"Eurasia" is a term with many meanings. It can refer to the combined landmass of Europe and Asia, or it can refer to states such as Turkey that straddle both continents. But as a geopolitical concept, Eurasia is a term that more effectively designates the area occupied by Russia and the countries of the former Soviet Union. Eurasia can thus be considered a geographic space as well as a political and culture space distinct from the two continents it separates.

Not Quite 'European'

This political distinction is one that was born a millennium ago with the emergence of Kievan Rus, the Slavic precursor to the modern Russian state. Founded in Eastern Europe in the ninth century in what is now Ukraine, Kievan Rus was among medieval Europe's largest states, encompassing territory from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. Its adoption of Orthodox Christianity as a state religion at the end of the 10th century distinguished it from the Catholic states of Western Europe, but it was nonetheless a manifestly European power.

However, Kievan Rus was overrun by the Mongols in the mid-13th century. The center of power of the eastern Slavs moved from Kiev to Moscow, a city that would gain prominence just as Kiev was incorporated by the Catholic powers of Poland and Lithuania. Moscow became the center of the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, which, beginning in the 14th and 15th centuries, grew in strength and territory as an Orthodox and Slavic power in Eastern Europe.

As Western European powers began to colonize overseas territories in the 16th century, Russia also began to expand beyond the reaches of Europe. Under its first czar, Ivan IV, Russia entered Siberia and, in doing so, became a truly transcontinental Eurasian power for the first time in its history. Though Russia only sparsely settled Siberia at first, its forays into that area effectively brought rule to Asia, subjugating the same Asiatic elements that had subjugated the Eastern Slavs hundreds of years earlier.

Russia continued to expand into Asia. It gradually but systematically incorporated the Caucasus and Central Asia into its empire, which brought it into contact and conflict with Muslim and Asiatic powers such as the Ottomans and Persians. Meanwhile, Russia expanded its empire westward into Europe, clashing with European powers such as Poland, Sweden and Austria over territory in Eastern and Central Europe and raising Russia to the level of Europe's strongest powers by the 18th and 19th centuries.
But Russia was still not quite "European." It held immense Asian territories, which were contiguous to mainland Russia and brought peoples and cultures into the Russian state that were not European. As an Orthodox empire, it differed religiously from its Catholic and Protestant counterparts. But there were also political and economic differences. The administrative and scientific advances that came with Europe's Enlightenment were slow to reach Russia, as were the technological advances that facilitated industrialization and the creation of modern nation-states in Europe. This widened the gap between Russia and Europe and, along with Russia's military weaknesses and overreach in both Europe and Asia, brought about the demise of czarist Russia in 1917.

The Soviet Union, which eventually replaced the Russian Empire, further attested to Russia's otherness. The ideology and internal political structure of the Russian state changed dramatically when Moscow adopted communism and socialism, yet the state continued to encompass most of the European and Asian territories that the Russian Empire had. World War II pulled the Soviets geographically deeper into Europe, but the ideological divide between communist Eastern Europe and capitalist Western Europe — firmly cemented as the Berlin Wall — pushed Russia politically away from Europe.

The Soviet collapse and the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s brought with it talk of Russia's final incorporation into Europe. Indeed, its inclusion seemed possible; Moscow had lost its Eurasian empire and the Russian Federation initially embraced democracy and capitalism with the West's assistance. But the transition proved so chaotic and painful for Russia that within a decade the state began to recentralize as Boris Yeltsin left office and Vladimir Putin entered it. The 1990s, celebrated as a golden age of economic growth and democracy in the United States and Western Europe, were considered catastrophic by Russian leaders and by much of the public. Russia spent the next 10 years recovering from the previous 10 years, and the state participated more actively in economic affairs and consolidated its political power under Putin. Moscow also sought to recover its lost influence in the former Soviet periphery, an effort that once again meant reaching into the Eurasian borderlands held so long ago by the Soviet and Tsarist Russian empires.

**Conflicting Imperatives**

From the mid-2000s until 2014, Russia gradually built itself up to Eurasian prominence. It was internally stable, thanks to strong economic growth from high energy prices and a centralized political regime. Russia also launched a new integration project known as the Customs Union, which eventually transformed into the Eurasian Economic Union and comprised former Soviet states in Europe and Asia, including Belarus and Kazakhstan. Moscow had a strong position in familiar grounds in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

But Russia's otherness from Europe could not be suppressed. Moscow saw in its vision for Eurasia the inclusion of Ukraine, the progenitor of Russian power. But that country would not capitulate to Russia, as demonstrated by the 2014 Euromaidan movement. The revolution began as a rejection of Ukraine's integration with Russia, and it ended when Ukrainians replaced their
government with one that was friendlier toward the West. In response, Russia annexed Crimea and abetted a pro-Russia separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine, effectively bringing those parts of Ukraine into the realm of Eurasia. Kiev and its Western allies fought back, so Russia has been unable to entirely place Ukraine within its Eurasia alliance structure.

Consequently, relations between Russia and Europe are as cool now as they were during the Cold War. The United States and European Union have isolated Russia with economic sanctions and have bolstered political ties with countries such as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which are located in Russia's periphery but whose governments nonetheless want to be closer to Europe. NATO has built up its military presence in the Baltics and Central Europe, while the European Union has courted countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan to serve as alternative energy exporters to Russia. All of these efforts were made to undermine the Eurasian power status that Russia has been trying to re-establish. For its part, Russia has tried to counter the expansion of European and American influence into what it considers its sphere of influence. These are the conflicting imperatives that frame the current standoff between Russia and the West.

**A Matter of Geography**

Ultimately, the distinction between Russia and Europe is less a matter of ideology than it is of geography. True, the relationship between the two has varied greatly throughout the centuries; Soviet Russia, for example, allied with the United Kingdom and France against Nazi Germany, only to become NATO's primary adversary. But even though Russia has changed ideologically and politically throughout its existence, the geographic areas into which it has expanded (or has wanted to expand) have not changed. Because Russia has no real physical barriers against Europe or Asia, these areas — the European borderlands of Eastern and Central Europe, the Asian borderlands of the Caucasus, Central Asia and Siberia — are the spaces it naturally must fill when it is strong and abandon when it is weak.

Russia now finds itself in a position of vulnerability, thanks in part to its standoff with the West, and that standoff shows no sign of abating. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that Russia has begun to enhance its ties with Asia. Indeed, Russia's links with East Asia, particularly with China, in areas such as energy, trade and finance are on the rise. Moscow's relationship with Beijing, whether in the form of security arrangements or joint economic groupings, has accordingly become much more important. In a way, Russia is rediscovering, or at least placing greater emphasis on, the Asian axis of its Eurasian construct.

That does not mean Russia can fully turn away from Europe. There are still too many things that bind Russia to Europe and too many European characteristics apparent in Russian society for that to happen. But regardless of how the current standoff with the West ends, or how well the pivot to East Asia succeeds, it is Russia's place — partly in Europe and partly in Asia, but never fully in either — that will shape its distinctly Eurasian identity.