

Russia's Shrinking Sphere of Influence: Steady Decline of a Great Power and its Implications for International Security

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Abstract

This article analyses the rationale behind Russia's ambitions to dominate over the former Soviet countries in its neighbourhood, the challenges it has been facing in its quest to materialize those ambitions, and some major outcomes of its struggle against these challenges. It also explores the existing *status quo* in the region and its prospective implications for the international security. It finds out that Russia is losing ground in the competition with both the West (i.e. EU and United States) and China over its neighbourhood. The article, however, concludes that the decline of Russia's influence in this region – the contraction of its sphere of influence – is not likely to bring about an all-out war between Russia and its geopolitical rivals for the foreseeable future.

Introduction

Russia's future is uncertain. It might pursue the course of modernization and emerge as a principal power in the twenty-first century. The modernized Russia could exert a substantial influence on the international relations and play a leading role in the formation of the world politics. In contrast, as many observers anticipate, Russia would plunge into being a marginalized power and even disintegrate, if it fails to progressively reconstruct and reform itself.¹ However, it is certain that Russia's foreign policy, which strives to keep the rival great powers away from the post-Soviet region that Moscow considers as its sphere of influence, is facing enormous challenges. The EU, USA, and China – the three great powers that challenge Russia's interests in this region – do not appear willing to leave the region to Russia's absolute control. In the aftermath of Crimea's annexation by Russia, the tensions between the sides intensified and many observers warned against the threat of an all-out war between the sides.²

Why does Russia seek to dominate its neighbourhood? To what extent has Russia been successful in its policies *vis-à-vis* the geopolitical challenges it has faced in its quest for regional hegemony? What implications could the existing *status quo* in Russia's neighbourhood entail for the international security in the wider region? This article is an attempt to suggest answers to these questions. It will re-assess Russia's foreign policy in Eurasia which many observers have portrayed as a success of the Russian leadership and/or a threat to the international security.³ It will examine the existing and prospective geopolitical situation in the region from the perspective of the Kremlin

¹ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, (London and Washington, DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press 2015), xviii.

² David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, "Outnumbered, Outraged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats NATO." *War on the Rocks*, April 21, 2016. <http://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outraged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato/> (accessed April 15, 2017); Michael Kofman and Andrei Shustentsov, "What Makes a Great Power War Possible," *Russia in Global Affairs no. 3 (2016)*: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/What-Makes-A-Great-Power-War-Possible-18241> (accessed April 15, 2017).

³ Sergey Karaganov, "2016 – A Victory of Conservative realism," *Russia in Global Affairs no 1. (2017)*: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/2016--A-Victory-of-Conservative-Realism-18585> (accessed April 15, 2017); Ariel Cohen, "Russia's Eurasian Union Could Endanger the Neighborhood and U.S. Interests," Backgrounder no. 2804 (2013): <http://www.heritage.org/europe/report/us-comprehensive-strategy-toward-russia> (accessed April 15, 2017).

and contradict it with the observations that have concluded that “Russia is winning”⁴ the Ukraine crisis or Russia has pursued a “victorious”⁵ foreign policy *vis-à-vis* its neighbourhood. It will also look into the geopolitical situation in Central Asia and examine Russia’s potential to successfully compete against the advance of China’s “creeping soft power”⁶ inward the region.

This research is conducted on the basis of the analytical logic of structural realism⁷ which is one of the most influential and sophisticated approaches to the international politics. The anarchic system of international politics is considered as the independent variable and regarded as objective reality out there which is distinct from the observer. The lack of overarching supranational Leviathan in the system urges its actors to act in accordance with the rule of self-help to survive in the hostile environment of the international relations. The behaviours of the great powers in this environment, their ambitions to maximize their power and security, and their corresponding policies to achieve this goal constitutes the dependent variable of the study. This methodological framework allows the study to identify the sources of Russia’s ambitions to dominate its neighbourhood, the reactions of the rival great powers to these ambitions, and the geopolitical outcomes of this confrontation. The article is to build its empirical argumentation through positivist methods by analysing a wide range of sources, particularly academic literature, but also the publications of think-tanks, official documents, and news media articles.

The article argues that as Russia seeks to reinstate its great power status and become equal to other great powers, it has been *sine qua non* for it to control its immediate external environment, avert the encroachment of rival powers, and thus become a regional hegemon. Russia has, however, failed to secure its domination over most of the countries in its neighbourhood. Although the Georgia war (2008) and Ukraine crisis (2014) stopped the path of these countries to the EU and NATO membership for the foreseeable future, they were in fact nothing more than a pyrrhic victory for the Russian foreign policy. Secondly, the article, exploring the geopolitical situation in Central Asia (CA), argues that although Russia’s interests in the region has not been challenged at the extent they have been in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, the future prospects from the Russian perspective look rather dismal in this region, as well.

Finally, on the contrary to the observers who warn against an all-out war between Russia and Western powers, the article argues that such a possibility is very low due to a number of reasons, including the mutually assured destruction possibility. The article contends Russia’s potential to force back the advance of the Western influence over the region has reached its limits. Therefore, the existing *status quo* is likely to remain unchanged for the long years to come, unless the West jeopardizes Russia’s interests further in the region which looks unlikely to happen. Last but not least, the article fleshes out that the gradual rise of Chinese influence over the Central Asian countries is likely to continue. However, this change in balance of power in the region is unlikely to bring about a military confrontation between China and Russia in the foreseeable future.

⁴ John Mearsheimer, “Don’t Arm Ukraine,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/09/opinion/dont-arm-ukraine.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone&r=0> (accessed March 13, 2017).

