War in Ukraine Exposes Russia’s Weakness

The Eurasian Union, as conceived by Russia, was supposed to rival the European Union as a trade and economic force. “Most notable about the Eurasian Union is not the geopolitical vision that motivates it, but how badly the entire project has gone,” argues Chris Miller, a PhD candidate at Yale University and a research associate with the Hoover Institution. Russian aggression is unnerving former members of the Soviet bloc. Neighboring Ukraine long had close ties with Russia, but with the takeover in Crimea and war along the eastern border, disagreements run deep and regional distrust spreads. Former Soviet states gradually expand their ties with economies that offer more than energy: “The appeal of European Union on the west and that of a resurgent China in the east continues to nibble away at Russian power and influence,” Miller explains. Aggression may deter nations like Georgia or Ukraine from joining NATO, but weakens Russian influence in other areas. Russia’s ready reliance on military force encourages other neighboring nations to diversify political, economic and cultural relations and better withstand bullying. – YaleGlobal

Putin, striving to wield influence over former Soviet states, must compete with EU and rising China
Chris Miller
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NEW HAVEN: With Russia quickly taking over Crimea and poised to bring other parts of Ukraine under its sway, President Vladimir Putin’s stock has soared not only in Russia but among some in the West. He is seen by many as a strong leader ready to take risks to achieve national ambitions.

Reality may be much bleaker for Russia. Instead of restoring the empire it lost when the Soviet Union collapsed, Putin’s new Eurasian Union, linking Russia’s economy with that of Kazakhstan and Belarus and seeking to include Ukraine, might be a marker of Russia’s continued decline. The appeal of European Union on the west and that of a resurgent China in the east continues to nibble away at Russian power and influence.

The Kremlin’s foreign policy in recent years has focused on creating a Eurasian Union in order to integrate Russia’s economy with those of post-Soviet neighbors. Moscow had hoped that the new union could rebuild the influence that had been lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. Yet Putin’s plans to include Ukraine in the Eurasian Union has clashed with Ukraine’s desire to chart an independent path.

Most notable about the Eurasian Union is not the geopolitical vision that motivates it, but how badly the entire project has gone. At best, it will have four members in addition to Russia: Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus and Kazakhstan. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are small countries where the Kremlin still wields significant influence. But Kazakhstan and Belarus, larger and richer, only joined the Eurasian Union because it suits their economic interests. Both have said that if the union ever infringes on their sovereignty, they will leave. Far from being stooges of the Kremlin, the larger members of the Eurasian Union have demonstrated their independence by ensuring that the union benefits them economically without constraining them politically.

Fueled by oil and gas, Russia’s economy has grown markedly under Putin’s rule, but the country’s economic rebirth has not been accompanied by an expansion of influence in the area Russians refer to as the “near abroad” – the five states of Central Asia; three of the Caucasus; plus Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine – former Soviet states.

Since Putin came to power in 2000, two trends have degraded Russia’s power over its neighbors. The first is that, as many Russia’s neighbors began to integrate their economies and societies with Europe’s, western influence has grown in economic, cultural, and political terms. Tens of thousands of Moldovans have found work in the EU. Azerbaijan exports billions of dollars of oil through Turkey to European markets. Georgians have been inspired by western democracy, and have sought to learn from western political practices. Even as Russia’s economy grew during the 2000s, western influence in Russia’s near abroad was growing, too. This competition constrained Russian power by helping countries such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine withstand Kremlin bullying.

Meanwhile, China’s rise has undermined the Kremlin’s influence in Central Asia. In the early 1990s, the five countries of Central Asia lacked assertive national identities and were economically dependent upon Russia. Many analysts expected Moscow to continue to dominate the region, particularly given that the West had little interest, while other regional powers such as Turkey and Iran were far weaker than Russia.
How not to win friends and influence people:
Russian President Vladimir Putin accompanied by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, left, arrive for military exercises before annexing Crimea (top); Russian troops invade Georgia in August 2008

China’s economic rise has changed that. The five Central Asian countries have developed extensive commercial relationships with China, exporting natural resources and importing consumer goods. Changing trade patterns have had profound political effects, too. When trade with Russia constituted most of Central Asia’s imports and exports, those countries were wary of angering Moscow. Today, however, with the construction of new gas pipelines to China and after extensive Chinese investment in mines and infrastructure, Central Asian governments have greater ability to stand up to Russian pressure. The Kremlin still wields significant leverage, especially when it threatens to expel Central Asian migrants working in Russia, which would severely damage Central Asian economies. Yet Moscow’s influence is reduced from 1999, when Putin took power. And as China’s economy grows and Russia’s stagnates, Central Asian governments will find that freedom of maneuver with regard to Moscow will continue to expand.

While Chinese and western influence has increased, Russia’s demonstrated willingness to use force against its neighbors has led other countries in the region to diversify their international ties. Before the current crisis, tensions were most high during the war with Georgia in 2008. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili feared Russian intentions and sought to join NATO for protection. The Kremlin strongly opposed NATO membership for Georgia, and before Saakashvili could convince the West to extend NATO membership, war broke out in 2008 between Georgian troops and Russian forces stationed in breakaway provinces of Georgia.

The Kremlin used the war with Georgia to send a message to other countries in the region – that attempts to ally with other powers would be punished. To underline the point, Moscow recognized the independence of two of Georgia’s separatist regions, Abkhazia and Ossetia, which continue to host Russian troops. Though the 2008 war achieved Russia’s goal of preventing Georgia from joining NATO, it seriously reduced Russia’s influence in the country. Commercial ties collapsed, and an even larger majority of Georgians concluded that Russia could not be trusted. The Kremlin succeeded in gaining a veto over NATO membership, but at the price of nearly every other form of influence within Georgia.

When Moscow began constructing its Eurasian Union several years ago, there was never a chance that Georgia would join. Many in the Kremlin, however, expected that Ukraine would be a natural partner, given the extensive economic, cultural and family ties that the two countries share. Yet in part because of the Georgian precedent and in part because many Ukrainians found a deal with the EU more appealing than partnership with Russia, Ukraine’s political elite was deeply divided and conflict broke out. After former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich fled and was replaced by a pro-EU government, the Kremlin turned to its military in an attempt to force Ukraine to join the Eurasian Union, or at least to prevent Kiev from moving closer to the West. Yet far from bolstering Russia’s influence, the war in Ukraine has again underlined Russia’s weakness. The best resolution to the war for Russia is a situation under which Moscow can veto Ukraine’s membership in western institutions, but is nevertheless distrusted by a majority of Ukrainians.

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Two trends degrade Russia’s power over its neighbors: the increasing integration with Europe and China’s rise.

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Two years ago, many analysts would have described Russia’s influence in Ukraine as extensive, but the Kremlin has discovered much to its own surprise that its only significant levers of power in Ukraine are military force and punitive gas sanctions. Putin has proven willing to use these tools regularly, imposing much needless suffering on Ukrainians, Georgians and others. Yet those in the Kremlin who hope that Russia can withstand western economic sanctions by reconstructing its former empire are mistaken. Even having invaded Ukraine, Russia has been unable to stop Kiev – many in the Ukrainian government prefer “Kyiv” for spelling the capital city, avoiding Russian transliteration – from signing a trade deal with the European Union. Putin’s Eurasian Union is not a new version of the Soviet Union – it is one more piece of evidence that Russia’s power in its neighborhood continues a steady decline.

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