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Russia’s Grand Strategy toward the West

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Abstract: Russia’s grand strategy toward the West is grounded in its historical experience of the past 300 years. Russian President Vladimir Putin has translated the traditional pillars of that strategy—strategic depth, restriction on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile alliances—into five concrete tasks intended to fortify Russia against Western efforts to hold it down: Clamp down on Western influences inside Russia to prevent the regime from being undermined from within; create a buffer zone against the West in the former Soviet space; impede the consolidation of the European Union as a strategic rival; compel the United States to abandon its hegemonic designs and operate like a normal great power; and work with China to contain the West’s strategic advance. How successful Russia will be is an open question, but its economic weakness raises doubts it can smoothly execute such an ambitious strategy.

Keywords: Russia; grand strategy; geopolitics; US-Russian relations; former Soviet space; China.

Introduction

Russia is a revisionist power. The prevailing Kremlin narrative is that the post-Cold War settlement in Europe was imposed upon Russia when it was strategically weak. Over Moscow’s objections, the US and its allies pushed Euro-Atlantic institutions, notably NATO, whose original purpose was to contain Russia, and the European Union, which Russia could never aspire to join, eastward toward Russia’s borders. Western ideas penetrated into Russia, threatening traditional Russian values and the regime itself. Washington supported ostensibly democratic but fundamentally anti-Russian color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 with the goal of expanding its geopolitical reach in the former Soviet space at Russia’s expense—or so Moscow would have the world believe.

As Russia regained its strength under President Vladimir Putin in the 2000s, it began to push back against the Western advance. Putin’s passionate speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 made clear his intention to reassert Russia’s position on the global stage. After castigating Washington for its alleged ambitions to create a unipolar world and refusal to respect Russia’s interests, he declared: “Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today.”1

A year and a half later, Putin fought a short war against Georgia, at least in part to prevent its further progress toward NATO membership. For an analogous purpose, he annexed Crimea and sparked a separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine in 2014. He ordered a military incursion into Syria in 2015 to bolster the Syrian president, Bashar al-Assad, and
counter what he saw as an American effort to use a popular uprising to oust him. And in February 2022 he launched a massive invasion of Ukraine to halt the country’s westward drift and pull it firmly back into Russia’s orbit, with the hope that his action would also erode the unity of the Western alliance and split the US from its European partners. His is a monumental effort to avenge the loss and humiliation of the 1990s and reassert Russia’s standing as a great power in Europe.

**Russia and the West: Historical Background**

Putin’s aggression has been vehemently criticized in the West. He has been demonized as a malevolent leader determined to upset the European security order established at the end of the Cold War by recreating the Soviet Union or Russian Empire and plunging the continent once again into the maelstrom of great-power competition and spheres of influence that marked Europe in the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.

His methods are indeed brutal in the extreme, but the basic thrust of his policy falls well within the Russian strategic framework that has evolved since Russia entered the European balance of power system in the eighteenth century. Contrary to much Western commentary, that framework was not some emanation of Russia’s authoritarian domestic politics or the manifestation of some musty messianic vision. Rather it was shaped by an unsentimental, calculated quest for the security of the state, that is, unabashed Realpolitik.

Since the founding of the Muscovite state in the thirteenth century, Russia has sought security on the vast, nearly featureless Eurasian plain in the creation of strategic depth, the relentless pushing of the borders outward from the country’s heartland. The process proceeded with great vigor during the eighteenth century, as the tsars focused on gaining access to warm water ports and expanding into Europe at the expense of a waning Sweden, Poland, and Ottoman Empire. Catherine the Great oversaw the greatest extension of Russian territory and control into Europe until Stalin, annexing much of what is Ukraine today, including Crimea, and collaborating with Austria and Prussia to partition Poland among themselves.

