budgetary and social considerations at home, the United States is naturally (and historically) inclined to back off from overseas interventions. To that end, Washington will pair a call for greater active responsibility from its allies with a strategy focused on preventing the rise of a single regional hegemon, rather than on imposing stability.

An Interesting Position
And so, Washington will find itself in an interesting position. Embroiled in an interminable war against terrorism (an inherently un-winnable conflict, since it purports to combat a tactic, not an enemy), the United States has an interest in sealing any vacuum that Islamist militancy might otherwise fill in a destabilized Central Asia. At the same time, direct, large-scale intervention is infeasible and perhaps unnecessary. If the United States' strategic objective is to prevent the rise of a single regional hegemon, having Russia and China engaged in Central Asia could prove useful.

Given their proximity to the region, both countries have a compelling reason to take action in Central Asia. Of course, their shared security concern could provide Moscow and Beijing impetus for greater joint military cooperation, and a Sino-Russian alliance would not be a positive development for U.S. international strategy. Nonetheless, it could just as easily expose the differences between the countries' strategies and goals in the region while tying up Russia and China's resources and attention. A protracted pacification and stabilization operation would stress the countries' budgets, military and domestic political capital. For the United States, this could solve a couple of problems at once. Heavily engaged in Central Asia, Russia may be more willing to make compromises in other areas. China, meanwhile, may divert resources from its maritime budget and developments to its land warfare capacity, easing tensions in the South and East China seas.

The threat of a floundering Central Asia would not be enough to overcome the domestic political and military obstacles to a direct, large-scale U.S. military intervention in the region, regardless of what moral, political or security justifications Washington may offer. During the Cold War, instability anywhere in the world could jeopardize the balance between the Soviet and U.S. spheres. Consequently, both powers adopted the habit of intervening by overt or clandestine means even in minor countries. After the Cold War, the United States continued in this vein, first under the guise of a moral imperative to promote stability for stability's sake, and later to counter terrorism. Now that the global balance of power is shifting, however, the United States is losing its ability and desire to be the policeman of the world.

**On the Origins of a Conflict**

**Analysis**

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(Stratfor)

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**Summary**

**Editor's Note:** This is the first installment of a five-part series that explores the past, present and future of the confrontation between Russia and the West on the Eurasian landmass.

Since its emergence as an organized state, Russia has collided with the West. For over a millennium, the two have clashed economically, politically and militarily, using the countries that form the buffer between them as a staging ground for their rivalry.
With Ukraine's Euromaidan uprising and Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the long-standing conflict has been renewed. But just as the end of the Cold War did not resolve hostilities between Russia and the West, neither will a resolution to the Ukrainian crisis erase the fundamental imperatives that have pitted the two against each other for more than a thousand years.

Analysis

The Russia-West divide began when the kingdom of Kievan Rus, the Slavic precursor to the modern Russian state, arose in Eastern Europe in the ninth century. With territory stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, Kievan Rus was one of medieval Europe's largest states. Toward the end of the 10th century, the kingdom adopted Orthodox Christianity as its official religion, opening a rift between itself and its Catholic neighbors in Western Europe and laying the groundwork for future contention between East and West.

A few centuries later, the Mongols invaded and destroyed Kievan Rus, and the state's center of power shifted from Kiev to Moscow. The city became the heart of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, a rising Orthodox and Slavic power that amassed its strength and territory during the 14th and 15th centuries. Meanwhile, Kiev (and much of modern-day Ukraine) became part of Catholic Poland and Lithuania, forging a lasting bond with the West.

The Rise of the Russian State

The Grand Duchy of Muscovy continued to expand and transform, first into the Tsardom of Russia in the 16th century and then into the Russian Empire by the early 18th century. Few geographic barriers stood between it and mainland Europe except vast and empty plains. And so, the empire extended its borders westward, vying with Poland, Sweden and Austria for territory in Eastern and Central Europe. By the start of the 19th century, Russia had become as powerful as many of Europe's strongest states.

But the lack of geographic barriers surrounding it also made the Russian Empire vulnerable. It needed to create space between itself and other formidable powers, and it did so by spreading its influence in the territories on its periphery. The empire gradually and systematically took control of Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. This brought the Russians into both contact and conflict with Muslim and Asiatic powers such as the Ottomans and Persians, as well as the European powers that held substantial sway in those territories, giving rise to great-power rivalries like the Great Game. As Russia evolved, so did its rivalry with Europe.
Then, at the start of the 20th century, something changed. The United States emerged on the international stage as a new global power, and the dynamics of the Russia-Europe conflict shifted. For the first time, a power that was not of the region played a significant role in its politics, first in World War I and then again in World War II. The competition between Russia and the West became an international one whose significance extended well beyond its geographic borders.
By the end of World War II, Russia's influence on the Continent had spread farther than ever, reaching as far west as Berlin. In response, the West formed a new strategy to halt the Soviet Union's spread: containment. Spearheaded by the United States, the strategy applied not only to Russia's presence in Europe but also to its activities around the globe. The competition took on global proportions during the Cold War, with its participants divided into two diametrically opposed political and military blocs: the Warsaw Pact and NATO.

**The Past 25 Years: A Rivalry Revived**

Although the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s marked the end of the Cold War, it did not signal an end to the broader dispute between Russia and the West. At first, though, all evidence seemed to point to the contrary: Talk arose of incorporating Russia into Europe and the Western alliance, and it even appeared to be feasible. Moscow had lost its Eurasian empire, and the new Russian Federation had embraced democracy and capitalism, at least initially.

But the transition proved so chaotic and painful for Russia that, within a decade, the state began to recentralize power as Boris Yeltsin left the presidency and Vladimir Putin assumed it. The 1990s, celebrated by the United States and Western Europe as a golden age of Russian economic growth and democracy, were lamented by Russian leaders and much of the public as a catastrophe.

