

Addendum on the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia, A Declining State in Transition: The Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian image in the contemporary world has been that of a state in decline. Formerly the Soviet Union, and the “senior partner” of the communist world’s Cold War struggle against the West, the nation began the process of economic decline two decades before it physically dissolved with the Soviet collapse. Post-Soviet Russia continued to stagnate and struggle with post-communist chaos until the rise of Vladimir Putin (himself a lifelong Communist), who rose to leadership in 2000. Russia has tried to piggyback its geopolitical resurgence on oil revenues, but these efforts have been partially subverted by fluctuations in petroleum prices. Mirroring centuries of Russian history, Putin has attempted to use expansionist policies to reassert Russia’s claims to superpower status. It has been only a partial success and continues in the shadow of negative trends.

Post-Soviet Russia has struggled with the transition, and especially the loss of power status accompanying that decline. The political units once part of the Soviet Union bloc surrounding (and especially bordering) Russia, such as Ukraine, the Baltic states, etc, were among the most vigorous defectors from the self-styled “worker’s paradise.” Russia has faced numerous ongoing dilemmas and problems since, including the loss of territory and population, which creates, among other issues, ego problems associated with the eager exodus of many from the Russian embrace. To “russify” the Soviet Empire, large numbers of great Russians were sent to peripheral parts of the Soviet Union and were, by and large, not particularly welcome immigrants. Their territories and populations, however, provided a shield around Russia that meant potential invaders would have to fight their way across territorial jurisdiction loyal to

Russia, thus reinforcing Russian security. When the Soviet Union collapsed, these reluctant Soviet powers abandoned a Russia which, in the 1990s, was incapable of enforcing its sovereign control of them.

The Russian Saga

Russia has always been an enigmatic place. It sits astride the eastern part of Europe and spreads across Asia to the Pacific, making it the world's largest country in land mass, even after half the Soviet Union defected and the union dissolved. Its sheer size makes it a consequential country, but it has remained culturally, politically, and physically at the fringes of a world order it seeks to join, even dominate, as a fully accepted member. Much of Russia's political history has been the quest for acceptance as a great power. It achieved that status after World War II; it arguably lost it after the Soviet Union disappeared.

Although much about Russia is mysterious from the outside (Winston Churchill depicted the USSR as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma"), its broad contours are not. By most material standards, Russia has always trailed behind the other major powers, and it continues to do so today. Its primary claim to world status is its size, and it has sought to augment its claim through relentless expansion. The sheer land mass and resultant power of the Soviet Union represented its high-water mark in international political terms. Along with the United States, it was one of only two major participants in World War II to emerge as a significant power, and its development of a large nuclear arsenal allowed it to rise to the status it had fought so long to achieve.

Unfortunately for the Russians, part of the image was an illusion, a false front that obscured flawed foundations. The Soviet Union's claim to leadership in the world was almost

entirely military. Its political system was harsh and authoritarian and eventually lost the support of the people both within its borders and throughout its vassal states in Eastern Europe. The economy was essentially a developing world construct in structure and performance, leading to its depiction by some as a “frozen banana republic with nuclear weapons.”

Despite efforts to obscure the fact, the fatal weakness of the Soviet system was evident to some by the early 1970s. It was the Era of Stagnation: by 1973, the only economic sector not in decline was vodka production. Soviet academic economists adopted Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife, Raisa (a colleague at Moscow State University), to publicize this fate, which helped lead to Gorbachev’s ascension to power. This crisis was most strikingly obvious in science and technology (a traditional Russian strength), and especially computer development, where the Soviets lagged progressively further behind. These trends led Gorbachev in two fateful policy directions. First, he determined that he must end the Cold War and try to rejoin the world order to gain access to funds and technology. Second, in 1989, he ended a decade-long debilitating military adventure in Afghanistan. The result demonstrated the weakness of the iron fist and encouraged defections from both the Soviet Union and among its satellites. I discussed this progression in a three-edition series of books in the 1990s collectively titled *The Shape of the Future*.