But the tsars also had a sense of limits. Like the rulers of other great powers that composed the balance of power system—Britain, France, Austria, and Prussia—Russia subscribed to the system’s essential principles. While Russia’s rulers actively competed for power, influence, and land, they avoided actions that could unduly upset the balance—Catherine never sought to absorb Poland outright; rather, she carved it up with Austria and Prussia to preserve the equilibrium in Eastern Europe. If one state threatened to upset the balance through territorial expansion, the others had the right to resist or to demand compensation to restore the balance. That is why Russia became the great enemy of Napoleonic France, and why Alexander I worked diligently at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 to rehabilitate France as an essential pillar of the balance of power and to carefully divide up the territory of Poland and Saxony to ensure a stable equilibrium among the great powers. The Congress also marked the Russian Empire’s last significant territorial gain in Europe until it collapsed in 1917.
The Congress also represented an historical divide in the relationship between Europe and Russia. During the century before the Congress, Europeans generally accepted Russia as European, even if they were aware of the barbaric quality of life in the empire. What was important for them was that the basic structure of the Russian regime, exemplified by the Court in St. Petersburg, resembled the *anciens regimes* elsewhere in Europe. Visiting aristocrats could easily mix at the Court; the Court language was French. Non-Russians occupied senior positions in the diplomatic corps and the military. Catherine the Great herself was by birth a minor German princess.

This European view of Russia as one of their own changed dramatically after the Napoleonic Wars. Liberal democratic values that had emerged initially in Britain and France slowly moved eastward across the continent, undermining autocratic regimes along the way. They penetrated into Russia but never took root. Russia remained in essence an absolutist autocracy, reviled as the gendarmes of Europe until the Crimean War, after which a crushing defeat vastly reduced Russian power on the continent. Russia might be geographically in Europe and an essential element of the power balance, but, henceforth, it was increasingly not seen as part of Europe, spiritually, philosophically, or politically.

This suited the tsarist regime well enough, even if there was a significant part of the elite that espoused European values, considered themselves to be Europeans, and wanted to modernize Russia along European lines. Moreover, the regime found itself on occasion compelled to adopt certain European political ideas and institutions to modernize the economy and advance technologically so that it could generate the power it needed to compete successfully with the more liberal great powers to the West. The Great Reforms of Alexander II, which emancipated the serfs, introduced local representative government, and liberalized the judicial and educational systems, among other things, are a case in point. But the regime's goal was always to borrow as little from the Europe as it could so as to preserve as best it could the fundamental, and essentially anti-European, characteristics of its autocracy. Censorship waxed and waned in direct proportion to the tsars' assessment of the threat Western ideas posed to their regime. And so another element of Russia's grand strategy toward the West became apparent: politically expedient restrictions on the flow of Western ideas into Russia.

A third element of the grand strategy grew in prominence after the debacle of the Crimean War. Suddenly made aware of its serious vulnerabilities, Russia launched a determined effort to disrupt any hostile coalition of powers along its borders. The Foreign Minister for a generation after the end of the war, Alexander Gorchakov, had as his first mission the dismantling of the old Crimean coalition. His successors actively maneuvered among the other European great powers, shifting alliances as necessary to ensure that Russia was not alone.

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century the broad outline of a Russian grand strategy toward the West was visible, resting on three objectives: strategic depth, restrictions
on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile coalitions. The Soviets pursued them, only with greater vigor and ruthlessness until the mid-1980s, when General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev launched a reform effort aimed at reinvigorating the Soviet system so that it could maintain its status as a great power well into the twenty-first century. He allowed the Soviet Union’s buffer zone in Europe to collapse, opened the country to Western ideas, and sought partnership with the US. Instead of reviving his country, however, he precipitated its collapse. Nevertheless, the first post-Soviet Russian leader, Boris Yeltsin, pursued a similar course, in part because he hoped the West would help Russia overcome a deep political and socio-economic crisis. Indeed, he sought to integrate his country into the Euro-Atlantic community. He failed, and it fell to his successor, Vladimir Putin, to draw the conclusion that Russia needed to restore its traditional framework for relations with West.

The Current Challenge

Putin has long harbored resentment against the West. His effort to forge a partnership with the US during his first years as president was driven not so much by a desire to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic region as by an effort to harness American power to the revival of Russia as a great power. After the horrific terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, he sought to build an anti-terrorist alliance with the US, which would have made Russia, at least symbolically, an equal of the US. ⁹

