

# Policy Report



## Geopolitical Upheaval in the Post-Soviet Space: The “Near Abroad” Tested by the War in Ukraine

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After the multiplication of military setbacks Russia suffered in the face of the Ukrainian armed forces' counter-offensive, it is fashionable to say that Moscow is cornered militarily and diplomatically. While the weakening of its ability to influence Western countries is a certainty, the marginalization of Russia in the post-Soviet space is much less so. Still, the Russian invasion has shuffled the decks in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. Absorbed by the Ukrainian conflict, which tends to turn into a war of attrition, Moscow is struggling to maintain its status as a stabilizing power and its role as a regional arbiter. In the context of this rapid recomposition, the Russian imperial project has provoked strong reactions in these countries that make up Moscow's security glacis. It is also necessary to analyze the eruption of pockets of conflict and the limited response of the Kremlin to stem the rise in regional tensions. Vladimir Putin's security equation is becoming more complex. Several opposing or allied powers are taking advantage of the situation to develop new partnerships at the expense of Russia, which is too busy gambling its reputation in Ukraine.

- The war's outcome in Ukraine will have broad consequences for maintaining or disintegrating Russia's positions in the post-Soviet space. By snatching a victory, its credibility will be renewed. Conversely, if defeated, its influence could gradually decline, and its isolation could extend beyond the West.
- Russia is still perceived as the stabilizing power of the sub-region, but its military and diplomatic escalation could increase opposing powers' attracting power. Moreover, as Russia's supremacy is challenged in this space, Moscow is increasingly constrained when choosing its alliance system while post-Soviet states aspire to more autonomy.
- For now, China and Turkey want to stay away from the Kremlin's military ambitions in the region. At the same time, a significant increase in diplomatic engagement from the E.U. and the U.S. remains unlikely. Moscow is not immune to a strategic shift from these powers that would aim to supplant Russia in the region.
- The use of inter-state armed violence to settle its territorial disputes has profoundly upset the regional balance and damaged Russia's credibility as a mediator. However, the conflagration of the Caucasus and Central Asia should not be seen as a consequence of Russia's setbacks in Ukraine.

## Introduction

Vladimir Putin seems to have mastered the art of disguising a succession of military defeats as a political victory. By celebrating hand in hand with puppet leaders the [annexation of four Ukrainian provinces bordering](#) the Sea of Azov, Vladimir Putin is still struggling to conceal the significant setback his army is experiencing in Ukraine. By continuing its reconquest, the Ukrainian army finally managed to reverse the trend on the military field thanks to a lightning counter-offensive that allowed it to recover [63% of the territory invaded by the Russian army since February 24, 2022](#). While the chances of ending the conflict remain slim, its resolve seems to be receding as it evolves into a [war of attrition](#).

In addition, Vladimir Putin is now facing a [wind of popular protest that has reached large sections of the population](#). While no [critical mass](#) is capable of shaking the foundations of power in Russia, the announcement of a partial mobilization has led to harshly repressed resistance movements, resulting in an exodus of about [700,000 Russians](#) abroad and towards countries bordering Russia. While those regions around Russia that constitute Moscow's security glacis have been [welcoming Russian civilians](#), the geopolitical consequences of the war in Ukraine are starting to show. With renewed fighting between [Armenia and Azerbaijan](#), border tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the geopolitical breakthrough of foreign powers in what Moscow has often considered as its “near abroad,” the sphere of influence that the Kremlin believes to be [natural](#) is flaring up, and is gradually eroding.

After a quick reminder of Russia's ambitions for regional dominance since 1991, this paper highlights the intensification of tensions in former Soviet countries and Russia's inability to curb them for at least three reasons. First, Moscow's diplomatic isolation appears to spread beyond the West as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict drags on, and concerns in Eurasian countries are increasing. On the other hand, the conflagration of the Caucasus and Central Asia raises questions about the effectiveness of Moscow's role as a regional arbiter that it has built for itself and that it is now struggling to maintain. Finally, faced with these two dynamics that are weakening Moscow, opposing powers are taking advantage of the situation and continue to gain control in the Eurasian space, to the detriment of Russia, which is too busy gambling its reputation in Ukraine. Cornered on both the military and diplomatic front, it will be a question of understanding whether the Kremlin's strategic orientation and security choices have contributed to the deterioration of its sphere of influence (if this deterioration is confirmed).

Faced with a security equation that is becoming more complex, is Russia, which seems to be suffering a loss of influence, able to ensure its role as guarantor of regional stability and preserve its geopolitical weight in the post-Soviet space?

## The Political Cost Of Rehabilitating The Russian Imperial Project

Indeed, it is appropriate to consider the current state of decay of relations between regional actors in the Caucasus, the Baltic area, and Central Asia. However, a look at the [attempts to restore Russian influence in the post-Soviet space](#) will shed light on Russia's current weaknesses in this same space. As it mixes nostalgia for Soviet/Tsarist greatness and Russian patriotism, Vladimir Putin's war of conquest in 2022 can be seen as the consecration of [Russia's imperial nature](#).

