

Chapter 3

Russia's Classical Notion of Great Power and Waning "Sphere of Influence"

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The leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Russia, and Tajikistan at their meeting in Armenia's capital Yerevan, November 23, 2022 (TASS/Kyodo)

RUSSIA'S LONGING for great power status has been a key subject of the discourse on Russia.¹ Though not large in terms of economic power (an aspect routinely emphasized in the modern era), it can appear to wield "great power-like influence" with its "great power consciousness" and use of force. This chapter discusses how Russia envisions "great power-ness" and "great power competition" and its actions. Through analyzing its rhetoric and actual behavior, the discussion focuses on the core goals of Russia's idea of great power: to unilaterally exercise power in the post-Soviet space, which Moscow views as its sphere of influence; and to get other great powers to recognize this sphere of influence.

In academic research, Hedley Bull, for example, identified "great powers" as one of the institutions that shape the international order, arguing that great powers unilaterally exercise power in their spheres of influence and recognize each other.² This seems to align with the behavior of modern Russia to some extent. However, outside Russian borders in Europe, Western countries do not recognize rights of Russia that extend beyond the sovereignty of other countries. The 14 countries other than Russia that were inside the Soviet Union have been independent for 30 years. They have maintained their distance with Moscow based on their respective circumstances and have refused total subordination. In other words, Russia has already lost the classical imperial-like rights that it wishes for in its sphere of influence, and such rights are inconsistent with contemporary great power politics. Nevertheless, its desire to protect what it regards as its own rights causes a sense of threat to Russia, creating a serious contradiction.

Even against this backdrop, Vladimir Putin's administration set itself the goals of exercising unilateral power in the post-Soviet space and achieving Western recognition of Russian influence. Moscow has sought to achieve these goals in three principal ways: enhancing national power; leveraging diplomatic and economic means to coordinate interests; and taking coercive measures to cause damage to its opponents. While initially employing all three ways to pursue its interests, Russia has increasingly relied on coercive measures after the first two failed to produce the desired results. This has created the cycle of triggering its opponents' hostility, which in turn exacerbates Russian dissatisfaction with not achieving its goals, leading Moscow to take further coercive measures. This chapter begins by outlining Russia's idea of great power politics, then explains the breakdown of Russia's relations with Ukraine and Western countries, and lastly, discusses Russia's relations with great powers in the context of the U.S.-China competition.

Russia's Great Power Consciousness

The Dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Incomplete Collapse of the "Russian Consciousness"

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the leader of the Soviet Union and launched *perestroika* (restructuring). By promoting the policy of increasing *glasnost* (transparency), calls for self-determination and democratization grew louder and prompted ethnic conflicts. Within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, a faction attempted a coup d'état to overthrow Gorbachev and keep the union together. Boris Yeltsin of Russia opposed the coup and gained political power. He declared the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) with Ukraine and Belarus, and the three countries became independent, leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In other words, it was Russia that actively created other independent states.

In 1992, the respective sovereign states fully initiated their nation-building process. Many of the newly formed sovereign states focused on integrating populations living within their borders and forming governments and institutions. Russia was alone in perceiving that it had responsibilities in the post-Soviet space beyond its borders. Given that it succeeded to the legal status of the Soviet Union, Russia could have believed that it had rights and obligations to integrate this space and to the facilities that remained there. Moreover, Russians struggled to instantly view people of Russian descent as complete foreigners. There was still the sense that they should be protected as part of "us."³ Without a "Republic of Russia" serving as a motherland in the Soviet Union, nor anything to indicate who constituted "Russians" outside of the union, it was difficult to define who was "Russian" in the hastily established smaller Russian Federation.

For Russia, it meant it had to embark on a tough challenge: regaining the integrated space it had given up. Russia referred to the former Soviet republics as "near abroad" and made an ambiguous distinction between them and countries outside the post-Soviet space. In the 1990s, hardliners in Russia advocated using military means to regain this space. However, this was unfeasible, and the mainstream idea became to leverage traditional economic ties to make integration real and gain influence. In this vein, the Putin administration, when it first came into power in 2000, adopted a realistic approach of suppressing hardline arguments and developing relations with both the former Soviet republics and Western countries to enhance Russia's national power.⁴

However, countries in the post-Soviet space began to distance themselves

from Russia, leading the Putin administration to exert pressure repeatedly to stop it. The Russian people consider Ukraine, which will be discussed later, as a country where Russians of the same ethnic group and brotherly Ukrainian people live, and as a region that played an important role in the history of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This made Ukraine's distancing from Russia particularly unfathomable to accept.

Relationship with the West: Cooperation and Confrontation

Another dimension of Russia's great power-like actions is its relationships with other great powers that should be balanced. In this context, relations with Western countries had a dual meaning. One was to gain great power capabilities by enhancing people's lives and national power through Western-style social and economic development. The other was to maintain Russia's status as a great power by rejecting Western-style political pressure. In the 1990s, Russia enthusiastically pursued Western-style reforms of the former. However, when Western countries did not accord suitable respect to Russia, its dissatisfaction mounted. Russia became increasingly determined to resist Western-style political pressure of the latter and attached importance to its relations with Asian countries. After Putin took office in 2000, the president sought to balance these relationships and enhanced national power by putting social and economic development on track, including stabilizing business relations with Western countries.