In its weakened state, Russia no longer needed to be actively and overtly contained by the West, and tensions between the two tapered off temporarily. However, the geopolitical imperative underpinning the United States' containment policy — blocking the rise of regional hegemons on the Eurasian landmass that could challenge the Western alliance structure — never disappeared. Thus, NATO and the European Union continued to expand. Meanwhile, Russia recovered and Putin consolidated his power. The Kremlin worked to regain its position in the former Soviet periphery. On a rising tide of high energy prices and political stability, Russia began to re-emerge as a regional power.
Russia's resurgence reignited the conflict between it and the West. The two fought for the allegiance of states in the former Soviet periphery, most clearly in the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, when Russia invaded Georgia after it and Ukraine attempted to join the Western alliance structure, particularly NATO. The European Union responded by launching the Eastern Partnership program in 2009, with the goal of strengthening economic and political ties with former Soviet states. In 2010, Russia countered with its own integration program, the Customs Union.

The rival blocs sought to attract countries in the Eurasian borderlands, perhaps the most contested of which was Ukraine. When, in November 2013, Kiev refused to sign an EU association agreement, the cornerstone of the Eastern Partnership program, protests erupted that ultimately transformed into the Euromaidan revolution of 2014. The situation quickly deteriorated, as Russia annexed Crimea and lent its support to the pro-Russia rebellion in Ukraine's east.

Since then, hostilities between Russia and the West have intensified, reaching levels not seen since the Cold War. With a proxy conflict in Ukraine, Western sanctions and Russian countersanctions, and military buildups on both sides, it is clear that the Russia-West confrontation has once again come to a head.

**The Next 25 Years: Same Conflict, Different Shape**

Less clear is the shape that the Russia-West confrontation will take in the coming years. The geopolitical imperatives that form the conflict's foundations will remain intact, as will the cultural differences that have spurred their competition in the Eurasian borderlands. But many changes are on the horizon as well, some of which could shift the balance of power in the West's favor.

One such change is the massive demographic shift that is underway in Russia, Europe and the former Soviet periphery. By 2050, U.N. demographic projections expect Russia's population to decline from 143 million to 129 million, a loss of nearly 10 percent. The West, by comparison, has a more favorable outlook: The United States' population will grow by over 20 percent, from 322 million to 389 million, while Europe's largest countries will end up somewhere in between Russia and the United States over the same period. Germany's population will shrink by 7 percent, from 81 million to 75 million; France's population will grow by 11 percent, from 64 million to 71 million; and the United Kingdom's population will rise by 15 percent, from 65 million to 75 million. Each of these trends will shape the economic and military standing of their respective countries over the next 25 years.

Consequently, Russia's ability to challenge the West by projecting its economic and military power will likely decline in the coming decades. Of course, demographic growth does not directly equate to the projection of power, and the West (particularly Europe) will experience challenges stemming from immigration and high non-European birth rates. Still, Russia's relatively steep demographic plunge can be expected to undermine its ability to influence its former Soviet neighbors. This will only become truer with each year that passes since the Soviet Union's collapse, as the social and cultural bonds that tie Russia to its periphery continue to weaken.
This is not to say Russia’s influence in the Eurasian borderlands will evaporate completely. Russia has been the dominant foreign power in the region for centuries, and its position has withstood serious challenges and periods of dramatic upheaval. Thus, Moscow’s primary challenge in the next 25 years will be to figure out how to maintain its advantage in the former Soviet periphery as its resources decline and the cultural and political ties underpinning its position erode.

The West will likely face its own challenges in the years ahead. A shift toward greater regionalization is already underway in Europe, and it will likely intensify in the next 25 years as groupings of states with shared political and cultural characteristics overtake the Cold War-era institutions of the European Union and, to a lesser extent, NATO. This does not mean the two will collapse entirely. Instead, they will likely be reshaped into more practical and sustainable forms. Nor will it necessarily lead to a power vacuum in Europe that Russia could exploit. In fact, it may allow some European countries to better deter Russian aggression. Nevertheless, the format and manner in which the West can challenge Moscow will almost certainly change.

These are the broad strokes that together start to shape the Eurasian borderlands’ future. Though other factors, including technological developments and the emergence of new political ideologies, will no doubt shape the Russia-West confrontation as well, by nature they are more difficult to predict. In this series, Stratfor will explore how the rivalry between Russia and the West has played out in Ukraine, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia prior to and since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We will then forecast how it is likely to change in each region over the next 25 years — a period that is poised to be just as dynamic, as both sides prepare for the sweeping changes ahead.

Ukraine: Caught Between East and West

Analysis

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(Stratfor)

Summary

Editor’s Note: This is the second installment of a five-part series that explores the past, present and future of the confrontation between Russia and the West on the Eurasian landmass.

Russia’s desire for influence in Ukraine is as old as the Russian state itself. It has fought for centuries to protect its stake in the Eastern European nation from the encroachment of the West, often turning to natural gas cutoffs or outright military intervention to do so.
Since the end of the Cold War, Ukraine has vacillated between East and West, split between the country’s pro-Russia and pro-Europe factions. Now, as Ukraine swings once more toward the West, Russia stands to lose much of its power over one of its most important satellites.