The end of the Cold War began Russia’s decline from superpower to a lesser status, plunging the nation into a state of economic and political chaos in the 1990s with which Boris Yeltsin, the new leader, could not successfully cope. The economy collapsed, leaving much of its population in abject poverty and misery. Former Soviet authority and power declined to the point that the United States was enlisted to help get part of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal out of the Soviet Socialist Republics (including Ukraine), where the loyalty and responsibility of newly

independent regimes was suspect, and to engage in some inspection of those weapons to guard against nuclear accidents. This was the situation Vladimir Putin inherited when he became president in 2000.

The Limits of Russian Power and Prospects

A declining Russia was beset by two major problems that continue to bedevil Putin's dream of reasserting Russian superpower status. One is demographic: the Russian population was roughly halved by the breakup of the USSR and has further declined since. The other is economic: Putin has addicted Russia to an economy dominated by oil sales, and the result is a petrolist state with all its inherent problems, including dependence on a wildly vacillating market for that resource.

The demographic problem is straightforward and dire. Using U.S. Census Bureau figures, the 2019 *World Almanac and Book of Facts* documents the Russian population decline. In 1990, the last year of the Soviet Union, its population stood at about 300 million (compared to 290 million for the United States). In 2018, the estimate was 142 million, and by 2050, it is projected at 129 million. By contrast, the U.S. projections are over 330 million today and extrapolated to 398 million in 2050, three times that of Russia. Russia's population used to be third largest in the world; it is now ninth and falling. Factors in this dismal prospect include declining fertility rates and shortened life expectancies. Because only seven percent of Russian land is arable, it also has trouble feeding itself. Proposed solutions include greater immigration and expansion into new territories. The success of either is problematic.

The other problem is economic. Putin tied Russia's economy to oil revenues, making the country a petrolist state with all the vagaries attached, including boom and bust cycles based on the global price of oil, corruption, and a government dependent on oil revenues. When oil prices

are high, the system appears to work, because there is a surplus of money to spend on citizen welfare and government expansion. When oil prices fall, discontentment and associated problems return. People see fewer benefits, the corruption associated with petrolism increases, and the system becomes what is sometimes called a kleptocracy. For instance, the price of oil collapsed in the early 2010s and in a two-year period, Russian gross domestic product fell from 2 to 1.2 trillion (U.S. gross domestic product at the time was over 16 trillion).

Putin's dream is clearly a return to great or superpower status, and both demographic and economic dynamics are heavy anchors weighing down this ambition. Clearly, Putin wants to rekindle the prestige of the Soviet days, and his long-term success and popularity are largely dependent on a return to glory for the highly nationalistic Russians. Putin witnessed the precipitous decline of his country in the 1990s, and he is struggling to reverse that status. He has, in typical Russian fashion, chosen expansion as his preferred method—until recently only into Crimea and Eastern Ukraine.

Putin's Russia may be a modern Potemkin Village, but it is still an important state whose continued decline can only further destabilize world politics. Because it possesses a sizeable arsenal of nuclear weapons, it remains a dangerous state, a status Putin punctuated by raising the alert status marginally early in the 2022 war with Ukraine. It also has under its permafrost and Arctic waters some of the globe's largest stores of petroleum energy, which the world needs as it makes its way through the transition away from fossil fuel-derived energy that will render petroleum marginal or unnecessary. It is still an aggressive, expansionist, and politically destabilizing place—it is Russia, after all, and that alone causes it to be described, possibly hyperbolically, as a “rising revisionist power.”

The Russians face a formidable task regaining their status in a world that is suspicious of them and their motives. The main geopolitical consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union is that it dismantled the *cordon sanitaire* of compliant states on the Russian border that guaranteed a future invader would have to fight its way across hostile ground before reaching Soviet territory. However, one major effect of the Soviet breakup was, to free these countries from Russian domination, and many of them became fiercely independent and even hostile to Moscow: dependencies became rivals, even enemies. In order to maintain control and the illusion of unity, Russia sent Russian immigrants into these outlying areas, where most remained after the Soviet Union broke apart. These people have become symbols of a Russian diaspora, as evidenced in places like Georgia, and most recently in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine, where Russia claims to have “liberated” them by invasion.

