



The War in Ukraine and Eurasia's New Imperial Moment

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shocked Western observers. Seizures of territory, mass expulsions, and all-out assaults on Ukrainian culture hearken back to an earlier, darker era in European history—the era of empire. Indeed, the conflict may be the 21st century's first imperial war. For President Vladimir Putin and many others in the Russian elite, Ukraine's underlying provocation lay not so much in its aspiration to join NATO or the European Union, but in the very temerity it displayed in existing at all. Expressing ideas that are widespread among Russian thinkers and politicians, Putin has argued that Ukrainians and Russians are, as he put it in 2014, "one people, a single whole"—and that because he considers Ukraine part of Russia's own historic patrimony, Moscow retains the right to conquer and reshape it with no regard for its inhabitants.¹

In denying the legitimacy of Ukrainian statehood, Putin is also denying the legitimacy of Russia's current borders, which took shape after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ever since, Russia has maintained (or secured) *de facto* control over a range of territories belonging to the internationally recognized territory of other states: Transnistria (Moldova), Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia), and of course, Crimea and the "people's republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk (Ukraine). Putin has also established effective political

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domination over Belarus, a country whose very existence he regards, like that of Ukraine, as problematic. In each of these cases, Moscow has claimed it was protecting some mix of Russians, “compatriots (*sootchestvenniki*),” and members of an amorphous “Russian World (*russkiy mir*),” whose identity is defined not by their Moldovan, Georgian or Ukrainian citizenship, but by some ineffable historical, cultural, or spiritual tie to Russia.

To understand these cross-border interventions, it helps to think about Russia not as a nation-state with fixed borders demarcating the extent of its territory and its people, but as the heir to a long imperial tradition, one which remains in many ways shaped by its imperial past. While “empire” has become a term of opprobrium since the onset of decolonization in the mid-20th century, its aftereffects remain surprisingly powerful. The Eurasian landmass, in particular, is populated by states that remain indelibly marked by their histories as empires and which continue to behave in more or less “imperial” ways.² Like Russia, Iran, Turkey and China are all engaged in cross-border power projection that erodes borders and asserts a claim on the loyalties of other states’ citizens—from Turkey’s political-military protectorate over northern Iraq and northern Syria; to Iran’s claim to dominion over Shias in Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon; to China’s disputes over maritime and terrestrial boundaries, along with efforts to consolidate its neighbors into a Sinocentric “Community of Common Destiny.”

Governments in Iran, Turkey and China have not expressed the overt ambition to conquer territory or wipe out a whole nation in the way that Putin’s Russia has. All four countries, though, have leaders who portray their states as the center of distinct regional orders, seek to dominate peoples and territories outside their formal borders, and consciously evoke their imperial history as a justification for claims to be something greater than ordinary states. Each is thus at least in part a revisionist power vis-à-vis a “rules based” international order that prioritizes states’ sovereign equality and territorial integrity. Iran, Turkey and China each challenge the sovereignty and territorial integrity of multiple neighboring states in ways that reflect each state’s incomplete transformation from empire to nation-state. Russia is a more overtly imperial power, whose leaders do not regard the country’s post-Soviet contraction as either legitimate or

Each of the four states’ transformation from empire to nation-state remains incomplete

permanent. Alongside the same tools of cross-border intervention employed by Ankara, Tehran and Beijing, Moscow also seeks to reverse the territorial contraction and loss of influence accompanying the Soviet collapse by seizing neighboring states’ territory and uprooting their populations. Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, therefore, reflects the desire of many in the Russian elite to reestablish an imperial Russia.

Examining both the legacies of imperialism in Eurasia's four major post-imperial states, as well as the shifting guises of imperial expansion and legitimization in Iran, Turkey, China and Russia shows how a shared aspiration to make a world "safe for empire" represents one of the principal challenges to the vision of a liberal order espoused, above all, by the United States. Rather than a world order based on international law, equal sovereignty, and territorial integrity, these four states—to varying degrees and in various ways—aspire to create a world where major powers dominate their respective regions, challenging the territorial status quo while leveraging ties of language, culture, religion, and history to draw citizens of neighboring states into their respective orbits. For the US and its allies, challenging this vision means doing more to bolster the sovereignty of vulnerable states like Ukraine or Iraq, not to mention resisting the temptation to pursue imperial aims of its own (as it has too often done in Latin America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere).

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the seduction that the idea of imperial restoration elicits in Eurasia's post-imperial states—but also the difficulties translating that idea into practice faces. On one hand, Russia's consistent underestimation of Ukrainian identity and patriotism among even Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens should be a warning to leaders in Moscow and elsewhere about the costs associated with empire-building in the 21st century. On the other hand, however, the spread of Ukrainian identity in the years since the Soviet collapse suggests that *ceteris paribus*, those costs will only rise in the future—and that Moscow has an incentive to act now before historical tides turn further against it. Unless Russia's imperial war in Ukraine is soundly defeated, the world should, therefore, be prepared for further bouts of Eurasian empire building.

