

Russia is On Track to Become Another Iran

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

June 08, 2014



In 1994, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, describing the prospects for the U.S.-Russia relationship, argued that Russia could be either "a sort of France," "a sort of China" or "a sort of Iran." It took Moscow 20 years, but it has transitioned through all three of these options.

Throughout the 1990s, Russia reasserted its right of return to the West after decades of Soviet isolationism. A important part of this was its drive to join Western institutions. While it retained a dissenting voice on many issues, including in Iraq, Bosnia, and Kosovo, it never questioned the values-based foundations of its common future with the West. Russia was a "sort of France," albeit with a dysfunctional economy.

Vladimir Putin's ascent to the Russian presidency in 2000 continued this effort to embed Russia within the Western camp. But it quickly fizzled out amid mutual distrust, the West's patronizing attitude, Russia's convoluted sense of victimhood and a reluctance to reform itself.

By the end of 2004, Putin had concluded that the Western trajectory was incompatible with the system of state capture and crony capitalism he was building in Russia. Rapid economic growth fueled by rallying energy markets convinced the Kremlin that Russia was a great power in its own right and could do without Western institutions and values. However, Russia refrained from challenging the West on security, except during the 2008 war with Georgia. Russia became "a sort of China," a nation focused on internal modernization with little appetite for reckless adventures abroad.

Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, though, signaled Russia's transition from an emerging to a submerging market. Its stage-managed politics was reorganized, Iran-style, around a "supreme leader" whose authority cannot be challenged.

Maintaining popular support amid diminishing economic prospects required an ideology of Russian exceptionalism and moral superiority over the West. Like Iran's ayatollahs railing against the Great Satan, Putin has discovered immense political mileage in tapping Russia's anti-Americanism.

Undermining the West and its rules for international order is becoming an important source of domestic legitimacy for Putin. Selective confrontation and competition with America energizes his political coalition at home and abroad. It now pays to be a "sort-of Iran."

With Iran, though, the West worries about a rogue state going nuclear. With Russia, it has to deal with a nuclear power going rogue.

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