

## *Chapter 3*

# The Collapse of Putin's Notion of Great Power<sup>1</sup>

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### **Putin's notion of a great power**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, relations between Russia and its neighbors have been fraught with problems. In 1992, while many of the newly formed sovereign states were focused on integrating populations living within their borders and forming governments and institutions, only Russia perceived that it had additional responsibilities in the post-Soviet space beyond its borders. Given that Russia succeeded the legal status of the Soviet Union, it had room to believe that it had rights and obligations to integrate this space and to the facilities that remained there.<sup>2</sup> 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." 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.

Russia referred to the former Soviet republics as "near abroad," making 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 leveraging traditional economic ties to realize integration and gain influence.

When President Vladimir Putin first took office in 2000, he took the pragmatic approach of suppressing hardline arguments and developing relations with both the former Soviet republics and Western countries to enhance Russia's state power.<sup>3</sup> In his April 2005 annual address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin discussed the major

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a summary of the main points of a presentation given at the International Symposium on Security Affairs (December 7, 2022). For further details, see "Russia's Classical Notion of Great Power and Waning 'Sphere of Influence,'" in *The Shifting Dynamics of Great Power Competition*, ed. Masuda Masayuki (National Institute for Defense Studies, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Serhii Plokhyy, *Lost Kingdom: A History of Russian Nationalism from Ivan the Great to Vladimir Putin* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 318.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 321.

ideological challenges in developing Russia.<sup>4</sup> During this address, 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 not to highlight Russia’s intention to rectify the mistake of the Soviet collapse, but rather how Russian society has been implementing reforms aimed at the values of freedom and democracy even in difficult times. He rejected the notion that Russians do not need freedom, and argued that, over the past three centuries, Russia, as a European nation, had overcome hardships in achieving freedom, human rights, justice, and democracy as its own values, along with other European countries. He also urged countries in the post-Soviet space newly admitted to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) to respect the rights of Russian minorities. While President Putin raised serious issues caused by the Soviet collapse in this address, he treated them as part of many challenges, and signaled that Russia was willing to develop together with Western countries, without emphasizing pressure or danger from the West. Similarly, the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Germany in May 2005 served as, in a sense, an opportunity for Russia to gain recognition as a great power amid a cooperative atmosphere, and 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, were invited.

In these instances, Russia is seen as having made a strong claim to its status as a great power, and this has been a key subject of the discourse on Russia.<sup>5</sup> Its main goals are thought to have been the unilateral exercise of power in the post-Soviet space and Western recognition of Russian influence. In practice, the Putin administration has pursued these goals in three principal ways: enhancing state power; leveraging diplomatic and economic means to coordinate interests; and taking coercive measures to cause damage to its opponents. However, it was only in the lead-up to 2022 that various attempts to deal with the Ukrainian issue failed and Russia resorted exclusively to coercive measures.

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<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” President of Russia (April 25, 2005), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>

<sup>5</sup> There are diverse interpretations of the goals of Russian great powerism. The following literature divides it into three major perspectives: Russia as a revanchist power, Russia as a defensive power, and Russia as an aggressive isolationist. Elias Götz and Camille-Renaud Merlen, “Russia and the Question of World Order,” *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2018).

## **Catastrophic consequences of Ukrainian intervention and full-scale invasion**

In January 2014, clashes intensified between anti-government protesters and suppression forces in the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Despite peace mediation by Russia and the EU in February, President Viktor Yanukovich fled Kyiv the day after signing the agreement, and a pro-Western government was established in Ukraine. 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 led a political uprising to become prime minister of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea with support from Russian forces. Through a “referendum,” his political group indicated Crimea was in favor of becoming a part of Russia. In March, Russia unilaterally claimed this part of Ukrainian territory as its own under the pretext of fulfilling Crimea’s wish. 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.

At the same time, Russia heightened tensions in neighboring areas outside of Ukraine, particularly in the Baltic Sea. This 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. Russia further waged cyberattacks on Ukraine, as well as operations to influence public opinion during U.S. and French elections, which further deepened hostilities.