⁵ Karaganov, “2016 – A Victory of Conservative realism.”

⁶ Ariel Cohen, “How the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Will Affect Russia and Eurasia?” in *Central Asia After 2014*, ed. Stephen J. Blank (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 21.

⁷ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979); John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

Against this background, this article will first discuss the rationale behind Russia's efforts to dominate its neighbourhood. Then it will move on to explore the challenges Russia has been facing in its quest to materialize its geopolitical ambitions and describe some outcomes of the geopolitical competition concerning the regional countries so far. The article divides Russia's neighbourhood into two analytical parts (on the one hand Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, on the other hand Central Asia) and discusses the geopolitical affairs concerning these regions in separate sub-sections. Finally, it will analyse the prospective implications of the existing *status quo* in Russia's neighbourhood for the international security. The article will end with a short conclusion.

Russia's Quest for Regional Hegemony and Geopolitical Challenges

Russia, being a "modern"⁸ state in the Cooperian sense, defends the Westphalian rules of the international politics and denounces the domination over the international relations by a single state or bloc of states. This approach urges Russia to rise as a great power equal to other great powers and to establish an international balance of power that secures Russia's national interests. This is a desire that requires Russia to dominate its neighbourhood both to guarantee the great power status and to ensure the security of its national borders. Hence, the Russian political elite consider the establishment of unchallenged dominance in the territories of the former Soviet Union as of supreme importance for Russia's international standing and foreign policy perspectives.⁹ According to the Kremlin's geopolitical outlook, Russia cannot compete globally with other great powers, unless it secures its hegemony over its immediate neighbourhood. As Leonid Kuchma, Ukraine's second president (1994–2005) wrote in his memories, "The loss of former influence, particularly in the borders of the former Soviet Union, is a catastrophe" for Russia and "life-and-death matter" for its leadership.¹⁰ Russia's approach to this region is often noted as "Russia's Monroe Doctrine"¹¹ of which principal objectives have remained unchanged since the early years of Yeltsin's presidency. Russia sees the region as its periphery and grants herself the right to limit sovereignty of regional countries and their geopolitical manoeuvres.¹² Russia's leaders, on many occasions, have not shied away from openly saying that Russia would do everything possible to prevent geopolitical shifts in this region that pose threats to Russia's national security.¹³

Russia's ambitions to re-establish its dominance over the territories of the former Soviet Union brought it with a clash with two powerful geopolitical centres – the West (i.e. EU and NATO) and China. The Western powers have worriedly reacted to Moscow's attempts to re-integrate the

⁸ Robert Cooper, *The Post-Modern State and the World Order* (London: Demos, 2000).

⁹ Nicole J. Jackson, *Russian Foreign Policy and the CIS: Theories, Debates and Actions* (London: Routledge, 2003), 69-70; Margot Light, "Russian Foreign Policy," in *Developments in Russian Politics 7*, ed. Stephen White, Richard Sakwa, and Henry E. Hale (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹⁰ Dmitry Trenin, *Post-Imperium: A Eurasian Story* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 88.

¹¹ Mark Smith, *Pax Russica: Russia's Monroe Doctrine*, (London: The Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1993); Mette Skak, "Russia's New 'Monroe Doctrine'" in *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, ed. Roger E. Kanet, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Lionel Ponsard, *Russia, NATO and Cooperative Security: Bridging the Gap*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 17.

¹² Lyudmila O. Igunnova, "Imperskaya Identichnost' Yevropeyskogo Soyuzu i Rossii" [The Imperial Identity of the European Union and Russia] *Bulletin of the Tomsk State University* 6, no. 32 (2014): 48; Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, xxi.

¹³ Reuters, "Russia Army Vows Steps if Georgia and Ukraine Join NATO," April 11, 2008, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/04/11/us-russia-nato-steps-idUSL1143027920080411> (accessed: 21 April 2017).

regional countries under its umbrella named Eurasian Union which they equated to the Soviet Union.¹⁴ The leaders of the United States have publicly criticized this project and vowed to take effective measures to avert Russia's plans "to re-Sovietize the region"¹⁵. Throughout the recent decade, the post-Soviet region, particularly Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, witnessed the consequences of this geopolitical confrontation. Russia's influence in CA, the eastern part of Russia's alleged sphere of influence, has not, however, been challenged yet at the extent it was in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Since the late XIX century, neither a Western nor an Asian power has ever strictly challenged Russia's dominion over the countries of this region. China, the geographically closest great power to Central Asia, has never publicly demonstrated any serious counter-reaction to Russia's policies, including its integration projects, to reinforce its presence in this region.¹⁶ However, this silence does not testify to China's submission to Russia's regional ambitions. Quite the contrary, over the years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has been boosting its influence over the Central Asian countries.

The Challenges Russia Facing in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Eastern Europe (Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus) and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) host the countries that Russia treats as supremely important for its national security and international standing. It has been widely stated by the scholars of the international relations that an unchallenged dominance over these countries is a geopolitical imperative for Russia's plans to re-emerge as a regional hegemon or a great power.¹⁷ The Kremlin has had a great potential to materialize this goal considering that the regional countries are far smaller than Russia geographically and dependent on the Russian economy and/or military to varying degrees. Nevertheless, the Western factor has made this goal a seemingly insurmountable challenge for the Russian foreign policy.

