

# The Calculations of Russia's Neighbors

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**For Russia's neighbors in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, the Ukraine crisis is a watershed moment.** Since independence, these countries had pursued a “multi-vector” foreign policy, which meant seeking new partnerships while acknowledging their dependence on Russia and being careful to respect Russian red lines.

After the annexation of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine, the location of those red lines no longer seems clear. The resulting uncertainty is forcing the leaders of the South Caucasus and Central Asian states to be more deferential to Moscow in the near term while accelerating these states' efforts to loosen and diversify their ties with Moscow. Time, especially the emergence of a new generation of leaders with no memories of the Soviet Union, will only accelerate this process.

Before the outbreak of protests on Kyiv's *Maidan Nezalezhnosti* [Independence Square] in September 2013, Ukraine's strategy for dealing with Russia was multi-vector as well. Economic and cultural ties with Russia remained strong, but the government, even under the allegedly pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich (whose political career the Kremlin aided), sought to develop diplomatic, trade, and investment ties with other partners. For Ukraine, that meant primarily the European Union, while the South Caucasus and Central Asian states have looked variously to the United States, EU, Turkey, China, and elsewhere.

While these states pursued economic ties with a range of neighbors, they understood that Moscow regarded security cooperation, especially the presence of NATO or U.S. forces, as a red line, and steered clear—or paid the price. Georgia's courting of NATO, which contributed to the 2008 war with Russia, and Kyrgyzstan's hosting of U.S. forces at the Manas Transit Center, which helped fuel Moscow's role in ousting former President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, served as object lessons of the costs of seeking outside security assurances. Still, the rule seemed to be: trade with whomever you want at least as long as you do not

challenge Russia's preferred position such as in EU energy markets, but keep U.S. and NATO forces out.

In line with this understanding, before the Maidan protests, post-Soviet elites from other states were generally weary of joining the Russian-backed Eurasian Customs Union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, or the planned Eurasian Economic Union. Despite the fact that Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev first proposed the Eurasian Union in the 1990s, many Kazakh officials and businessmen opposed Putin's scheme, and even Nazarbayev took pains to emphasize that the planned body was solely an economic union.

Others, including Armenia, where more than 5,000 Russian troops are based, as well as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose economies are heavily dependent on remittances from Russia, demurred. Meanwhile, Ukraine, along with Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova, negotiated association agreements with the EU that, when implemented, would radically transform their economic and administrative structures, weakening inherited links with Russia. Although Moscow opposed these agreements and encouraged its neighbors to join its customs union, these countries largely continued charting their own course, mostly evincing little interest in the customs union.

Nevertheless, in the run-up to the EU summit where Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine were set to formalize their association agreements, Russia began exerting enormous political and economic pressure. In September, Armenia abruptly announced it was shelving its association agreement and would join the customs union. Soon thereafter, Ukrainian

President Yanukovich also buckled, following a secretive two-day visit to Moscow. Yanukovich's about-face sparked the protests that led to his downfall, Russia's occupation of Crimea, and the insurgency in eastern Ukraine. These events seemed at odds with the previously accepted rules of the game. Russia's military intervention in Ukraine was driven more by post-colonial disregard than any prospect of NATO forces on its border (indeed, it was the Russian intervention that led new President Petro Poroshenko to again seek Ukrainian NATO membership).

Moreover, to justify the intervention, Putin proclaimed a wide-ranging mandate to protect "compatriots," "Russians and Russian-speakers" throughout the former USSR. This formula gave Moscow a pretext to intervene in any of its former dependencies—including the Baltic states. Incautious remarks from Putin about Kazakhstan lacking historical legitimacy only exacerbated the sense of concern in the neighborhood that Russia had gone rogue.

The Ukraine crisis held another lesson for the former Soviet states as well, a lesson about the dangers of "people power." The "Maidan scenario"—a corrupt, ineffective government

thrown out by its own people—represents the greatest fear of many post-Soviet leaders. The result, in at least some states, has been greater repression and less openness, even if these crackdowns make a Maidan more likely in the longer term.

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In the near term, the twin fear of Moscow and the Maidan is working to Russia's advantage. Unlike the West, Russia will not object to crackdowns on domestic opposition, while joining the Eurasian Economic Union provides some insurance against Russian meddling (a *krysha*, or roof, in Russian criminal slang). In the past year, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have applied

to join the Eurasian Economic Union, while Azerbaijan and Georgia have increasingly hedged their pro-Western orientations. Further driving this tilt toward Moscow is the perception, widespread especially in Central Asia, that U.S. engagement in the region is declining with the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Yet the post-Soviet states view Russia's decision to change the rules of the game as a threat to their sovereignty. The crisis in Ukraine has strained the bonds of affection tying these states to Russia. While they may have little choice but to join Russian-led multilateral bodies, these countries will work to ensure that these entities remain toothless, and will redouble their efforts to reduce their dependence on and vulnerability to Russia. Almost without exception, elites in the South Caucasus and Central Asia see greater U.S. engagement as vital to the sovereignty and independence of the region's states.

The irony is that, as Putin made clear in 2008, Russia does not view Ukraine, any more than the states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as a "real state." By forcing these countries to defend their independence, Moscow is compelling them to define themselves and their national interests, often in opposition to Russia. Russia's actions are breeding a new national identity and pride, which will be the surest guarantee of these countries' sovereignty over the longer term. ►