As a reminder, from 1990, the first pillar of Russian foreign policy revolved around restoring relations with its “near abroad.” This concept developed to protect the [permanent interests](#) of the former colonial power allowed the Kremlin to decree the existence of a sphere of vital interest composed of all sovereign [states that were formerly part of the Soviet Empire](#). However, from now on, the exclusive character of this zone of Russian influence is questioned.

During the implosion of the USSR, Moscow needed stability. Accordingly, it sought to [institutionalize a rapprochement](#) with neighboring countries to avoid a deterioration of the economic, cultural, and linguistic interdependence that bound them. Moreover, through organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the creation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 1992 – a NATO-modelled military alliance putting forward [its own reading](#) of the principle of collective security – Moscow has also sought to halt NATO’s expansion while strengthening its leadership in Eurasia.

However, [Russia’s political weight](#) in these international organizations may have repelled several states from the Eurasian project since it could be perceived as a political process to restore “historic Russia.” In short, an attempt to restore what would constitute “an [inalienable part of our own history](#), culture and spiritual space,” according to Vladimir Putin’s revisionist reading. In the decade following the collapse of the USSR, the Russian regional integration process was perceived as a neocolonial project by more than one state.

And with good reason: the Kremlin’s double game between Armenia and Azerbaijan and its support to separatist movements in Georgia led the latter two to [leave the CSTO in 1999](#) to seek allies elsewhere. This ouster symbolized Russia’s inability to deepen cooperation ties or settle ethnic and border tensions between the members of this military alliance. Therefore, destabilization has developed insidiously in the “Russian fold,” another formula used in the Kremlin.

Understanding that Russia’s integration on the world stage would not be sufficient to guarantee [its right to oversee](#) the evolution of the post-Soviet space, Moscow has also relied on coercion and repression. Through a newfound confidence at the beginning of the Putin era characterized by a relative [nostalgia for the Empire](#), the Kremlin has constantly exacerbated ethnic quarrels and manipulated territorial conflicts to put its expansionist project into practice. To cite just a few examples, Russia’s blitzkrieg against Georgia in 2008 to support secessionist forces in the regions of [Abkhazia and South Ossetia](#) and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 are the symptoms of an aggressive strategic doctrine, all of which make it *de facto* a less attractive ally.

Moscow’s legitimization strategy, which was widely revived in 2022, was based on humanitarian intervention, using the rhetoric of the [responsibility to protect](#). It was also based on a [mimicry of Western discourse that justified NATO’s](#) interventions – notably in Kosovo – and which allowed Russia to demand to be treated fairly in its strategic choices by the international community. By seeking to be treated on an equal footing with the United States and, more broadly, with the transatlantic community, the Kremlin appeared anxious to [restore its geopolitical role](#).

Led to believe that the Atlantic Alliance would collapse under the weight of its political contradictions, Moscow saw a Western decline, illustrated in particular by the [U.S. debacle in Afghanistan](#), as an incentive to put into practice its expansionist project in February 2022. A lost bet for Vladimir Putin since [NATO seems to have been resurrected](#) with the identification of a common enemy, while Russia, through the CSTO, can no longer stop the [territorial disputes](#) destabilizing the regions that revolve around it.

[Moscow has struggled to re-establish its backyard for three decades](#), but Vladimir Putin is now primarily distracted by the protracted conflict in Ukraine. Of course, diplomatic incidents and clashes in [Moscow’s former satellite states](#) have been commonplace since the break-up of the USSR. However, this military adventure of the Kremlin may have deteriorated diplomatic and political efforts to reverse the trend of “the [greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century](#).”

The analysis of the positions taken by the former Soviet Republics on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, therefore, serves a twofold purpose. Firstly, it will make it possible to measure the emancipation aspirations of these States vis-à-vis Moscow. Secondly, it will allow grasping the responsibility of the Kremlin in these renewed tensions, which could lead to cracking of its zone of influence.

### Eastern Europe Caught Between Great Powers

At the heart of the strategic rivalries between the West and Russia, Eastern Europe countries that were present in the [shared neighborhood](#) of these two large groups are now forced to align themselves on one side. Far from having constituted a [homogeneous group](#) in their attitude towards Russia in the years leading up to the invasion, the former Soviet republics in Eastern Europe (Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Moldova, and Ukraine) are now facing a new [Iron Curtain](#) according to Sergey Lavrov. We will not analyze Ukraine’s strategic positioning about the conflict for obvious reasons related to the Russian invasion. Nevertheless, after ten months in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the resurgence of the bloc line and the fragmentation of the European space has finally made it possible to strengthen the ranks between the European member countries of the transatlantic community, thereby increasing [the pressure on Russia](#) and its partners.