The end of the Cold War generated a cooperative international environment between NATO and Russia. Particularly, the 1997 Russia–NATO Founding Act and the 2002 NATO – Russia Council formalized the relations between the former Cold War foes and created a basis for cooperation. In the following years, the Alliance integrated the Baltic States and most of the Central and Eastern European states. Since Russia was in the depth of despair throughout the 1990s, it could not prevent the expansion of the Western political and military structures inward the territories previously dominated by the Kremlin. This emboldened the Western powers and allowed them to reach the boundaries of the former Soviet Union in the beginning of the new millennium and declare the door of the Alliance open to the regional countries. This period coincided with the resurgence of Russia from the misery of the previous decade under the presidency of the newly-elected President Vladimir Putin and led the two geopolitical poles into an increasingly intense confrontation.

The rivalries between the two have become particularly hard for Russia because the *modus operandi* of the struggle for power and influence has turned out substantially different from that of the previous centuries: it is no longer *only* the military might that determines the fate of the expansionist policies, *but also* power over the minds and hearts of people – soft power – in the

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe & Radio Liberty, "Clinton Calls Eurasian Integration an Effort to 'Re-Sovietize'," December 7, 2012, <http://www.rferl.org/a/clinton-calls-eurasian-integration-effort-to-resovietize/24791921.html> (accessed April 1, 2017).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Alexander Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 95-96.

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Premature Partnership", *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (1994).

contested region.¹⁸ This fact is worriedly observed by the Russian officialdom. For example, Russian Chief of General Staff Valery Gerasimov, who believes that “responding to [hybrid warfare and colour revolutions] using conventional troops is impossible”¹⁹, argues that: “The role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness. The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures.”²⁰

The attractive power of the Western countries (economic prosperity, higher life standards, rule of law, democracy, etc.) seriously affected the geopolitical vision of most people in the regional countries. The state leaders in almost all the regional countries, with the exception of Belarus, declared the European integration as the foreign policy priority. Some of these countries (e.g. Georgia and Ukraine) also demonstrated a willingness to join the Transatlantic bloc. The western powers supported the growing pro-Western sentiments in the region by investing a large sum of resources on their projects *vis-à-vis* the regional countries. They also supported many critical regional projects that were at odds with the interests of Russia. Most prominently, the US supported the establishment of the energy pipelines (e.g. the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, Nabucco, and the trans-Caspian pipeline) from Caucasian basis to Europe that were to bypass Russia.²¹ Those pipelines were to prevent Russia from monopolizing trans-Caspian energy flows to Europe and deal a blow to Russia’s dominance in European energy market.²² In addition to it, the United States also demonstrated a clear support to the pro-Western and largely anti-Russian colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space.²³

Amidst the geopolitical dilemma posed by the rival great powers (i.e. West and Russia), the three countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus) took the neutral or pro-Russian geopolitical path, whereas the other three countries (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) demonstrated a determination to realize their European dreams. The EU and NATO support inspired the pro-Western groups in the region, particularly in the latter group of countries. Russia’s failure to avert the pro-Western drift of these nations and the substantial support of the Western powers to this drift led to the Russia – Georgia war (2008) and an international crisis over Ukraine (2014).

In these two instances, Russia managed to secure the most pressing imperative of its foreign policy concerning Georgia and Ukraine: Russia’s military intervention brought about insurmountable

¹⁸ Vasif Huseynov, “Soft Power Geopolitics: How Does the Diminishing Utility of Military Power Affect the West - Russia Confrontation over the ‘Common Neighbourhood,’” *Eastern Journal of European Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁹ Sputnik, “Russian Military Experts to Develop ‘Soft Power’ Concept – Reports,” March 1, 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/201603011035564527-russia-soft-power-hybrid-warfare/> (accessed April 29, 2017).

²⁰ Valeriy Gerasimov, “Tsennost’ Nauki v Predvidenii” [The Value of Science is in Foresight] *Voyenno Promyshlennyy Kur’yer*, 8, no. 476 (2013).

²¹ Eurasianet.org, “Current Geostrategy in the South Caucasus,” January 6, 2007, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/pp010707.shtml> (accessed May 1, 2017).

²² Stephen F. Larrabee, “The United States and Security in the Black Sea Region,” *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 9, no. 3 (2009): 304.

²³ Andrew Wilson, “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution, NGOs and the Role of the West,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 1, (2006); Jonathan Steele, “Ukraine’s Postmodern Coup D’état,” *Guardian*, November 26, 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/nov/26/ukraine.comment> (accessed May 1, 2017); Mark R. Beissinger, “Promoting Democracy: Is Exporting Revolution a Constructive Strategy?” *Dissent* 53, no. 1 (2006); Mark R. Beissinger, “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5, no. 2 (2007); Janusz Bugajski and Margarita Assenova, *Eurasian Disunion: Russia’s Vulnerable Flanks* (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2016), 16.

obstacles on the Euro-Atlantic integration path of the two countries. The Georgia war ended with the de-facto detachment of the two breakaway regions – Abkhazia and South Ossetia which constitute 20% of Georgian territory – from Tbilisi’s control. Russia recognized the independence of these two regions, located military forces in their territories, and sealed its control over them. The Kremlin went through a similar experience in its response to the former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich’s overthrow in February 2014. Facing the threat of losing Ukraine to the pro-Western forces, Moscow took a bold stance and annexed Crimea – the region which hosts the only warm water port of Russian navy close to Russia’s borders and which is of enormous geostrategic importance for Russian national security. Crimea’s annexation and Russia-supported separatism in Eastern Ukraine, in similar vein to the one in the Georgian case, became a grave deterrent on Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic integration path. This is why, it is argued by many observers that Russia achieved a great victory in the region through its manoeuvres in the Georgia war (2008) and Ukraine crisis (since 2014). However, Russia’s success in complicating the pro-Western drift of these counties does not represent the entire geopolitical picture emerged in the aftermath of these two events. Russia, on the other hand, lost its unchallenged control over Georgia and Ukraine. Its policies to re-integrate the post-Soviet countries within the Eurasian Union were seriously damaged and, thus, its sphere of influence further contracted.

