



STRATFOR

GLOBAL INTELLIGENCE



RUSSIA'S EXPANDING INFLUENCE: Introduction: The Targets

March 8, 2010

This analysis may not be forwarded or republished without express permission from STRATFOR.
For permission, please submit a request to PR@stratfor.com.

Russia's Expanding Influence, Introduction: The Targets



The United States' involvement in the Middle East — wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a standoff with Iran over its nuclear program — has given Russia an opportunity to expand its influence in the former Soviet Union. Moscow has already had some success in consolidating control

over what it considers the four most crucial countries, but it would like to push back against the West in several other countries if it has time to do so before Washington's attention returns to Eurasia.

Editor's note: This introduction launches a four-part series in which STRATFOR will examine Russia's efforts to exert influence beyond its borders.

Russia today is vastly different from the Russia of 10 or 20 years ago. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the West began a geopolitical offensive in Russia's near abroad, and met with some success. However, the past two months have seen a drastic rollback of Western influence in the former Soviet Union, with Russia forming unions with Kazakhstan and Belarus and a pro-Russian government returning to Ukraine. Moscow is making progress in its grand scheme to solidify its position as a regional power in Eurasia once again, reversing what it sees as Western infiltration. The question now is [how far Russia wants to go](#) — or how far it feels it must and can go — in this quest.

The Inherent Russian Struggle

Russia's [defining problem](#) stems from its geographic indefensibility. Russia has no rivers, oceans, swamps, mountains or other natural features truly protecting it. To compensate for these vulnerabilities, Russia historically has had to do two things: Consolidate forces at home while purging outside influences, and expand in order to create buffers around its borders. At times, Russia reached out too far and collapsed, which forced it to start over. But Russia has only been a stable, strong power — regionally and globally — when it had a buffer zone surrounding its core. The best example of this was the Soviet Union, in which Russia surrounded itself with a sphere of countries under its control, from Central Asia to the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. This gave Moscow the insulation it needed to project influence far beyond its borders.

But in 1989, the Soviet Union lost control of Eastern Europe and had disintegrated by 1991, returning Russia essentially to its 17th century borders (except for Siberia). Russia was broken, vulnerable and weak.

The United States, on the other hand, emerged from the Cold War with a huge opportunity to contain Russia and prevent its re-emergence as a great power in Eurasia. The Soviet disintegration did not in any way guarantee that Moscow would not resurge eventually in another form, so the West had to neuter Russia both internally and externally. First the United States nudged the pro-democratic and capitalist forces inside Russia to try to change the nature of the Kremlin. Theoretically, this led to the democratic experiment of the 1990s that ended in bitter chaos, rather than democracy, within Russia. Yet it did prevent the Russian government from becoming a consolidated (let alone powerful) entity.

The United States also began working to contain Russia's influence inside its borders and pick away at its best defense: its buffer. The United States and Western Europe carried out this strategy in several ways. The West used its influence and money quickly after the fall of the Soviet Union to create connections with each former Soviet state. It also fomented a [series of color revolutions](#) in Georgia,

Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan that solidified Western influence in those countries. [NATO](#) and the European Union also expanded into former Soviet territory to include Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Washington and NATO even opened military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to facilitate moving supplies into Afghanistan.

Moscow saw this as a direct and deliberate challenge to Russian national security. But before it could even consider reaching across its borders to counter the West's geopolitical encroachment, Russia had to clean house. Under former Russian President (and current Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin, [Russia's internal consolidation began](#)



with the Kremlin regaining control over the country politically, economically and socially while re-establishing its control over Russia's wealth of energy reserves. The Kremlin also put an end to the internal volatility created by the oligarchs, organized crime and wars in the Caucasus. The recentralization of the Russian state under Putin's rule, coupled with high energy prices bringing in exorbitant amounts of money, made Russia strong again, but it still needed to reclaim its buffer zone.

The Window of Opportunity

While Russia reconsolidated, the United States became preoccupied with the Islamic world. As the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have developed, they have absorbed Washington's focus, presenting Russia with an opportunity to push back against the West's increased influence in Eurasia. It remains unclear whether Russia would have been able to counter the Western infiltration of the former Soviet states if the United States had not been looking elsewhere. But [Russia has taken advantage of Washington's preoccupation](#) to attempt to re-establish its sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union.

The U.S. absorption on Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan has not occurred without Russian involvement. Russia has [used its connections](#) in the Middle East and Afghanistan as leverage in its negotiations with the United States for years, demanding that Washington outright abandon moves to solidify Western influence in the former Soviet states. Furthermore, Moscow's plan to expand its influence into the former Soviet sphere depends on Washington's preoccupation. Thus, Russia has openly supported Iran with political, nuclear and military deals, and has made negotiations for military supply routes into Afghanistan more difficult for the United States and NATO.

The [geopolitical tug-of-war](#) between Washington and Moscow has not been easy. But while Washington has been preoccupied with its wars, Russia has been able to reconsolidate its influence in countries that never strayed far from Moscow's hand, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan. Russia proved that the West could not stop it from militarily rolling back into its former territory during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. Russia's most crucial victory to date has been in Ukraine, where the top four candidates in the country's January presidential election were all pro-Russian, thus ensuring the end of the pro-Western Orange movement.