Having become beholden to Vladimir Putin, Alexander Lukashenko offered Russia a [rear base](#) and a logistical platform for operations in the North, notably during the failed attempt to conquer Kyiv. Subsequently, the deluge of missiles and suicide drones that hit the main Ukrainian cities in October 2022 was launched partly from [Belarusian territory](#). Still, Minsk’s collaboration does not stop there and tends to become more formalized. For example, the two dictators agreed on creating a “regional joint army group” of about 9,000 soldiers. Minsk was initially reluctant to intervene militarily in the conflict. Still, according to the [Belarusian Ministry of Defense](#), allegations of Ukrainian threats on the Belarusian borders justified the creation of this “defensive” military group.

In the event of direct involvement and a joint attack, Belarus would become a co-belligerent and would expose itself to heavy Western sanctions that would further weaken Alexander Lukashenko. While the rapprochement with Vladimir Putin was not a choice but more a [constraint](#) to save the

faltering power of the Belarusian president, his [political survival](#) now depends on the goodwill of his Russian counterpart.

On the other hand, since February 2022, the need to hedge against a possible [resurgence of the Russian threat](#) has been reinforced in the Baltic States. While the [Russian enclave of Kaliningrad](#) is now crystalizing all tensions, the Baltic countries’ voices have resonated further within the European institutions and the North Atlantic Council. They had the bitter satisfaction [of being proven](#) right about the Kremlin’s belligerent intentions.

Endowed initially with limited means, the [growth in those states’ capabilities](#) began well before the beginning of the conflict, as was NATO’s deterrent posture in the East, of which they are central partners in deploying [NATO’s deterrence and defence posture](#) on its eastern flank. On the political front, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia have imposed new restrictions, including banning [Russian tourists](#) from entering their territory. By going even further than its neighbouring countries, Lithuania has achieved what the E.U. has failed to do, namely to ban [the import of all hydrocarbons](#) from Russia. After the [doctrinal reversal](#) triggered by the trauma of the annexation of Crimea, the invasion of Ukraine has finally perpetuated [security choices](#) that the Baltic States had adopted since 2014. Although these strategic steps have been developed since the dual accession of these countries to NATO and the E.U. in 2004, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict constitutes a major rupture insofar as [the Baltic countries have cut themselves off from Russia](#).

Also plagued by extreme vulnerability, Moldova is caught between Romania (E.U.) and western Ukraine. The pro-Russian secessionist region of Transnistria could be an outpost for the Kremlin [to outflank the Ukrainian forces](#). Although Moldova became a [candidate country](#) for E.U. membership in June 2022, it does not benefit from the same security guarantees as other Eastern European countries. Since it is not part of NATO, Moldova refuses to [impose the arsenal of sanctions](#) on Russia in order to hedge against any Russian retaliation. This façade of neutrality has its limitations. Moldova is now suffering the shock wave of the war in Ukraine: the gas giant [Gazprom](#) has threatened Chisinau to reduce its gas supplies. Forced to concede a [certain restraint](#) to avoid being treated as a “[hostile country](#)” by the Kremlin, Moldova’s contradictory dynamics weaken its geopolitical situation.

Regarding the Caucasus (Armenia and Azerbaijan will be treated separately due to their bilateral conflict), Georgia has also shown a renewed willingness to move closer to the E.U. For these reasons, she was quick to condemn the invasion of Ukraine while promoting her candidacy for membership of the E.U., even though it faced [the reluctance of some member states](#). And for a good reason: by being on the front line, Georgia would face [a similar fate to Ukraine’s](#) if the conflict were to spread. Moreover, Russia’s Foreign Ministry has expressed concern about [joint military exercises between Tbilisi and NATO](#) in September 2022, saying that Western efforts to draw Georgia into its orbit threaten Russia’s national security. While Moscow-backed separatist forces still occupy 20% of its territory, Tbilisi’s priority is to prevent [Georgia from being dragged in](#) to another war with Moscow.

The war in Ukraine has challenged the [fragile balance](#) between European and Russian actors. Driven by security fears, the Baltic States finally chose to strengthen their policy of firmness while urging other European states to conform to their maximalist posture against Russia. However, the



further the Kremlin continues its headlong rush, the more these states perpetuate the rapprochement with the West by adopting a cumulative strategy, i.e., “a [dual security scheme](#) in which alliances are security guarantees in the same way as national capabilities.” As for Moldova and Georgia, which do not benefit from the same security guarantees, the Kremlin’s capacity for influence and nuisance permanently reduces their strategic choices. It also obliges them to display relative neutrality – to avoid, for example, a resumption of the [Transnistrian](#) conflict – without endorsing the invasion of Ukraine, just like many countries of the former Soviet space in Central Asia and the Caucasus at the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

## Dissonant Voices Rise Within The Eurasian Community

In the two years leading up to the war in Ukraine, Moscow had adopted a [moderate foreign policy](#) toward the former Soviet republics by demonstrating diplomatic skills to stop the rise of tensions in its historical backyard. Nevertheless, by “[exposing unsuspected weaknesses](#),” Moscow is now struggling to assume its role as an arbitrator while preserving its position in Central Asia.