Empire's Long Shadow

The salience of imperial legacies within Eurasia, as opposed to other regions, is far from incidental. None of Eurasia's four major post-imperial states has gone through a true reckoning with the costs and crimes of empire. Conversely, Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and other one-time imperial metropoles in Europe have managed to distance themselves to varying degrees from that past, in part through membership in a European Union that ensured their prosperity and subsumed the strategic rivalries that once led them to "scramble" for territory in Africa and elsewhere (it is hardly surprising, therefore, that Britain's departure from the EU has prompted a flurry of imperial nostalgia).³

Another reason is geography. Once decolonization was accepted in principle, it was comparatively easy for European states to disentangle themselves from

distant colonial outposts. France's bloody, tragic struggle in Algeria—which was close enough that Paris and the *pied noir* settlers regarded it as part of the metropole—is the outlier, and therefore perhaps the decolonization era's closest analogue to the Russian view of Ukraine. In comparison, geographic, cultural, religious, and linguistic propinquity make it more difficult for Eurasia's four post-imperial powers to simply wash their hands of their onetime imperial peripheries. Nor have Russia, Iran or China traded the pursuit of integration for the pursuit of empire as the EU's members have; similarly, the resurgence of Turkey's imperial dreams is in part a consequence of Ankara's movement toward European integration stalling.

One does not have to accept Putin's claim that Ukrainian nationhood is a fiction to acknowledge that the lands and peoples of what are now Russia and Ukraine have been deeply enmeshed for centuries. However destabilizing Iran's support for Shiite proxies around the Middle East may be, the role of Iran-centered clerical, pilgrimage, educational, and other networks shaping regional politics long predates the 1979 Islamic Revolution.⁴ Although Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his contemporaries sought to isolate Turkey from the wider "post-Ottoman space," migrants fleeing the collapse of Ottoman power maintained Turkey's link to the Balkans and the Black Sea, while the partition of Ottoman Kurdistan after World War I left Turkey with enduring security challenges along its borders with Iraq and Syria.⁵

Such connections have endured despite the collapse of formal empire in the early 20th century. China was the first to have its empire replaced by a modern state in 1911, while Iran in 1925 was the last. Though the Russian Empire formally ended in 1917, the USSR that replaced it was also an imperial state whose power ultimately reached into the center of Europe.⁶ For much of the 20th century, "empire ... became the property of historians," as nationalist leaders like Atatürk, Reza Shah Pahlavi, and Chiang Kai-Shek prioritized valorization of the nation—however defined—over imperial restoration.⁷ Atatürk oversaw language reform that purged Turkish of its Persian and Arabic influences—including replacement of the Arabic alphabet with Latin. He also shut down the Sufi lodges that were nodes in transnational religious networks and supported the creation of a new nationalist mythology that reinforced the idea of Anatolia as the historical homeland of the Turkish people. In Iran, Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Shah undertook similar campaigns to impose a uniform Persian culture, while crushing uprisings among borderland populations. Chiang's Republic of China also pushed assimilation, even as it faced conflicts with the Japanese, regional warlords, Mao Zedong's Communists, and separatists in borderlands like East Turkestan (Xinjiang).

Despite its emphasis on Marxist-Leninist ideology and rhetorical hostility to imperialism, the Soviet Union often acted like a traditional empire. By the

end of the Russian Civil War, the Red Army had reconquered Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia. Moscow then acquired an “outer empire,” effectively reaching to the Elbe, by the end of World War II. After 1945 though, Moscow struggled to hold onto what it already had, facing rebellions in East Germany (1953), Hungary (1956), Czechoslovakia (1968) and Poland (1981), and then in the Baltic states, Georgia and Ukraine in the late 1980s. The end of the Soviet Union a few years later inaugurated a brief period under Boris Yeltsin when Moscow too attempted to build something like a non-imperial state on the territory of the new Russian Federation—including through Yeltsin’s support for Ukrainian independence.

In all four states, however, the effort to construct non-imperial or post-imperial states foundered, in part because their internal construction remained the product of past imperial expansion and rule. By the turn of the 21st century, all were once again engaged in the geopolitics of empire. The shift to a more imperial mode of geopolitics was the product in part of the Cold War’s end, which gave Iran, Turkey and China opportunities to reconnect to former peripheries long under Soviet domination. The end of the Cold War also saw a larger Westernization of the international system, accompanied by renewed emphasis on liberalism, democracy, and the kind of Westphalian sovereignty that states like Russia, Turkey, Iran and China all struggled to implement. All remained outside (or in Turkey’s case, on the margins of) the Euro-Atlantic West, comprising an “axis of the excluded” that challenged key aspects of the emerging “rules based” order.⁸ Meanwhile, instability in their respective peripheries—the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia (including Afghanistan) and Mesopotamia—helped “pull” the interest of Eurasia’s post-imperial states beyond their respective borders. Examining the shifts, once again, to more imperial geopolitical models in these states suggests that pursuit of a world “safe for empire” is one of the key reasons why Russia, Turkey, Iran and China often cooperate with one another—for instance in the Russo-Turkish-Iranian “Astana format” in Syria—even when their concrete interests diverge. It also offers insight into Russia’s shocking move in Ukraine in 2022.

