

Revenge of Revisionism

For more than three decades after the Cold War, the international system was widely described as unipolar, defined by U.S. military primacy, the global reach of American alliances, and Washington's outsized influence over international institutions and economic rules. While this unipolar moment was never as absolute as its advocates claimed, it nonetheless shaped global expectations: major wars of territorial conquest were presumed obsolete in Europe, the United States was assumed to be the default security provider for much of the world, and global finance and trade remained deeply integrated into a Western-led order. Russia, a former superpower that had lost an empire and endured a painful transition, increasingly viewed this system as humiliating, illegitimate, and strategically dangerous.

Since Vladimir Putin's [speech](#) at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, the Russian Federation has emerged as a champion challenger of the existing world order. Challenges aimed at carving out a more profound role for Russia in world affairs as a part of the attempt to restore its for-

mer glory, otherwise known as a policy of "rising from its knees." For a while, such a policy seemed to have been "working well" for Russia: the invasion in Georgia and the de facto occupation of two of its regions, the annexation of Crimea and the occupation of other regions of Ukraine, the formation of the Russo-centric Eurasian Economic Union, re-projecting power in the Middle East by actively deploying and employing its military in Syria, the proliferation of activities of the allegedly "private" Wagner military company in Africa and Asia, re-surfacing in Venezuela and in other parts of Latin America, openly challenging the West by forming institutions like BRICS, and many more. But the price to be paid for all of the abovementioned was either minimal or negligible.

Russia's Strategic Miscalculation

The Kremlin's long-term objective was always clear: weaken U.S. dominance, fracture Western unity, and force the world to accept Russia as a decisive pole in a multipolar system.



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Yet, Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, intended as the decisive act of strategic revisionism, became one of the greatest geopolitical miscalculations of the post-Cold War era. Rather than accelerating the decline of unipolarity and elevating Russia's global standing, the war has constrained Moscow's power, exposed structural weaknesses in its state and military, and made it a far less credible and capable player in world affairs. The invasion did not destroy the Western-led order; it reactivated it.

Meanwhile, American President Donald Trump – and not the Russian one – became a major challenger of the world order. The Ukrainian “adventure” did not restore Russian prestige; it reduced Russia's strategic autonomy and narrowed its options. And it did not produce a new multipolar equilibrium with Russia at the center; rather, it accelerated Russia's drift toward dependence on a smaller set of partners, especially China, while limiting its ability to shape events beyond its immediate neighborhood.

The Logic of Russia's Challenge to the Unipolar System

Russia's post-Soviet foreign policy evolved through phases. In the 1990s, Moscow was weakened internally and sought integration with the West, albeit from a position of inferiority. By the early 2000s, fueled by energy revenues and political consoli-

dation, Russia regained confidence and began re-asserting influence in its near abroad. Over time, the Kremlin developed a narrative in which NATO enlargement, U.S. interventions (Kosovo, Iraq, Libya), and the “color revolutions” were not separate events but components of a coherent Western strategy to encircle Russia, undermine its regime, and deny it great-power status.

This worldview framed the unipolar order as a direct threat. If the United States and its allies could determine European security, shape political outcomes in post-Soviet states, and enforce norms through sanctions or military intervention, then Russia’s sovereignty, as the Kremlin defined it, was perpetually vulnerable. In response, Moscow pursued several tools of resistance: energy leverage, disinformation, cyber operations, military modernization, and selective intervention (Georgia 2008, Crimea 2014, Syria 2015). These moves aimed to demonstrate that Russia could veto outcomes, impose costs, and force the West to negotiate.

For Moscow, Ukraine (like previously Georgia) represented not merely a geopolitical battleground but a symbolic and strategic frontier: a successful, democratic, European-oriented Ukraine would have been a long-term ideological and political threat to Russia’s authoritarian model and imperial self-conception.

By 2021–2022, the Kremlin appears to have concluded that incremental disruption was insufficient. Ukraine’s westward orientation was accelerating. The Ukrainian state, despite its weaknesses, was consolidating a civic identity increasingly incompatible with Russian imperial narratives. The Minsk process had stalled. NATO was not offering membership, but Western military support was growing. For Moscow, Ukraine (like previously

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Thus, the invasion was not only about territory. It was about rewriting the rules of European security and proving that the West could not defend its principles. In effect, Russia attempted to force the end of the post-1991 settlement by demonstrating that military conquest was still viable, that NATO was risk-averse, and that the United States would not sustain long-term confrontation.