### *Russia Faces Mistrust In Central Asia*

For the countries of Central Asia, defying the former colonial power required great caution in terms of [rhetoric](#) to avoid Russia’s retaliatory measures. Henceforth, with the recent developments in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the cards seem to have been reshuffled.

Many international observers spoke of pro-Russian [neutrality](#) to characterize the non-alignment of many non-Western states. However, it is now the rhetorical disalignment that seems to prevail in the case of Kazakhstan. Moscow benefited from a certain gain in prestige during the military support to the Kazakh president with [3,000 Russian paratroopers](#) and CSTO soldiers in January 2022 to crush the insurgency that threatened him. However, Kazakhstan finally decided to distance itself from Russia by cutting short “[Russian attempts](#) to use the CSTO in Ukraine (reminding, in fact) that it is a defensive alliance and not a projection force.” The cold shower did not stop there because Kazakhstan also refused to [recognize](#) the annexation of the four Ukrainian oblasts. The deterioration of relations between the two partners is increasing as Kazakhstan has prioritized bypassing the main export route [for its oil](#). For now, this oil passes through the Russian port of Novorossiysk (this sea route currently serves as a lever of influence for Vladimir Putin to put pressure on his Kazakh counterpart). [Moscow’s best ally](#) continues to emancipate itself, and, against all expectations, President Tokayev’s critical tone and his desire to preserve his country’s autonomy are asserted.

The same goes for the Tajik president, who, during a speech at the CIS summit in Astana on October 12, 2022, blamed the collapse of the USSR on Russia’s inability to take into account the interests of small Soviet republics. After this meaningful parallel, he asked Vladimir Putin to show [more respect](#) for his country. As for Kyrgyzstan, its absence from the CIS summit in St. Petersburg and its [refusal to organize the CSTO’s joint military exercises](#) raise concerns that it is distancing itself from its Russian partner. Uzbekistan has not hesitated to openly condemn the annexation of Ukrainian provinces, to [defend Ukraine’s territorial integrity](#), and to remind Moscow of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of a state. For its part, however, Turkmenistan [relies on Russia](#) to prevent a significant crisis along its shared border with Afghanistan. However, as

it owns the world’s fourth largest gas reserves, Turkmenistan seems more likely to get closer to Turkey, which is striving to build a “[vital role](#)” in the energy sector. However, the government in Ashgabat has never publicly expressed its position on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the contrary, it wants to maintain [close ties with the Kremlin](#), which seems to be an exception in Central Asia.

This renewed confidence in the Central Asian republics can mean two things. First, it may signify that new security doctrines are emerging that aim to multiply strategic partnerships to reduce dependence on the Russian tutelary power. Second, it could also have to do with the desire to reaffirm the resilience of ties of [friendship](#) with Moscow. As a result, Russia may pay more attention and consideration to those small republics that remain allies, despite the risks of geopolitical weakening of Russia: they remain allies even when others seek to gain greater independence. Still, in either case, these invectives prove that Russia’s positions in the region are waning and that a readjustment of these asymmetric partnerships is needed to prevent Moscow’s isolation from spreading durably beyond the West.

This brief historical review given to Vladimir Putin aimed to reaffirm that each former Soviet republic now has its sensitivities and interests. However, this warning came during the [trilateral meeting](#) between the Russian president and his Tajik and Kyrgyz counterparts to find a diplomatic solution to the border conflict between the latter two. Finally, the strategic prudence of the states of these subregions may have given way to [disapproving speeches](#) about Russia’s imperial nature or weariness about its inaction toward the gradual deterioration of the regional security context.

### **Russian Image Of Peace Mediator Damaged By Caucasus And Central Asia**

Confronted with the reactivation of two frozen conflicts in its “near abroad,” Russia is facing [doubts from its allies](#) about its ability to maintain its commitment to the idea of collective security: Moscow is, for the moment, conspicuous [by its inaction](#).

### ***The Ineffectiveness Of The Kremlin’s Military Alliance In Curbing Internal Conflicts***

The first conflict in question here is between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. If the common border between these Central Asian republics has regularly been the battleground for [clashes](#), this new eruption [of](#) violence has been the deadliest in thirty years. At the heart of this tragedy was the border division resulting from the dismemberment of the USSR. By denying a [historical reality](#), it has participated in the fragmentation of the regional space and the rise of tensions around the Tajik enclave of Vorukh. Drawn under coercion (of the Soviet regime), the [administrative boundaries](#) between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may have created disputes between communities that mutated into an interstate conflict when they acquired the legal status of international borders. Furthermore, “almost [half of the border](#) between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan has not yet been drawn,” and an increasing border militarization has accentuated security tensions for both states.

