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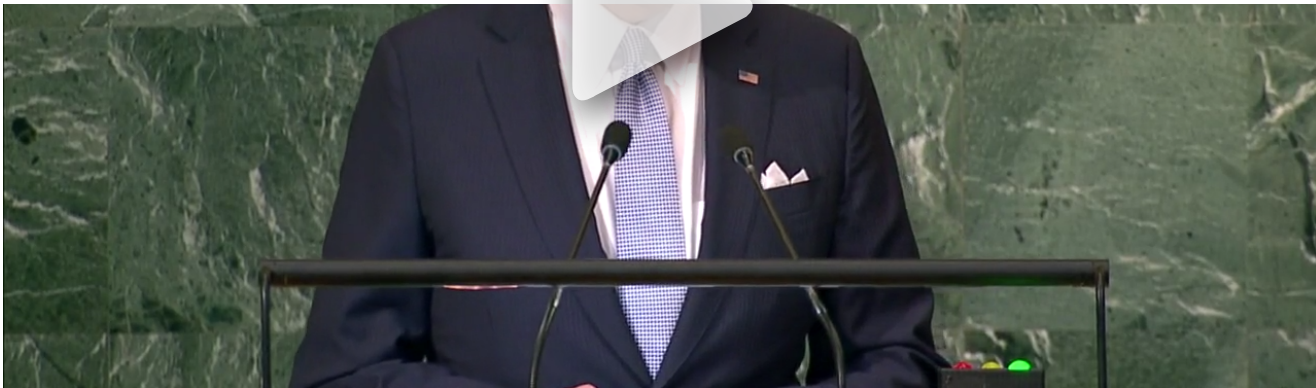
Putin's losses in Asia are bigger than in Ukraine

BY WILLIAM OVERHOLT, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 09/21/22 3:00 PM ET

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While the United States and European Union have focused on limited but hopefully important Russian reverses in Ukraine, a potentially more important setback to imperial Putinism is occurring in Central Asia.

The game in Central Asia is a version of rock-paper-scissors. Russia employs military power, Turkey along with moderate Islam cultural and linguistic affinities, and China a giant

OF TURKIC STATES. ITS INFLUENCE HAS EXPANDED, BUT WITHIN LIMITS CREATED BY TURKEY'S RELATIVELY SMALL ECONOMY AND MILITARY.

Russia has of course been determined to define the region as its rightful legacy from the Soviet empire, like Ukraine unreasonably lost in the Soviet collapse. Russian intervention in Kazakhstan in January 2022 to ensure the victory of a Russia-friendly president was its most decisive move. Russia has benefited from the region's economic dependence and military vulnerability. The region, including Kazakhstan, however, has increasingly resisted Russian efforts at dominance and in the process has emphasized the rights of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Kazakhstan has refused to recognize the "independence" of the two pieces of eastern Ukraine sequestered by Russia in 2014 and, reflecting their own concerns about Russian imperial ambitions, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have stood up for Ukraine's sovereignty.

Turkey's President Erdoğan, aligning with those Central Asians, struck a major diplomatic blow against Russia, denouncing the invasion of Ukraine and saying that Crimea must be returned to its rightful owner. Mild public criticism of Putin by India's Prime Minister Modi, saying this is not a time for war, was just a pinprick, but a pinprick at a vulnerable spot.

China's economic magnet has always been potentially the most powerful post-Soviet force in Central Asia, but China has usually increased its influence without antagonizing its rivals. This has always required delicate balances. Turkey originally denounced Chinese actions in Xinjiang as genocide but was diplomatically persuaded to soften. Sino-Russian rivalries for influence had been papered over by the February 2022 declaration of a partnership without limits. But recent developments have led China to focus the power of its economic magnet on Central Asia. In Africa and South Asia, national debt crises and project deficiencies have created setbacks for China's broader use of its economic magnet, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), leading to a diminished priority for the global BRI in favor of a more concentrated emphasis on Eurasia, especially Central Asia. In addition, China has been friend-shoring by cutting its dependence on supply chains to the West and increasing its investments in Central Asia. Politically, concern over Afghanistan has led China to seek increased Central Asian collaboration.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, although supported strongly by Chinese propaganda, inhibits China's Eurasian ambitions because key Eurasian transport routes, notably the China-Europe Railway Express, possibly China's most important BRI investment, run through Russia and sanctions therefore impair the benefits of Chinese investments.

sovereignty and territorial integrity,” Xi said during a meeting with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, according to a Kazakh government statement. If Xi himself publicly announced this, it would have minimal impact in the aftermath of Xi’s nearly identical commitment to Ukraine. But for Tokayev to publicly emphasize the Chinese assurance shows confidence that, even after Russia’s January intervention to support Tokayev, Kazakhstan can further assert its autonomy.

Just a few years ago, President Tokayev’s quotation of Xi would have been targeted at Western “color revolutions.” Now the primary concern is imperial Putinism.

Sun Tzu would proudly endorse Xi’s subtle intervention: without any concrete deployment of power, indeed with just a single sentence about Kazakh “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity” quoted by someone else, Xi has changed the Central Asian balance in China’s favor. Machiavelli would also nod approval: shift the regional balance by stabbing your unlimited partner in the back.

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These developments have global importance because Putin’s aspirations to reconstruct the Soviet empire are far more extensive in Central Asia than in Europe. The game of rock-paper-scissors continues but the balance has changed. The major Central Asian states now feel greater confidence in asserting Chinese protection against Russian hegemony, even as they continue to use Turkey and Russia to try to prevent Chinese regional hegemony.

Before its invasion of Ukraine, Russia could sustain the fiction of long-term dominance of Central Asia. No longer. Before the invasion of Ukraine, Putin’s priority for the military and for kleptocracy, rather than for building a diversified, competitive economy, condemned Russia to a future as a quarry for China and Germany. Now China can manage its convenient neighborhood quarry with minimal competition.

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