The shift to a more imperial mode of geopolitics was in part the product of the Cold War’s end

Iran

Though Iran’s frontiers were continually rolled back by its imperial rivals (Russia and Britain) in the 18th and 19th centuries, at its height under the Safavid dynasty (1501-1722) and the conqueror Nader Shah Afshar (ruled 1736-47), Iran’s

frontiers encompassed the eastern Caucasus, parts of Iraq's Shiite heartland, the southern part of Central Asia, and much of modern Afghanistan and Pakistan. Persian cultural influence, meanwhile, extended from the Ottoman Empire in the west to the Shiite courts of Bengal (India) in the east. Even as political authority remained fragmented across much of this region, the influence of Persian culture and political institutions, such as absolute monarchs acknowledged as the "Shadow of God" on earth, sustained what one scholar called an Iranian "empire of the mind" across much of Central Eurasia.⁹ The shrinkage of Iran's frontiers during the 19th century, along with the expunging of Persianate influence by British India, Atatürk's Turkish Republic, and the new Arab states, encouraged the last shahs of the Qajar dynasty (1796-1925) and their successors the Pahlavis to pursue a "glorification of the country ... centered on land" rather than an expansive imperial vision.¹⁰

The Pahlavis nevertheless emphasized continuity with the ancient empires of the Achaemenids (525 BCE-404 BCE) and Sassanians (224-651) as a tool for legitimization—most notoriously with Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's grandiloquent ceremony marking the supposed 2500th anniversary of Cyrus the Great's birth in 1971. Though the ruling clerics of the Islamic Republic rejected the idea of continuity with the past and mocked Mohammed Reza Shah's self-portrayal as the heir to Cyrus, they shared their predecessors' belief in Iran's special mission, one they couched primarily in religious rather than nationalist terms. Their emphasis on Islam as the dominant element of Iranian identity encouraged attempts to spread the Islamic Revolution to other Muslim countries. The leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, argued that "an Islamic movement, therefore, cannot limit itself to any particular country, not even to the Islamic countries; it is the continuation of the revolution by the prophets."¹¹

Though Khomeini and his followers initially hoped that the Islamic Revolution would inspire copycats among both Sunnis and Shias, the September 1980 outbreak of war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq (during which most Iraqi Shias remained loyal to Baghdad) led the ruling clerics to seek allies and proxies primarily among fellow Shias. Today, while Tehran supports Sunni militants like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, its imperial aspirations have a strong sectarian element. The Islamic Republic

Today, Tehran's imperial aspirations have a strong sectarian element among Shias

has knit together a network of proxies—most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah—as tools for cross-border power projection. Hezbollah forms the nucleus of a Shiite "foreign legion," bringing together Shias from Afghanistan, Lebanon,

Iraq and elsewhere that Iran uses for military intervention and the creation of political proxies in both Sunni and Shia-majority states.¹² Hezbollah has been instrumental in the Syrian conflict, which has left Bashar al-Assad's government deeply dependent on Iran (and Russia); it is also the dominant political faction in Lebanon. Tehran also uses Hezbollah to train other proxy groups in Iraq, and seeks to set up similar forces in Bahrain, Yemen, Pakistan and elsewhere. These groups allow Iran to erode its neighbors' sovereignty and shape their domestic politics from within.

Ever since the Islamic Revolution, Tehran has also sought influence by establishing its authority over Shiite clerics in neighboring states. Khomeini's vision of revolutionary Shiism rests on an absolutist version of the doctrine known as *velayat-e faqih*, or Guardianship of the Jurisprudent. Based on the traditional Shiite practice of choosing a "source of emulation (*marja-e taqlid*)" to follow, Khomeini argued for a strict clerical hierarchy under a Supreme Leader who would combine both religious and temporal power. In this conception, Iran's Supreme Leader (today, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) is not only the leader of the Iranian state, but a source of what Tehran asserts is unquestionable authority over all Shias inside and outside of Iran. According to Iran's ruling clerics, a Shia in Iraq or Lebanon should be Shiite first and Iraqi or Lebanese second—and in being Shiite, should embrace the politicized faith of the Iranian Islamic Revolution. This struggle to dominate the religious hierarchy is most visible today in Iraq, where clerics aligned with Tehran have built up patronage networks in Shiite shrine cities like Najaf and Karbala to promote clerics loyal to Tehran in place of those, like Iraq's revered Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who challenge both Iranian influence and Khomeini's model of *velayat-e faqih*.