The Russian regime of Vladimir Putin has sought to wrestle with the assaults on Russian security and status in the world. In important ways, Putin is a creature of the Soviet/Russian past. His background is, after all, as a KGB agent, not the kind of history that would lead to a liberal mindset. Putin’s worldview has been summarized by his observation that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the worst political catastrophe of the twentieth century, an observation arguably true for Russia, if not the rest of the world. Putin came to power in 2000. Now at age 70 in 2022, he is clearly intent on remaining in control as long as he physically can. Putin’s goal is to return Russia to its former Soviet glory and status. Securing that goal is clearly the political legacy he wants to leave behind: a Russia, metaphorically speaking, where the monuments to the Soviet past are replaced by monuments to himself as the leader of a revived Russian superpower.

This creates two geopolitical imperatives for Putin. One is the restoration and reassertion of Russia as a great power. Russia’s geopolitical profile is more of a state in decline, not power

and expansion. Its population base is shrinking, and its economic strength is based in a commodity (oil) of declining importance. Putin's purpose is clearly to reestablish as much of former Soviet sway as he can, even as it leads to a bleak geopolitical future. Consolidating influence—even control—over as much of the former Soviet Union as he can is almost certainly a cornerstone of this effort, but it is resisted in the regions that broke away from Soviet domination, which are largely uninterested in contributing to the return of Russian glory (Belarus is the only notable exception). Putin tipped his hand by attacking and subjugating Georgia in 2008, where 18 percent of the population is Russian. Putinism was asserted in 2014 when the Russians occupied the Ukrainian area of Crimea to regain warm water access to the Black Sea. Consolidating that control is part of the 2022 Russian campaign against the Black Sea port of Odessa that began with the invasion of February 24th.

These dynamics help (but may not entirely) explain the Russian war against Ukraine. The Russians—and especially Putin—have portrayed their aggression as the result of Ukraine's growing public interest in closer alignment with the West, notably membership in the European Union (EU) and, more ominously, NATO. The potential integration of Ukraine into the West would place an opponent (and certainly an adversary) on Russia's western border, along a corridor that is part of the historic invasion route of Russia from the west. Given Russian history and anti-Western sentiment, possible rapprochement with the West is suspicious to many authoritarian Russian elites, who view westernization and democratization as threats to their hold on the country. The degree of recent political liberalization in Eastern Europe and their drift toward the West has alarm bells ringing in Russia.

Ukraine has a prominent place in these concerns because it is by far the largest of the former Eastern Bloc states wedged between Russia and the NATO West. It broke free from

authoritarian/Marxist domination in 2004 as the result of the so-called Orange Revolution and has adopted a neutral political stance that many in the Russian former communist elite (like Putin) view with suspicion. The country is physically large by regional standards, with a physical area about the size of Texas and four times the area of Georgia in the United States. It is also the most populous former Soviet state, with a prewar population of about 44 million (several million of whom have fled into exile and could return after the fighting ends). Its physical boundary with Russia (including contested states like Donetsk) is 1,944 kilometers long, and Russian accession of these areas (which, combined, have roughly three million imported Russian immigrant citizens) would relieve much of the immediate Russian fear of invasion.

The stated wartime objectives of the Russians reflect these concerns. In a March 7, 2022 pronouncement, Putin called for four conditions for ending the war. All of them, of course, assert or imply Ukrainian responsibility for making the Russian action “necessary.” The four demands are: that Ukraine cease all military actions against the Russians; that the Ukrainians amend their constitution to “enshrine neutrality”; that they acknowledge that Crimea is “Russian territory”; and that they recognize Donetsk and Lugansk as independent states. Indeed, the official rationale for the February 24, 2022 invasion of Ukraine was to protect the “three million lives” of residents of Donetsk from attack by the Ukrainians. The individual and collective impact of meeting these demands would be to reconstruct, in a limited manner, the cordon sanitaire between Russia and the West and effectively guarantee that a future war between Russia and the West would be engaged on Ukrainian, rather than Russian, soil.

