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The Only Winner in Ukraine Is China

By Dmitry Trenin

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For a generation, relations between the U.S. and Russia were essentially about history. Since the Cold War's end, Russia was becoming increasingly peripheral to the U.S. and much of the rest of the world, its international importance and power seemingly consigned to the past. That era has now ended.

To be sure, the current conflict between the U.S. and Russia over Ukraine is a mismatch, given the disparity in power between the two sides. Russia is not and cannot even pretend to be a contender for world domination. Unlike the Soviet Union, it is not driven by some universal ideology, does not lead a bloc of states ruled by the same ideology, and has few formal allies — all of which are small. Yet the U.S.-Russian conflict matters to the rest of the world.

Ukraine's fate particularly matters to other countries in Eastern Europe, particularly Moldova and Georgia. Both, like Ukraine, have signed association agreements with the European Union; and both will have to walk a fine line to avoid becoming battleground states between Russia and the West. Similarly, Russia's nominal partners in its Eurasian Union project — Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan — will need to balance carefully between Russia, their nominal "strategic" ally, and the U.S., which holds the keys to the international

political and economic system.

What happens to Ukraine matters to Western and Central Europe, too. As security worries on the continent rise, EU-Russian trade will fall. As a result of U.S. pressure, the EU will eventually buy less gas and oil from Russia, and the Russians will buy fewer manufactured goods from their neighbors. Distrust between Russia and Europe will become pervasive. The idea of a common space from Lisbon to Vladivostok will be buried. Instead, the EU and U.S. will be aligned even more closely, both within a reinvigorated NATO and by means of the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership.

Japan has a stake as well. Its decision to join the U.S.-led sanctions against Russia means foregoing plans to build a solid relationship with the Kremlin to balance China in Asia. The U.S.-Japanese alliance will be reaffirmed, as will Japan's position in that alliance. In a somewhat similar way, South Korea will need to bow before U.S. demands to limit its trade with Russia, potentially eliciting a less cooperative Kremlin stance on the divided Korean Peninsula.

As a result, the U.S.-Russian conflict will probably lead to a strengthening of the U.S. position vis-a-vis its European and Asian allies, and a much less friendly environment for Russia anywhere in Eurasia. Even Russia's nominal allies will have to look over their shoulder to the U.S., and its forays into Latin America and enclaves of influence in the Middle East will be of little importance.

There is only one exception to this pattern of heightened U.S. influence: China. The sharp reduction of Russia's economic ties with advanced countries leaves China as the only major economy outside of the U.S.-led sanction regime. This increases China's significance to Russia, promising to enable the Chinese to gain wider access to Russian energy, other natural resources and military technology.

Chinese support for Russia would be a novelty in world affairs. Many do not view it as a realistic scenario. Russia, after all, would find an alliance with China too heavy to bear, and, whatever their ideology or whoever their leaders, Russians remain European.

That may be true. Yet it is also true that one of the most revered Russian heroes from medieval history, Prince St. Alexander Nevsky, successfully fought Western invaders while remaining loyal to the Mongol khans.

There is no question that Russia will pay a price for its actions in Ukraine. The question for the U.S. and its allies is whether exacting that price will come with a price of its own.

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