Turkey

While Atatürk and his immediate successors sought to draw a line under Turkey's Ottoman past, the Turkish Republic remained deeply imprinted by it from the beginning. Atatürk himself had been a prominent figure in the Young Turk movement that ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1908 until its collapse after World War I. The concentration of power in the center, development of a statist system emphasizing the subordination of religious institutions to secular power—and even the proclivity of the Turkish military to intervene in politics—all have Ottoman roots.¹³ In February 1920, the last Ottoman parliament adopted the so-called National Oath (*Misak-ı Milli*), which emphasized that territories under Ottoman control at the time of the Armistice and inhabited by "a Muslim Ottoman majority" united by "religion, descent, and common aims" constituted "an indivisible whole."¹⁴ Several territories mentioned in the National Oath remained outside the borders recognized under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne

that secured recognition of the new Turkish Republic—including the old *vilayet* of Alexandretta, which became part of French Syria; Cyprus; Western Thrace as well as several islands in the Aegean Sea (Greece); and the regions containing the cities of Aleppo and Deir-ez Zor (Syria), Mosul (Iraq), and Batumi (Georgia).

All of these territories would become targets for implicit or explicit irredentism from early in the history of the Republic. In spring 1939, Turkish troops marched into Alexandretta, which Ankara had taken to calling Hatay (from ‘Hittite,’ to emphasize that the region constituted part of the homeland of the ancient Anatolian-based Hittites). The occupation forces oversaw a referendum that ratified Hatay’s annexation by Turkey. After constitutional rule broke down in Cyprus in the mid-1960s, an Athens-backed coup aiming to secure unification (*enosis*) of Cyprus with Greece led Turkish forces to occupy the Turkish-majority northern third of the island in July 1974. Ankara then proclaimed the establishment of a *de facto* Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, protected by around 30,000 Turkish troops.

Turkey has also established long-lasting military and political influence in northern Iraq and northern Syria as it seeks to contain the threat of terrorism and separatism posed by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Imperial collapse left Ottoman Kurdistan divided between Turkey and what at the time were the European mandates in Iraq and Syria, with borders that cut through remote deserts and mountains paying little heed to tribal or ethnic ties. Even before the outbreak of the PKK rebellion in 1984, Turkey, Iraq and Syria all sought to manipulate the Kurdish issue for their own ends. The ouster of Saddam Hussein and the outbreak of civil war in Syria earlier this century created vacuums in these border regions that Kurdish groups, including those affiliated with the PKK, sought to fill.

Ankara subsequently employed military and other tools to contain the threat of Kurdish separatism on the territory of its neighbors. Turkey deployed troops to northern Iraq soon after the 2003 US invasion; it eventually worked out a *modus vivendi* with the non-PKK Kurds loyal to the Barzani family who oversee northern Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG has allowed Turkish forces to carry out raids against PKK targets, often over the objections of the government in Baghdad, and has developed direct economic ties to Turkey. Turkish forces similarly moved into Syria in 2016, partly in response to US support for forces that included the PKK-aligned People’s Protection Units in the fight against ISIS. Ankara has subsequently established its own administrative structures in parts of northern Syria, where observers note the presence of Turkish flags and the introduction of Turkish language in schools—even as officials reject any suggestion that Ankara seeks to redraw borders.¹⁵

Elsewhere, Turkish actions have been more modest, but governments in Greece, Syria, Iraq and Georgia have all accused Ankara of maintaining a kind

of proprietary attitude toward territories covered by the National Oath. Following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Turkish officials suggested that Ankara was entitled to a share of northern Iraq's oil revenue, and then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan claimed that because "we are present in Mosul's history," Turkey could not remain indifferent to developments in the city.¹⁶ Erdoğan likewise emphasized Turkey's longstanding ties to Aleppo to justify intervention against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Large-scale Turkish investment in Batumi, construction of an Ottoman-style mosque, and pressure on local authorities to shut down bars and casinos—as well as schools connected with the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen—have all been sources of strain with the Georgian government as well.¹⁷

Even beyond the territories encompassed by the National Oath, Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has emphasized how Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic heritage links it to other states that similarly emerged from the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, the Black Sea littoral, the South Caucasus, and the Arab Middle East. Throughout this "post-Ottoman space," the AKP has sought to leverage this shared history as a source of influence and a basis for cultural, economic, and even political integration. This effort was especially pronounced at the height of the Arab Spring, when the AKP portrayed its blend of Islam and democracy as a model for the Arab world. In the Balkans, Ankara has expanded the role of *Diyonet*, the religious bureaucracy charged with oversight of religious institutions within Turkey, to promote a vision of Islam in the region congruent with Turkish interests. *Diyonet* provides financial and other support to mosques and communal groups in the Balkans, while Turkey's development agency TİKA funds the construction of Ottoman-style mosques.¹⁸ Turkish officials meanwhile portray themselves as an "elder brother" to leaders like Bosnia's Bakir Izetbegović.¹⁹

**Turkey's AKP
claims its Ottoman-
Islamic heritage
links it to other
states from the
former empire**

China

China's more recent embrace of imperial geopolitics after several decades of following former Premier Deng Xiaoping's admonition to "hide your capabilities and bide your time" is a product not only of the rapid economic and military expansion of recent decades, but also of efforts to create a new basis for the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) rule in the wake of the June 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Those efforts include a renewed emphasis on China's imperial past. Especially under Xi Jinping, the

CCP has embraced a narrative of continuity with the past that seeks to reverse the loss of status associated in popular memory with the “century of humiliation” prior to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Since the end of the Cold War, the PRC has increasingly looked to the long imperial era, lasting from the unification of the kingdoms on the North China Plain by the First Emperor of Qin in 221 BCE until 1911, as a source of legitimacy and inspiration.