In his April 2005 annual address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin discussed the major ideological challenges in developing Russia.⁵ He famously stated that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major geopolitical disaster," and mentioned the compatriots who were left outside Russian territory and the social chaos that ensued. Nevertheless, his aim was to highlight not Russia's intention to rectify the mistake of the Soviet collapse, but rather, the Russian society's implementation of reforms in quest of the values of freedom and democracy even in difficult times. President Putin rejected the notion that Russians do not need freedom. He argued that, over the past three centuries, Russia, as a European nation, along with other European countries, overcame hardships in achieving freedom, human rights, justice, and democracy as its own values. He urged that the countries in the post-Soviet space newly admitted to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) respect the rights of Russian minorities. While President Putin raised the serious issues caused by the Soviet collapse, he treated them as one of many challenges. Without emphasizing pressure or danger from the West, he signaled that Russia would develop together with Western countries. The 60th anniversary of the

victory over Germany in May 2005 served as, in a sense, an opportunity to gain recognition as a great power amid a cooperative atmosphere, inviting leaders or equivalent representatives from permanent members of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, the major victors of World War II, as well as from Germany and Japan, the defeated nations.

However, as time passed, dissatisfaction grew with Russia's insufficient influence in the post-Soviet space and with Western countries' underestimation of Russia on international affairs. As a result, the Putin administration began to increasingly dispute the West's confrontational than cooperative stance toward Russia. By then, Moscow had already expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that its arguments were not adequately respected on such issues as the Kosovo War in 1999 and the Iraq War in 2003. In 2007, Russia stepped up its confrontational approach toward Western countries. At the Munich Security Conference in February of that year, President Putin criticized NATO for allowing members to build up their missile defense capabilities without taking Russia's concerns into account. In December, Moscow took tangible action in the form of suspending the implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

During this time, Russia's main goal was not confrontation with the West. It placed importance on the dialogue framework with NATO, setting as a higher goal earning the recognition of Western countries and realizing a stable relationship. Even when criticizing NATO, Russia sought to be a useful partner, such as by continuing the security cooperation in Afghanistan while strongly asserting individual issues, and maintained an overall diplomatic posture that aspired for recognition with an honorable standing.

Neo-Eurasianism and "Multipolarization of the World"

As Russia asserted its sphere of influence and deepened confrontation with Western countries, "neo-Eurasianism" gained traction. "Eurasianism" has origins in Russian emigrants in the 1920s who contended that Russia has not only European but also Asian heritage. In the 1990s, this ideology backed Russia's political insistence to turn the post-Soviet space into a Russia-led sphere of civilization. This version of the ideology is known as "neo-Eurasianism."⁶ It proclaims that Russia does not need to accept the values espoused by Western countries, and that it ought to pursue democracy and market economy suited to the "uniqueness of Eurasia" and increase affinity with Asian countries. With "Eurasia" as a keyword, the argument grew stronger that Russia should take the lead in integrating the post-Soviet space, a special space consisting of countries with a common historical legacy. Through the years, Russia has promoted paradigms for enhancing

integration with post-Soviet space countries with which it has strong ties.

Furthermore, contemporary Russia's neo-Eurasianism became a driving force in envisioning and promoting the "multipolarization of the world," not limited to the post-Soviet space. Neo-Eurasianism aligns with the argument that Western countries are not the only advanced leading nations, that multiple leading nations are growing based on their own civilization and are shaping the international order in a more equal manner, with Russia as one of the nations demonstrating its power. In July 2008, Russia released the "Foreign Policy Concept," which presented the view that economic growth centers will be distributed throughout the world in a more equal manner and "multipolarization" will advance.⁷

Such "multipolarization" will facilitate Russia's projection of itself as a great power, alongside other non-Western great powers, even if it does not conform to Western standards. The leading emerging nations are non-Western countries, many of which are in Asia. This is reconcilable with the pro-Asian approach emphasized by Russia's neo-Eurasianism. One of the paradigms expected to promote "multipolarization" in coordination with Asian countries is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was established in 2001 with Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, China, and Russia as its members. These countries give greater priority to stable governance under national sovereignty than to liberal democracy under Western standards, and often concurred on affirming authoritarian rule while opposing separatism and extremism.

In terms of great power relationships through "multipolarization," Russia has emphasized its relationships with China and India in particular. China is a great power which can exert influence in the world and compete with the United States, while India is a leading nation which has tensions with China but at times takes a different position from the United States'. A paradigm that includes these three countries and is in favor of "multipolarization" is BRICS, a group of five emerging economies that has held summits since the 2009 summit in Russia. As of late 2022, its members are Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The BRICS countries converge on reflecting the interests of emerging countries in international affairs, which have been led by Western countries. They are also promoting development finance cooperation, including the establishment of the New Development Bank (NDB). As the above shows, Russia has sought to reinforce its great power status by leveraging cooperation with countries that are easy to work with under "multipolarization."