Putin’s shadow dominates these rationales. It is not plausible to maintain that the armed forces of Ukraine posed any kind of direct or immediate threat to a country with three to four times their population, and there would have been far more deliberation involving an attempt to

join NATO before any direct Russian military action would have been required to halt the expansion. Was the accession of Ukraine to NATO imminent? If it was, it was a secret assiduously kept from western publics; it was certainly not a part of the debate in the United States, where there would have been significant opposition based on the dangerous, and from an American viewpoint, unnecessary, threat it might create. How many Americans knew of a Ukrainian movement to join NATO in January 2022? The answer is virtually no American outside government did and raising the possibility would have been controversial enough to spark major debate in the current American political atmosphere. Ukrainian advocacy was not matched by NATO interest (at least publicly). If Putin acted to douse the groundfire of Ukrainian membership in NATO, why he did so is not entirely obvious.

It is thus difficult to disentangle the Putin factor from the geopolitical considerations. The fear of encirclement—even a staging ground for a western invasion in the most extreme rendering—is the underlying rationale for Russian action, although it is difficult to determine definitively if that was truly the case in invading Ukraine. More compelling reasons for launching the war may emerge as time goes by, but Ukrainian public enthusiasm for closer ties to the West can hardly have provided an adequate rationale for the barbaric nature of the invasion and its actions against the Ukrainian people. The publicly stated rationale did not provide adequate justification for the invasion that followed. So why did Putin order the invasion? The answer is necessarily speculative.

The Russian Performance and Consequences of the War

To say that the Russians have not distinguished themselves or accomplished their goals in attacking Ukraine is obvious, at least as of this writing in April 2022. Their performance has

been less than exemplary. In the absence of reliable information, the reader can only speculate why they acted and why their performance was so lackluster. In this case, looking at the experience from the dual, and interrelated, lenses of burnishing Russian prestige and security represents one perspective. Putin and his quest for his personal place in Russian history represents the other.

One of the factors that looms in the background of the conflict is the role of nuclear weapons. The United States and Russia's possession of nuclear weapons has influenced both countries' perceptions of the war and their approach to it. As the war proceeded embarrassingly inconclusively in its first week, Russia addressed the nuclear factor directly by increasing their nuclear alert level marginally, an act that did not measurably affect the fighting in Ukraine but did remind the world that nuclear escalation was possible. It was a stern reminder of the potential horror of modern war between nuclear-armed powers.

Some general, if tentative, observations can be made. The first is that the entire Russian operation and performance have been badly flawed, and the result is likely to further challenge historic relationships between Russia and its neighbors. The backlash is likely to have both internal and international implications. Domestically, there was already some opposition to the operation while it was ongoing, and since it was less than the smashing success they expected, is likely to result in some negative sentiment about the government. Putin himself is likely to be the object of criticism, the irony of which is that his legacy will likely be tarnished, not burnished as he had undoubtedly hoped and planned. The Russian world image he has promoted is also likely to suffer. In a UN General Assembly vote taken early on after the invasion, only five states voted against a proposal condemning the action. The invasion was supposed to strengthen the images

of Putin and Russia; it did not. Certainly, the international —and probably domestic— image of Putin is stained, possibly beyond redemption.

This negative effect on Russia's "brand" is also likely to be harmful for Russia's global image, particularly given the brutal actions taken against civilian targets during the war's conduct. Indeed, there are already accusations of war crimes committed by the Russians, and the impact of economic sanctions against them will be far reaching and long lasting. The Ukrainian image has been enhanced by the determined resistance of its much smaller, largely untrained, volunteer forces against Russian professional military forces: other groups with grievances against the Russians and any country thinking of associating with the Russians are almost certainly to be influenced by the apparent ineptitude of the Russian effort. Russia as a member of the international community has been diminished by the experience, which does more to reinforce the image of the "banana republic with nuclear weapons" than it does Russia as a respected pillar of the international community. The interesting question for the future is the fate of Putin's hold on power and how international esteem for Russia, never very high, is affected by its handling of this crisis.