While the territory controlled by China’s imperial dynasties was “as fluctuating as a seasonal lake,” under Inner Asian

Putin is seeking a new set of rules to accelerate the shift to a world safe for empire

“conquest dynasties” like the Yuan (1279-1368) and the Qing (1644-1911) it encompassed not only the bulk of modern China, but also extensive territories in Central Asia, Mongolia, and the Russian Far East.²⁰ These territories were torn away from the Qing and its successors—mainly by Russia—during the “century of humiliation.” After the collapse of the Qing, Tibet and Xinjiang/East Turke-

stan also enjoyed periods of foreign-backed *de facto* independence until the CCP established control in the aftermath of World War II. While the CCP today prioritizes revisionist claims along its maritime periphery, the legacy of these territorial losses in Eurasia still shapes Beijing’s approach to its neighbors.

The CCP has also placed renewed emphasis on concepts and ideas from the Confucian intellectual tradition to take the place of discredited Marxist-Leninist ideology. Among these concepts is the depiction of China as the wellspring of a universal civilization that should ultimately encompass “All Under Heaven (*tianxia*)”—and which in the meantime provides the framework for administering a web of hierarchical relationships with neighboring peoples. In the ancient era, *tianxia* referred to the entirety of the known world. It also suggested a cosmically sanctioned “political order in which the world [as opposed to individual states] is primary.”²¹ Within this idealized model, the Emperor, or Son of Heaven (*tianzi*), embodied Confucian values and acted as a font of legitimacy. Other rulers “visited the imperial court, performed *ketou* [kowtow] … and presented gifts of local produce. In return, their legitimacy as rulers was affirmed.”²² Since the 1990s, PRC scholars have explicitly invoked the idea of a Sinocentric *tianxia* as the basis for a new kind of international order, one based on hierarchy and deference rather than Westphalian ideals of equal sovereignty.²³ These ideas have become part of the intellectual apparatus of the CCP’s ruling elite, providing both a language for articulating the Party’s post-1989 claim to legitimacy, as well as a framework for reshaping regional and global order in line with Chinese interests.

Assumptions about a Sinocentric *tianxia* are instrumental above all to the Community of Common Destiny (or Shared Interests), which Xi announced as a signature geopolitical initiative in his address to the 2017 Belt and Road Forum in Beijing.²⁴ Though the term itself originated with former Premier Hu Jintao, the Community of Common Destiny concept under Xi has become more ambitious and more extensive. Xi's version echoes ideas from the Confucian canon about China as the Central State or Middle Kingdom (*Zhongguo*—the Mandarin name for China) at the core of a universal *tianxia*, “a borderless order with China at its center; a benign hierarchical order guided by morality and administered for the benefit of all . . . informed by a sense of the superiority of the Chinese civilization.”²⁵ These ideas inform Chinese efforts to reform global governance to bring existing institutions more in line with China's own political system—for instance appointing its own officials to UN development agencies and getting the BRI attached to the UN's Millennium Development Goals—as well as creating new non-Western multilateral organizations that embody Chinese preferences and norms.²⁶

Assumptions about a Sinocentric *tianxia* are instrumental to the Community of Common Destiny

The idea of the Community of Common Destiny as a modern *tianxia* also informs Beijing's attempts to establish hierarchical relationships with smaller states, what Xi refers to as “partnerships based on dialogue, non-confrontation and non-alliance.”²⁷ Such partnerships, of which China has signed dozens since Xi took power in 2013, are based on mutual obligation rather than formal commitments. In exchange for development funding and other economic benefits, particularly under the auspices of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Beijing expects smaller states to support its political and security objectives. Most notable is the demand for recipients of Chinese largesse to embrace Beijing's position on territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

Beijing, though, also uses its economic weight to secure support for fighting the “three evils” of separatism, terrorism, and extremism.²⁸ In practical terms, that support means pressuring governments to deny sanctuary to Uyghurs, whom Beijing has rounded up *en masse* on accusations of extremism in a campaign which human rights organizations and the United States government have claimed is tantamount to genocide.²⁹ Though the Uyghurs' plight elicits sympathy among fellow Turkic-speaking Muslims in Central Asia, Beijing has largely persuaded the region's governments to deny Uyghurs sanctuary and to suppress public manifestations of support.