The Core Miscalculation: Overestimating Russia, Underestimating Ukraine and the West

Russia’s strategic failure began with flawed assumptions. The Kremlin expected a rapid collapse of Ukrainian resistance, a decapitation of the government in Kyiv, and a swift installation of a compliant regime. It assumed that Ukraine was a weak, divided state whose institutions would crumble under pressure. It also believed that Europe, dependent upon Russian energy and accustomed to internal divisions, would not sustain unity or accept major economic costs. Finally, Moscow assumed that the United States, distracted by domestic polarization and competition with China, would limit its response to symbolic sanctions.

All three assumptions proved disastrously wrong.

Ukraine did not collapse. It mobilized. The Ukrainian state and society demonstrated resilience, and the armed forces adapted rapidly. The invasion, rather than fracturing Ukrainian identity, consolidated it. Russian military shortcomings,

logistical failures, poor coordination, low morale, and inadequate intelligence turned what was expected to be a lightning operation into a grinding war of attrition.

Europe did not fracture. It aligned, against all odds. While debates over escalation and aid levels persisted, the overall trajectory was not what Russia expected. European sanctions expanded, defense budgets increased, and the European Union took unprecedented steps to support and even integrate Ukraine. Even more consequential, NATO did not weaken but actually grew in size and strength. Finland and Sweden, long neutral, [moved](#) toward membership, a strategic outcome that directly contradicted Russia's stated objective of reducing NATO's footprint.

The United States did not disengage. It started to lead. Washington coordinated military assistance, intelligence support, and sanctions and framed the war as a defining contest over the rules of the international system. Rather than proving that American power was exhausted, the war demonstrated the enduring capacity of the United States to organize coalitions and sustain strategic pressure—especially when allies perceive existential stakes.

The Kremlin's miscalculation was, therefore, systemic. It was not merely a tactical error in battle-field planning; it was a strategic misunderstanding of political will, national identity, alliance cohesion, and the long-term consequences of attempting to overturn norms through force.

So far, Russia has profoundly miscalculated the second presidency of Donald Trump. At first glance, this presidency was supposed to be beneficial for Russia (challenging the world order, making unnecessary rifts with traditional allies, stopping direct military supplies to Ukraine to name few), but factually, [successfully pressuring](#) India to drastically diminish procurement of Russian

crude, [altering](#) Venezuela's oil flow and the [seizure](#) of tankers of the so-called "shadow fleet" severely hindered Russia's revenues, hence the ability to balance its books and sustain a protracted war. Even if a peace deal is reached on Ukraine, it is doubtful that Trump will treat Russia as an equal partner; most likely, Russia will be forced to cede substantial economic power to American business conglomerates.

War as a Trap

As history books teach, great powers can lose influence not only by defeat but by overextension. The war in Ukraine has become a trap that consumes Russia's attention, manpower, finances, and diplomatic capital. The longer the war continues, the more it functions as a gravitational pull that limits Moscow's ability to act elsewhere. Russia's armed forces have been heavily committed, necessitating continuous recruitment, mobilization, and equipment expenditures. This has reduced readiness and flexibility for contingencies across the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Arctic.

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The war has also reshaped Russia's military reputation. Prior to 2022, Russia cultivated an image of modernized competence, reinforced by its operations in Syria and its posture in Europe. The invasion shattered that image. Even if Russia can adapt and learn, the perception of its conventional military power has been permanently altered. For states weighing partnerships, arms purchases, or security alignments, credibility matters. A military that struggles in a major war against a neighbor

is less intimidating globally and less persuasive as a guarantor of security, especially when the perceived status of the “second most powerful army” in the world and the previous glory of Russian/Soviet weaponry has vanished.

At the same time, Russia’s war economy, while capable of sustaining production, has imposed opportunity costs. Resources that could have been invested in modernization, technology, infrastructure, human development, or long-term competitiveness are now channeled into sustaining a war. The result is the economy’s strategic stagnation. Over time, a state that militarizes its economy to sustain a prolonged conflict often becomes less innovative, less diversified, and more dependent upon a very narrow set of exports and partners.