Russia-U.S. Relations and the Devastating Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine

Contradictions in the Post-Soviet Space and Contradictions with Western Countries

Russia's goal was to expand its influence in the post-Soviet space and achieve a favorable status that is recognized by the West. However, the gap between ideal and reality widened. After NATO launched the accession process in 1999 for such countries as Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, President Putin signed the Rome Declaration in May 2002, with Russia and NATO agreeing to maintain a non-hostile relationship at the NATO-Russia Council. In 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania joined NATO. While Russia expressed dissatisfaction, its relationship with NATO remained stable. Even though the land that was formerly part of the Soviet Union between Russia's enclave of Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg acceded to NATO and deployment of troops became possible, Russia did not view it as a security threat that put its survival at stake.

As for Ukraine, President Putin had shown enthusiasm for Russia-led integration of Ukraine from the beginning of his presidency. In the 2004 presidential election, President Leonid Kuchma of Ukraine supported candidate Viktor Yanukovich as his successor. However, an anti-government movement protested that Yanukovich's election was fraudulent. Russia's Putin administration had sent political operatives to support Yanukovich's victory, and urged President Kuchma to be tough on the opposition movement. Yet, Kuchma did not take coercive measures. As a result of a re-vote, Yanukovich was defeated, and Viktor Yushchenko was elected. This was an unexpected failure for the Putin administration, which construed it as an outcome of greater Western manipulation.⁸ After assuming office, President Yushchenko took actions that encouraged strong anti-Russian nationalism. In 2006, Russia used coercive measures to temporarily stop the supply of gas to Ukraine at a preferential price, dealing a blow to the Ukrainian administration.

Later, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007, President Putin criticized NATO's expanding membership and strengthening of missile defense. The issues were twofold. First, they will result in more hostile forces in areas that Russia considers as its sphere of influence. Second, when conflicts arise over it, they will constrain Russia's military destructive power with counterstrike capability. Although the NATO Bucharest Summit in April 2008 stopped shy of releasing a detailed roadmap for the accession of Ukraine and Georgia, it presented a framework for their future accession.

Furthermore, Russia began to take actions that involve the use of force. In August 2008, a conflict resurged in South Ossetia, where an ethnic conflict (1991–92) had occurred in Georgian territory. In response, Russia, which had mediated a ceasefire and deployed peacekeeping forces in 1992, intervened militarily. France facilitated negotiations as a mediator, and a ceasefire was established after five days of fighting. This solidified the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia within Georgian territory. Since then, NATO, to avoid Russia's use of force, has not admitted Georgia as a member.

By using limited force in areas it considers to be its sphere of influence, Russia stopped Western expansion into the region while maintaining relations with Western countries. When Barack Obama became the U.S. president in 2009, he chose to "reset" and stabilize relations with Russia, breaking away from the interventionist and expansionist policies of previous administrations. This marked a Russian success in the sense of forcing its will on the West and incentivized Moscow to rely on coercive means. On the other hand, it was unable to stop the momentum for separation from Russia and blamed the West's manipulation, and ultimately, failed to increase integration in the post-Soviet space.⁹

In Ukraine, the Yushchenko administration floundered, and Yanukovich, who was expected to stabilize relations with Russia, won the 2010 presidential election. He extended the stationing of Russia's Black Sea Fleet in exchange for preferential gas supplies, while also deepening Ukraine-NATO cooperation and advancing relations with the EU.

In 2011, the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East, triggering anti-government protests that overthrew some regimes while causing civil wars or divisions in other countries. Furthermore, protest movements against Putin's return to the presidency spread across Russia from 2011 to 2012. The Putin administration denied these internal factors, and interpreted that the West was intentionally intervening to establish an anti-Russian government (the term "color revolution," as these movements were called, was even used by China to criticize such protests). In Russia, protesters were labeled as traitors who were incited by foreign powers and were called "foreign agents." The administration also regulated information to contain street protests. Overall, there was a pervading sense that Russia was under Western pressure.

In 2013, as Ukraine's Yanukovich administration proceeded to conclude an association agreement with the EU, Russia's Putin administration became more concerned that Ukraine would be unable to participate in their Eurasian integration plan. Urged to abandon EU membership, President Yanukovich postponed the agreement signing in November 2013. People who had expected internal reforms in line with the EU's standards took to

the streets, calling for the conclusion of the agreement and Yanukovich's resignation. Even under such circumstances, at a briefing for foreign military attaches held in December, Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov of Russia expressed his country's wish to work with NATO to achieve stability in the Central Asian region, after the scheduled end of NATO's Afghanistan mission in the following year. NATO's threat to Russia was not imminent.

The 2014 Ukraine Operation and Subversion of the West

In January 2014, clashes intensified between anti-government protesters and suppression forces in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. Despite Russia and the EU's peace mediation in February, President Yanukovich fled Kyiv a day after signing a peace accord, and a pro-Western government was established. Subsequently, protests against pro-Western central governments erupted in the Crimean Peninsula, Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Odessa, and other areas. In the Crimean Peninsula, Sergei Aksyonov became prime minister of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea with support from Russian forces. Through a "referendum" in March, his political group indicated Crimea was in favor of becoming a part of Russia. Then Russia unilaterally claimed the Crimean Peninsula as Russian territory under the pretext of fulfilling Crimea's wish. In April, armed conflicts broke out in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, and Russia continued to provide support to sustain them. However, it could not gain control over all of both oblasts or much of the southeastern part of Ukraine, and the unrest in Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Odessa drew to a close.