Georgia began to pursue political and economic integration into the Euro-Atlantic community more successfully than any other post-Soviet country in the region. It terminated its membership at the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and distanced itself from the other Russian integration projects. Together with Moldova and Ukraine, it signed Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union and was granted with visa-free access to the Schengen zone. The integration of Georgia into the Transatlantic Alliance has been also proceeding steadily, to a large extent, thanks to Georgia’s firm commitment to the NATO membership. Currently, the Georgian Parliament is to add a new chapter to the state constitution concerning Georgia’s European and Euro-Atlantic integration which will officialise the country’s Western-leaning geopolitical orientation as a constitutional imperative.²⁴ The general public, whose 72% support the government’s stated goal to join the European Union and 61% are in favour of the NATO membership,²⁵ is a determined driving force of the country’s pro-Western geopolitical course.

In the wake of Yanukovich’s overthrow, Ukraine also massively intensified its relations with the Western powers. Association Agreement and DCFTA, which imply “a comprehensive ‘Europeanization’ of Ukraine’s economy, political system, and public administration”²⁶ were signed shortly after Yanukovich’s departure. The country has already launched the implementation of these agreements. The volume of trade with the EU currently accounts for 40% of Ukraine’s foreign trade, while the share of Russia has dropped from 27.3% to 11.5% over the

²⁴ Tabula, “Parliament Chairman: Georgian Constitution Will Have Chapter on European Integration,” April 18, 2017, <http://www.tabula.ge/en/story/119411-parliament-chairman-georgian-constitution-will-have-chapter-on-european-integration> (accessed May 1, 2017).

²⁵ Civil.ge, “NDI-Commissioned Public Opinion Survey,” January 16, 2017, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=29775> (accessed May 1, 2017).

²⁶ Andreas Umland and Iryna Solonenko, “EU-Ukraine Relations After the Ukrainian Parliamentary Elections: A New ‘Plan B’ for Brussels’ Policies toward Kiev,” *German Council on Foreign Relations*, November 20, 2012, <https://dgap.org/de/article/eu-ukraine-relations-after-ukrainian-parliamentary-elections> (accessed May 2, 2017).

last three years.²⁷ Ukraine is about to obtain visa-free regime with the EU which will certainly increase the integration of the Ukrainian society into the European community. The range of integration with the West expands beyond the borders of the Europe: In 2016, Kiev signed a free trade agreement with Canada (CUFTA). In the same year of Yanukovich's fall, the Ukrainian parliament revoked the law on neutrality and declared the country's goal to the NATO membership. A state programme for the adoption of NATO standards by the Armed Forces of Ukraine by 2020 has been accepted and is being implemented.²⁸

On the other hand, the gap between Russia and Ukraine is increasingly widening at both governmental and societal levels. Russia's intervention devastated its image in the eyes of millions of Ukrainians and cultivated hate against Russia's leaders and their policies *vis-à-vis* Ukraine. The post-Euromaidan government took a series of actions in order to accelerate this process and minimize Russian cultural influence on Ukraine. Towards this end, the government imposed restrictions on the Russian language textbooks, Russian media, Russian language, Russian symbols, and the promotion of Soviet heritage. The Ukraine crisis has strictly deteriorated Russia's image in the eyes of the Ukrainian population. Very tellingly, while just 4%²⁹ of the respondents rated Russia unfavourably in Ukraine in 2010, the percentage of these people went up to around 60%³⁰ in 2014. A similar trend was felt in other regional countries, even in Belarus, Russia's closest ally in the region: after Crimea's annexation, fearing that Russia's "green little men" would be deployed also against Belarus, President Lukashenko sought to normalize its relations with the West.³¹ He also underlined Minsk's "independence" from the Kremlin and stressed that "Belarus is not part of the Russian World."³²

The Challenges Russia Facing in Central Asia

Central Asia, the region where Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are located, is a remote region for the Western powers to act as an assertive geopolitical force. The partial withdrawal of the US troops from Afghanistan, the closure of the US military bases in the Central Asia, the relatively low profile of the Western economic and soft power influence, and Washington's lack of updated long-term strategy concerning the region have downgraded the visibility of the Western powers in the region.³³ The major powers that dominate and preserve the potential to dominate the region in the years to come are Russia and China.

²⁷Lb.ua, "Ukraine-Russia trade drops by \$30bn over three years", February 14, 2017, https://en.lb.ua/news/2017/02/14/3118_ukrainerussia_trade_drops_30bn.html (accessed May 1, 2017).

²⁸ Interfax Ukraine, "Ukrainian Army Will Switch to NATO Standards by 2020 and Get New Logistics System," March 1, 2017, <http://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/394507.html> (accessed May 1, 2017).

²⁹International Institute for Policy Studies, "Inside Ukraine," May 8, 2010, http://old.icps.com.ua/files/articles/57/96/Inside_Ukraine_ENG_8.pdf (accessed May 2, 2017).

³⁰Pew Research Center, "Russia's Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine," July 9, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/>.

³¹ Andrew Wilson, "Belarus' Balancing Act: Lukashenko Looks West and East," *Foreign Affairs*, October 29, 2005, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/belarus/2015-10-29/belarus-balancing-act> (accessed 17 March 2017).