Putin abandoned that approach as Russia engineered an economic recovery that enabled Russia to liberate itself from Western financial support and he came to see US policy as fundamentally inimical to Russian interests. The turning point came in 2004, bracketed by two events. The terrorist seizure of an elementary school in Beslan in September ended with the deaths of nearly 385 people, 186 of them children. Putin saw an American hand in the Chechen rebellion against Moscow, if not in the Beslan attack itself. ¹⁰ The conclusion was clear: American talk of counterterrorism cooperation was little more than a smokescreen for US geopolitical advance in the former Soviet space at Russia’s expense. In November, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine led to the Putin-backed presidential candidate being denied victory in favor of a pro-Western figure. That led Putin to conclude that US democracy promotion was just another smokescreen for American advance at Russia’s expense. ¹¹

The resentment built in the following years and culminated in Putin’s remarks at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007. ¹² That marked Putin’s effective abandonment of any effort to forge a partnership with the West. His successor, Dmitry Medvedev, might have still been interested in a partnership and welcomed US President Barack Obama’s decision to reset relations, but once Putin announced his decision to return to the Kremlin in 2011, the deterioration in Russia-West relations restarted and accelerated, leading to the ongoing war in Ukraine, the most severe crisis in Russia-West relations since the darkest days of the Cold War. In Putin’s eyes, American behavior was just the present-day manifestation of a centuries-old Western effort to contain and undermine Russia. ¹³
Russia’s Grand Strategy: The Goals

In confronting the West, Putin has retooled the traditional Russian approach to current circumstances. The traditional pillars—the quest for strategic depth, restriction on Western ideas, and disruption of hostile alliances—have been translated into five concrete tasks, all in the name of fortifying Russia as a great power against Western efforts to hold it down:

• Clamp down on Western influences inside Russia to prevent the regime from being undermined from within.

• Create a sphere of influence, or buffer zone, in the former Soviet space against encroachments by the West.

• Impede the consolidation of a European entity that would dwarf Russia in population, wealth, and power potential much as the US does today.

• Compel the US to operate like a normal great power, that is, a country that has no universalist ambitions and has to respect the interests of other great powers to advance its own.

• Build a strategic partnership with China to counterbalance Europe economically and the US strategically, that is, to contain the West’s strategic advance.

During his twenty-plus years in power, Putin has elaborated a set of interlocking policies to advance these goals. At the same time, he has fashioned the necessary arrangements that have enabled him to mobilize the country’s resources for his agenda, and built up the instruments of coercion, especially the military, which are essential to executing his policies. Although his approach may not have been articulated in full in any single document, his speeches over the years and various national security documents have laid out a discernible strategy toward the West. Moreover, it is a strategy that in broad outlines is likely to outlive him. It enjoys widespread support within the elements and resonates with the people. Putin’s grand strategy toward the West is in fact Russia’s grand strategy, well-grounded in Russian strategic thinking, tradition, and historical experience.

… And the Policies

**Domestic Consolidation.** Putin inherited from Yeltsin a Russia that was in disarray. Regional barons ruled their provinces with little regard for the Kremlin’s preferences, and oligarchs privatized parts of the central government apparatus for their own parochial purposes. Foreign governments, particularly the US, had inserted themselves into government offices, playing a large role in the formulation of economic and budgetary policy.14

Putin saw as his first task restoring the Kremlin’s writ across the country. He quickly tamed the regional barons and oligarchs. He divided the country into seven federal districts and placed his personal representatives in charge to ensure that the governors complied with Kremlin policies. He also stripped them of their ex officio seats in the Federation.
Council, the upper house of the national legislature, thus depriving them of direct input into federal laws and legislation, as well as the immunity from criminal prosecution, which all federal legislators enjoyed. As for the oligarchs, he threatened to seize the commercial empires they had accumulated through corrupt means in the 1990s unless they desisted from interference in Kremlin politics. He drove into exile or imprisoned the very few who refused that offer. The others got the message.\textsuperscript{15}

The second task was to restore Russia’s sovereignty, that is, to create conditions in which Russia could govern itself free of outside interference. For that reason, he used the windfall from rising oil prices to pay off Russia’s debt to the International Monetary Fund in 2005 and to the Paris Club of creditor nations in 2006, thus freeing Russia from Western financial tutelage.