Apart from this emphasis on molding policy choices through development assistance, the legacy of 19th century territorial losses also hangs over China's

relationships with its neighbors. China's territorial aspirations today focus primarily on its maritime periphery, above all on the South and East China Seas, where Beijing asserts extensive maritime claims. While an international tribunal ruled in 2016 that these claims have no basis in international law, Beijing continues justifying them with reference to "historical rights."³⁰ China also asserts a right to Taiwan, seized from the Qing by Japan in 1895, as part of its legitimate territory. While officially committed to "peaceful unification," Beijing has built up its military capabilities for a cross-Strait invasion and escalated its threats of force as Taiwan has deepened ties with the United States and its Pacific allies. On the Eurasian mainland, China has resolved many of its territorial disputes, but has been increasingly aggressive about those that remain. The un-demarcated border with India sparked a war in 1962, and sporadic clashes have broken out ever since. The growth of Chinese infrastructure in the border region spurred new clashes in 2020, while similar activities have raised concerns in Nepal and Bhutan about the potential for Chinese irredentism there as well.

Beijing has, conversely, clearly demarcated its borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Nevertheless, elites in all four states worry about the potential for further Chinese efforts to reverse losses suffered at the hands of the Russian Empire in the 19th century.³¹ Beijing still classifies the 19th century agreements under which the Russian Empire seized some 900,000 square kilometers of territory as among the "unequal treaties" forced on the Qing by European imperialists, and some textbooks continue to show the relevant parts of Central Asia and the Russian Far East as China's "legitimate" territory.³² When Beijing was negotiating border agreements with its Central Asian neighbors (in the mid-1990s with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and in the early 2010s with Tajikistan), it used both carrots and sticks to pressure them into ceding around 16,000 square kilometers of territory, despite the popular backlash that ensued. Pointing to the process by which Beijing secured control over Tibet and Xinjiang, observers in these states (and in Russia) also worry that Chinese-built infrastructure promised as part of the BRI will serve to consolidate Beijing's influence and create a foundation for further efforts at political control.

Russia Looms Large

Of Eurasia's post-imperial states, it is Russia, though, that is engaged in the most nakedly imperial approach. Turkey and Iran have intervened militarily across their borders, while China threatens force against Taiwan, but Russia's direct invasions and seizures of territory are in a category by themselves. Russia's war in Ukraine rests, moreover, on a basic denial of the rights of Ukrainians to a separate identity and statehood. In that sense, it looks less like the kind of

manipulation of imperial legacies pursued by China and Turkey, or even Iran and Hezbollah, and more like the classical imperialism of centuries past.³³ The same identity narrative underpinning Moscow's attempt to conquer Ukraine shapes its relationship with neighboring Belarus. Along its southern periphery in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia seeks to consolidate its influence through territorial revision, military deployments, and the construction of Russocentric multilateral bodies, even as local populations worry that the invasion of Ukraine portends a renewal of a Russian imperial enterprise that could eventually target them as well.

Though the Soviet Union employed anti-imperial rhetoric both at home and abroad throughout the Cold War, in practice, it maintained the essentially imperial makeup it inherited from the Romanovs in 1917. In post-Soviet Russia, Yeltsin, like Atatürk, attempted to build something like a territorially bounded nation (without the latter's demands for cultural assimilation). He withdrew Russian forces from many neighboring states, dramatically downsized the army, disbanded the KGB, and ended the ruble zone. He also pushed for the creation of a civic patriotism within Russia, reviving the old term *rossiyanin(a)* to refer to a citizen of the state irrespective of ethnicity, while downplaying responsibility for ethnic Russians (*russkie*) living outside the Russian Federation's borders. Particularly during his first term (1992-96), Yeltsin's foreign policy lodestar remained seeking partnership and integration with the Euro-Atlantic West.

Yet Yeltsin was unable to fully separate Russia from its post-imperial periphery, which many Russians continued to regard as a "near abroad" lacking the full complement of sovereignty reserved for Russia and states in the "far abroad."³⁴ This proprietary outlook led Russia to remain deeply engaged in the internal affairs of its neighbors and to claim the right to maintain a sphere of "privileged interests" throughout the post-Soviet region.³⁵ Meanwhile, instability stemming from the Soviet collapse itself was invoked to justify Russia's demands to maintain post-imperial dominance, even as a backlash to Yeltsin-era reforms and the loss of status accompanying the Soviet collapse allowed neo-imperial ideologies to flourish.

Ethno-territorial conflicts in Moldova, Armenia/Azerbaijan, and Georgia kept Russian forces engaged in a dual role as peacekeepers and tools of influence. Russia eventually helped "freeze" these conflicts, ensuring that the route to a settlement always ran through Moscow. Concerns about instability spreading across un-demarcated borders provided a rationale for maintaining forces on the territory of Central Asia's nascent states as well.³⁶ Preventing the complete

**Yeltsin was unable
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Russia from its post-
imperial periphery**

unravelling of supply chains and other economic links encouraged efforts at multilateral integration in bodies like the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Though Putin initially prioritized improving relations with the United States, the outbreak of “color revolutions” against Russian-backed governments in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) revived Russian concerns about the vulnerability of its post-imperial periphery. Moscow blamed Western influence for the color revolutions, especially once new governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv pushed for NATO membership. Coupled with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s attempt to reassert control over the Russian-backed separatist region of South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, NATO’s 2008 promise that Georgia and Ukraine “will become members” of the alliance prompted Moscow’s August 2008 invasion of Georgia. After the war, Russia proclaimed the “independence” of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (only recognized by a few other states), which have since become outposts for Russian security services. Since 2008, Moscow has continued chipping away at Georgian territory through “borderization,” gradually moving the *de facto* border further into unoccupied Georgian territory.