Additionally, Russia heightened tensions in neighboring areas outside of Ukraine, particularly in the Baltic Sea. It presented NATO members and neighboring countries, such as Sweden and Finland, with the risk of dangerous military clashes. The West had no tolerance for Russia's actions and imposed economic sanctions. Russia may have thus believed that the leveling up of hostile actions was necessary and justifiable.

Moscow did not tolerate rebellions in areas it viewed as its sphere of influence. Its aim at this time was to elevate the level of fighting and increase pressure on Western countries, while also leaving room for trade and mutual recognition between the great powers. Russia's continued backing of separatist regions within Ukrainian territory made the integration and NATO membership of Ukraine unrealistic for the foreseeable future. While Western countries were aware of Russia's illegal occupation and intervention in the Crimean Peninsula and the eastern region of Donbas in Ukraine, they avoided escalating the conflict with Russia to a high-risk level, such as to full-frontal clashes or to conflicts that threaten Russia's internal security. Rather,

the West supported a diplomatic approach to achieve stability through reconciliation with Russia.

Assuming President Putin's ambition was to integrate Ukraine into Russia's sphere of influence, it was Putin himself who shut the door on that possibility. In the face of territorial aggression, political forces in Ukraine that opposed Russia formed the foundations of the government. Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected to the presidency in May 2019 with a campaign promise to hold dialogues with President Putin and ease tensions with Russia. However, when concessions did not yield results, he responded to domestic public opinion and shifted to a confrontational approach against Russia.¹⁰ Ukraine deepened ties with Western countries and, with the cooperation of NATO, strengthened military training and command. Russia turned the core of Ukraine into its adversary and held parts of southeastern Ukraine. Consequently, Crimea became dependent on Kherson oblast for water and electricity, and Russia had to deal with the occupation of the difficult-to-sustain Donetsk region. The cost of an option of abandoning negotiated political integration and using force began increasing in 2014.

As successful integration of Ukraine became more uncertain, Russia may have decided to leave it for the future and wait for Ukraine to exhaust itself. In the meantime, Russia's relations with the West deteriorated, and this had ramifications for its economic relations with Western countries and Ukraine. Nonetheless, even under economic sanctions, Russia managed to sustain its major industrial and economic activities. To the extent that it did not escalate into a major conflict, Moscow continued to confront and provoke Western countries and seek their recognition of Russia's claims.

In September 2015, Russia began military operations in Syria to support the Assad regime, aiming to prevent both its collapse and a successful government overthrow by a civil movement. At the same time, Russia's motive was to achieve alignment with the West by championing "united front on international terror." Furthermore, in a June 2020 opinion article, President Putin emphasized the role played by the Soviet Union in defeating Nazi Germany. While condemning Poland for considering the Soviet Union as an evil power on par with the Nazis, he called for a meeting among the five victorious powers in World War II to reaffirm the role of the Soviet Union.¹¹ As this reveals, while continuing with the hardline actions and arguments, Putin maintained an ideal of great power cooperation rather than confrontation.

Yet, as the hostile relationship with Western countries continued, Russia waged cyberattacks on Ukraine, as well as operations to influence public opinion during the U.S. and French elections. These actions were not seen prior to 2013. Amidst the already deepening hostility, Russia appeared to be

using coercive means to strike at its opponents, believing that being feared by opponents was beneficial for Russia, even if, as a result, it is viewed as an enemy.

Russia's aggressive actions proceeded and expanded but with certain constraints. The means that Russia used at this time were generally summed as "hybrid warfare" by Western countries. It has been roughly described as a combination of military operations and other means to achieve war objectives.¹² Hybrid warfare from 2014 to 2021 is characterized by the use of diverse means, as well as instruments that are below the threshold of conventional war. If a conventional war were to occur normally, the targeted state and its partners would have to take a united response, which increases solidarity. But if the conflict is in short of a conventional war, the fear of escalating the conflict into a conventional one prevents the responding side from using force with firm resolve and solidarity. From this reasoning, some states cannot intervene in the unconventional conflict, making it difficult to form a united opposition.

Russia appeared to be using only coercive means that would not trigger a major conflict like those mentioned above. Andrey Kortunov of the Russian International Affairs Council, a think tank close to the government, warned about worsening balance of military and diplomatic means.¹³ As his statement suggests, while Russia succeeded in inflicting damages through coercive means, it made it difficult to conduct diplomacy that coordinates and increases its own interests.

Full-scale Invasion of Ukraine and Deteriorating Strategic Environment

Taking office in January 2021, President Joseph Biden agreed to an unconditional extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) with Russia. From March to April, Russia deployed units near Ukraine and heightened tension. Upon President Biden's proposal, a U.S.-Russia summit meeting was held in June in Geneva. The two leaders held a friendly conversation, and the meeting ended with both sides acknowledging their differences. In other words, at this point, Russia did not claim to be under noticeable threat from the United States. In fact, President Putin may have judged that the Biden administration would overlook even Russian actions that were beyond the level previously subject to U.S. warning.