**Analysis**

There was once no distinction between the Russian and Ukrainian nations in their earliest forms; both peoples belonged to the loose federation of eastern Slavic tribes known as Kievan Rus that emerged in Eastern Europe toward the end of the ninth century. Over time, the medieval state grew to become one of the largest on the Continent, spanning between the Baltic and the Black seas. But it was different from its neighbors to the west: Orthodox Christianity was the dominant religion in Kievan Rus, setting it apart from the mostly Catholic Western Europe.
In the 13th century, Kievan Rus began to destabilize in the face of internal discord, only to be swept away completely by invading Mongol hordes from the east. The state’s capital, Kiev, as well as the rest of the land that is now Ukraine, languished until the Western Catholic powers of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth conquered it at the start of the 14th century. Meanwhile, the principality of Muscovy, which lay northeast of Kiev, grew to become the new center of the Slavic Orthodox civilization to the east.

Emergence of the Ukrainian Front

The two major powers — the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to the west and the burgeoning Russian Empire to the east — competed for control of Ukraine over the next 300 years, giving rise to
the East-West divide that exists in the country to this day. But a third force — the Cossacks — began to gain influence in Ukraine as well, complicating loyalties even further. A frontier people, the Cossacks had a fierce warrior mentality and were constantly feuding with their Asian and Muslim neighbors to the south. They were also staunch observers and defenders of their Orthodox faith.

The Cossacks were the precursors of Ukraine's modern independence movement, belonging to neither the Catholic Poles nor the distant Orthodox Russians. In 1648, Bohdan Khmelnytsky — perhaps the most famous Cossack — led an uprising against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and established an independent Cossack state centered on the banks of the Dnieper River, which bisects the city of Kiev. However, much like the kingdom of Kievan Rus, the Cossack state did not last. Six years after launching his rebellion, Khmelnytsky allied with Muscovy in its war against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, ultimately leading to the integration of Kiev and modern-day eastern Ukraine with Muscovite Russia. Western Ukraine remained under Polish control.

As the Russian Empire expanded throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, its influence in Ukraine grew. The Partitions of Poland gradually chipped away at the commonwealth's territory, granting the Austro-Hungarian Empire control of the far western Galicia region while giving the rest of the country to Russia.

In the early 20th century, after the fall of the Russian Empire, a Ukrainian nationalist movement emerged in the western province of Lviv. When the Soviet Union was founded in 1922, Lviv was the only Ukrainian territory that was not incorporated into the new Soviet state. Instead, it became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, and Kiev was its capital.

Josef Stalin's forced collectivization of the Soviet Union's agricultural sector brought starvation to the Ukrainian countryside in the 1930s, and soon after World War II began the Nazis invaded. When the Allies defeated Nazi Germany, all of Ukraine, including the province of Galicia, was brought under the Soviets' domain for the first time in centuries. The next 40 years were relatively calm for Ukraine, though they were marked by Soviet rule. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, Ukraine became an independent state.

**The Past 25 Years: Tug-of-War Between Russia and the West**

The end of the Cold War brought an unprecedented degree of independence to Ukraine. Nevertheless, the legacy of suzerainty lingered, making the country's political scene more volatile. Russia continued to influence Ukraine from the east, while the newly formed European Union began to exert its power over the country from the west. Within Ukraine, competing political factions emerged that were loyal to one foreign patron or the other.

At first, the weak Ukrainian government attempted to rebuild the country while maintaining a precarious balance between Russia and the West in its foreign policy. But when the pro-Russia Viktor Yanukovich won a narrow and contested victory over his pro-West opponent, Viktor Yushchenko, in Ukraine's 2004 presidential election, mass protests erupted. After what became
known as the Orange Revolution, the election results were deemed illegitimate, and Yushchenko assumed the presidency instead.

During the decade of political polarization that followed, Ukraine began to politically reorient itself toward the West, and it formally pursued membership in the European Union and NATO. This aggravated tensions with Russia. Moscow responded by cutting its natural gas flows to Ukraine in 2006 and 2009 and by expressing explicit discomfort with Kiev's new pro-West policies.

Still, the defining feature of this period was the infighting taking place within Ukraine's own government, especially between Yushchenko and his running mate, Yulia Timoshenko. Their dispute, which divided the government, prevented the country from meaningfully integrating with the West and led to a steep decline of the government's popularity among Ukrainian voters. By the next presidential election in 2010, the political tides had turned: Yushchenko garnered a mere 5 percent of the vote and ceded the presidency to Yanukovich accordingly.

However, Yanukovich's victory was hardly sweeping, and the bulk of his support came from constituencies concentrated in the country's pro-Russia east and south; he registered very little support in Ukraine's pro-Europe center and west. Upon assuming office, Yanukovich wasted no time in reversing his predecessor's efforts to integrate Ukraine with the West. He made NATO membership illegal and extended the Russian Black Sea fleet's port lease in Crimea by 25 years in exchange for lower natural gas prices. These decisions alienated and angered pro-West Ukrainians, who complained that Yanukovich abused his power.

The final straw came when Yanukovich pulled out of an EU free trade agreement just before an Eastern Partnership summit, again in return for financial aid and lower prices on energy imports from Russia. Protests erupted, eventually becoming the large-scale demonstrations known as the Euromaidan movement that culminated in Yanukovich's ouster in February 2014. The scale and intensity of the protests were unmatched by any in Ukraine's post-Soviet history.

When a new pro-West government led by President Petro Poroshenko rose in Yanukovich's place, Ukraine swung away from Russia yet again. Unsurprisingly, ties between Ukraine and Russia have deteriorated again, but this time Russia has responded more aggressively. To counter what it considered to be a dangerous level of Western influence near its borders, Russia annexed Crimea and instigated a pro-Russia rebellion in eastern Ukraine. The situation there has come to a tense standstill as Russia faces off against the West.

**The Next 25 Years: Moving Away From Russia**

A look at Ukraine's long history shows that major shifts in the country's foreign policy and political orientation are not unique to the Euromaidan uprising. The country has frequently pivoted between Russia and the West as the pro-Russia east and the pro-Europe west vie for power.