While both sides blame each other, they still expected Russia to exercise its peacemaking role through [the CSTO](#). Moscow finally asked the parties to the conflict to find a solution through [dialogue](#), judging that the clashes had not reached a level of intensity that would justify its intervention. Therefore, with this limited reaction, the Kremlin is adopting an ambiguous strategic

posture. On the one hand, it invites Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to sit down at the negotiating table when, at the same time, Moscow settles its [territorial disputes](#) through interstate armed violence. On the other hand, the two countries are Russia’s two flagship military establishments in Central Asia. Finally, there is no provision for an open conflict between two CSTO member states in the [statutes of the Russian-headed military alliance](#). For all these reasons, on top of Moscow’s difficulties in Ukraine, its room for maneuver is limited, and the Kremlin is being bound hand and foot. In this context, the agreements reached between the two countries were made through strictly bilateral contacts, [effectively excluding Russian mediation](#).

Russia found a way out by stipulating that the CSTO was not intended to manage conflicts between the member states of the Military Alliance. Nevertheless, the risk that the CSTO becomes an empty shell is all the more significant for Moscow when a frozen conflict gets reactivated, and Russia must provide military assistance to an ally under military attack.

### ***Is The CSTO s An Empty Shell? The Kremlin’s Passivity In Meeting Its Obligations To Provide Assistance***

Two years after the war in Nagorno-Karabakh, this thirty-year frozen conflict between Baku and Yerevan now raises questions because of the intensity of the clashes in September 2022. While the seeds of a larger-scale war have sprouted, Nagorno-Karabakh and, more recently, Armenian territory have been nibbled away by Baku. This rise in tensions happened despite the mediation efforts of European Council President Charles Michel at the tripartite meetings organized to [reach a peace agreement](#) or at least a normalization of relations between Yerevan and Baku.

For its part, the [Russian regional sponsor](#), which ended the open conflict two years ago through sustained diplomatic activism, no longer seems able to contain Azerbaijani territorial aspirations. In 2020, under pressure from Vladimir Putin, the Azerbaijani president gave up on taking Nagorno-Karabakh militarily. Today, the violation of the fragile [ceasefire agreement brokered under the auspices of Moscow](#) - and guaranteed by a 2,000 Russian soldiers interposition force - show a lack of respect towards the Kremlin’s authority. Baku is aware of this, but Russia’s setbacks in Ukraine offer a [strategic opportunity](#) to reverse the previously signed peace agreement and accelerate the negotiation pace to obtain broader concessions from Yerevan. As for Armenia, it logically turned to its allies to preserve its territorial integrity.

Under the [CSTO’s solidarity clause](#), activated for the second time ever, Russia and other member states should lend a hand to Armenia. However, Moscow faces a security dilemma as the sole judge of the level of military assistance that should be provided. Indeed, saving the CSTO as a [credible alternative to NATO](#) by providing the military aid it owes to Armenia would alienate Azerbaijan, which happens to be simultaneously an [ally of Kyiv](#) and Turkey’s protégé. A further escalation of tensions could strengthen the Turkish-Azeri coalition and ensure decisive [influence](#) for Ankara in the sub-region against its Russian competitor. At the same time, the trade agreements signed between Azerbaijan and Russia regarding the export of hydrocarbons allow Moscow to circumvent Western sanctions. Armenia, which has little weight in the competitive cooperation between the great powers, could then serve as a [bargaining chip](#) for Russia to maintain its strategic partnerships with Azerbaijan and Turkey to avoid too much rapprochement between them.



It seems that “an [armed conflict in the South Caucasus](#) is not on the agenda for Russia.” In other words, Moscow will not intervene militarily in the sub-region: Russia does not have the military nor the logistical means to get involved in a second war, and more importantly, it does not want to. A multi-front war [would greatly help Ukraine](#) and disperse Russia’s military efforts. This relative disinterestedness still represents a political cost for the Kremlin. Armenia does not seem [able to do without Russian support](#) in the face of Azerbaijan’s military superiority. But the level of mistrust of Moscow peaked during the [widespread protests in Yerevan](#) against the Russian regime and at the latest CSTO meeting in this same capital. This multilateral meeting resulted in the Armenian Prime Minister’s refusal to sign the joint declaration of the Military Alliance and his [abrupt ouster](#) from the discussion table.

Russia’s reluctance to take sides will affect its reliability as an ally and credibility as a guarantor of regional stability. Its reputation having also been tarnished, the CSTO has been able to prove that it is “intended more to [mark the loyalty](#) of its members to Moscow than to ensure their security.” This loss of momentum in the sub-region is also illustrated by the strategic redeployment of [1500 Russian soldiers from Tajikistan](#) to the Ukrainian front to support the war effort. This [decrease in the visibility](#) of the Russian military presence may have left a [security vacuum](#) that could destabilize the Eurasian space.

By prioritizing its strategic interests over those of its allies and proving ineffective in undermining military escalation in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia has allowed other regional powers to advance their pawns. The construction of the [first Chinese base](#) on Tajik territory does not seem to be the only element that demonstrates the decline of Russian influence in Central Asia.