³²Union.info, "Lukashenko: 'Belarus is not part of the Russian world,'" January 30, 2015, <http://uatoday.tv/geopolitics/belarusian-president-denies-belarusian-land-is-a-part-of-the-russian-world-406152.html> (accessed May 1, 2017).

³³ Marco Rossi and Roberto Bendini, "Old Games, New Players: Russia, China and the Struggle for Mastery in Central Asia", European Parliament (2012), 16-19; Reid Standish, "U.S. Chases New Role in Central Asia Against Mounting Security Concerns," *Foreign Policy*, November 5, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/11/05/u-s-chases-new-role-in-central-asia-againstmounting-security-concerns-afghanistan-isis-taliban-russia/> (accessed 28 April 2017); Marlene Laruelle, "U.S.-Russia Relations in Central Asia: Change Within," *The Washington Times*, October 28, 2016,

Until recently it used to be only Russia that dominated over the regional countries. From the late XIX century, when Russia completed the invasion of the Central Asia, the region remained under Moscow's unchallenged control up until the collapse of the Soviet empire.³⁴ In a period of more than one century, Russia bolstered up its presence in the region in all spheres, including culture, economy, and security. Russia managed to remain as the most influential external power in the region also following the collapse of the Soviet Union. A number of factors, *inter alia* the dependency of the Central Asians on Russia for migrant employment, remittances, energy subsidies, and export market, Russia's historical, linguistic, and cultural ties with the Central Asian populations, the existence of substantial Russian minority in the region, have made the perseverance of Russia's influence possible.³⁵

However, the third millennium brought changes to the regional balance of power. The following brief analysis asserts that Russia's influence is in decline in this region, as well. The advancing power here, on the contrary to Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, is not the West, but China.³⁶ Tellingly, China does not publicly contend Russia's dominance in the region, due to a number of reasons, first and foremost, because Russia is interested in ensuring stability in Central Asia as much as China is. A political turmoil across the region would empower terrorism, extremism, and separatism which both Moscow and Beijing strive to keep away from their borders.³⁷ Second, in accordance with the concept of "peaceful rise", the Chinese try to avoid looking as a geopolitical contender and thus provoking Russia to confront China's advance into its "near abroad". Toward this end, Beijing tries to involve Russia in its regional projects and do not publicly question Russia's claim to the region as its "sphere of influence". Third, Russia's dominion was seen in Beijing as a bulwark against the influx of Western (American) influence in the region. However, the interests of the two powers do not invariably converge. Particularly, the aftermath of the 9/11 terror act in the United States changed Chinese perceptions of Russian domination over the Central Asia. Russia's cooperation with the United States and the opening of the American military bases in some of the regional countries were observed apprehensively by the Chinese political elite.³⁸ For Beijing, the Russia – American cooperation demonstrated that Moscow cannot be trusted as a guarantee of the regional stability in Central Asia. China had to more actively engage with this region seeking to reinforce its role in ensuring the regional stability.

In recent years, China has significantly bolstered up its ties with the Central Asians through a number of integration projects, primarily the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the China-led One Belt, One Road (New Silk Road) land route (Russia is participating in both projects). These initiatives allow Beijing to build up economic leverages *vis-à-vis* the Central Asian

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/oct/28/us-russia-relations-central-asia/> (accessed 25 April 2017); Liselotte Odgaard, "Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood: China's Relations with Russia in Central Asia," *Asian Security*, (2017), 5.

³⁴ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Chatham House, 2008), 91-92.

³⁵ Rossi and Bendini, "Old Games, New Players."

³⁶ Raffaello Pantucci, "China's and Russia's Soft Competition in Central Asia," *Current History* 114, no. 774, (2015).

³⁷ Russell Ong, "China's Security Interests in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 4 (2005).

³⁸ Nicklas Norling, "China and Russia: Partners with Tensions," *Policy Perspectives* 1 (2007), 36-37; Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners. Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era*, (M.E.Sharpe: New York, 2004), 38; Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 96-97.

countries.³⁹ On the contrary to Russia’s security-centred integration projects (e.g. Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)), China pursues “soft regionalism”⁴⁰ that is less military-oriented and more multilateral. According to Bobo Lo, “The SCO and the CSTO thus serve virtually identical purposes for two of the great powers in Central Asia: the SCO is China’s multilateral instrument of influence, while the CSTO fulfils the same function for Russia.”⁴¹ Besides, a number of oil and gas pipelines from Central Asia to China have been established or are in planning stages. By the virtue of these projects China has been able to maintain its position as the leading trade partner of the region since 2008.⁴² Its overall trade with Central Asia has shot up to \$35 billion in 2016 from less than \$527 million per year in 1992⁴³, while Russia lagged behind with a turnover of less than \$19 billion in 2016 (Table 1). Its investments in the region also exceed those of Russia’s.⁴⁴ On the account of the scope of China’s growing influence in the region, many experts consider Beijing the most likely candidate of being the winner of the geopolitical games over Central Asia.⁴⁵

Table 1. The bilateral trade between the Central Asian countries and Russia/China in 2016 (USDbn).⁴⁶

Country	Russia⁴⁷	China⁴⁸
Kazakhstan	13,039	20
Kyrgyzstan	1,196	5
Tajikistan	0,688	1
Turkmenistan	0,902	5
Uzbekistan	2,726	4
Total	18,569	35

³⁹ Garret Mitchell, “China in Central Asia: The Beginning of the End for Russia?”, *SLOVO* 26, no. 1 (2014); Thomas Puls, “One Belt One Road – Chinas Neue Seidenstraße,” *IW-Kurzberichte* 67, The Cologne Institute for Economic Research (2016).