The Sanctions Regime and the Limits of Russia’s Economic Power

One of the Kremlin’s central bets was that the West would be unwilling or unable to impose truly damaging economic measures. This bet failed. While sanctions did not collapse Russia’s economy overnight, they have structurally constrained Russia’s long-term capacity to compete as a global power.

Sanctions targeting financial systems, technology imports, and defense-industrial components have limited Russia’s access to advanced machinery, semiconductors, and high-end industrial inputs. Even where Russia has found workarounds through third countries, these are less efficient, more expensive, and politically conditional. The war has accelerated the decoupling of Russia from global financial markets and advanced technology – two resources essential for modernization in the 21st century.

Energy, Russia’s most powerful economic tool, has also become less effective. Europe’s rapid diversi-

fication away from Russian gas reduced Moscow’s ability to use energy as geopolitical leverage. Russia can redirect some exports to Asia, but this often occurs on less favorable terms and requires costly infrastructure adjustments. The broader result is a shift from being an energy superpower with strategic influence over Europe or elsewhere to becoming a more constrained supplier, increasingly dependent upon a limited set of buyers.

Economic power is not only about GDP. It is about connectivity, access, innovation, and the ability to shape rules. The war has reduced Russia’s connectivity to the most advanced parts of the global economy. This limits its ability to be a serious global player, especially in areas like high technology, finance, and industrial competitiveness.

Diplomatic Isolation and the Erosion of Power Projection Instruments

A great power’s influence depends upon more than coercion. It also relies upon diplomatic credibility, legitimacy, and the ability to build coalitions. The invasion of Ukraine severely damaged Russia’s diplomatic standing in much of the world, particularly among European states and many developed democracies.

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Moreover, Russia's claim to defend sovereignty against Western interference became difficult to sustain while it pursued a war of conquest. This contradiction weakened its ideological appeal, especially among states that value territorial integrity. While some governments remain neutral or opportunistic, the war has made Russia a more polarizing and less trusted actor.

Russia's soft power has also been damaged by the visibility of destruction, civilian suffering, and the perception of imperial aggression. In the long term, soft power is difficult to rebuild, and reputational losses can outlast battlefield outcomes. For a state seeking to be a global pole, this matters. Influence requires partners who choose alignment not only out of fear but also out of perceived benefit and legitimacy.

Russia's power projection through private military networks has likewise been constrained. The Wagner Group once served as a flexible tool for influence in Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic, and Sudan—offering security services, regime support, and political leverage in exchange for access to resources. After Wagner's 2023 mutiny and the subsequent death of its leadership, Russia moved to bring these operations under tighter state control. Yet, this restructuring reduced the group's autonomy and agility, limiting one of Moscow's most effective low-cost global instruments.

One may argue that the current U.S. administration is facing the same problem: a decline in its soft power and a loss of trust among traditional allies. The fundamental difference is that, unlike Russia, the U.S. remains a global, and in many cases indispensable, power that can afford a temporary setback. Even the current American administration considers traditional allies as essential and is allegedly merely trying to bring them more in

line with its vision on issues like immigration, climate change, anti-woke-ism, etc.

The China Factor: From Strategic Autonomy to Asymmetrical Dependence

Perhaps the most consequential result of the war has been Russia's deepening reliance upon China. Before 2022, Russia and China had developed a partnership based upon shared opposition to U.S. dominance. Yet, Russia maintained strategic autonomy: it could sell energy to Europe, import technology from the West, and act as a swing player between East and West. That autonomy is now diminished.

As Russia's access to Western markets and technology narrowed, China became an increasingly vital economic outlet. This shift has made the relationship more asymmetrical. China has a far larger economy, greater technological capacity, and a broader network of trade partners. Russia, under sanctions and at war, has fewer options. In such a relationship, Russia risks becoming the junior partner - useful as a supplier of raw materials and a geopolitical distraction for the West, but less capable of shaping China's strategic decisions.

This undermines Russia's claim to be an independent pole in a multipolar order. Multipolarity, in theory, implies multiple centers of power with strategic autonomy. If Russia becomes structurally dependent upon China, it ceases to be a pole and becomes an adjunct. The war, therefore, may have accelerated the emergence of a world with greater Chinese influence, but not necessarily one in which Russia is a true equal partner.