### **A Strategic Vacuum Coveted By Rival Neighboring Powers**

Although several experts believe that Baku would never have intervened militarily in Armenia without Moscow’s approval, the Kremlin’s double game remains speculative. The fact remains that Russia must now [deal with Turkey](#) on this issue and with other regional powers that were [absent from the regional game](#) several years ago. While they provide the Kremlin with geopolitical assets in the context of the war it is waging with its neighbor, they still significantly limit its [strategic independence](#). Meanwhile, the military one-upmanship at work offers new opportunities to revise diplomatic allegiances.

### **A Fragile But Fruitful Balanced Position For Turkey**

Ankara positioned itself as a major geopolitical player in the context of the war in Ukraine, notably during the negotiation in Istanbul of [the “Black Sea Grain Initiative” agreement](#). Therefore, Turkey has made itself indispensable for Moscow, and mediation is not its only feat of arms to achieve this. Will its strategic ambivalence allow Ankara to become a diplomatic crossroads? It seems on the right track since it is the only actor to dialogue with all the warring parties. As the Russian-Ukrainian conflict evolves, Ankara emerges as an indispensable interlocutor while projecting its influence more effectively in Central Asia, notably by establishing [a Turkish outpost in Azerbaijan](#).

Western chancelleries appreciated Ankara’s mediation efforts and [bulwark role](#) against Moscow in the Black Sea during the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. His commitment to collective security elicited warm thanks from [Jens Stoltenberg](#). As for the strong security partnership that began with Ukraine in 2014, it has served Turkey twice. First, it allowed it to challenge [Russia’s supremacy in its neighborhood](#) and to ingratiate itself with Western leaders by strengthening the Ukrainian security apparatus. Over the same period, the sale of 32 Bayraktar TB2 drones, which have distinguished themselves on the battleground, has led to a slight readjustment of the initial balance of power and has given the [Turkish armaments industry](#) a certain aura.

At the same time, Turkey is a significant ally for Russia as it tends to [undermine NATO’s work](#) from within. By keeping his options open regarding his relationship with Moscow or blocking [the accession of Finland and Sweden](#) to prioritize his strategic interests over NATO’s, President Erdogan partially harms Western cohesion by exercising [strategic blackmail](#). In the case of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Turkey pretends to condemn the invasion. But it also allows Moscow to circumvent Western sanctions by offering an indispensable outlet for Russian hydrocarbon exports since [the European embargo](#). It is also a critical economic partner, with a marked increase in trade volume between the two countries since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Finally, Turkey is a crucial military partner for Russia in Syria, where, despite political [dissension](#), their actions have been coordinated. Turkey’s in-between position favors it from all parties to the conflict. To this end, Moscow bows down with complacency when Ankara extends its sphere of influence beyond the Turkic Council.

Recently renamed the [Organization of Turkic States](#) (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan), this organization could be transformed in the coming years into a political-military alliance with Turkey at its center. Ankara intends to establish itself permanently in the region by proposing a political project adapted to countries with populations that are [predominantly Muslim](#) and speak Turkic languages. These states’ heavy dependence on Russia, especially in the defense field, seems to fade as Turkey sells its heavy weapons and drones to Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Moreover, [drone diplomacy](#) extends to other countries not part of the Turkic community since Tajikistan is not Turkic-speaking.

The ambiguity of relations between Russia and Turkey could be perpetuated if they wage a struggle for influence using the Central Asian landscape as a new terrain for confrontation. Despite this, Moscow needs Ankara, which has positioned itself as an irreplaceable mediator through “[wide-gap diplomacy](#)” (*diplomatie du grand écart*) in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. If keeping this central position between Kyiv and Moscow will undoubtedly be [challenging to sustain](#) in the long term, this lever of influence now allows President Erdogan to have the freedom to conclude military partnerships with almost any Central Asian country. Hence, Ankara is developing a [third path for regional integration](#), an alternative to those proposed by Russia and China.

### ***Towards A Readjustment Of The Chinese Position In The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict***

As Sino-Russian relations thrive on U.S. [hardening](#) of them, the bonds of friendship presented as unshakable by Russian and Chinese leaders could run out of steam. Beijing hesitates between saving the principle of non-interference, a pillar of its foreign policy, and aligning itself with Russia in the “crusade” it is waging against the West. In the end, Beijing will have shown strategic caution.

However, the refusal to support the Russian war effort, the recent statements of the Chinese executive, and the fact that several states are seeking closer ties with China make this informal alliance uncertain.

Last October, in Astana, as the leaders of the former Soviet space and China engaged in an intense [diplomatic joust](#) with the war in Ukraine in the background, a landmark event went under the radar. By positioning itself as a bridge between [West and East](#), Kazakhstan maintains relations with China, the E.U., and the United States, which tends to irritate many Russian officials severely. With a zeal similar to the revisionist discourse that started the conflict in Ukraine, a Duma deputy explained the need to [de-Nazify](#) Kazakhstan. Beijing responded curtly by declaring its support for [Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity](#), a clear red line to Moscow.