⁴⁰ Rossi and Bendini, “Old Games, New Players,” 6.

⁴¹ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 113.

⁴² Alexander Cooley, “China’s Changing Role in Central Asia and Implications for US Policy: From Trading Partner to Collective Goods Provider”, Prepared Remarks for “Looking West: China and Central Asia” U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission March 18, 2015.

⁴³ Eurasianet.org, “Central Asia: Report Looks at China’s Role in Central Asia,” February, 26, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66607> (accessed May 1, 2017).

⁴⁴ Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood,” *Asian Security*, 10.

⁴⁵ Marlene Laruelle, “Russia Facing China and India in Central Asia: Cooperation, Competition, and Hesitations,” in *China and India in Central Asia: A New “Great Game”?* ed. Marlène Laruelle, Jean-François Huchet, Sébastien Peyrouse, and Bayram Balci, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 14; Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules*, 165-166.

⁴⁶ The source of the figures shown for the trade turnover between China and Central Asians informs that these figures are approximations and might be imprecise, as this data has been collected from the media coverage (it is difficult to attain accurate data from Central Asia).

⁴⁷ Proved, “Vneshnyaya trgovlya Rossii v 2016 godu: tsifry i fakty” [Russia’s External Trade in 2016: Figures and Facts] February 14, 2017, <http://провед.рф/analytics/research/40407-vneshnyaya-torgovlya-rossii-v-2016-godu-tsifry-i-fakty.html> (accessed May 1, 2017).

⁴⁸ Chris Devonshire-Ellis, “China in 2017 – Increasing Trade Alliances with Eurasia,” *China Briefing*, January 11, 2017, <http://www.china-briefing.com/news/2017/01/11/china-in-2017-increasing-trade-alliances-with-eurasia.html> (accessed May 1, 2017).

Russia's soft power and its cultural predominance has also been declining across the region. Although the Russian language remains the de-facto *lingua franca* of the region's political, economic and cultural circles, the number of its speakers in the rural areas is steadily decreasing.⁴⁹ The retreat of the Russian soft power happens in other spheres, as well. The decline of Russia's "soft influence" in the region coincides with the rise of China's. Raffaello Pantucci has observed that: "China has also begun to assert itself culturally. There is increasing evidence that most of the Central Asian elite's children are being sent to Chinese universities. Scholarships, language courses, and Confucius Institutes drive this burgeoning relationship, slowly cultivating a generation of young Central Asians with an affinity for China. In this realm, too, the era of Russian dominance in the region has waned."⁵⁰

On the other hand, in similar vein to other post-Soviet states, the CA states have long tried to minimize Russia's influence and secure their sovereignty. However, the threat of potential reprisal or economic and military dependence on Russia have restricted the scope of manoeuvring of most of the regional states. In particular, Russia's aggressive reaction to the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine resonated as an alarm of a potential retaliation should the post-Soviet countries attempt to pursue a policy that Moscow disapproves.⁵¹ Hence, for these states, Beijing serves as a useful geopolitical option to counterbalance Russia's power projection. Particularly, following the Ukraine crisis and economic downturn in Russia, this option has gained momentum in the regional countries.⁵²

The Present Status-Quo in Russia's Neighbourhood and Its Implications for the International Security

The decline in Russia's geopolitical supremacy that started a quarter century ago with the fall of the Soviet Union seems to be continuing. After the countries previously belonged to the Warsaw Pact and the Baltic States joined the Western political and military structures, the other countries that were part of the Soviet Union also set to gradually drift from Russia's geopolitical orbit towards more independence or the orbit of the rival powers. The determination of some of the post-Soviet countries to shake off Russia's influence, the support of the rival powers to these countries, and the Kremlin's dogged insistence to maintain them in its sphere of influence have generated a number of international crises in the region. The recent crisis over Ukraine has reconfigured the balance of power in the post-Soviet sphere and established a new *status quo* in the region located between EU and Russia which is often called the "common (or shared) neighbourhood".

Although some prominent Russian experts glorify the Kremlin's "victorious" foreign policy over the last three years,⁵³ a sober analysis of the situation shows that Russia has in fact few reasons to celebrate. The last three years have witnessed Ukraine's seemingly permanent departure from Russia's sphere of influence and growing controversies between Russia and its Eurasian allies.

⁴⁹ Rossi and Bendini, "Old Games, New Players," 14.

⁵⁰ Pantucci, "China's and Russia's Soft Competition in Central Asia," *Current History*, 275-276.

⁵¹ Bayram Balci and Ekaterina Kassimova, "How Central Asian Republics Perceive the Emerging Eurasian Union," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 24, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/01/24/how-central-asian-republics-perceive-emerging-urasian-union-pub-58943> (accessed May 2, 2017).

⁵² Dmitry Trenin, "From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, April 09, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/04/09/from-greater-europe-to-greater-asia-sino-russian-entente-pub-59728> (accessed May 2, 2017).

⁵³ Karaganov, "2016 – A Victory of Conservative realism."