The Near Abroad: Shrinking Influence Where It Once Dominated

Ironically, the war in Ukraine has weakened Russia's influence in precisely the region it claims as its sphere of privileged interests. States in the post-Soviet space have observed Russia's military struggles and the costs of alignment with Moscow. Some have sought greater autonomy; others have diversified partnerships with Türkiye, China, the EU, or regional actors.

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Russia's security commitments in places like the South Caucasus and Central Asia have been strained by the demands of the war. When a hegemon is preoccupied, local actors exploit the vacuum. Even if Russia retains significant leverage, its ability to enforce outcomes has diminished. Over time, this erosion of regional dominance further limits Russia's global role because power projection typically begins with stable control of the near periphery.

Russia's traditional role as a security guarantor in the South Caucasus weakened dramatically after 2020. Armenia, formally allied with Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), received no meaningful protection during repeated Azerbaijani pressure and the eventual collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Moscow's inability (or unwillingness) to enforce its own se-

curity order exposed the limits of its regional authority. Now, Türkiye and, to a certain extent, the U.S. determine new trade corridors in the region, directly contradicting Russia's declared interests.

A second instrument, economic leverage, has also diminished. Russia historically used trade, labor migration, and energy dependence to influence neighboring states. Today, Caucasian and Central Asian countries see Russia as much less favorable for economic migration. Open hostilities toward the Azerbaijani and Central Asian diasporas and attempts to use the Armenian diaspora against the Armenian state, often manifested on the policy level, further pushed the "near abroad" away from Russia. Russian "cultural centers" and media outlets are seen as hostile actors, further eroding their influence and diminishing Russian soft power.

Meanwhile, Türkiye has expanded its role in the South Caucasus and Central Asia through defense cooperation, cultural diplomacy, and economic ties. China continues to grow as the dominant economic force in Central Asia, offering infrastructure and investment without Moscow's coercive baggage. Even within Russia's former sphere, states now hedge more actively, seeking diversification rather than dependence.

The Unipolar Order Did Not End—It Hardened

The Kremlin's ultimate goal was to end unipolarity by demonstrating that the West was decadent, divided, and incapable of defending its order. Instead, the invasion of Ukraine triggered a partial reconsolidation of Western powers. NATO expanded and rearmed. The European Union is re-evaluating its security posture and drastically increasing not only support for Ukraine but also its own military industry and expenditure. The United States demonstrated renewed leadership

in world affairs, often supplemented by real-time tariff wars and decisive military actions.

This does not mean the world returned to a simplistic unipolar model. China remains a major rival to the United States. India and other middle powers seek strategic autonomy. The global South is not uniformly aligned with Western positions. Yet, Russia's war did not produce the multipolar outcome Moscow sought. Rather than proving that American power was finished, the war underscored that U.S. alliances remain the central organizing force in global security.

In other words, Russia attempted to break the unipolar order through military revisionism, but it ended up strengthening the institutions and coalitions that sustain Western primacy. Russia became the clearest example of how revisionism can backfire when pursued through maximalist military aggression.

Russian Demise and Implications for Georgia

Russia's "demise," understood as strategic weakening rather than collapse, will not automatically liberate Georgia. But it does change the structure of risk and possibility. Russia's decline increases the urgency of Georgia's internal choices. The greatest risk is not that Georgia misses an opportunity, but that it becomes trapped in a gray zone - too

vulnerable to Russia, yet too politically inconsistent to anchor itself firmly in the West. As Russia's coercive capacity erodes, the decisive factor becomes Georgia's own institutional strength: the rule of law, democratic legitimacy, economic resilience, and defense modernization. In a region where power is shifting, small states survive not by waiting for history to favor them, but by building the capacity to exploit openings while deterring threats.

The occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia nervously observe events in Ukraine, Moldova, and Armenia-Azerbaijan, and even more so in Syria, Venezuela, and Iran. Against this background, the prospects for international recognition of their "independence" are vanishing, and the two regions have become increasingly concerned about whether Russia will be able to continue supporting them economically and politically. It may not be an immediate threat, but the possibility is no longer unthinkable.

Also against such a background, the self-isolated and ostracized Georgian government has become a real liability for Georgia's national interests and is rapidly losing its relevance. For the first time in a generation, Georgia may have a real chance to reduce Russia's grip - if it can act with unity, clarity, and long-term discipline, but not with the current regime ■