China’s strategic caution concerning the conflict may have given way to some exasperation towards the Kremlin’s [excesses of authority](#). Beijing, which was confined to its role as the dominant economic power, is now meddling in sub-regional security issues – even though those were Russia’s preserve – by proposing a peace process between Kyiv and Moscow. The question then arises as to whether, in the long run, Beijing could supplant Moscow in its role as guarantor of regional stability. To answer this, we must turn our attention to another diplomatic summit.

In Samarkand, Beijing has been actively courted at this annual state meeting that would determine which major players would be at the heart of the [infrastructure and connectivity projects](#) of the Belt and Road Initiative. The Chinese president recalled that he was the central economic player in the region while promoting a new axis through the countries of Central Asia that [would bypass Russia](#). By acting on fronts other than Ukraine, the Russian president wanted to prove to the West that he was not so isolated internationally. However, this staging did not hide that he was under [pressure](#) from his allies, who sought to adopt a common position on the commercial consequences of the Kremlin’s military adventure. As evidenced by the holding [of joint military exercises](#) or the surge in Chinese exports to Russia, it will take more to undo the informal alliance between the two countries.

Nevertheless, the G20 held in Bali confirmed this trend of strengthening Moscow’s diplomatic isolation as Beijing distanced itself. The latter said it was [worried about the war](#) without exerting any real pressure on Russia. But Xi Jinping’s thinly veiled criticism of his Russian counterpart - by opposing the “[instrumentalization](#)” of food and energy products - suggests some skepticism from the Chinese leader. In the future, China’s lack of a clear stance will allow it to choose sides. Beijing may position itself as an early supporter of Russia if Moscow wins this war to advance [their shared vision of a new world order](#). However, in the event of a Russian defeat, it could permanently distance itself from Moscow so as not to be associated with the amateurism of the Russian army. Therefore, several strategic opportunities are available to Xi Jinping, which is not the case for Vladimir Putin, who is becoming more and more limited in the choice of his alliance system as his isolation deepens.

Finally, the Kremlin has no [alternative ally](#). Beijing takes advantage of this dependency to accelerate its rapprochement with the countries in the Russian orbit and organize a “[new space of vassalage](#).” By staying away from Moscow’s military ambitions, Beijing first seeks to secure its corridors by creating a [vast space for communication and trade](#) to be connected to European

markets. In short, an extension of its [good neighborliness policy](#). But this could evolve into an expansionary policy based on the firepower of the Chinese economy as the imbalance in the Sino-Russian partnership widens, especially since Moscow has even less capacity to compensate for China’s [diplomatic and economic superiority](#).

In the future, Vladimir Putin may refuse to be short-circuited on his Asian flank by trying to maintain Russia as the great stabilizing power in managing regional conflicts. But, on the other hand, it could also refocus its war and diplomatic efforts in the Donbas to secure the territorial gain from annexing Ukrainian regions, all to the detriment of its positions in the Eurasian space. In either case, however, its [unreliability](#) could push the former Soviet states into the hands of countries that could seek to become [masters of Eurasia](#).

### ***Can The E.U. And The U.S. Make A Difference In The Strategic Competition Taking Place In The Eurasian Space?***

Whatever the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and Ukraine’s E.U. accession process, [“Europe and Russia are likely to be separated for a long time.”](#) This rift will be all the more noticeable between the United States and Russia if Washington sees the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as a [golden opportunity to weaken Moscow permanently](#). At the same time, even if they do not have the will to become the region’s [policemen](#), the United States and Europe, by demonstrating diplomatic skills, could raise their level of geopolitical ambitions in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

By recognizing that it [wants to act “geopolitically,”](#) the E.U. is betting on building deeper partnerships in these regions. In Central Asia, the European Union’s strategic ambitions have accelerated with the war in Ukraine. Strengthening these bilateral relations will enable it to move closer to the energy independence and strategic autonomy it seeks by [securing new energy supply routes](#). As a result, central Asian countries can diversify [the range of their diplomatic strategies](#) and reduce dependence on Russia. Charles Michel’s trip to Astana during the EU-Central Asia summit and [Josep Borell’s trip to the Samarkand Economic Forum](#) attest to this European desire to assert itself in the regional game and to compete with Chinese and Russian influence.

In the Caucasus, the European “civilian mission” sent along the common border between Azerbaijan and Armenia for a more precise delimitation of the border attests to the [significant role](#) played by the European Union in achieving de-escalation between the two countries. While Nancy [Pelosi’s](#) recent visit to Yerevan (which allowed talks between the two rival countries of the Caucasus to be held in Washington) attests to the renewed interest of the Americans in the sub-region. Nevertheless, a significant expansion of U.S. engagement or a reorientation of policies already established in Central Asia remains unlikely as [South Asia remains the top U.S. strategic priority](#).

As all the Central Asian republics and those of the Caucasus have sought a new [geopolitical balance](#) since the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the E.U. and the United States have a great opportunity to strengthen economic and political ties with the countries of these highly strategic regions. Similar to the resumption of the European [“Global Gateway”](#) initiative providing for massive investments in connectivity projects, the war in Ukraine has had the merit of placing

Central Asia and the Caucasus as key areas/central corridors and no longer as blind spots in the transatlantic community’s foreign policy.