However, the latest conflict in eastern Ukraine has polarized the country more than any other in its post-Soviet history. In fact, it resembles how divided Ukraine was before it was incorporated into the
Soviet Union. This polarization is likely to continue in some form for several years, if not decades, as the military engagement with Russia becomes ingrained in Ukrainian society and weakens the historical bonds between the two countries. Animosity will probably only intensify as younger generations with no memory of Ukraine's Soviet period grow up in a country where Russia poses the greatest threat to national security.

In the meantime, the high level of economic integration that has defined the relationship between Ukraine and Russia for centuries is also likely to weaken in the coming decades. Because of the crisis in eastern Ukraine, the two have already significantly reduced trade ties: Ukraine has slashed its imports of Russian natural gas, while Russia is preparing to embargo Ukrainian agricultural products. Such retaliatory measures will probably intensify over time, and the two countries will come to rely less on each other economically. Similarly, political and military ties will remain neutral at best. Each of these factors makes a reorientation toward Russia highly unlikely in the next 25 years.

As Ukraine's ties with Russia erode, Kiev will meanwhile try to strengthen its connection with the West. This does not necessarily mean that Ukraine will become an EU and NATO member, since those institutions will undergo changes of their own over the next 25 years. However, Ukraine will probably integrate further with the two countries that played a major role in shaping its pre-Soviet history: Poland and Lithuania. Poland and the Baltic states are currently in the throes of a long-term effort to merge their energy and economic infrastructure to create a regional bloc. Joining the bloc will become increasingly attractive to Ukraine in the coming decades, especially if membership comes with the political and security backing of the West's most powerful member, the United States.

This potential grouping, which harken back to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, will be made more feasible by the sweeping demographic changes taking place in Ukraine. The country is set to experience one of the steepest population declines in the world: It will lose 21.7 percent of its population by 2050, dropping from 45 million people to 35 million. As it does, Ukraine will need to secure partnerships with larger countries or multinational alliance groups to maintain its economic viability and gain security patrons to protect itself from Russia — something that also interests Poland and the Baltic states, as well as Moldova, Romania and other countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, Ukraine and Russia will not sever all ties over the next 25 years. The deep cultural, linguistic and religious bonds that exist between them are not likely to be broken entirely over the course of a generation. Still, the bonds will weaken, as will the two countries’ broader bilateral ties when Ukraine moves out of Russia’s shadow.

Lead Analyst: Eugene Chausovsky
The Caucasus: A Crucible for Eurasian Powers

Analysis

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(Stratfor)

Summary

Editor's Note: This is the fourth installment of a five-part series that explores the past, present and future of the confrontation between Russia and the West on the Eurasian landmass. Part one explored the origins of the conflict, part two examined Ukraine, and part three looked at Eastern Europe.

Where the boundaries of Europe and Asia meet, a relatively new arena has emerged in the competition between Russia and the West: the Caucasus. The region, which comprises Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, rests outside mainland Europe and is surrounded by regional powers. A wave of separatist movements since the fall of the Soviet Union has played an influential role in how the Caucasus countries view Russia, which has consistently lent its support to disputed territories.

In the coming decades, the Caucasus will continue to be an important battleground for Russia and the West as other regional powers like Turkey and Iran are drawn into the competition for influence. And as Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan align more closely with their chosen sides, all signs point to a Western-backed alliance gaining ground.

Analysis

Georgia did not become a staging ground for the Russia-West rivalry until the 18th century, well after the seeds of competition had been sowed in Ukraine and Eastern Europe. In prior centuries, the Ottoman and Persian empires ruled Kartli-Kakheti, the territory that is now Georgia. In the late 18th century, Russia formed an alliance with the Georgian state to protect the fellow Orthodox nation from the Muslim Ottomans and Persians. In 1801, Georgia was formally incorporated into the Russian Empire. When the empire collapsed in 1917, Georgia underwent a brief and unstable period of independence before subsequently being formally incorporated into the Soviet Union five years later.

Armenia, like Georgia, was a part of the Ottoman and Persian empires for hundreds of years. An Orthodox nation, it became a part of the Russian Empire in the early 20th century too, though not before its Ottoman rulers launched a mass killing of Armenians in 1915 for fear of Armenian loyalty to the Russians. This proved to be a defining moment in Armenian history, tainting its future relationship with Turkey and scattering large numbers of Armenians throughout the world. After the Russian Revolution, Armenia gained its independence for a time before joining the Soviet Union in 1922.
Azerbaijan followed much the same path, throwing off its long-time Ottoman and Persian rulers in 1813 only to be swept up by the Russian Empire. In the late 19th century, Azerbaijan attracted the attention of the West with its significant oil reserves. Alfred and Robert Nobel built a railway linking Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, to Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, as a means to transport Azerbaijani oil to the world market. By 1900, Azerbaijan had become the largest oil producer in the world. Its independence in the wake of Russia's collapse was short-lived: After a brief occupation by the British, it was swept into the newly formed Soviet Union in 1922. Though Nazi Germany attempted to seize Baku's oil fields during World War II, the Soviet army defeated the German soldiers before they could reach Azerbaijan.

The Past 25 Years: Alliances Change

In the years leading up to and immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, each of the Caucasus countries experienced widespread instability. From the unrest arose the separatist movements that would ultimately create the breakaway territories at the heart of conflict in the Caucasus today.

For Georgia, this came in the form of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two territories that sought to establish republics independent of Tbilisi's control. Separatists clashed with Georgian security forces in 1991-1992 before Russia intervened on their behalf, enabling Abkhazia and South Ossetia to claim de facto independence from Georgia.