While restoring Russia’s financial independence, the Kremlin also turned to restricting foreign influence on domestic politics. In large part, this was a reaction to the color revolutions in the former Soviet space from 2003 through 2005. The Kremlin was convinced that the West used non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to foster regime change, and it was determined to fortify itself against such agents.\textsuperscript{16} In 2006, it passed legislation that limited the operations of foreign NGOs in Russia.\textsuperscript{17} At the same time, it sought to limit the activities of religious organizations, especially the Jehovah Witnesses and Pentecostalists, that were not among Russia’s traditional religions (Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism).

The effort to reduce foreign influence, and push back against Western values, was accelerated with Putin’s return to the Kremlin in 2012. In the midst of an economic slowdown, he decided to shift the basis of the regime’s legitimacy from rising living standards to patriotic pride.\textsuperscript{18} The Kremlin had school history texts rewritten to present a more positive view of Russia’s development. It reintroduced patriotic education into the school system. As an addition to the large May 9 military parade on Red Square marking the victory over Nazi Germany, a celebration Putin had revived in his first presidential term, the Kremlin endorsed a civilian procession, the Immortal Regiment, to underscore the links of ordinary Russians to the generation that won the war.

To bolster this patriotic pride, Putin increasingly espoused traditional Russian, Orthodox family values, which he contrasted with the values of a decadent West. And he introduced policies to circumscribe the spread of Western values in Russia, beginning with the Foreign Agents law of 2012, which required any NGO receiving foreign funding to register as a “foreign agent,” a term associated in the Russian mind with spying, espionage, and treachery.\textsuperscript{19} More recently, the law has been extended to apply to individuals, especially bloggers, who might receive foreign sources of income.

In the past two years, the Kremlin has made a concerted effort to crack down on all political dissidence that has Western overtones. The fate of Russia’s leading opposition figure, Aleksey Navalny, provides the most graphic example.\textsuperscript{20} A failed assassination attempt
with a deadly poison, Novichok, in August 2020 was followed by his arrest in January 2021, when he returned to Russia after recovering abroad from the effects of the poison, and then imprisonment on trumped-up charges. His countrywide political organization was quickly suppressed, as its leading organizers were either arrested or fled into exile. More recently, with the war in Ukraine raging, the Kremlin has cracked down on all independent media outlets—especially those espousing liberal, Western values, such as the popular radio station Echo of Moscow and the TV channel Rain.

In a little more than twenty years, Putin has thus reshaped domestic politics to increase the country’s resilience against Western ideas and attitudes. This has provided him with a foundation, upon which he believes he can be more assertive in pursuing Russia’s national interests abroad in the face of what he sees as a concerted Western effort to undermine Russia.

**Post-Soviet Sphere of Influence.** Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia has explored various institutional arrangements to retain its influence and presence in the former Soviet states, starting with the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1991. A subset of those states signed the Collective Security Treaty in 1992 to coordinate military and security matters. But all these efforts languished as Russia suffered from a profound socio-economic and political crisis in the 1990s.²¹

Although the Collective Security Treaty was given an organizational framework in 2002 to enhance security cooperation and Russia’s influence, Putin initially was not focused on building an exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet space. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, over the objections of his security officials, Putin approved the temporary establishment of US military bases in Central Asia to fight the war in Afghanistan.²² He also did nothing to discourage US military and security cooperation with Georgia, which included assistance in Tbilisi’s regaining control over the Pankisi Gorge, which had been a safe haven for Chechen rebels fighting against Moscow in Chechnya.

But Putin’s views changed rapidly after the color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. The latter precipitated a government-wide reassessment of US goals in the former Soviet space and a decision that Moscow needed to resist US encroachments on Russia’s sphere of influence with much greater vigor. The first notable success was Uzbekistan’s demand in 2005, with Moscow’s active encouragement, that the US vacate its military base at Karshi-Khanabad amid strains in bilateral relations growing out of Washington’s condemnation of the methods Tashkent had used to suppressed anti-government protests in the Fergana Valley.²³ At the same time, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Astana, Kazakhstan, issued a statement demanding that the US set a deadline by which it would close its military bases in Central Asia—something Washington refused to do.²⁴ (The last US base at Manas, Kyrgyzstan, was not vacated until 2014.)²⁵

Putin also gradually came to the view that Russia needed to enhance its economic cooperation with the former Soviet states to protect itself against Western encroachment. In
2011, when he was still prime minister (but had already made clear his intention to reclaim the presidency from Medvedev), Putin endorsed the creation of a Eurasian Economic Union, an idea the Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev had first raised shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Soon thereafter, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Belarus agreed to establish such a union by 2015. More recently, Putin has exploited the travails of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, growing out of a massive popular protest against a rigged presidential election in 2020, to compel him to cede ever more of his country’s sovereignty in economic matters to Russia in the framework of the Belarus-Russia Union State, which was created in 1999.