Russia similarly invaded Ukrainian territory in 2014 in response to the “Revolution of Dignity” that ousted President Viktor Yanukovych, annexing Crimea, and launching a war when its effort to conduct a similar *coup de main* in the eastern Donbas region failed. The trigger for the Revolution of Dignity had been Yanukovych’s decision, under Russian pressure, to back away from his commitment to signing a trade agreement with the European Union. The agreement would have reoriented Ukraine’s economy toward the West and required domestic reforms that would make its politics less tractable to Russian influence. Moscow’s insistence that Kyiv reject the trade pact was further connected to its development of a new Russocentric Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU) as an alternative to the EU for its post-Soviet neighbors—while strongly pressuring them into membership.

Along with the security-focused Collective Security Treaty Organization, the EEAU is the institutional embodiment of the idea, long circulating in Russian analytic and policy circles, of Moscow as the center of a new Eurasian bloc that would act as a counterweight to the West and as the foundation for Moscow’s own great power aspirations—what Putin called “a powerful supranational association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region.”³⁷ The EEAU has reoriented trade patterns, deepening member states’ economic dependence on Russia, while Moscow uses its economic dominance within the organization to shape the agenda and bypass formal constraints on its actions, turning it into a tool of Russian economic and political control.³⁸

Moscow also justified its invasions of Ukraine on the basis of Putin’s claim that Russians and Ukrainians are a single nation—and that the development of a

distinct Ukrainian identity and statehood is therefore part of an “anti-Russian project” carried out by foreign enemies.³⁹ That belief has roots stretching back to the first period after the Grand Princedom of Muscovy conquered what is now Ukraine in the 17th century.⁴⁰ It continues to resonate among a Russian intellectual and political elite that has never come to terms with the loss of status accompanying the erosion of Russia’s imperial space. This claim on the loyalties of other states’ citizens, at odds with Yeltsin’s attempts to consolidate a civic nation within Russia’s borders, is the most unambiguous evidence of the continued influence of imperial thinking within the Russian elite—and a public that, so far at least, largely supports Putin’s “special military operation” against Ukraine.⁴¹

Implications of Russia’s Imperial Revival

Of course, a similar “near abroad” syndrome is visible in the ways Iran, Turkey and China—not to mention states like France and Britain—have at various times understood their relationships with onetime dependencies (think for instance of France’s role as a security provider in the Sahel). Unlike Britain or France, though, geography dictates that Eurasia’s post-imperial states must remain deeply interconnected with their neighbors. Migration, instability, smuggling, and other challenges on one side of Eurasia’s post-imperial frontiers will always have an opportunity to spread across permeable, often ill-defined borders. As former Turkish Foreign Minister (and now Erdogan rival) Ahmet Davutoğlu argued, Turkey has a responsibility to ensure order in its wider region because “if there is no order, then we will pay the price together.”⁴² Attempts to establish order have frequently entailed troop deployments and other measures that compromise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring states.

Too often, however, these deployments and related measures aim not so much at establishing order as disrupting it, allowing Eurasia’s post-imperial states to project power as part of a larger effort at restoring their own influence in the international system. Iran’s deployment of Shiite proxies to Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere is one example of this attempt at stoking disruption as a tool of control—one that rests on a rejection of the modern idea of nation-states with defined borders and equal citizenship. Alongside its nuclear buildup, Iran’s aspiration to reshape the Middle East by eroding the sovereignty and territoriality of its neighbors is the principal reason the United States and its allies regard the Islamic Republic as a “rogue state” (even if US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq was one of the main enablers of Iran’s imperial ambitions). Normalization with Tehran will thus require not merely a return to the 2015 Joint

Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) limiting its nuclear program, but also an Iranian commitment to the sovereignty of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Afghanistan.

If that seems a tall order, the war in Ukraine suggests that returning to something like a stable relationship with Russia will be all but impossible under current conditions. Russia's rejection of Ukrainian (and Belarusian) nationhood, and its assertion that the two countries are not merely part of Russia's sphere of influence but rather are, in some ineffable way, "Russian" suggests the reasons why the current war in Ukraine is different in scope and ambition than the post-imperial interventions carried out by Turkey, China, and even Iran. Moreover, in contrast to the situation in these other three states, Russia's loss of empire remains comparatively recent, and many of its current leaders (including Putin) are themselves products of the imperial system that existed before 1991. They share assumptions—about Russia's role as a major global actor, about Russian identity and culture as more "advanced" than those of neighboring peoples, and about the need to reverse at least in part the verdict of 1991—that seem anachronistic in a post-imperial world.