The question now is: What does Russia feel it must accomplish before the United States is freed up from its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or its standoff with Iran?

The Russian Plan

The Kremlin is not looking to re-establish the Soviet Union. Rather, Moscow has stepped back and looked at its former Soviet sphere and determined what is imperative to the future of Russia's regional power and stability. Essentially, Russia has placed the countries of its former sphere of influence and other regional powers into four categories:



Copyright STRATFOR 2010 www.STRATFOR.com

- First are four countries where Russia feels it *must* fully reconsolidate its influence: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Georgia. These countries protect Russia from Asia and Europe and give Moscow access to the Black and Caspian seas. They are also the key points integrated with Russia's industrial and agricultural heartland. Without all four of them, Russia is essentially impotent. So far, Russia has reconsolidated power in Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, and part of Georgia is militarily occupied. In 2010, Russia will focus on strengthening its grasp on these countries.
- Next are six countries where Moscow would like to reconsolidate its influence if it has the opportunity to do so before Washington's attention turns back to Eurasia: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Russia does not need these countries in order to remain strong, but without them the West is too close to the Russian core for comfort. These countries have either strategic geographic locations, links to Russia or valuable assets. Estonia could almost be put into the first category, as some forces inside Moscow consider it more important because of location near Russia's second-largest city, St. Petersburg, and on the Baltic Sea. Russia will attempt to deal with these countries only after its four top priorities are met.
- The third group on Russia's list consists of countries that are not critical to the Kremlin, but Moscow feels could easily be controlled because of their own inherent vulnerabilities. These countries — Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia — are not geographically, politically or economically important and are so unstable that Moscow could consolidate control over them rather quickly. Some of these countries are already under Russian control, through no concerted effort on Moscow's part, but their natural instability and weakness can make them more trouble than they are worth.
- The final group on Russia's list consists of countries that are not former Soviet states or countries Russia thinks it can pull in under its influence. These last countries — Germany, Turkey, France and Poland — are regional powers (or future powers) in Eurasia that could complicate Russia's efforts. Moscow feels it needs to form a strong relationship, or at least an understanding, with these countries about Russia's dominance in the former Soviet sphere. These countries are all NATO members, and each has its own complex relationship with the United States. But Moscow again is taking advantage of the United States' distraction to

leverage its own relationship with these countries. Moscow will have to play a very delicate game with these regional heavyweights to make sure it does not turn them into enemies.

A Closing Window

Russia has had some success in meeting its goals while the United States has been preoccupied, but it also knows Washington is attempting to [wrap up its affairs](#) in Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan and have a freer hand in other areas. For Russia, the clock is ticking.

Russia does have the advantage, in that it is easier for the United States to prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon than to control one that has already emerged. The United States' focus will return to Eurasia after Russia has already made significant progress on its to-do list. But this is not to say that Russia is the definite winner. Russia's geopolitical imperatives remain: The country must expand, hold together and defend the empire, even though expansion can create difficulties in the Russian core. This is already a difficult task; it will be made even harder when the United States is free to counter Russia.

In this series, STRATFOR will break down exactly how Russia will be tackling its to-do list of countries, examining the different levers Moscow holds over each country and what bumps it may experience along the way.



ABOUT STRATFOR

STRATFOR is the world leader in global intelligence. Our team of experts collects and analyzes intelligence from every part of the world -- offering unparalleled insights through our exclusively published analyses and forecasts. Whether it is on political, economic or military developments, STRATFOR not only provides its members with a better understanding of current issues and events, but invaluable assessments of what lies ahead.

Renowned author and futurologist George Friedman founded STRATFOR in 1996. Most recently, he authored the international bestseller, [The Next 100 Years](#). Dr. Friedman is supported by a team of professionals with widespread experience, many of whom are internationally recognized in their own right. Although its headquarters are in Austin, Texas, STRATFOR's staff is widely distributed throughout the world.

"Barron's has consistently found STRATFOR's insights informative and largely on the money-as has the company's large client base, which ranges from corporations to media outlets and government agencies." -- Barron's

What We Offer

On a daily basis, STRATFOR members are made aware of what really matters on an international scale. At the heart of STRATFOR's service lies a series of analyses which are written without bias or political preferences. We assume our readers not only want international news, but insight into the developments behind it.

In addition to analyses, STRATFOR members also receive access to an endless supply of SITREPS (situational reports), our heavily vetted vehicle for providing breaking geopolitical news. To complete the STRATFOR service, we publish an ongoing series of geopolitical monographs and assessments which offer rigorous forecasts of future world developments.

The STRATFOR Difference

STRATFOR members quickly come to realize the difference between intelligence and journalism. We are not the purveyors of gossip or trivia. We never forget the need to explain why any event or issue has significance and we use global intelligence not quotes.

STRATFOR also provides corporate and institutional memberships for multi-users. Our intelligence professionals provide Executive Briefings for corporate events and board of directors meetings and routinely appear as speakers at conferences. For more information on corporate or institutional services please contact sales@stratfor.com