Nevertheless, Russia’s actions at this time proceeded with certain constraints. While it did not tolerate rebellions in areas it viewed as its sphere of influence and elevated the level of fighting to increase pressure on Western countries, it also left room for trade and mutual recognition between the great powers. Russia’s continued backing of separatist regions within Ukrainian territory made the integration of Ukraine and its membership in NATO 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 would threaten Russia’s internal security. Rather, the West supported a diplomatic approach to achieve stability through reconciliation with Russia.

However, on February 24, 2022, President Putin declared a “special military

operation” and launched an open invasion of Ukraine. This was a costly full-frontal clash, and Ukrainians and those in partner countries acted in unison to counter it. On the same day, Russian airborne troops raided an airport near the capital of Kyiv, but the seizure operation failed. In addition, several assassination operations targeting President Zelensky were reportedly thwarted.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> In cities like Kherson, Ukrainian resistance collapsed early, perhaps due to the successful clandestine operations inside the defense forces, and Russian military occupation and governance began. These factors suggest that President Putin went ahead with the “special military operation” with the expectation that it would be successful in coercing the entire Ukrainian nation.

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, further eroding the foundation of cooperation between the great powers. 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 prioritize controlling Ukraine as its prerogative as a great power, and to relegate the balance of great powers, as well as its status, security, and capacity building, to the background.

What actually happened after Russia failed to achieve the operation’s initial objective revealed Russia’s lack of capability and significantly undermined its strategic position. Russia’s defensive line penetrated deep into Ukrainian territory, and its elite units suffered losses. Meanwhile, Ukraine improved its forces with the support of Western countries. Russia’s seizure of parts of Ukraine since 2014 had both solidified Ukraine’s resolve as a country to refuse integration with Russia and increased its political and military capacity. Thus, the actions taken by the Putin administration since 2014 had the effect of hindering its ability to achieve its goals in 2022, and the administration failed to accurately assess this situation. Russia’s decision to launch a full-scale invasion has led Finland and Sweden

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<sup>6</sup> Manveen Rana, “Volodymyr Zelensky Survives Three Assassination Attempts in Days,” *The Times*, March 3, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Mykhaylo Zabrotskyi, Jack Watling, Oleksandr V Danylyuk, and Nick Reynolds, “Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022,” Royal United Services Institute (November 30, 2022).

to announce their intention to join NATO, and capabilities to strike St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad are increasing.

Among its deficiencies, the dysfunction of Russia's conventional forces stood out. During February and 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. As a result, Russia was forced to reduce its overly extended front line and concentrate its forces toward the Donbas region. From April to June, Russian forces slowly took control of cities such as the major city of Mariupol in southern Donetsk oblast and Severodonetsk in western Luhansk oblast by inflicting massive destruction. Then, from July to August, 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, Ukrainian forces carried out several simultaneous attacks on Russian-held positions in eastern Kharkiv oblast, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the Russian forces. The Russian forces then retreated, leaving behind a large number of military supplies. 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. The Ukrainian forces fought valiantly using intelligence, precision guidance, and other means, despite their limited firepower. In contrast, the Russian forces failed to secure air superiority, lost the Black Sea Fleet's flagship and many tanks, allowed sabotage 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.

The prestige Russia desired in the post-Soviet space is decreasing. At the October 2022 summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan directly urged President Putin to respect each member country.<sup>8</sup> Not only has Ukraine rejected Russian-led integration, but relatively friendly countries have also been asserting their right to speak. Western countries have also significantly reduced the level of diplomatic and economic relations they maintained with Russia up until 2021, rejecting Russia's claim to its sphere of influence. 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Saito Ryota, "The Sense of Distance between Central Asia and Russia Seen from the CIS Summit: The Background to the Rahmon Statement, and Putin's 'View of the Alliance,'" International Information Network Analysis, Sasakawa Peace Foundation (November 2, 2022). [https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/saito\\_03.html](https://www.spf.org/iina/articles/saito_03.html)

## Cooperation with China

As Russia asserted its sphere of influence and deepened confrontation with Western countries, “neo-Eurasianism” has gained traction. According to this ideology, Russia does not follow European traditions, but maintains its own unique civilization as a major “Eurasian” country that inherits Asian traditions as well. In Russian usage, “Eurasia” almost exclusively refers to the post-Soviet space, which Russia claims to be leading. It also reinforces the idea that Russia should naturally cooperate with Asian countries as well as European ones.