In July, President Putin published an essay on the Kremlin's website titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians."¹⁴ He argued that the creation of Ukraine as an independent nation separate from Russia was a mistake made in the past, and that Ukraine will prosper only in unity with

Russia. While many Russians likely support this view, President Putin did not elaborate on what was urgent and dangerous and how it could be solved. What is certain is that the Putin administration expressed dissatisfaction with the situation in Ukraine not unfolding in the way it had hoped.

In the same month, the 2021 version of the *National Security Strategy* was released in its first revision since 2015. It positions Russia as "one of the influential centers of the contemporary world," and identifies the security challenge as preserving its status as a great power independent of the influence of Western countries.¹⁵ The document also mentions other challenges, including preventing the erosion of the traditional historical memory of the Russians. However, it does not state that "neo-Nazi forces are committing genocide against Russian-Ukrainians," a view later advocated by Russia.

In August, as the Taliban captured the Afghan capital of Kabul, the United States withdrew their forces from the country. Russia, along with China, sought to stabilize the region following the establishment of the Taliban regime and conducted military exercises in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

In October, the Russian forces began to redeploy their troops near the Ukrainian border. As Washington monitored this development, Moscow proposed in December that NATO return to deploying armaments only in countries that were its members as of 1997, and moreover, publicized this document unilaterally.¹⁶ If the Russians had any intention to negotiate, they would have made their demands and then published an agreed document. The way in which the Russians disclosed their most significant demand at the outset suggests that they had no intention of reaching a negotiated settlement.¹⁷ Russia neither controlled Ukraine, nor had the power to compel NATO forces to make a substantial retreat. For such a country, to make these demands in seriousness was unbecoming of a great power and unacceptable even in classical great power politics.

In fact, the United States rejected the demands but proposed to discuss the issue of missile deployment in Europe. The elicitation of this proposal may be considered successful Russian coercion. If Russia wanted to improve its security environment, it could have continued the consultations to constrain U.S. military forces, as the Russian president and foreign minister stated on February 14, 2022.

However, on February 24, 2022, President Putin declared a "special military operation" and launched the invasion of Ukraine. On the same day, airborne troops mounted a sudden attack on Kyiv but failed to capture the capital city. In addition, several operations to assassinate President Zelenskyy were reportedly thwarted.¹⁸ The Ukrainian military presence outside of the eastern conflict zone was small, and Russia deployed much

larger invading forces than the Ukrainian defense forces around Kyiv.¹⁹ In cities like Kherson, Ukrainian resistance collapsed early, perhaps due to successful clandestine operations inside the defense forces, and Russian military occupation and governance began. Considering these factors, President Putin may have executed the operation expecting that forcing the "special military operation" on the entire Ukrainian nation would be successful.

If the operation had succeeded early on, the Russian side would have taken minimal losses due to Ukrainian resistance. Western countries would have been unable to apply united pressure on Russia, and Russia would have suffered far less damage. However, Western countries may have still vehemently disapproved of Russia's actions, and the foundation of great power cooperation may have further eroded. Furthermore, Western countries may have built up their military capabilities near Russia's borders and posed a danger to the country. In other words, the Putin administration had made a calculated decision to give priority to controlling Ukraine as a great power's privilege, and keep great power balance, status, security, and capacity enhancement on the back burner.

The failure to achieve its initial objective exposed Russia's lack of capabilities, greatly undermining its strategic position. Russia's defensive line penetrated deep into Ukrainian territory, while elite units suffered losses. On the other hand, Ukraine improved its military capabilities with the support of Western countries. Finland and Sweden announced their intention to join NATO, and capabilities to strike St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad are increasing. Russia has been unable to establish power in its sphere of influence, deteriorated its national security, and even lowered its status as a great power.

The conventional forces' inability to function stands out among their deficiencies. From February to March, Russia failed to ready the resources necessary to take Kyiv by conventional combat, causing a significant depletion of elite forces, such as airborne and tank units. Russia reduced its overly extended front lines and concentrated its forces toward the Donbas region. From April to June, by inflicting massive destruction, it slowly



A Russian armored vehicle captured in Kharkiv oblast (Maxym Marusenko/NurPhoto/Kyodo News Images)

took control of cities, such as major city Mariupol in southern Donetsk oblast and Severodonetsk in western Luhansk oblast. From July to August, the Ukrainian forces appeared to launch counterstrikes against the Russian forces' rear areas in Kherson oblast, making the Russian forces prioritize the defense of those areas. However, in early September, the Ukrainian forces carried out several simultaneous attacks on Russian-held positions in eastern Kharkiv oblast, exploiting vulnerabilities of the Russian forces. The Russian forces then retreated, leaving behind a large amount of military supplies. Even with limited firepower, the Ukrainian forces fought valiantly using intelligence, precision guidance, and other means. In contrast, the Russian forces failed to secure air superiority, lost the Black Sea Fleet's flagship and many tanks, allowed destruction operations in the rear, and lost senior commanders to sniper attacks. All of this shed light on a reality that greatly diverged from the image Russia had projected of itself as a military great power.

