



Ukraine's Strategic Significance

Ukraine. Russian influence is now increasing in three directions: toward Central Asia, toward the Caucasus, and, inevitably, toward the West, the Baltics, and Eastern Europe. For the next generation, until roughly 2020, Russia's primary concern will be reconstructing the Russian state and reasserting Russian power in the region.

Interestingly, the geopolitical shift is aligning with an economic shift. Vladimir Putin sees Russia less as an industrial power than as an exporter of raw materials, the most important of which is energy (particularly natural gas). Moving to bring the energy industry under state supervision, if not direct control, he is forcing out foreign interests and reorienting the industry toward exports, particularly to Europe. High energy prices have helped stabilize Russia's

economy internally. But he will not confine his efforts to energy alone. He also is seeking to capitalize on Russian agriculture, timber, gold, diamonds, and other commodities. He is transforming Russia from an impoverished disaster into a poor but more productive country. Putin also is giving Russia the tool with which to intimidate Europe: the valve on a natural gas pipeline.

Russia is pressing back along its frontiers. It is deeply focused on Central Asia and will over time find success there, but Russia will have a more difficult time in the even more crucial Caucasus. The Russians do not intend to allow any part of the Russian Federation to break away. As a result, there will be friction, particularly in the next decade, with the United States and other countries in the region as Russia reasserts itself.

But the real flash point, in all likelihood, will be on Russia's western frontier. Belarus will align itself with Russia. Of all the countries in the former Soviet Union, Belarus has had the fewest economic and political reforms and has been the most interested in re-creating some successor to the Soviet Union. Linked in some way to Russia, Belarus will bring Russian power back to the borders of the former Soviet Union.

From the Baltics south to the Romanian border there is a region where borders have historically been uncertain and conflict frequent. In the north, there is a long, narrow plain, stretching from the Pyrenees to St. Petersburg. This is where Europe's greatest wars were fought. This is the path that Napoleon and Hitler took to invade Russia. There are few natural barriers. Therefore, the Russians must push their border west as far as possible to create a buffer. After World War II, they drove into the center of Germany on this plain. Today, they have retreated to the east. They have to return, and move as far west as possible. That means the Baltic states and Poland are, as before, problems Russia has to solve.

Defining the limits of Russian influence will be controversial. The United States—and the countries within the old Soviet sphere—will not want Russia to go too far. The last thing the Baltic states want is to fall under Russian domination again. Neither do the states south of the northern European plain, in the Carpathians. The former Soviet satellites—particularly Poland, Hungary, and Romania—understand that the return of Russian forces to their frontiers would represent a threat to their security. And since these countries are now part of NATO, their interests necessarily affect