The outbreak and outcomes of the Ukraine crisis dealt a crushing blow to Russia's geopolitical ambitions and its regional integration initiatives. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its intervention into Eastern Ukraine were the last nail in the coffin of Kremlin's plans to pull the entire Ukraine into its orbit. Although Russia took over Crimea and transformed Donetsk and Lugansk into satellites akin to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but it lost Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis further shrank Russia's sphere of influence and marred its desire to emerge as a regional hegemon. Vladimir Chernega, Russia's advisor to the Council of Europe, has rightfully described the outcomes of this crisis as Russia's "biggest geopolitical defeat" in the post-Soviet period.⁵⁴

On the contrary, the Ukraine crisis ended up with a true victory for the West. The West's victory lies in the fact that without any military operation the goal to prevent the Kremlin's plans to draw Ukraine under its domination has been accomplished. It is true that NATO is unlikely to grant membership to the three countries in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus (Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) that have chosen the Euro-Atlantic integration. In fact, the existence of these countries as a West-controlled buffer zone – not their admission into the Alliance that could spiral into a military clash or even a nuclear war with Russia – is more advantageous for the West.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the Ukraine crisis contributed also to the growing controversies amongst members of the Eurasian Economic Union, accelerated its break-up and prevented the emergence of a Soviet-style strong geopolitical foe in the region.⁵⁶⁵⁷

Presumably, this is why no serious reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea or its support to the separatists in East Ukraine has been made by the United States and European Union. Although the two powers have imposed a wide range of sanctions on Russia, but they seemingly do not affect Russia's foreign policy.⁵⁸ George Friedman, in the aftermath of Crimea's annexation, made an accurate observation that "The U.S. sanctions strategy is [...] not designed to change Russian policies; it is designed to make it look like the United States is trying to change Russian policy."⁵⁹ Likewise, the German *Die Zeit* newspaper wrote in May 2015 that "Anyone attempting to measure the gap between the Ukrainian wishes and American response will see that there hasn't been anything more than gestures and symbolism so far".⁶⁰ During the ensuing years, under the

⁵⁴ Vladimir Chernega, "Ukrainskiy urok" [The Ukrainian Lesson] *Russia in Global Affairs no 4*. (2015): <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Ukrainskii-urok-17645> (accessed April 15, 2017).

⁵⁵ Reuters, "Commentary: Why Ukraine's NATO Membership is not in America's Interests," May 5, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-nato-commentary-idUSKCN0XW0V3> (accessed April 1, 2017).

⁵⁶ Areg Galstyan, "Is the Eurasian Economic Union Slowly Coming Apart?", *The National Interest*, March 29, 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-eurasian-economic-union-slowing-coming-apart-19947?platform=hootsuite> (accessed April 1, 2017).

⁵⁷ Therefore, much of the analyses that criticizes the West for making a mistake or failing to learn the lesson of the previous events, such as the Georgia War of 2008, misses the mark, See for example, Spiegel.de, "Interview with Henry Kissinger conducted by Juliane von Mittelstaedt and Erich Follath, "Do we achieve world order through chaos or insight?", November 13, 2014, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-henry-kissinger-on-state-of-global-politics-a-1002073.html> (accessed May 1, 2017); John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault the Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September-October, 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault> (accessed May 2, 2017).

⁵⁸ Andrey Movchan, "How the Sanctions Are Helping Putin," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, March 28, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/03/28/how-sanctions-are-helping-putin-pub-68442> (accessed May 1, 2017);

⁵⁹ George Friedman, "The U.S. Opts for Ineffective Sanctions on Russia," *Stratfor*, April 29, 2014, <https://www.stratfor.com/weekly/us-opts-ineffective-sanctions-russia> (accessed May 1, 2017);

⁶⁰ Alice Bota and Kerstin Kohlenberg, "Did Uncle Sam buy off the Maidan?", *Zeit Online*, May 17, 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2015-05/ukraine-usa-maidan-finance/seite-2> (accessed 29 March 2017).

presidency of Barack Obama and his successor Donald Trump, no substantial changes happened to this strategy and the international conflict over Ukraine has gradually become “another forgotten war.”⁶¹

However, another understated nuance of the Ukraine crisis is the fact its outcomes, though were not desirable, but are satisfactory for the Russian political elite. Russia had encountered the threat to completely lose its control over the Ukrainian territories which are of supreme geostrategic importance for Russia. Up until 2014, during Yanukovich’s presidency in Ukraine, Russia on the one hand had managed to extend the Black Sea Fleet’s use of leased facilities in Sevastopol and the Crimea, on the other hand Ukraine had adopted the law on non-alignment with any military bloc. Yanukovich’s fall engendered both of these accomplishments. However, in the course of the crisis, Russia succeeded to prevent it from happening. It annexed Crimea and freely located its military in the territory. It has also rolled over obstacles before Ukraine’s accession into Euro-Atlantic blocs. Henceforth, although it is very hard for Russia, if not outright impossible, to reverse the Euro-Atlantic path of Ukraine, it is equally improbable for the West to risk accepting it into the EU or NATO as long as the territorial conflicts in Eastern Ukraine are not resolved and the threat of nuclear Armageddon remains relevant.

Thus, the present status-quo over Ukraine established over the last three years satisfies both Russia and the Western powers, though to varying degrees. This situation minimizes the possibility of an all-out war between Russia and West in the foreseeable future. The lowering of this possibility is also influenced by the very likely cosmic costs of military confrontation and probably also Russia’s awareness of the far superior military capabilities of NATO countries. The skyrocketing advance of military technology and above all the mutually assured destruction possibility created by the nuclear weaponry strengthen the status of the military power as *ultimo ratio* or, as Mark Galeotti points out, a “final ‘just in case’ option”.⁶² The West’s reserved reaction to the Ukraine crisis testifies to the conviction that the Western powers are not willing to push Russia to this option in the rivalries over the “common neighbourhood”. Nor is Russia likely to launch a war against the West unless the latter further jeopardizes Russia’s interests in the region.