## Conclusion

Has the war in Ukraine finally dealt the final blow to Russia’s sphere of influence? Only the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict will provide an answer. “If [Russia wins militarily](#), it will have enormous psychological leverage” to weigh in regional conflicts. On the contrary, if it loses, its influence will gradually decline, and several pockets of conflict will likely erupt again. All the geopolitical recompositions at work lead us to believe that Moscow’s reputation is indeed on the line.

It should be recalled, however, that Russia is still perceived as the [stabilizing power](#) in the subregion. Armenia has not left the CSTO despite the rejection of the military alliance, and many states remain dependent on Moscow in terms of security. To maintain his international stature, Vladimir Putin is active on all fronts. But he is absorbed in the war in Ukraine and therefore uses many resources to prove that he will survive in the diplomatic ballet being played out in Eurasia. While Russia is gradually becoming exhausted in this military and diplomatic [one-upmanship](#), China and Turkey are taking advantage of the situation to expand their spheres of influence. While they are currently responding to the desire of the former Soviet countries, which wish to reduce their dependence on the Kremlin, Russia is not immune to a strategic shift on their part that would supplant it as a major military power. The increased presence of China and Turkey, and to a lesser extent that of the E.U. and the U.S., will have consequences for the “[diplomatic map](#)” and Russia’s ability to secure its [geostrategic position](#) in Central Asia.

Several experts consider that one should be wary of making predictions about the outcome of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the possibility that Russia would be relegated to the rank of a middle power. However, the consequences of the Kremlin’s succession of military and diplomatic setbacks already allow us to draw several lessons.

While many countries were quick to choose “balance” rather than align, it turns out that several lines of convergence seem to be emerging. For some, it will be a question of [perpetuating their policies of firmness and sanctions](#) towards Russia while seeking to get as many people as possible to join (Baltic States) or to continue their rapprochement with the European Union (Georgia, Moldova). Others will entrust their future to the Kremlin by strategically aligning with it (Belarus). The last group is progressively choosing non-alignment – to different degrees – since they now refuse a [new iron curtain](#) and therefore develop so-called multi-vectorial diplomacy (the rest of the South Caucasus and Central Asia). And the diversification of relations between the countries of the former Soviet space is not beneficial to Russia. As for the neighboring regional powers taking advantage of the new security architecture that tends to emerge (Turkey and China), they are sanctuaries free from Western sanctions. If this is not the case, Moscow runs the risk of [hyper-dependence](#) on them, ultimately weakening its position in the post-Soviet space. Moreover, as made evident by the SCO’s lack of reaction to the [violent confrontations between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan](#), with the perpetuation of regional conflicts, these foreign powers will not fight to be the ones that will shoulder the “burden of security.”



Regarding its stabilizer’s role, the more Russia continues its rush forwards, the weaker its credibility as a mediator becomes. However, to view the conflagration of the Caucasus and Central Asia as a consequence of Russia’s setbacks in Ukraine would mean jumping to conclusions and ignoring the regional dynamics and political agendas specific to these sovereign states. Nevertheless, these conflicts have increased in intensity (human toll, use of heavy artillery and drones, etc.) and in-depth. In contrast, Russia has responded merely with the bare [minimum](#) to prevent the escalation of violence.

Even if the Ukrainian reconquest boosted by Western military assistance could stagnate on the front in the coming weeks, it constitutes a military and psychological [turning point](#). If the ability of Ukrainians to fight has been dramatically underestimated, it is now clear that that of Russia’s armed forces has been [overestimated](#). “Today, not only is its [hard power meeting its limitations](#), but its *soft power* is now declining.” Therefore, the collapse of the myth of Russian military power has echoed beyond the Kremlin, instilling [doubt and mistrust](#) among Russian sympathizers. Thus, the countries in the post-Soviet space are taking advantage of this new degree of autonomy and the challenges to Moscow’s supremacy in this space to diversify their support.

Faced with this growing isolation in the various regional platforms, the new decree signed by Vladimir Putin in September 2022 provides the Kremlin with an additional pretext to interfere in the sovereign territories of the former Soviet Union. This document unveils a new humanitarian policy aimed at defending the Russian-speaking populations in the region and the intrinsic values of the [“Russian world.”](#) Halfway between an admission of weakness linked to its decline in the area and a threat to its neighbors seeking emancipation, Russia seeks to [codify its right to interfere in the internal affairs of another state](#).

Moscow’s role in cracking its security glacis is even more indicative by breaking the taboo of [“interstate armed violence](#) as an instrument serving political goals.” Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan are all taking advantage of the [border blur](#) inherited from the Soviet period to legitimize their territorial claims at the expense of neighboring countries. Finally, by attacking a sovereign state, Moscow will have provoked a weakening of the internal unity of the CSTO and a shift in the [strategic balance](#) in the region. At the same time, it opened the door for other states to extend their territorial sovereignty through uninhibited violence.