

Moscow's Status Anxiety

Opinion

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Russia is a great nation by virtue of its history and culture; few have doubts about it. But being a great world power is a relative value: others have to recognize it. Tricking others into recognizing one's worth does not work.

The Russia File, a Wilson Center blog by [Maxim Trudolyubov](#), June 7, 2017 In my secondary school years in the late 1980s, "Deployment of New Missiles in Europe Must Stop," "Moscow Pulls Out of the U.S. Olympics," and "Reagan's Great Lie in the Sky" were the kinds of news stories one had to present in front of the class after spending an evening sifting through the newspapers. We had weekly "political information" classes back then, and these headlines come back to me whenever I remember those times. It was just the way the world was: they called us "evil," we called them "imperialists"; they were running their part of the world, we were ruling ours. Underlying all the media noise was a notion firmly held by both sides that they were equals, each power holding a 50 percent stake in the world's ultimate security "joint venture." The Soviet bloc and other socialist-leaning countries were not called "the second world" for nothing. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia sought to consolidate its former international status. Moscow made sure the Soviet nuclear arsenal was on Russian territory, took up responsibility for the Union's debts, inherited its permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, and claimed the former republics' largest foreign assets. By virtue of this transition, the Russian elites have always considered themselves entitled to the Soviet Union's stature in the world. Americans thought otherwise. U.S. politicians—starting with George H. W. Bush, who in 1992 [declared](#) that "the Cold War didn't end; it was won"—tended to see Russia's stake in the world as diminished. Of course, this was a viewpoint, not a document: the standoff between the powers of the capitalist West and the socialist East had been very real, but no capitulation treaty was signed at the end of the Cold War because the war, itself, had never been formally declared. The same goes for the Soviet-American security "joint venture": it had never been instituted on paper and could be easily diluted. Or so it feels now. "The collapse of the Soviet Union was unique in the pace with which the country's international status crumbled," Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, [wrote](#) in *Vedomosti* at the end of January, not long after President Trump's inauguration. "In November 1991, the USSR was one of the two pillars of the world order. (Mikhail Gorbachev served as one of the two principals, with Bush, of the 1991 Madrid Conference, an attempt to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.) In December of the same year, the newly independent Russia was receiving humanitarian aid from its former adversaries—no military defeat suffered!" This is today's vision. I am not sure that many, even among the top officials, felt so strongly about the loss of Russia's international status back in the 1990s. The overwhelming concern was to make sure the transition was peaceful. "The Soviet Union had more than five million soldiers deployed from Budapest to Vladivostok, and hundreds of thousands more troops in KGB and interior ministry battalions," the historian Stephen Kotkin wrote in his aptly named book, *Armageddon Averted*. "It experienced almost no major mutinies in any of

these forces. And yet, they were never fully used.” [⋯]
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