In the Kremlin’s view, none of these arrangements is complete politically, economically, or militarily without the participation of Ukraine, the post-Soviet state with the greatest power potential after Russia. Ukraine occupies strategically valuable territory on the north shore of the Black Sea, providing Russia a gateway into Europe and a buffer zone against invasion from the West. Moreover, Crimea, the Ukrainian peninsula that dominates the Black Sea, is home to Russia’s Black Sea Fleet—Moscow had insisted on retaining the lion’s share of the Soviet fleet when the Soviet Union broke up for strategic reasons.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Ukraine, however, has been at odds with the Kremlin, determined to assert its own independence and sovereignty. It refused to become a full member of the Commonwealth of Independent States or join the Collective Security Treaty. It relinquished its Soviet-era nuclear arsenal only after receiving (as it turned out worthless) security guarantees from Russia, the US, and the United Kingdom in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. It bargained hard over Moscow’s access to the Black Sea Fleet’s facilities in Crimea, while holding open the possibility of allowing NATO ships to use Crimean ports. Since the middle of the 2000s a large segment of the Ukrainian elite has worked to integrate Ukraine fully into the Euro-Atlantic community through membership in both NATO and the European Union. In 2019, Ukraine enshrined in the constitution its strategic course toward membership in those two organizations.

Moscow finds Ukraine’s westward aspirations an unacceptable threat to its security and prosperity. It has tried various ways to keep Ukraine in its orbit—alternating between economic blandishments (heavily subsidized prices for natural gas up to 2006, for example) and economic pressure (sharp increases in the price for natural gas and temporary cutoffs in supply for non-payment of Ukraine’s substantial debt). More recently, Moscow has resorted to force. Its annexation of Crimea and fomenting of rebellion in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 came in response to events in Kyiv that forced a pro-Russian president to flee the country and put in place a government intent on rapidly moving westward politically and economically. These moves did not have the desired effect. Ukraine signed an Association Agreement with the European Union in 2015, and in 2020, NATO granted the country the status of a “Enhanced Opportunity Partner.” Those developments lay behind Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022, in an effort to end conclusively any Ukrainian aspirations to join NATO and fully escape the Russian orbit.
Disruption of Europe. With a population of 450 million, a GDP of $15.2 trillion (in nominal terms), and a world-class scientific-technological base, a fully consolidated European Union would dwarf Russia (144 million people, $1.5 trillion economy) in power potential much as the US does today. By contrast, Russia compares favorably in power potential with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, Europe’s major powers. The calculus is thus simple for Moscow: it needs to do whatever it can to retard, if not reverse, the consolidation of the European Union. In this regard, although it had little influence over the U.K.’s exit from the EU, that development was most decidedly viewed with great favor in Moscow.

Moscow has resorted to various tools to drive wedges between EU and NATO member states, and between the US and Europe, and to exacerbate tensions within individual countries. It has, for example, used differentiated energy policies to nourish tensions between Germany on the one hand and Poland and the Baltic states on the other. The dispute over the Nord Stream 2 pipeline—a Russian-German joint venture that Poland and the Baltic states adamantly oppose—is a case in point. Moscow has financially supported both right- and leftwing populist and nationalist movements, overtly and covertly, to fuel opposition to Brussels and to put pressure on the governments of individual states. It has developed warm ties with the Hungarian leader, Victor Orban, whose authoritarian tendencies have caused friction with the EU. It has used cybertools and disinformation campaigns to disrupt electoral processes across the continent. And it has put pressure on the vulnerable Baltic states to raise concerns as to whether NATO would indeed honor its guarantee of collective defense in the event of a Russian attack and anxieties among other NATO members that they might in fact be called upon to honor that guarantee.

