

STUDI INTERNAZIONALI

Russian Influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia Amid the War in Ukraine

By Lucas de Arruda Zanani

After the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin gambled on a swift victory, a gamble that may have ultimately contributed to the unraveling of Russian hegemony in the Caucasus and Central Asia—remnants of Soviet-era dominance and vulnerabilities inherited by the Russian Federation (Stent, 2019, p. 73). What are the next steps for Putin's regime as we witness renewed conflicts and tensions in regions once kept in check under a so-called *Pax Russica* (Marten, 2023, p. 91)? Three years into the Ukrainian war, the Russian military has been unable to conclude the conflict against a notably smaller and less formidable power. This has been interpreted globally as a clear indication of Russia's lack of war readiness and its overall incompetence after decades of relative peace (Galeotti, 2022, p. 105). There is, as has become apparent, a stark difference between the Russian forces that waged war in Chechnya and the Russian military occupying vast parts of Ukraine today (Kofman & Edmonds, 2022, p. 36). Despite their considerable size and extensive military hardware, Russia's forces have failed to effectively apply the tactics of the past against their latest adversary (Galeotti, 2022, p. 122). As noted by experts, Russian military doctrine since World War II has focused on swift and precise actions designed to quickly end engagements (Allison, 2013, p. 19). When a rapid conclusion is not possible, the doctrine shifts to systematic advances anchored by heavy artillery barrages and the methodical destruction of enemy defenses (Kofman & Edmonds, 2022, p. 49). Both of these strategic paradigms have been on full

display in the ongoing war in Eastern Europe (Cohen, 2019, p. 82).

The initial attempt to capture Hostomel Airport and decapitate the Ukrainian government failed (McFaul, 2018, p. 140), yet Russia committed to its so-called "Special Military Operation." This initial failure was followed by a full-scale invasion. However, after another debacle involving a maneuver war that Russia could not sustain, the conflict devolved into a static trench warfare reminiscent of World War I (Kofman & Edmonds, 2022, p. 57). The geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus and Central Asia has shifted as Russia's military machine has been halted by a smaller player on the world stage (Pashakhanlou, 2023, p. 31). The military stalemate is not the only reason for this change. A critical factor reinforcing this momentous shift has been the substantial backing Ukraine has received from the West since the invasion began (Charap & Colton, 2017, p. 62). This aid has sent a powerful message to smaller nations that once felt dependent on Russia for security and stability (Siddi, 2016, p. 835). The Western backing of Ukraine has exposed cracks in Russia's ability to project power beyond its borders, emboldening countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia to reconsider their reliance on Moscow (Marten, 2023, p. 96). One significant outcome of this shift is the growing assertiveness of countries like Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, which are reevaluating their political and economic alliances. In Armenia, the long-standing reliance on Russia as a security guarantor has been questioned, especially after Russia's perceived inaction during the recent escalation of the

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Cornell, 2011, p. 254). Meanwhile, Azerbaijan, buoyed by its energy wealth and military success, has grown bolder, pushing its regional ambitions without fear of immediate Russian retaliation (Cornell, 2011, p. 265). Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, are also drifting away from Moscow's sphere of influence. Kazakhstan, in particular, has started to forge stronger ties with China and the West (Chausovsky, 2020, p. 12), with President Tokayev showing increasing reluctance to align his country with Russia's war narrative. This recalibration reflects a broader regional sentiment: as Russian military might falters, the Central Asian republics are exploring alternative alliances to safeguard their sovereignty and pursue independent foreign policies (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017, p. 102). This trend has been exacerbated by Russia's diminished ability to mediate and influence regional disputes as it once did. The traditional *Pax Russica*—where Russia acted as the arbiter of conflicts in its periphery—has been weakened by its preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and the depletion of its military and economic resources (Baev, 2020, p. 34). In the void left by a distracted and weakened Russia, other powers, particularly Turkey and China, are positioning themselves to fill the gap, offering military, economic, and political support to countries once firmly within Russia's orbit (Shiriyev, 2022, p. 76). Turkey, under President Erdoğan, has actively sought to expand its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, leveraging cultural ties and military partnerships, especially with Azerbaijan (Shiriyev, 2022, p. 84). Turkey's growing presence in the region is emblematic of the changing power dynamics, where regional powers are no longer waiting

for Russian leadership but are instead pursuing their own agendas (Cornell, 2011, p. 275). China, through its Belt and Road Initiative, has also deepened its involvement in Central Asia, providing infrastructure investments and economic incentives that are increasingly attractive to the region's governments (Chausovsky, 2020, p. 19). The war in Ukraine, therefore, represents not just a challenge to Russia's military strength but a broader threat to its geopolitical influence in the former Soviet Union (Allison, 2013, p. 55). As Russia's position weakens, the Caucasus and Central Asia are no longer passive regions in its sphere of influence but active arenas of geopolitical competition (Marten, 2023, p. 102). The erosion of Russian dominance here could be one of the most enduring consequences of the conflict in Ukraine, marking the end of an era of uncontested Russian control in its near abroad (Galeotti, 2022, p. 132). In conclusion, the war in Ukraine has had profound repercussions beyond its immediate theater. Russia's failure to swiftly win the conflict has sent ripples throughout its former empire, particularly in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Kofman & Edmonds, 2022, p. 72). As smaller nations in these regions reassess their reliance on Moscow, the balance of power is shifting, with new actors emerging to fill the void left by a weakened Russia (Siddi, 2016, p. 841). How Putin's regime navigates this changing landscape will determine the future of Russian influence not only in Ukraine but across its entire post-Soviet periphery (Cohen, 2019, p. 108).

Bibliography

- Allison, R. (2013). *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ambrosio, T. (2009). *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Baev, P. (2020). *Russia's Arctic and Far East Ambitions: The Role of Asia Rising*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA).
- Charap, S., & Colton, T. J. (2017). *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).
- Chausovsky, E. (2020). "China's Economic Reach in Central Asia." Foreign Policy Research Institute. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/12/chinas-economic-reach-in-central-asia/>
- Cohen, S. F. (2019). *War with Russia? From Putin & Ukraine to Trump & Russiagate*. New York: Hot Books.
- Cornell, S. E. (2011). *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.
- Cooley, A., & Heathershaw, J. (2017). *Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Galeotti, M. (2022). *The Weaponisation of Everything: A Field Guide to the New Way of War*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gvosdev, N., & Marsh, C. (2013). *Russian Foreign Policy: Interests, Vectors, and Sectors*. Los Angeles: CQ Press.
- Hill, F., & Gaddy, C. G. (2015). *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.
- Karagiannis, E. (2019). *The New Geopolitics of the South Caucasus: Prospects for Regional Cooperation and Conflict Resolution*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Kofman, M., & Edmonds, J. (2022). "Russian Military Strategy and War in Ukraine." *War on the Rocks*, July. <https://warontherocks.com/2022/07/russian-military-strategy-in-ukraine/>