U.S. Strategy and the Real Lessons of the War in Ukraine: From Cooperation with Russia and China to Lasting Confrontation

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No one can yet predict just how much of a human tragedy the Russian invasion of Ukraine will create. What the U.S. and its strategic partners can predict, however, is that Russia will be a lasting threat as long as Putin or anyone like him remains in power. What is also equally clear is that while China may be less openly provocative and threatening, its competition with the United States presents a steadily growing threat, and China is moving from cooperation and civil competition to the possibility of a major military confrontation as well. If anything, President Xi has already proved that China can create a far more effective threat than Russia over the coming decade, and President Xi already controls a far a larger economy than President Putin.

China already sharply outspends Russia in building up its military forces. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that Russia officially spent only $62.2 billion in FY 2021, although this is a high estimate based on comparative purchasing power – and it could be as high as $178 billion. Russia’s military spending is sharply limited by its weak economy, and it cannot credibly do anything in the face of continued sanctions that will allow it to compete with the IISS estimate of $754 billion for the United States and over $300 billion for NATO European countries.

The World Bank does estimate that Russia did partly recover from the breakup of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) from a gross national product (GNP) of only $667 billion in 1998 to $1,416 billion in 2020 (measured in constant 2015 dollars), but this compares to $19,435 billion for the U.S. in 2020 (14 times larger) and $13,886 for the European Union (9.8 times larger).

In contrast, the World Bank estimates that China has seen its GDP rise from $1,123 billion in 1991 to $14,632 billion in 2020 (measured in constant 2015 dollars) – a figure 13 times larger than in 1991. China has steadily increased its official figures for military spending for over two decades, alongside its expanding economy. It officially spent $207.3 billion on its military in 2021 according to the IISS, and its purchasing power could already be as high as $332 billion. Some estimates indicate that China could equal the U.S. by 2035-2040.

For all the talk of resuming the Cold War, the reality is radically different. The United States and its strategic partners now confront two superpowers – not just one – and powers that pose both a global as well as a regional challenge. A rising China is also becoming the most serious threat. It is becoming a serious nuclear power, it is modernizing its conventional forces far more quickly than Russia, and it is a growing technological rival to the U.S. and its partners. Its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as well as its global trade and investment efforts are also a far more effective method to use its civil-economic power to win strategic influence.

Accordingly, the U.S. needs to do far more than simply react to the war in Ukraine and help to rebuild NATO. The challenge is global, and it will increase every year. The real lesson of the war in Ukraine is that the U.S. must now plan to work with its strategic partners indefinitely into the future and in ways that meet both authoritarian threats.

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