Even in Russia, doubts began to creep in over the insufficient strength of the Russian forces, despite authorities painting a world picture contrary to reality by emphasizing Ukrainian wrongdoing and Russian military successes. "Putin under Pressure"²⁰—as this title of a September 18 editorial in *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* reveals, people in Russia began to realize that dissent was emerging over Putin's leadership. Against this backdrop, on September 21, President Putin issued a mobilization order and indicated the goal of adding 300,000 troops. The order compounded the ambiguities: will it enable Russia to sufficiently replenish its force in a few months and carry out operations to achieve its objectives; or will distrust and resentment toward the Russian forces that still cannot win threaten Putin's rule? Untrained men who should not have been mobilized were sent into ill-prepared operations, and many lost their lives in battle. In November, the Russian forces withdrew from the occupied territory of Kherson oblast on the western bank of Dnieper River, a difficult-to-defend area. By the end of 2022, Russia was unable to demonstrate any clear improvement in its operational capabilities.

Regardless of how much military success Russia achieves in Ukraine, Russia has fundamentally become estranged from great power cooperation. It lacks the strength to confront other great powers or build a united front, and has greatly diminished its position as a player in the great power game. Its goal for the foreseeable future is to ensure the survival of the Putin administration.

Russia has decreased its desired prestige in the post-Soviet space. At the October 2022 summit of the CIS, President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan directly urged President Putin to respect member countries.²¹

The main objectives of Russian great power politics—exercising power in the post-Soviet space and getting Western countries to respect Russia's sphere of influence—have suffered severe setbacks.

Cooperation with China and Global Engagement Efforts

Engagement with Non-Western Regions

Great power politics are unfolding outside of Europe as well. If progress is made in "multipolarization" that was discussed earlier, emerging non-Western countries may gain strength and raise their voices against the West, putting Russia in a more advantageous position with the region. While the 2021 *National Security Strategy* is focused on Western pressure and the resistance to it, it lists China and then India as Russia's foreign policy partners outside of the post-Soviet space, followed by BRICS and regional organizations in the Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and Africa.²²

BRICS members have cooperated in making the voices of key emerging economies heard in the Western-led international system. These countries have not joined the severe Western measures against Russia and abstained from relevant UN resolutions. Some of them are democratic nations, but, unlike Western countries, they neither question internal affairs of other countries, nor seek conformity to common standards. In this respect, they are less likely to pose troubles for Russia. At the same time, BRICS is not a grouping that takes united actions, and member countries have not actively supported Russia in its difficult situation. Shortly after the BRICS Summit held virtually in June 2022, the leaders of India and South Africa headed to Germany to attend the G7 Summit as invited countries.

BRICS and G20 members include leading countries which do not side with the West, helping Russia feel not isolated. Additionally, many African nations distinguish themselves from Western countries, with some not criticizing Russia and some actively cooperating with it. Tank units from Algeria participated in the September 2022 Vostok-2022 military exercise in Russia's Primorsky krai. When delays in grain exports from Russia and Ukraine caused a food crisis in the Middle East and Africa, Russia claimed that Western sanctions were hindering its grain exports and refuted claims that it was exporting hunger. Moscow made efforts to maintain good relations with several African countries.²³

The approach toward Russia adopted across a broad area of the world has decreased the pressure on Russia. However, its influence is not so significant as to advance Russia's tangible strategic interests. Nevertheless, in the Middle East, Russia has achieved a position as a major player in the regional situation, mainly through military means. As a result, European countries and the United States take Russia's activities into account on issues involving Middle Eastern countries.

In Syria, where a civil war continues, the Putin administration has taken

actions to protect the Assad regime from anti-government armed groups. Especially since the military operations in September 2015, countries such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel that are involved in or affected by the Syrian civil war have pursued dialogue, taking Russia's position and behavior into account amid the relative decline in U.S. military presence. Turkey and Russia support different sides in Syria and Libya. Yet, except for a tense period between November 2015 and June 2016,²⁴ Turkey has promoted dialogue and controlled the extent of confrontation. Israel maintains a level of dialogue with Russia to ensure that the presence of Russian forces in Syrian territory does not harm its own interests.²⁵ In September 2022, a prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia was realized with the mediation of Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

Furthermore, Iran has provided direct military cooperation for Russia's operations. Iranian-made Shahed-136 drones were used for suicide attacks on October 10, 2022, when Russian forces launched coordinated attacks on energy infrastructure in several Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv. The United States, the United Kingdom, and France condemned Russia and Iran for violating UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which prohibits the transfer of certain military technologies from Iran. While both countries deny the illegality of their actions, third-party verification may be performed for equipment that landed on Ukrainian territory. The fact that Russia behaved in clear violation of the UN Security Council resolution, coupled with the fact that Russia is attacking Ukraine with the military support of Iran, a country under UN sanctions, show Russia has once again strayed from its expected role as a responsible great power. As for Iran, its provision of high-risk military support to Russia, which is stuck in the international mire, suggests it holds Russia in considerable regard.

Russia-China Cooperation on the International Order

Russia, together with China, advocate for the "democratization of international relations." They have sought the transformation of Western-led international norms and institutions, arguing that they are unsuited to the interests and capacities of many countries around the world. In the area of information technology (IT) management, Russia and China advocate for norms that prioritize domestic security management, whereas Western countries have emphasized the free flow of information on the internet. In 2011, Russia, China, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan jointly proposed an international code of conduct for information security to the UN General Assembly. The proposal included regulating the dissemination of information on separatism and other elements that undermine the stability of sovereign states, as well

as regulating the use of IT that threatens the stability of other countries.

