

POST-IMPERIUM A Eurasian Story

Executive Summary

The Book in a Nutshell

Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the Russian empire is gone and not coming back. Russia's primary ambition today is to be recognized as a great power, an aim that has most to do with asserting its own independence. However, to be seen as a great power in the twenty-first century, Russia has to become a great country, above all for its own people. It has the necessary resources at its disposal, but it must quickly modernize or risk being marginalized.

Key Themes

Life After Death: Relics of the defunct empire are still visible—at home and abroad. Domestically, today's Russian Federation is neo-tsarist and mildly authoritarian. Internationally, Russia now recognizes all former Soviet republics as separate countries, even if it does not yet see all of them as foreign states.

Imperial Exit and Post-Imperial Condition: The collapse of the Soviet Union reduced the country's size, population, military might, and economic output, but still left Russia with key assets like an abundance of natural resources, above all, energy; a nuclear arsenal on par with the United States; and a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Geopolitics and Security: Russia is awakening to the reality of powerful and dynamic centers rising all around its borders: the EU, China, Turkey, Iran, and India. Russia does have the potential to play the important role of a makeweight and affect the global balance of power even though it no longer looms large over its neighbors.

Economics and Energy: While accounting for only 2 percent of global GDP, Russia has experienced strong economic growth due to its rich natural resources and soaring energy prices. Its current aim is to dominate the economic space between the European Union and East Asia, while using the more advanced economies as sources of technology, investment, and innovation.

Demographics and Immigration: Russia's population is shrinking rapidly. A reduced supply of workers and conscripts is one of the major reasons the country is unlikely to return to its imperial past. Once an active colonizer, Russia is now struggling to integrate the immigrant workers its economy needs.

Culture, Ideology, and Religion: In the non-ideological, realpolitik-grounded view of the Russian leadership, the world is composed of a handful of truly sovereign great powers—America, China, and Russia among them. Moscow will lay great emphasis on sustaining its strategic independence vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing.

Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers

Support Russia's modernization drive: The United States should cultivate closer economic and social ties with Moscow through freer movement of people, goods, capital, and expertise, thereby improving Russia's chances of modernizing, liberalizing, and becoming a more valuable partner for the United States.

Pursue missile defense cooperation: Washington should seize upon Moscow's inability to compete militarily with the United States as an opportunity to turn an essentially adversarial strategic relationship into a collaborative one. Cooperation on missile defense, in particular, is a potential game changer that would tie Russia closely to the West in the emerging great power lineup. A security community in the Euro-Atlantic, including Russia, as well as the rest of Europe and North America, is in the United States' long-term strategic interest.

Recommendations for Russian Policymakers

Reform institutions: Modernization viewed only in terms of technology transfers and islands of innovation is too narrow to succeed. Russia must energize its modernization drive by rolling back corruption, opening its political system, and strengthening the rule of law. Conservation of the present system will lead to decay and disintegration.

Embrace soft power: Soft power should be central to Russia's foreign policy. Russia already possesses virtually unused elements of this kind of power across the post-Soviet world, from the widespread use of the Russian language to the cultural influence of Russian literature and music. These must be expanded to include education and science.

Reduce reliance on hard power: The Russian brinkmanship that contributed to the outbreak of the war with Georgia has worked against Russia's best interests, creating the image of a bully bent on restoring the empire. To reassure its neighbors, Russia should promote historical reconciliation with those neighbors that suffered from Soviet actions. Improved relations with Poland should be solidified and expanded to include the Baltics.

Assume the role of a benevolent regional leader: Taking a leading role in resolving conflicts in the former Soviet space would go a long way toward mending relations with neighbors and establishing Russia's capability and willingness to produce international public goods.

Embrace Russia's position as a Euro-Pacific nation: The global power shift toward the Pacific necessitates a new focus in Russian foreign policy. Russia's cutting-edge, twenty-first century frontier lies to the east, where it has both a need and a chance to benefit from ties with its immediate Asian neighbors: China, Japan, and South Korea, and the Pacific countries: the United States, Canada, and Australia. Russia would do well to think of Vladivostok—located within easy reach of East Asia's dynamic economies—as its twenty-first century metropolis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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