In Central Asia, the situation is different. The China – Russia competition over the Central Asian countries has not yet reached to the level of Russia’s confrontation with the West over Eastern Europe and South Caucasus and is unlikely to intensify to that level in the upcoming years.⁶³ Although the two great powers are far from establishing an alliance,⁶⁴ there is a strategic partnership between them which is more or less advantageous for each side.⁶⁵ Russia has had to share its dominance over the region with China.⁶⁶ The Kremlin cannot afford to avert Beijing’s growing economic influence in the regional countries or to undermine the establishment of the oil-

⁶¹ Maria Altshuller, “Another Forgotten War: The Lack of a Western Response to the Ukrainian Conflict”, *Harvard International Review*, February 20, 2017, <http://hir.harvard.edu/article/?a=14466> (accessed May 11, 2017).

⁶² Mark Galeotti, “No, Russia is not Preparing for All-Out War,” *openDemocracy*, June 21, 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/mark-galeotti/no-russia-is-not-preparing-for-all-out-war> (accessed April 21, 2017).

⁶³ Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood,” *Asian Security*.

⁶⁴ Joseph Nye, “A New Sino-Russian Alliance?”, *Project Syndicate*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-china-alliance-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-01> (accessed April 27, 2017).

⁶⁵ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 5; Geir Flikke, “Collusive Status-Seeking: The Sino-Russian Relationship,” *Central Asia After 2014*, ed. Stephen J. Blank, (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press, 2013), 33; Odgaard, “Beijing’s Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood,” *Asian Security*.

⁶⁶ Laruelle, “Russia Facing China”, 12.

gas pipelines to China that bypass Russia. Nevertheless, for the time being, neither Beijing nor Moscow is interested to put the bilateral relations at risk for CA. The two powers organize joint military exercises in the region through the SCO. The cooperation between the sides is more visible in the United Nations Security Council where the two states operate as a unified opposition against the Western powers. They coordinate their policies on key issues and do rarely criticize each other publicly. Beijing has demonstrated an accommodating attitude towards Moscow's policies concerning most of the recent international crises such as Ukraine and Syria. The similar reaction had been demonstrated also during the Russia – Georgia war (2008): Neither China's officialdom nor its media joined the Western discourse on the war. The war was presented as Moscow's legitimate political action to protect its interests against the Western efforts to contain Russia.⁶⁷

However, in contrast to those observers⁶⁸ who argue so, this cooperation does not mean that “the increasing willingness to engage in cooperation on the use of force to counter a central national security threat that is shared by all powers in Central Asia” has replaced mistrust between Beijing and Moscow. The Russian fear of China's growing influence in Central Asia is real and often underlined by the Russian experts.⁶⁹ For instance, Alexander Gabuyev, head of the Russia in the Asia Pacific Program at the Carnegie Moscow Centre, fleshes out that “when China announced its Silk Road plan in Kazakhstan, it was met with a lot of scepticism and even fear by the Russian leadership [...] the feeling was, ‘it's a project to steal Central Asia from us, they want to exploit our economic difficulties to be really present in the region’”.⁷⁰ This is due to this fear that Russia has attempted, mostly in vain, to block some of China's regional projects, such as Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank which Beijing, circumventing Moscow, established in June 2015 with a \$100 billion capital base.⁷¹ This fear is also the reason why Russia have invested more in its security-centred project known as the CSTO than the China-led SCO.⁷² However, despite the tensions between the sides which have the potential to gradually rise,⁷³ because of the reasons mentioned before this mistrust is not likely to generate a full-scale conflict in the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

Three research questions, investigating the rationale behind Russia's desire to dominate its neighbourhood, the challenges the Kremlin has encountered on this road and the implications of the existing status-quo for the international security, have guided this study. The research has found out that Russia's desire to re-emerge as a great power equal to other great powers motivates its policies to pull the neighbouring post-Soviet countries towards its orbit at all costs. However, a number of grave challenges, in particular the advance of the influence of Western powers and China and the desire of some of the post-Soviet countries to shake off Moscow's influence, have

⁶⁷ Thomas S. Eder, *China-Russia Relations in Central Asia Energy Policy: Beijing's New Assertiveness and 21st Century Geopolitics* (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2014), 29.

⁶⁸ Odgaard, “Beijing's Quest for Stability in its Neighborhood,” *Asian Security*, 7.

⁶⁹ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 99-100.

⁷⁰ Simon Denyer, “In Central Asia, Chinese inroads in Russia's Back Yard,” *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/chinas-advance-into-central-asia-ruffles-russian-feathers/2015/12/27/cfedeb22-61ff-11e5-8475-781cc9851652_story.html?utm_term=.92d53c44ad53 (accessed April 28, 2017).

⁷¹ Denyer, “In Central Asia, Chinese inroads in Russia's Back Yard.”

⁷² Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 112.

⁷³ Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 114; Laruelle, “Russia Facing China”, 14; Eurasianet.org, “Russia ‘Increasingly Distrustful’ of SCO,” March 5, 2013, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66643> (accessed April 28, 2017).

complicated Russia's external environment and its hegemonic policies. The research concluded that Russia is losing ground in the competition with the West and China. However, this is not likely to bring about an all-out war between Russia and its geopolitical foes due to several reasons, *inter alia* the mutually assured destruction capability, Russia's acquiescence with the newly-established *status quo* in the "common neighbourhood" with the EU, and the importance of the cooperative ties between China and Russia for the both countries.

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