Meanwhile, Armenia and Azerbaijan sparred over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, home to an Armenian majority but administered by Azerbaijan. During the late Soviet era, the glasnost and perestroika reforms created room for the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh to petition to join Armenia. Yerevan supported the move, but Baku strongly opposed it. When Moscow chose not to intervene, war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. With Russia's support, Armenia won the conflict, taking Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent regions within Azerbaijan's territory before signing a cease-fire in 1994.

Each of these conflicts ultimately played an important role in shaping the foreign policy orientations of the Caucasus countries. In response to Russia's support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, then-Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze sought to counter Moscow's influence by allying with NATO and the European Union. His successor, Mikhail Saakashvili, intensified these efforts, ramping up Georgia's military and economic cooperation with the West. The country's rising tension with Russia eventually culminated in the Russo-Georgian War in August 2008. Russia defeated Georgia in five days and recognized the independence of the two breakaway territories, formalizing its military presence there in the process. Though the Georgian Dream political coalition managed to defeat Saakashvili in the 2012 parliamentary elections with its campaign of normalizing economic ties with Russia, the country has continued to strategically integrate itself with the West by pursuing NATO and EU membership. Georgia has intensified its efforts since the Ukraine crisis began in 2014, signing an EU Association Agreement in June 2014 and debuting a NATO training center in August 2015.
The fight for Nagorno-Karabakh has similarly molded Armenian and Azerbaijani loyalties. Armenia strengthened its alliance with Russia, retaining a Russian presence in Gyumri and pursuing closer economic ties by joining the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union. It is also a member of Russia’s military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Azerbaijan, though, chose to forego forming an alliance with Russia. Instead, it has pursued a diversified foreign policy that seeks to balance its ties with Russia, the West and Turkey. The country has used its sizable oil and natural gas resources, developed with the help of Western energy firms, to expand its energy exports in many directions, including toward Turkey, Europe, Iran and even Russia. With these newfound revenues, Baku is building up its military in the hope of someday reclaiming Nagorno-Karabakh. The current crisis in Ukraine and its political reorientation has enabled Azerbaijan to put more pressure along its line of contact with Armenia and steer negotiations with a weakened Russia in an attempt to change the frozen conflict’s status quo.

The Next 25 Years: The Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey Axis Strengthens

The Caucasus has been one of the most dynamic fronts in the former Soviet space for the past quarter century, and the next 25 years will likely be no different. The web of relationships that defines the Caucasus — whether between the countries themselves or with external powers such as Russia, Turkey, Iran and the West — makes it probable that significant geopolitical changes lie in store for the region in the coming decades.

As with Ukraine and Eastern Europe, sweeping demographic changes will play a key role in shaping the Caucasus' future policies. The populations of Georgia and Armenia, both Orthodox countries, are projected to contract substantially by 2050. Georgia will lose 12.9 percent of its population (dropping from 4 million to 3.5 million people), while Armenia will lose 9.6 percent (from 3 million to 2.7 million people). In contrast, Azerbaijan will see its population grow by 12.2 percent over the same period, rising from 9.8 million to 11 million people.

These changes are not confined to the Caucasus; regional powers will undergo demographic adjustments of their own. Russia, for example, is set to see a population decline of about 10 percent, falling from 143 million people to 129 million by 2050. In the meantime, the populations of Iran and Turkey will expand considerably, from 79 million to 92 million and 96 million, respectively. While Russia has nearly double the number of people that Turkey and Iran do now, the gap will appreciably narrow within the next 25-35 years. This will likely tip the economic and military balance of power in the region in Turkey's and Iran's favor. Meanwhile, Moscow's soft power will wane as the cultural links that tie the Caucasus to Russia fade away.

Over the same period, the West will remain active in the Caucasus, though how it interacts with and influences the region will change. As Europe devolves into a collection of de facto regional groupings — a new Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a northern Germanic bloc and a southern Mediterranean bloc — the influence of the Continent as a whole in the Caucasus will weaken. However, countries in Central and Eastern Europe may turn to Azerbaijan as a means to diversify away from Russian energy supplies. The United States, meanwhile, will become more engaged in
the Caucasus as the competition between Russia, Turkey and Iran for toeholds in the region intensifies.

Among the Caucasus countries themselves, Azerbaijan will likely be able to reclaim at least some control of Nagorno-Karabakh, whether through military action or a diplomatic settlement, within the next 25 years. Indeed, such a settlement (or at least the early stages of one) is already beginning to take shape, and the process will speed up as Azerbaijan's demographic, economic and military growth coincides with Armenia's decline. As it becomes stronger, Azerbaijan will improve its economic and military ties with Georgia and Turkey, a move that the United States will back. Meanwhile, Armenia will look to develop a closer economic and military relationship with Iran to counterbalance the Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey axis. In its own weakened economic and military position, Russia may have to support this move. Consequently, competing alliances between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey (with selective and implicit support from the United States) on one hand and Armenia, Iran and Russia on the other will emerge in the coming decades.

Competition between the two blocs will not necessarily lead to military engagement. But given the complex network of ties in the Caucasus, several political and security tripwires will make a physical confrontation possible. For instance, the status of the region's breakaway territories will remain a source of tension, as will the weapons build-ups and military exercises of both groups. Ultimately, though, the alliance of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey will prove stronger, both economically and militarily, than its Armenia-Iran-Russia rival, and with the United States' backing, it will have the upper hand in determining what shape the Caucasus' future takes.

Central Asia: A Different Kind of Threat

Analysis

JANUARY 1, 2016 | 10:15 GMT
(Stratfor)

Summary

Editor's Note: This is the last installment of a five-part series that explores the past, present and future of the confrontation between Russia and the West on the Eurasian landmass. Part one explored the origins of the conflict, part two examined Ukraine, part three looked at Eastern Europe, and part four considered the Caucasus.

