

Russian Grand Strategy Evolution¹

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Russia's failed attempt at regime change in Ukraine will require it to reduce its ambition of being recognized as the leader of Eurasia and to increase its cooperation with new centers of power to mitigate isolation from the west and avoid economic dependence on China. Russia's grand strategy leading into its war with Ukraine aimed to gain recognition as a great power, lead Eurasia, partner with new centers of power, and cooperate selectively with the West. Russia's attempted regime change in Ukraine and its consequences have demonstrated that Russia's aims are overambitious and have reduced Russia's options going forward.

Grand strategy outlines a national government's worldview, valued interests, and theory for achieving those interests.¹ A 2019 RAND study describes Russia's view of the world as one transitioning from post-cold war unipolarity into a multipolar balance of power.² Russia's interests in such a world are being recognized as a great power, leading post-soviet Eurasia, partnering with new centers of power, and cooperating selectively with the West.³ Russia's theory to achieve its interests can categorize into six elements: develop an integrated response to integrated threats, pursue regional leadership, prepare for non-contact warfare and small conflicts along its border, prioritize regional power projection over expeditionary military capability, cooperate selectively while limiting Western ambitions, and pivot away from the West to "new centers of power."⁴

Russia's attempted invasion and regime change in Ukraine supported accomplishment of its grand strategy by attempting to prevent loss of regional leadership to the EU and NATO in Ukraine and by attempting to demonstrate Russia's great power status. Russia's failure to achieve its desired results in Ukraine will require it to either adjust its ambitions or change its ways of accomplishing those ambitions.

Russia's available means are not likely to increase, and its government structure is not likely to facilitate a change in ways. Russia's primary risks will be isolation from West and increasing economic dependence on China. Opportunity remains for Russia to cooperate with "new centers of power" to mitigate economic isolation from West, but Russia currently lacks the economic, military, and information power for the West to recognize it as a great power. Furthermore, Russia risks losing post-soviet Eurasian leadership to China, and antipathy will characterize its relationship with much of Europe and Middle East. Russian actions in Ukraine demonstrate its bankruptcy of hard and soft power necessary to lead as a great power in the stable polycentric world it envisions. To this point, the methods Russia has chosen to use drive global transition undermine its vision for post-transition stability. Failure of Russian intervention in Ukraine will force Russia to accept the hostility it has instigated in its neighbors. Due to Russia's failure to use coercion to convert Ukraine into a "friendly", or even neutral, neighbor, Russian grand strategy needs to adjust technique to avoid losing further influence.

Russia still holds opportunities to partner with India, Brazil, and ASEAN states by restructuring Russia's Euro-centric post-Soviet infrastructure to compete with China's BRI, but it must walk tightrope with China to maintain an amicable relationship without becoming their economic client. To modernize its military, Russia will need to improve its logistical sustainment, and increase emphasis on contact warfare after apparent failures in Ukraine.

Whether Russia succeeds to adapt to the circumstances it has created will depend on Putin to abandon the overambitious ends or counterproductive ways he has used up to this point. Russia's failed attempt at regime change in Ukraine will require it to reduce its ambition of being recognized as the leader of Eurasia and to increase its cooperation with new centers of power to mitigate isolation from the west and avoid economic dependence on China.

Notes

1. Charap, Samuel, et al., *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), 5.
2. Ibid, 21.
3. Ibid, 21-23.
4. Ibid, 32.