China's Xi Jinping government identifies the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a project for transforming the international order. If successful, the BRI would generally be in line with Russian interests. More countries will be able to receive development assistance, even if they do not conform to the norms set by Western countries. This would give non-Western countries, including Russia, greater freedom of action. Russia itself will be able to advance infrastructure development with Chinese investment. As a result, countries in the post-Soviet space, especially Central Asian countries, will become closer to China than to Russia. Even then, Russia seeks to become a pivotal player in the security domain, so that these countries cannot distance themselves decisively from Russia. At the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in April 2019, President Putin stated that the BRI promotes economic development in the Eurasian space, and that the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI will cooperate in opposing U.S. trade protectionism and unilateral sanctions.²⁶ In other words, Putin stressed not that Russia was joining the BRI as one of the participants. Rather, it underscored its own paradigm in vowing to cooperate with the BRI's efforts to break away from the United States.

As discussed above, Russia seeks an international system that is not led by the West, which overlaps to some extent with China's aspirations. However, the two countries also have many differences that prevent united action. For example, while China puts efforts into UN peacekeeping activities, Russia, perhaps not seeing any significant benefits, has decreased its involvement in them. Furthermore, compared to China's extensive involvement in the global economy, Russia's involvement is limited to a few sectors, such as the energy and weapons industries. As a result, Russia can more easily pursue narrow national interests, even if doing so disrupts the global economy and, in fact, is bringing negative consequences to China's economic activities.²⁷

It should be noted that the Russia-led scheme in the post-Soviet space does not have the power to exert influence outside of it. Moreover, countries in the post-Soviet space are deepening their relationships with China and Western countries. Whereas China competes with the United States in a range of areas, including trade and technology, Russia lacks the capacity to support China. For example, Russia was incapable of taking actions to support China or restrain the United States when it imposed tariffs on Chinese products. When soybean exports from the United States to China decreased, Russia took over U.S. exports, which only served the interests of Russian trade rather than solving China's issue.

Following the onset of the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China has not ratcheted up its rhetoric or actions against Russia. However, the same

is true for countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa. China mainly sources its energy from the Middle East and Central Asia. Although China also imports from Russia, it appears that its purchases will not offset the drop in the EU's demand for Russian resources since 2022, and that Chinese imports will not lead to a recovery in Russia's income. While economic sanctions on Russia have made it difficult to procure semiconductors, China's major IT firms had prioritized Western markets and have not been highly active in the now sanctioned Russian market.

The SCO Summit held from September 15 to 16, 2022 in the ancient city of Samarkand, Uzbekistan provided the leaders of diverse Eurasian countries an opportunity to meet and talk face-to-face. For President Putin, it served as an occasion to showcase his relationships with numerous non-Western countries. At the same summit, however, following Russian military debacles in Ukraine's Kharkiv oblast, Putin was told by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India, "today's era is not an era of war." Putin also had to assure President Xi Jinping of China: "We understand your questions and concern about this. During today's meeting, we will of course explain our position." It was clear that Russia has not obtained China's full support to overcome its predicament.

Limited Significance of Russia-China Military Cooperation

As Russia and China deepen their ties, their ability and willingness to coordinate military operations may become a major issue during a crisis. Half a year into the military operation initiated by Russia in February 2022, China was still not providing any direct military support to Russia. Iran and North Korea, countries that the West suspect of supplying military supplies to Russia, are already under sanctions and have relatively little to lose from deteriorating relations with the West. On the contrary, it is not an easy decision for China to provide direct support to Russia, which would likely arouse hostility and prompt countermeasures by the West. Whether Beijing, for the sake of not losing Russia as a friendly nation, would want to risk involvement in a dangerous confrontation with the United States will depend on whether allowing Russia's defeat is deemed to cause a more precarious strategic environment. Russia and China could engage in military cooperation, but they may not always have interests that align and may not necessarily conduct significant joint actions.

To date, China has enhanced its military operational capabilities with the support of Russia. Many of the aircraft and vessels operated by China have been purchased from Russia from the 1990s to 2000s. In the 2010s, China purchased Su-35 fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missile systems

from Russia ahead of other countries. However, China has also operated numerous independently developed aircraft and vessels in recent years, and has successfully developed and deployed critical equipment such as anti-ship ballistic missiles without relying on Russia. As a result, acquisition of Russian military technology has become a smaller variable than in the past.

Russian and Chinese military exercises have also been closely followed second to equipment. It is difficult to assess whether military exercises with Russia have helped China build up its experience. Around the time that the Maritime Cooperation joint naval exercise began in 2012, there was talk in China about the significance of improving anti-submarine warfare capabilities. From 2018, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) began participating in strategic-level military exercises in Russia's military districts. Around this time, Chinese commentaries were published about the significance of learning joint operations capabilities through experience. However, it is unclear whether Russia has adequately cooperated in improving the capabilities required by China, or whether China was merely emphasizing the significance of participating in politically necessary military exercises. At the very least, these joint exercises provided the PLA with opportunities to enhance its proficiency by traveling to Russia and conducting operations outside of Chinese territory. In September 2022, the military exercise Vostok-2022 was conducted in the Eastern Military District after Russia's shortcomings in joint operations capabilities had been revealed. At that time, China did not make any specific mention of the significance of participating in the exercise and improving its proficiency.