The very anachronism of their views helps explain why the invasion of Ukraine has been such a shock outside of Russia. The kind of imperial expansion Russia is now pursuing has a long history—in Eurasia and beyond. It largely vanished, though, in the decades after World War II. By 1991, Russia found itself belatedly confronting the same dilemma that Eurasia's other three post-imperial states had been grappling with for decades: how to build a territorially bounded state and nation amid the wreckage of empire. Putin has now abandoned that challenge, choosing instead the quixotic path of seeking to rebuild Russia as a truly imperial state. Ukraine is the principal target, but Moscow's reversion to imperial geopolitics appears equally threatening to Russia's other neighbors.

How to build a territorially bounded state and nation amid the wreckage of empire?

Despite the existence of formal agreements committing Moscow to respecting its neighbors' sovereignty and territorial integrity, Putin is demonstrating that Russia has no use for agreements belonging to a post-imperial world it has rejected. The outcome of Russia's war in Ukraine thus has implications far beyond the region itself. Putin's Russia has long claimed an exemption from a "rules based" international order allegedly designed by and for the West.⁴³ With its war in

Ukraine, it is seeking nothing less than a new set of rules—rules designed to accelerate the shift to a world safe for empire.

Eurasia's three other post-imperial states have adopted an ambiguous position on the war. China and Iran abstained on the March 2, 2022 UN General Assembly vote demanding Russia withdraw its troops from Ukraine, while Turkey voted in favor.⁴⁴ More generally, Ankara has sought to maintain a cautious balance between Kyiv and Moscow, supplying weapons to Ukraine but refusing to join most sanctions on Russia.⁴⁵ Both Iran and China have adopted Russian talking points about NATO expansion as the underlying cause of the war, yet both have refrained from siding too overtly with Moscow. Tehran's sympathies largely align with Moscow, but Iran nurses its own bitter historical memories of Russian imperialism, and worries that Russian and Iranian oil will have to compete for the same limited markets as a result of sanctions.⁴⁶ While Putin and Xi signed a declaration just weeks before the outbreak of war affirming that "the friendship between the two states has no limits," Beijing has rejected Putin's requests for military assistance.⁴⁷ It has also taken advantage of Moscow's isolation to push Russia out of lucrative arms markets in Asia and demanded a steep discount for continued purchases of Russian oil.⁴⁸

The caution of Ankara, Tehran and Beijing is due in no small part to the continued vigor of the Western liberal order. The threat of sanctions limits how far even powerful states like China can go without provoking retaliation that could devastate their economies. Nevertheless, because the war in Ukraine is in no small part a war over the universality of that liberal order, its outcome will have significant implications for the future of Turkish, Iranian and Chinese foreign policy too. If Russia succeeds in cleaving off further pieces of Ukrainian territory while muddling through economically, Eurasia's other post-imperial powers could come away emboldened to pursue their own revisionist aspirations anew (Beijing, in particular, is watching closely as it calibrates its approach to Taiwan).

Since energy and financial sanctions are imposing costs on Western economies as well, it is not at all clear that the unity that has characterized the trans-Atlantic response to the invasion of Ukraine will endure. Nor has the Western response gained significant support in much of the Global South, which faces the prospect of hunger due to the collapse of grain exports from Russia and Ukraine. If the West's military support for Ukraine and push for global solidarity fail to dislodge Russia, Washington and its allies will struggle to deter similar challenges to the status quo in the future—whether initiated by Russia or by other neo-imperial powers.

At the same time, the outcome of Russia's invasion will have profound implications for Russia itself. A victorious Russia would be emboldened, under Putin or a successor, to carry out further acts of imperial expansion. Elites in many smaller post-Soviet states, including Moldova, Georgia and Kazakhstan, are deeply worried that they too could be in Moscow's crosshairs. Victory in Ukraine

would reinforce the role of imperial expansion as a source of political legitimacy for a regime that has failed to deliver on promises of stability and prosperity for its people. As Putin discovered after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the glow of conquest is like a drug that eventually wears off, requiring further doses to achieve the same effect.

Should the invasion fail, Putin's hold on power will be weakened, perhaps fatally. A post-Putin Russia may be no more liberal, but it would in the short term at least be much weaker. Centrifugal forces of the kind that overtook the late USSR could once again emerge, above all in the North Caucasus, which—along with Siberian ethnic republics like Buryatia—has suffered disproportionate casualties in Ukraine.⁴⁹ For a new leadership to consolidate power in Moscow, it would likely have to negotiate a new framework for relations with Russia's territorially concentrated ethnic minorities, accelerating the Russian Federation's transformation into a genuine federation. It would also have to swallow genuine Ukrainian (and probably, Belarusian) independence and a weakening or collapse of bodies like the EAEU.

Russia's own elites would then have to face the costs and consequences of the imperial adventures they oversaw.⁵⁰ Defeat in the first truly imperial war of the 21st century could force Russia's leaders and its people into the kind of reckoning that Europe faced during the age of decolonization. Perhaps then, the world would finally see the development of a Russia shorn of its imperial baggage and prepared to live in a truly post-imperial world. If not, then the 21st century is liable to shape up as a new Age of Empire across, and potentially beyond, Eurasia.

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