Much like the Caucasus, Central Asia serves as a relatively new but no less important staging ground for the ongoing competition between Russia and the West. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the region has been somewhat of a melange of indecision and opportunism: Kazakhstan has stayed close with Russia, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have stayed relatively neutral. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the other hand, have had difficulty settling on which foreign patron to support as violent upheavals have swung their foreign policies back and forth.
Over the coming decades, instability and internal conflict will continue to pose the greatest threats to the region as the influence of Russia and the West in Central Asia fades. But in their place, two new powers will rise that will shape the future of the region: Turkey and China.

**Analysis**

Throughout history, powerful empires, including Persian, Mongol and Turkish empires, have fought to control Central Asia. Russia did not join the fray until the late 18th century. When it did, its expansion into the region was gradual, starting in the area that is now Kazakhstan. From there, it slowly penetrated southward into modern-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

The Russian Empire's initial forays into Central Asia coincided with the British Empire’s expansion into the Indian subcontinent, giving rise to what would be known as the Great Game, a long-running battle for regional control. Imperial Russia wanted an outlet to the sea and a buffer between potentially hostile powers in Asia, be they indigenous peoples or imperial armies. Afghanistan would later become just that, separating the Russian and British empires and eventually playing an important role in subsequent conflicts between Russia and the West in Central Asia.

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**RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA**

![Map of Russia and Central Asia](image-url)
Though the Russian Empire's collapse in 1917 led to a brief and unstable period of independence in Central Asia, its Soviet successor would once again pull the region into its orbit in the following decade. Soviet rule dramatically changed the politics of Central Asia. Peoples from other parts of the Soviet bloc were forced to resettle throughout the region, while Russification programs emphasized the adoption of Russian language and customs. Central Asia became closed off to the West and to the Muslim states surrounding it, including Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan.

However, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 accelerated the bloc's undoing and gave the West the upper hand in the Cold War. Substantial support from the West, especially the United States, enabled the Afghan mujahideen to counter the Soviet military's efforts to prop up the communist government in Kabul. This exposed the Soviet Union's military weakness and drained its economic and political resources, reducing Moscow's ability to continue contending with the West on a global scale.

The Past 25 Years: The Afghan Conflict Creates Volatility

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, each of the five Central Asian states — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — gained their independence. With the exception of Tajikistan, which descended into a chaotic civil war almost immediately, all installed their former Communist Party secretaries as their new presidents.

In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Central Asia's two largest states, these presidents have remained in power at the head of highly centralized political systems ever since. Under President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan has maintained a close relationship with Russia by joining the Moscow-led Customs Union (now the Eurasian Union) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization military alliance. Though it has relied on the West to develop its large oil and natural gas resources, Kazakhstan has remained tied to Russia strategically. Uzbekistan, however, has remained neutral under President Islam Karimov's rule, eschewing alliances with both Russia and the West. While it did host U.S. and NATO military bases for a time during the West's war in Afghanistan, it later closed them after the West raised concerns over human rights abuses. Uzbekistan has also retained close economic ties with Russia but has avoided participating in Moscow-led integration projects.

Like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan has attempted to keep its distance from both Russia and the West. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov has maintained his predecessor's isolationist policies, keeping power highly centralized under his office. Though Turkmenistan initially sent most of its considerable natural gas output to Russia, in recent years it has rerouted much of its supplies to China amid a steep drop in Russian imports. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan continues to explore other export options, including the Trans-Caspian and TAPI pipelines to Europe and South Asia. In the wake of the crisis in Ukraine, Europe has been particularly interested in courting Turkmenistan as an alternative natural gas supplier to Russia, though the Kremlin has so far been successful in halting projects that would send Turkmen natural gas to the Continent. Now approached by the West, Russia and China, Turkmenistan continues to seek a balance between all three without formally aligning with any of them.
Unlike their other Central Asian neighbors, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been politically unstable since the fall of the Soviet Union. In Kyrgyzstan, revolutions took place in 2005 and 2010; the first brought to power an administration friendly with the West and the second replaced that government with one that favors Russia. Since then, Kyrgyzstan has strengthened its ties to the Kremlin, joining the Eurasian Union and allowing Russia to expand its military presence in the country while expelling the United States from the Manas air base in 2014. In Tajikistan, civil war raged from 1992 to 1997, when the pro-Russia faction led by President Emomali Rakhmon emerged victorious. Rakhmon has ruled the country ever since, pulling it closer to Russia, particularly in terms of security and military cooperation.

Along with each country's unique circumstances, the evolution of Russia's relationship with the West in Afghanistan has shaped the rivalry in Central Asia. At the start of the U.S. invasion and during NATO's occupation of Afghanistan in the early 2000s, both sides cooperated extensively. In fact, Russia brokered access to strategic military bases and lines of supply in Central Asia on behalf of U.S. and Western forces. But as the war dragged on, Moscow grew fearful of the West's intention to maintain a long-term military presence in the region, potentially challenging Russia's role as a regional heavyweight. Central Asian states then evicted Western forces from their bases and severed their supply routes. Now, with the Taliban and the Islamic State gaining strength in Afghanistan, Russia and the United States are lobbying for competing border security initiatives with the countries of Central Asia.

The Next 25 Years: Other Powers Overtake Russia and the West

As in the rest of the former Soviet periphery, the competition between Russia and the West will be heavily influenced by the demographic changes set to take place in Central Asia in the next 25 years. But unlike Eastern Europe and the Orthodox countries in the Caucasus, Central Asia is on the verge of a tremendous population increase. By 2050, Kazakhstan's population will rise by 27 percent (from 17.6 million people to 22.4 million), Uzbekistan's by 24 percent (from 29.9 million people to 37.1 million) and Turkmenistan's by 22 percent (from 5.4 million people to 6.6 million). At the same time, Kyrgyzstan's population will grow by 39 percent (from 5.9 million people to 8.2 million) while Tajikistan's will rise by an astonishing 70 percent (from 8.4 million people to 14.3 million).