As to their joint military operational capabilities, a notable example is joint bomber patrol conducted around the Sea of Japan since 2019. This has involved the flight of four aircraft—Russian bombers backed up by a Chinese early warning and control aircraft and Chinese bombers backed up by a Russian early warning and control aircraft. The four exercises conducted through 2022 appear to have achieved a certain level of practicality. However, this capability represents only a small fraction of full-scale military operations.

The real issue is that the vessels and aircraft of the two countries can have a serious impact on the security of the countries concerned. This is true of simultaneous military actions based on coordinated objectives, if not highly integrated operations. This possibility was indicated by Russian and Chinese vessels' successive entries into the contiguous zone surrounding Japan's Senkaku Islands in 2016. Both in October 2021 and September 2022, naval vessels of the two countries jointly sailed near Japan. However, when China conducted large-scale military exercises near Taiwan in early August 2022, the Russian forces did not make any noticeable moves. Russia has not made

explicitly clear whether it is willing to take action that could risk becoming a target of the U.S. forces if a serious military situation involving China were to occur in the periphery of Japan.

Either way, scenarios of coordinated military operations arise when Russia or China become entangled in or willingly become involved in their partner's military situation. Just because of the serious military conflict and its troubles in Europe, Russia did not participate in military actions for China under its wishes, or conduct operations aimed at addressing military threats shared with China. While Russia-China military cooperation has advanced, it has not reached a significant turning point in terms of coordinated military operations.

Conclusion

As the above discussion showed, the Putin administration's core goals of great power politics are to unilaterally exercise power in Russia's sphere of influence and to get other great powers to recognize its status. However, Russia has found itself moving further away from achieving these goals.

The Putin administration has not relied solely on coercive measures since 2000. There have been periods when it approached Ukraine through political influence or economic cooperation, effectively combining political, economic, and diplomatic means to promote the economic and social development of Russia and raise its diplomatic status. However, when trouble arose, the Putin administration demonstrated a hardline posture. The Ukrainian people resisted, and their ties to Russia waned. Additionally, Russia faced backlash from Western countries. The infringement of Ukrainian territorial integrity and human rights in 2014 was the determining factor behind Ukraine's alienation and international mistrust of Russia. While Russia's coercive measures against both Ukraine and Western countries achieved some success, relying too heavily on them brought Russia further away from realizing its goals of great power politics. By its own doing Russia narrowed the path to keep Ukraine within its influence, prompting the planning and execution of a large-scale military invasion—the ultimate coercive measure—from 2021 to 2022. Increasingly dissatisfied with the results of attempts at its unattainable goals, Russia took action, believing that its goals can be achieved with the use of force. This hints at the shortcomings of Europe's overall security paradigm and Russia overstepping its limitations.

Since the invasion began in February 2022, the means that the Putin administration has employed to achieve its goals have suffered significant losses. While Russia has demonstrated the destructive force of military

power, it has proven itself to be incapable of using the means effectively to achieve its objectives and win full-scale battles. Russia has financial reserves, and daily life is carrying on. However, considerable restrictions on trade with Western countries have substantially decreased foreign currency income and access to international technology markets. Russia's prospects for growth and national power accumulation have plummeted. Furthermore, Ukraine and Western countries' united stance against Russia has made it difficult for Moscow to overturn this situation diplomatically. Because Russia did not sufficiently coordinate its actions with countries, such as China and India, Russia's great power capabilities have lost credibility. Consequently, it has struggled to develop partnerships that contribute to "multipolarization." Although Russia-China military cooperation has continued, it has not produced any visibly favorable outcomes, neither for Russian interests in Europe, nor for China's actions in East Asia and globally. As they reveal, Russia has made missteps in setting its goals and selecting its means in great power politics, and no longer has the capabilities necessary for great power politics. In the post-Soviet space, the results have been de-Russification of Ukraine and significant decline in other countries' trust in Russia. Additionally, Western countries increasingly reject Russia's sphere of influence and are building up their military strength.

If Russia manages to carry out the invasion advantageously and impose its will on Ukraine, friendly countries in and outside the post-Soviet space may become more cooperative toward Russia, bringing it closer to its image of a great power. However, even then, losses and devastation in Ukraine, as well as the enduring effects of Western sanctions are inevitable, and it will not be until the distant future that Russia achieves the status of an honorable great power. Conversely, if it cannot stop the invasion despite facing disadvantages, Russia as a weaker party may continue to use coercive measures while expanding the scope of its international norms violations. If inappropriate military cooperation with Iran and North Korea advances due to Russia's declining norms, the spread of destabilizing factors will compound the concerns. In either case, Russia may not provide substantive support to China in the U.S.-China competition, but it is likely to hinder the actions of Western countries. Russia is expected to remain a destabilizing factor in international politics, unless it retreats from Ukraine, fundamentally changes its behavior so as not to become a reemerging threat, and becomes a member of a new stable balance.