This “Eurasia” concept is also behind the idea of cooperating with China, which implies joining forces with other Asian powers against the West as well. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which China’s Xi Jinping administration has identified as a project for transforming the international order, generally falls in line with Russian interests, as it is an example of an initiative that differs from that of Western countries. 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.<sup>9</sup> In other words, rather than Russia’s individual participation in the BRI, President Putin stressed that Russia would cooperate with the BRI’s efforts to break away from the United States, while also highlighting the presence of a Russian-led framework.

Thus, 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 them from acting in unison. For example, while China puts efforts into UN peacekeeping operations, Russia has reduced its involvement in them, perhaps because it does not see any significant benefits. 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. This makes it easier for Russia to pursue its own narrow national interests even if doing so disrupts the global economy and, in fact, has negative consequences on China’s economic activities.<sup>10</sup>

To begin with, the Russia-led framework in the post-Soviet space does not have the power to exert influence outside of that space. Countries in the post-Soviet space are also

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<sup>9</sup> Masuda Masayuki, Yamazoe Hiroshi, and Akimoto Shigeki, *China Security Report 2020: China Goes to Eurasia*, English edition (Tokyo: NIDS, 2019), 44-45.

<sup>10</sup> Marcin Kaczmarek, “Convergence or Divergence? Visions of World Order and the Russian-Chinese Relationship,” *European Politics and Society* 20, no. 2 (2018), pp. 218-221.

deepening their relationships with China and individual Western countries. Whereas China has a competitive relationship with the United States in a range of areas, including trade and technology, Russia lacks the capacity to support China in this regard. 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, but this only served the interests of Russian trade rather than solving China's issue.

The February 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a decision that prioritized Russia's own sphere of influence over working with China to create a favorable international environment. While China has not made any harsh statements or taken actions against Russia, neither have 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 is unlikely that China's purchases will be enough to offset the drop in demand for Russian resources from the EU since 2022; Russian revenues will not be recouped because of China. And whereas economic sanctions have made it difficult for Russia to procure semiconductors, China's major IT firms have always prioritized Western markets and have not gone as far as to actively operate in the now sanctioned Russian market.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Summit held from September 15 to 16, 2022, in the ancient city Samarkand, Uzbekistan, provided an opportunity for the leaders of diverse Eurasian countries 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 the Ukraine's Kharkiv oblast, Putin was told by Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India that "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." This occasion made clear that Russia was not getting China's full support to overcome its predicament.

## **Conclusion**

As the discussion above shows, 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 Russia's status. However, the reality is that it is far from achieving these goals.

Since the invasion began in February 2022, the means the Putin administration has employed to achieve its goals have also suffered significant losses. While Russia has demonstrated the destructive force of its military capabilities, it has proven itself to be incapable of using these means to effectively 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, and in turn, Russia's prospects for growth and the buildup of state power have plummeted. 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, it has lost credibility in its capabilities as a great power and has struggled to develop partnerships that contribute to "multipolarization." And although military cooperation with China continues, such cooperation has not produced any visibly favorable outcomes, neither for Russian interests in Europe, nor for China's actions in East Asia and the globally. All of this reveals that Russia has made missteps in setting its goals and selecting its means in great power politics, and has lost the capabilities necessary for great power politics. In the post-Soviet space, the results have been the de-russification of Ukraine and significant decline in other countries' trust in Russia. Additionally, Western countries increasingly building up their military strength in rejection of Russia's sphere of influence.

If Russia manages to carry out the invasion advantageously and impose its will on Ukraine in the future, friendly countries in and outside the post-Soviet space may become more cooperative toward Russia, bringing Russia closer to its desired 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 Russia cannot stop its invasion of Ukraine despite facing disadvantages, it may continue to use coercive measures as a weak player while expanding the scope of its international norms violations. If Russia's declining norms result in inappropriate military cooperation with Iran and North Korea, the spread of destabilizing factors will add to these 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 the Western countries. Until Russia retreats from Ukraine, fundamentally changes its behavior so as not to become a reemerging threat, and becomes a member of a new stable balance of power, it will remain a destabilizing factor in international politics.