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Ukraine and the Russian Way of War

There are continuities between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and customary Russian approaches to the use of armed conflict in advancing the state's interests. These are important for understanding the contemporary conflict between Kyiv and Moscow.

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There are continuities between Putin's invasion of Ukraine and customary Russian approaches to the use of armed conflict in advancing the state's interests. These are important for understanding the contemporary conflict between Kyiv and Moscow. They invoke the old truism—you must deal with the enemy you have, not the enemy you want.

Two aspects of the war against Ukraine invoke reflection on historic precedents. First, Russia has traditionally never shied away from using force in attempts to overturn an international order not to its liking. Second, the rulers of Russia have always held that the security of the Eurasian land mass comes from establishing a hard sphere of security around the Russian space, one that also ensures access to the global commons.

Russia and Global Conflict

Russia has always envisioned itself as a great power, an empire that eats geopolitics for breakfast when it finds an international order and balance of power that threatens its ability to exercise power and influence with freedom of action. There are innumerable examples of this in both the imperial and Soviet eras.

During the Napoleonic Wars, for instance, Russia considered French dominance of continental Europe as a prospect beyond the pale of what Moscow could accept. Thus, Russia defied Napoleon's continental blockade of Britain, though the emperor knew full well this could lead to war.

The Crimean War (1853–56) is another illustrative example. The official cause was a dispute over authority of the Orthodox Christians living in Ottoman territory. This was a pretext for a great power struggle to tip the balance of power, as well as ensure Russian access to the Black Sea.

Arguably, World War I also reflected this priority. Despite innumerable domestic challenges and a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), Moscow plunged head on into the conflict rather than see the development of a global international order unfavorable to Russia.

The Soviet era saw more continuity than differences with imperial foreign policy. Though the Bolsheviks (Russian communists) presumptively withdrew from the war in December 1917, geopolitics quickly returned as a feature of Soviet policy in the interwar years. It culminated with the Soviets joining the Allied war effort.

While Moscow eschewed a direct conflict with the West during the Cold War, it was abundantly clear early in the postwar period that the Soviets saw American–British dominance as completely unacceptable. While Moscow did not attack the United States or Europe, consistently throughout the Cold War the Soviets underwrote armed conflicts as tools to degrade American power and influence, offsetting the Russian disadvantages in global competition. These efforts include, for example, support for the Korean War (1950–53), the Vietnam War (1955–75), wars against Israel (1967 and 1973), and insurgencies in Africa and Latin America in the 1980s, as well as supporting terrorist attacks on the West in the 1970s and 1980s.

Russia and Regional Conflict

Without question both imperial and Soviet Russia have had little aversion to use wars to either protect or expend a hard sphere of influence. Indeed, this is arguably an indisputable element

of Russian grand strategy.

In the imperial age the wars and proxy wars on the Russian periphery are innumerable. As previously noted, the Crimean War was just as much about consolidating the Russian sphere of influence as tilting the scale in great power competition. Moscow's role in the Balkan Wars (1912–13) also included efforts to advance both its regional sphere of influence and the global balance of power.

Most notably during the Soviet era, Russia willingly used force to prevent countries from breaking away from the Soviet sphere of influence, including both military interventions in Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968).

Policy and Putin

It ought to come as no surprise that Putin would return to these priorities in formulating Russia's path forward in the modern world. First, if anything, Putin is the product of Russian strategic culture. He grew up in the Russian system. His whole life he looked at the world from a Russian perspective. He lamented Russia's loss of control over the post-Soviet space and bristled against Russia's declining influence in great power politics.

Indeed, there is more than ample evidence of Putin's perspective. It is present in Russian strategic writings, Putin's rhetoric, and in Russia's actions as well. Russia seized parts of Moldova, Georgia, and in 2014, part of Ukraine. All these actions reflect the traditional Russian dual agenda: expanding the Russian hard sphere of control and territorial acquisitions that Moscow could use to tweak relations with the West, becoming more aggressive or reasonable as suited its purposes.

The invasion of Ukraine was the logical next step. A successful invasion would have expanded Russia's hard sphere of influence, humiliated the Europeans and Americans, and impressed the Chinese—a boon to Moscow's great power status.

Past as Future

If Russia suffers a catastrophic defeat in Ukraine, it will only steel Putin's resolve to comeback and reverse the course of history, stealing victory from defeat, much like the imperial victory over Napoleon and the triumphal Soviet counter offensive against Nazi Germany. If, on the other hand, Russia wins on the ground or at the negotiating table, it will only whet Putin's appetite for more.

The end state that is most likely to emerge from the fight will likely not be too much different from imperial setbacks on the periphery or the ambivalent results of Soviet proxy wars. Ukraine is going to look like West Germany 1945 or South Korea 1953 or Israel 1967 with a stand-off and unresolved territorial claims. What will hold Russia at bay is not a negotiation, or a humbled, or a satiated Russia, but a Ukraine that has conventional capacity to deter future invasions, and an economy and political stability that is resilient against Russian pressure. This will be the least bad result, but an all-too-common outcome in dealing with Russia—a cold peace that holds the bear at bay.

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