While such population growth is normally conducive to economic growth and military strength, it will occur in Central Asia at a time when the region's resources, including water and food, are already strained. The population explosion will hit hardest in the Fergana Valley, which is the region's demographic core and is shared by Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. There, the Soviets designed convoluted borders to intentionally create divisions between the Central Asian states. The area has already been the site of several ethnic conflicts. With the number of people expected to rise dramatically in the next 25-35 years, the Fergana Valley will likely become a hotbed of tension and conflict in the region.

Meanwhile, Central Asia's cultural makeup will undoubtedly change. The widespread use of Russian as a lingua franca, which is rooted in the Soviet period, will probably decline as new generations with no memory of their countries' Soviet past grow up. Russia will see its influence over the region
decline as such cultural bonds — as well as its own capabilities to project economic and military power — weaken. The transition from Soviet-era leaders like Nazarbayev and Rakhmon, who have favored Russia over the West, to new rulers from the post-Soviet generation will make Central Asia a more unpredictable place that is open to contestation — a change that is unlikely to favor Russia.

However, the West will also see its ability to influence Central Asia decline as the regionalization of Europe forces the Continent to focus on matters closer to home. Still, countries in Central and Eastern Europe may seek to import Central Asian energy supplies through the Caspian corridor to diversify away from Russia. Meanwhile, the United States will remain an important player in the region. As in the Caucasus, it will be selective in how it engages in Central Asia, preferring to step in from time to time to keep any single external power from gaining too much influence.

While the reach of Russia and the West recedes over the coming decades, two other powers will rise in their place: Turkey and China. Four of the five states in Central Asia are ethnically Turkic, and as Russia’s cultural bonds in the region fade, Turkey’s will strengthen. Because Turkey’s population is predicted to grow by more than 20 percent, reaching 96 million people, it will have greater economic and military power to match its rising soft power. China, for its part, has already made economic inroads into the region over the past decade, and its economic influence will likely continue to grow. Such growth will be aided by the fact that Russia will not continue to be able to financially support many Central Asian states. That said, China will still have to contend with Turkey, which will be more active in the region. But this contest is unlikely to take on a military dimension; China and Turkey will have more immediate security concerns in East Asia and the Middle East.

Afghanistan will continue to have a significant impact in Central Asia, not as a regional power with influence but as a weak state with the potential to destabilize the region. Cross-border ties between ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens on either side of the boundary between Afghanistan and Central Asia will grow. This could increase the likelihood of Islamist and militant elements spilling over into the region. Although they will continue to compete at a strategic level, Russia, Turkey, China and the United States will cooperate at a tactical level to prevent the rise of powerful radical Islamist groups in Central Asia. For the foreseeable future, instability and conflict within and between Central Asian states will continue to pose the largest threat to the region, one that will be far more difficult to contain.

Lead Analyst: Eugene Chausovsky

Eastern Europe: Finding Strength in Numbers

Analysis

DECEMBER 30, 2015 | 09:00 GMT
(Stratfor)
Summary

Editor's Note: This is the third installment of a five-part series that explores the past, present and future of the confrontation between Russia and the West on the Eurasian landmass. Part one explored the origins of the conflict and part two examined Ukraine, caught between East and West.

The competition between Russia and the West has been played out heavily in Ukraine throughout history. But that is just one part of a much wider swath of territory in Eastern Europe that has been caught up in the great rivalry. Today, this territory consists of Belarus, Moldova and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Each of these countries has chosen its own path since the fall of the Soviet Union. Some have remained staunch supporters of Russia, others have enthusiastically embraced European institutions, and others still have shifted uncertainly between the two. In the next quarter century, the countries of Eastern Europe will begin to coalesce, forming a new regional bloc that will pool the economic and military strength of its members.

Analysis

The story of Belarus is similar to the story of Ukraine. Belarus was first drawn into the Russia-West rivalry because it belonged to eastern Slavic state of Kievan Rus. After the collapse of Kievan Rus in the 13th century, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania pulled Belarus into its domain, which later became the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The Poles and Lithuanians ruled Belarus for hundreds of years, until the commonwealth broke apart amid the Partitions of Poland of the 18th century. Belarus then joined the Russian Empire and, after a brief period of independence following the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union.

The Baltic states followed a somewhat different path. Neither Estonia nor Latvia was a part of Kievan Rus. Instead, they were incorporated into the various Scandinavian and Germanic empires that existed throughout most of the Middle Ages. Lithuania, on the other hand, was a power in its own right: It began as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 13th century before merging with Poland to form the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th century. Like their neighbors, all three Baltic states became part of the Russian Empire and, eventually, the Soviet Union.

Moldova can also trace its roots beyond Slavic territory. Moldova began as a part of Romania, and by the time it was absorbed into the Russian Empire at the turn of the 19th century, it had not yet formed a cultural or political identity of its own. Russia promoted Moldova's assimilation through an extensive Russification program, setting Moldova apart culturally and politically from Romania. Though Moldova briefly returned to Romanian hands after the Russian Revolution, the Soviet Union later reincorporated it into Russian territory during World War II.

