

The (Russian) Empire Strikes Back

by [John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[John Hannah \(/experts/john-hannah\)](#)

John Hannah is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.



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The hand-wringing that accompanied Boris Yeltsin's crushing of the neo-fascist uprising in Moscow last month deflected attention from an issue that really should keep U.S. policy-makers awake nights: Russia's attempt to resurrect an exclusive sphere of influence across the former Soviet Union.

Like so many dominoes, the former Soviet republics are succumbing to Moscow's reassertion of imperial prerogatives.

The process is now hurtling toward its logical conclusion, with Moscow's sights set on Ukraine -- 52 million people strategically situated in the heart of Central Europe.

Mr. Yeltsin had many differences with his former vice-president, Aleksandr Rutskoi. But a conviction that Russia should exercise hegemony over its former empire was not one of them.

True, the two men had vastly opposing strategies. Mr. Rutskoi wanted to challenge the West by asserting Russia's imperium through direct military confrontation. He would have wiped out all vestiges of the new states' independence and re-established the Soviet Union's borders.

In contrast, Mr. Yeltsin has sought to safeguard Russia's relations with the West by more subtle muscle-flexing. Economic blackmail and "rogue" army units have been his weapons to coerce the former republics into the Moscow-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

He seems willing to allow Russia's neighbours to retain the trappings of sovereignty, provided Moscow has the final say on important policy questions.

Recent events in Georgia provide a textbook case of this strategy. The devastating defeat inflicted on Georgian troops in September by Abkhazian rebels would have been impossible without support from Russia's army.

Subsequently, the Georgian leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, was forced to beg Mr. Yeltsin for membership in the CIS.

The endgame is obvious: a bilateral treaty providing Russia's military with permanent bases in Georgia, including control over its strategic Black Sea coast. In short, Georgia's re-integration into Russia's security orbit involves about as much mutual consent as a Mafia shakedown.

Russia had cowed its independence-minded neighbours with tacit threats of dismemberment before. In the former republics of Moldova and Azerbaijan, an undeniable pattern has emerged.

Secessionist rebels, abetted by rogue Russian forces, score impressive military successes. Miraculously, when these states relent and agree to join the CIS, Russia's ability to impose a lasting ceasefire soars.

All this, however, has been a prelude to the final act: Ukraine. Moscow seeks to short-circuit its largest neighbour's drive for independence.

Economically, it has exacerbated Ukraine's internal crisis by withholding vital energy supplies. Politically, it has waged a successful diplomatic campaign to isolate Kiev internationally in a dispute over former Soviet nuclear weapons.

On the brink of chaos, Ukraine has already made major concessions to Moscow. An original, though reluctant, member of the CIS, it has agreed to tighter economic co-ordination within the commonwealth and has surrendered the entire Black Sea Fleet to the Russian navy.

Now, special Russian access to Ukraine's Black Sea ports and Ukraine's acceptance of the Russian-dominated CIS security treaty seem only a matter of time.

With Ukraine's resubjugation, Russia - Mr. Yeltsin's democratic Russia -- will have gone far toward reconstituting its old empire.

In so doing, it will have decisively, and unilaterally, determined the geo-strategic alignment of post-Cold War Europe. Is the West paying attention? ❖

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