In addition, Moscow is actively stoking instability in the Balkans. It stood behind an abortive coup in Montenegro in 2016 to derail that country’s path to NATO membership. It has maintained close ties with its traditional ally Serbia and supported Belgrade’s continuing efforts to undermine Kosovo’s independence. It has backed Bosnian-Serb leader Milorad Dodik’s separatist aspirations and disruptive policies inside Bosnia-Herzegovina. More broadly, it has used disinformation campaigns to stoke tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim populations in the region. All these steps have complicated EU and NATO efforts to pacify the region and to integrate the individual countries into the Euro-Atlantic community.

Finally, Putin has exploited Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s disaffection with the reaction of the US and other NATO countries to the failed coup attempt in 2016, and the close cooperation by the US with Kurdish forces in Syria, which Ankara claims have links to terrorist groups inside Turkey—to drive a wedge between Turkey and NATO. Erdoğan’s decision to purchase Russia’s advanced S-400 air defense system—against Washington’s strenuous objections—has further strained relations already under stress because of his authoritarian tendencies.


Containment of the US. Putin's goal with regard to the US, simply put, is to transform that country into a normal great power, that is, one without universalist ambitions that has to respect the interests of the other great powers to advance its own. He has, however, evolved in his approach to this task. When he first assumed power, Putin hoped that he could build a partnership with the US that would give him influence over Washington, much as Britain's vaunted “special relationship” with Washington reputedly did. That was one reason for Putin's quick offer of support to President George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, despite opposition from his security chiefs. This effort culminated in the Moscow Summit in June 2002, when the two presidents issued a joint declaration that laid out a framework for strategic partnership.

But Putin was quickly disabused of any thought that this arrangement gave him significant influence in Washington. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, despite Moscow's objections, shortly after the Moscow Summit (he had indicated his intention to do so six months earlier). He proceeded with a major expansion of NATO, including membership for the Baltic states, even though this raised grave concerns in Moscow. He invaded Iraq, despite Putin's protest. And he failed to offer much assistance to Putin in his effort to suppress the Chechen rebels, who were terrorists in Moscow's view but who, in Washington's eyes, had legitimate grievances against Moscow. Beslan and the Orange Revolution finally persuaded Putin that partnership with the US would not limit its ambitions or the challenges it posed to Russia's position in Eurasia and aspirations to play a larger role on the world stage.

Consequently, Putin turned to other means of containing what he saw as Washington's hegemonic designs. He began to pay more attention to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a counterweight to US actions in Central Asia. He launched the BRICS process, which brought Brazil, Russia, India, and China, and later South Africa, together, to give them more weight in the global economy by setting up alternatives to the power of the Western-dominated international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And he stressed the importance of such institutions as the United Nations Security Council and, to a lesser degree, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as platforms for discussion of major security issues because Russia had an effective veto over US actions in them.

At the same time, Putin began to challenge the US more frontally, in both word and deed. His remarks at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 marked the beginning of a series of addresses that castigated the US for its alleged ambitions to build a unipolar world and impose its values, as well as its general disrespect for countries that pursued independent foreign policies, such as Russia. He used force for the first time in Georgia in 2008 to thwart what he saw as a US effort to bring that country into NATO and tear it out of Russia's sphere of influence. He used force again in Ukraine in 2014 for a similar purpose, and in Syria in 2015 to undermine US policy in the Middle East. And he invaded Ukraine in 2022 to stop NATO's eastward expansion.
Strategic alignment with China. Russia began to improve relations with China in the late Soviet period. Relations continued to advance under Yeltsin and then Putin, with a major acceleration coming in the wake of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. The goal throughout has been to use relations with China to expand Russia’s room for maneuver on the global state, particularly vis-à-vis the US.

The rapid rise of China as both an economic and military power has given it added weight in Russia’s strategic calculations. It can serve as an alternative to the European Union in trade, enabling Moscow to reduce its excessive reliance on Europe, which accounts for about half of Russia’s bilateral trade and roughly three-quarters of foreign direct investment in Russia (at least until the outbreak of the war in Ukraine). It provides an alternative market for Russian oil and gas, which are exported primarily to Europe (until Russia began to produce liquified natural gas, virtually all of Russian gas exports went by pipeline to Europe). To this end, Russia has built an oil and a gas pipeline into China. At the same time, China can also serve as a strategic counterbalance to the US.