The Past 25 Years: Tangled Alliances
Since gaining independence after the fall of the Soviet Union, Belarus has had a relatively steady foreign policy agenda. Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, who has kept his grip on power since winning the country’s first presidential election in 1994, has maintained many elements of the country’s former Soviet structure, including the extreme centralization of power within the executive branch and an economy dominated by the state. Lukashenko has also continued to promote close economic and military integration with Russia; his country is a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization military alliance. Belarus and its leader keep their distance from the West and have avoided integration initiatives such as the European Union’s Eastern Partnership program. Belarus has even participated in joint military exercises with Russia near Europe’s periphery. And, while it is true that Lukashenko has helped mediate talks between Russia and the West since the crisis in Ukraine broke out in 2014, Belarus remains steadfastly aligned with Russia.
The Baltic states, on the other hand, have adopted a resoundingly pro-West stance since the Soviet Union's collapse. Almost immediately after gaining independence, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania began the process of joining the European Union and NATO. In 2004, they became members of both blocs. All three are part of the eurozone and support a NATO buildup in their territory to deter
Russian aggression. Despite the presence of Russian minority populations, through which Moscow exerts its influence, the Baltic states have maintained close ties to the West.

Moldova, marred by political instability stemming from deep divides between the country's pro-Russia and pro-West factions, has wavered somewhere between Belarus and the Baltics. Immediately after gaining its independence, Moldova descended into armed conflict between security forces and separatists in the pro-Russia region of Transdniestria. The conflict enabled Transdniestria to break away from Moldova, and Russia continues to support the region militarily and economically to this day. Meanwhile, Moldova is struggling to form a coherent foreign policy because of the deep political rifts that remain in place. The Russia-leaning Vladimir Voronin led the country from 2001 to 2009 before being toppled during a pro-Europe revolution. Voronin's ouster brought in the pro-West Alliance for European Integration government, which has been so mired in political disputes that it has collapsed several times within the past five years. Now, a weak interim administration governs Moldova, and the country's political system remains split between pro-Russia and pro-West forces.

The Next 25 Years: Tightening Regional Ties

In the coming decades, Eastern Europe will undergo a radical demographic change. According to the United Nations' 2015 World Population Prospects report, Belarus, the Baltics, Moldova and Ukraine all rank among the 15 countries expected to see the biggest population declines by 2050. The population of Belarus will drop by 14.4 percent, from 9.5 million people to 8.1 million, while Moldova's will fall by 20.3 percent, from four million people to 3.2 million. Similar numbers are expected for the Baltic states: Estonia's population will decrease by 14 percent, from 1.3 million people to 1.1 million; Latvia's population will decrease by 19.1 percent, from two million people to 1.6 million; and Lithuania's population will decrease by 17.5 percent, from 2.9 million people to 2.4 million.
Such demographic change will reshape these countries' economies and politics as well as their foreign policy orientations. As their populations shrink, Eastern European nations will be forced to forge partnerships to avoid economic downturns and to protect themselves from external threats. In fact, they have already begun to do so. Belarus has tied itself to Russia, the Baltic states have aligned with Europe, and Moldova (with the exception of Transdniestria) has sought to meaningfully integrate with the West. In the coming quarter century, the goal will remain the same, though how Eastern European countries achieve it may change.

**POPULATION CHANGE, 2015-2050**

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<th>2015</th>
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<td>321.8</td>
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*Source: United Nations*
Belarus’ unwavering loyalty to Russia may come into question in the next 25 years. Its orientation has been defined by a single administration that is heavily centered on one personality: Lukashenko. His successor could easily choose a different course. As Russia struggles to address its own demographic decline and with a new generation of Belarusians with fewer ties to the Soviet era moving into positions of political leadership, it is possible that Belarus will join the pro-West camp. The growing availability of non-Russian energy supplies, especially via liquefied natural gas import terminals in Poland and the Baltic states, will ease Belarus’ dependence on Russia in the long run.

As with Ukraine, this will not necessarily lead to Belarus joining the European Union or NATO. Instead, the country could move to strengthen ties with its neighbors, potentially creating a bloc similar to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that includes Ukraine and the Baltic states. The United States, because of its own long-standing interest of containing Russia, would likely support such a bloc, giving countries like Belarus even more incentive to join.

The formation of an Eastern European alliance would be particularly attractive to the Baltic countries, which will be collectively populated by only roughly 5 million people by 2050. By joining forces with Poland, Belarus and Ukraine, this figure would rise to at least 80 million people. In this way, the Baltic states could overcome their small sizes and deter Russian interference in the region.

Moldova will need the security of a collective economic and military union too, since it is also facing a steep demographic decline. While it is possible that Moldova could rejoin Romania, whether officially or in a de facto sense, Romania’s demographic troubles are shaping up to be even worse than Moldova’s. A new Eastern European bloc might therefore appeal to both countries, which share other potential members’ proximity to and fear of Russia. Members would also have other similar priorities, including the diversification of their energy sources and the weakening of Russian influence in the European borderlands.

A potential Eastern European bloc composed of Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Romania and the Baltic States would have a population comparable to Russia’s in the coming decades. Economically, it would likely be more advanced and sophisticated than Russia. The gap between the two would only grow as Russia’s position as the region’s dominant energy supplier weakens over time. Militarily, the bloc could be capable of defending itself from Russia if it received support from the United States. Given Washington’s long-standing interest in countering Russia’s power plays, this would not be an unlikely scenario.

Of course, Russia will not be forced to retreat completely behind its own borders. It will continue to be an important player in the region, especially in Belarus and parts of Moldova, where its cultural ties are strongest. However, this affinity will be overshadowed by the economic and military integration taking place within Eastern Europe, making it far more difficult for Moscow to extend its influence there. Meanwhile, the region will shift further toward the West over the next 25 years, forming a highly integrated bloc of like-minded countries that will help to shape the Continent in its own right.

Lead Analyst: Eugene Chausovsky