

Between East and West

By Daniel Abebe

Review of CONFLICT IN UKRAINE: The Unwinding of the Post-Cold War Order, by Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer

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At first glance, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine seems like the same old story. Russia, this story goes, is an imperial power, hoping to regain the superpower status it lost at the end of the Cold War. More than twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia still maintains troops in Moldova and routinely threatens to cut off energy supplies as it meddles in Moldovan politics. Just seven years ago, Russia invaded Georgia, ostensibly to protect Russian citizens living there, but also to send a message to its neighbors not to get too close to the West. For the past five years, Russia has pressured Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan to join its Eurasian Economic Union, while heavily criticizing Georgia, Ukraine, and other post-Soviet states for pursuing closer relationships with the European Union. And most recently, Russia annexed Crimea and armed separatists in eastern Ukraine in the name of protecting Russians abroad. Like Imperial Russia and Soviet-Russia before it, modern Russia is using its economic and military power to reassert control over its traditional sphere of influence.

But international politics is rarely that simple. Rajon Menon and Eugene Rumer complicate the conventional story by providing a thoughtful analysis of the key political, economic, and historical factors that eventually led to the current rupture in Russian-Ukrainian relations. Menon, a Professor of Political Science at CUNY, and Rumer, a Director at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, point out that western Ukraine is a bastion of generally pro-European, ethnic Ukrainians while eastern Ukraine – the Donbas – is the home of many ethnic Russians who share cultural and linguistic affinities with Russia. This crucial division, combined with Ukrainian dependence on EU loans and Russian energy and the persistence of a deeply corrupt political structure, makes maintaining stability in Ukraine difficult, even in the best of times.

As the authors show, the current crisis grows in part out of Ukraine's vacillation between an EU that doesn't really want it as a member, and an expansionist Russia on whom it doesn't want to depend. This tension came to a head in then-President Victor Yanukovich's abrupt decision to reject the EU's Association Agreement and Deep Comprehensive Free Trade Area in exchange for over \$15 billion in aid, loans, energy, and credits from Russia, triggering the current crisis.

What makes Menon and Rumer's contribution valuable is that it situates the crisis in both the broader context of the relationship between Europe, the United States, and Russia, and the structure of the post-Cold War order. Rather than blaming Russia for causing the crisis – as many in the popular press have – Menon and Rumer challenge the

simplistic view that Russia is the “singular villain” in the conflict. They describe how the EU’s and NATO’s expansion, both economically and militarily, threatens Russian interests in its traditional sphere of influence and encourages Russian resistance to the West’s encroachment. As they put it, “Imagine what the American reaction would have been had the Soviet Union won the Cold War, incorporated Canada and Mexico and the other Central American states into the Warsaw Pact, and declared that Washington had no cause to worry, its historic vital interest in these places notwithstanding.”

Moreover, once the crisis in Ukraine began, the EU and NATO struggled to respond to Russia as intra-organizational divisions among its members became apparent. Great Britain, France, and Germany were hesitant to act against Russia, as the English benefit from Russian investment in their financial and real estate markets, the French rely on Russian purchases of French armaments, and the Germans depend on Russian oil and natural gas supplies. At the same time, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, and other former Eastern Bloc members of the EU were not only more supportive of sanctions against Russia but also concerned about Russian expansionism. Finally, the United States had little economic leverage over Russia – U.S./Russian trade is minimal – and no one was interested in a military confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. The conflicting national interests of the United States, the EU, and NATO, and the lack of an overarching, unifying threat from Russia resulted in the failure of the West to develop a coherent framework for responding to Russian aggression.

This failure, Menon and Rumer argue, results from the collapse of the Cold War security architecture that maintained stability between EU, the United States, and NATO on one side, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact on the other. EU enlargement and NATO expansion in particular, by including former Warsaw Pact countries, began to encroach on Russia’s “privileged interests” in its near periphery without a clear strategic justification and might well have destabilized the evolving relationship between the West and Russia in the post-Cold War world. Although NATO expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s did not coincide with an increase in military spending by Germany, France, Spain, and Great Britain, for Russia it was a provocative attempt by NATO to move closer to Russia’s doorstep and further humiliate a fallen world power. As Menon and Rumer suggest, the conflict in Ukraine is arguably a symptom of the lack of a shared conception of the post-Cold War security architecture between Europe, the United States, and Russia that, if unresolved, only invites further economic and security competition in the post-Soviet states.

After evaluating the strategic interests of the EU, Russia, and Ukraine, Menon and Rumer offer some sensible predictions on the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine. They argue that the EU will encounter difficulties in maintaining unity on sanctions given its dependence on Russian energy and that NATO’s powerful European members will likely push for rapprochement with Russia. In the short term, Russia will likely pivot to China, both out of necessity and shared interests, but it has economic and geopolitical interests in re-engaging Europe. If so, Ukraine will have to manage its relationship with Russia alone. Menon and Rumer are skeptical that the conflict in Ukraine will result in a full-scale Russian invasion or even the occupation of eastern Ukraine. Rather, they suggest that the conflict will remain “frozen,” as the EU, Russia, and the United States try to develop a new political and security framework.

Overall, *Conflict in Ukraine* is a succinct primer on a topical and important issue, useful to both foreign policy practitioners and those wanting an introduction to Russia-Ukraine relations within the context of international politics. The argument itself is straightforward but Menon and Rumer's evenhanded description and assessment of the EU's, Ukraine's and, most important, Russia's strategic interests are perhaps the main contributions.

While Menon and Rumer do well in addressing the "context, causes, and consequences" of the conflict, they do leave a few questions unanswered. First, they never address whether Ukraine could have done anything to avoid a conflict with Russia. Sure, Ukraine certainly made several strategic errors, ranging from a failure to clean up a kleptocratic political establishment, an inability to adopt internal reforms, and seemingly constant equivocation in its relationship with the EU and Russia, but Menon and Rumer seem to suggest that conflict, of some kind, was almost inevitable. This may seem to be the case with the benefit of hindsight, but if it was inevitable, why did no one see it coming? The authors give too little weight to historical contingency.

Second, had the EU and NATO been more circumspect in expanding into Russia's periphery, would Russia have felt less threatened and, by extension, would it have been less likely to meddle in the politics of various post-Soviet states? Or would Russia have simply moved more quickly into a power vacuum? Menon and Rumer leave unanswered what they think Russia's underlying motives were. Was Russia reasonably addressing threats to its security and economic well-being, or seeking any excuse to enhance its power?

Finally, the authors describe the historical contingencies that resulted in Ukrainians and a significant percentage of ethnic Russians living in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. One might view the past as the problem, namely that the disjuncture between the nation and the state is at the root of the conflict in Ukraine, and internal divisions between Ukrainians and Russians in Ukraine will sometimes trigger larger conflagrations. If so, should we be concerned that conflict between Russia and the post-Soviet states – many with substantial populations of ethnic Russians – will become the norm?

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