Closer alignment with Russia has also served China’s purposes by providing it ready access to natural resources to fuel its robust economic growth and stability along a long border that allows China to devote greater attention and resources to the challenge it faces from the US in East Asia and the Western Pacific. As a result, strategic alignment has progressed rapidly in recent years. Bilateral trade approaches $150 billion annually, making China Russia’s top trading partner. Long wary of Chinese investments in Siberia and the Far East, Russia now welcomes them. At the same time, defense cooperation has grown dramatically. Joint military exercises are routine and increasing in complexity and ambition. Joint naval exercises have taken place in the South China Sea, in the Mediterranean, the Baltic Sea, and near the Persian Gulf. Russia is selling China some of its most sophisticated military hardware, including an advanced jet fighter (Sukhoi SU-35) and the sophisticated S-400 air defense system. It is now helping China build a ballistic-missile early warning system, which, when complete, will make China one of only three countries to have such a system, the other two being Russia and the US. Meanwhile, the two countries have stepped up their coordination of positions at international fora in opposition to what both see as US hegemonic ambitions, while advocating for a multipolar world.

“Not always for but never against” is the way Russians describe relations with China, an attribute that is on display in voting patterns at the UN Security Council, most recently in a vote condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Russia vetoed the resolution; China abstained). While Sino-Russian relations fall short of a full-fledged alliance, they are moving in that direction.35 In a February 4, 2022, joint statement, Putin and Xi Jinping declared that there are “no limits” to their strategic partnership and, for the first time, Beijing officially announced its opposition to NATO’s expansion.36
Conclusion

Although Russia under President Putin has never articulated a grand strategy toward the West in a single document, it has developed a grand strategic framework that guides its actions on the global stage and enables it to opportunistically advance its interests against the West in a rapidly changing geopolitical context. It undergirds a sense of purpose and political will that have enabled Russia to become one of the three most consequential geopolitical actors in the world today, along with China and the US, even though by most measures—population, GDP, and investment in research and development, for example—it lags far behind the other two.

Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether this grand strategy will serve Russian purposes over the long run. Even now it is clear that Russia's ambitions outrun its accomplishments. Russia has been more active in the former Soviet space in recent years, but its hold on the region is not necessarily any firmer—as recent unrest in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the South Caucasus underscores. Political disarray in Europe is much more a consequence of domestic circumstances than Russian action. As Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates, its actions can be counterproductive, galvanizing Europe's resistance to Russia—Finland and Sweden, two traditionally neutral countries, are on a fast track to NATO membership, and Europe is now working hard to wean itself off of dependence on Russian energy resources. The same goes for Russian efforts to constrain the US—Russia's invasion of Ukraine has energized Washington to play a more active role on the global stage in opposition to Russia. Even the strategic alignment with China is fraught with long-term complications—given the great disparity in growth rates and the breakdown in relations with the West, Russia is well on its way to becoming China's junior party, in danger of losing its much-prized strategic autonomy.

Finally, there remains the profound question of Moscow's ability to generate over the long run the resources and power it needs to pursue an ambitious grand strategy toward the West. The West is now levying crushing sanctions against Russia because of its actions in Ukraine for the express purpose of eroding Moscow's power-generating capabilities. And those sanctions come after a decade during which the Russian economy has stagnated. As John LaDonne noted, the Soviet Union collapsed, as did the Russian Empire before it, because it could not reconcile military and political ambition with economic backwardness. Russia today might not be headed for collapse, but its continuing economic problems raise doubts about how successful it will be in containing the West.

Thomas Graham, a distinguished fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, was the senior director for Russia on the National Security Council staff during the George W. Bush administration. During his Foreign Service career, he served two tours of duty in the political section of the US Embassy in Moscow and, as acting political counselor from 1996 to 1997, oversaw all embassy political reporting to Washington.
Endnotes


34. The BRICS (minus South Africa) was initially a Goldman Sachs emerging market concept, which Putin co-opted to advance his global ambitions. The group’s first ministerial meeting was held in 2006 and its first summit, in Russia, in 2009, while Putin was serving as prime minister.


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Books: Feldman, Lily Gardner, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation: From Enmity to Amity (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 20-33


For multiple notes referencing the same work, please use the following shortened note form after the first reference. Feldman, Germany’s Foreign Policy of Reconciliation, 73-78. Roehrig, “Stability or Instability?,” 131.
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