



The Root Causes of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract

Russian invasion of Ukraine goes much further than phantom pains of Russia's imperial dreams. This unfolding confrontation must be understood as a major clash in the rising strategic competition to determine the future architecture of the world order and the European security system. To analyse the essence of this aggression, one should not succumb to the temptations to deny Putin and his entourage rationally. Most of the steps taken by the Kremlin, both before and after February 24, 2022, look quite rational, if framed by the regime's evaluation of the state of the world. This war is not just about Ukraine, in fact Russia tests in Ukraine the US and the West's "acceptability red lines" and this is seen in Moscow as a prelude to the destruction of the rules-based world order. Global governance indeed begs not just for modern institutions' reform because their credibility has been substantially eroded by inaction and lack of solidarity but for revision and remodelling because their inadequacy and inefficiency have become ever-present, crying and overwhelming. Redefining multilateralism will not be enough. We will have to reinvent it.

Every day people die in Ukraine. The count may already be in dozens of thousands. These are Ukrainian soldiers, civilians, children and even Russian soldiers who came to a foreign land as aggressors, but many of whom are forced, almost teenage conscripts. Russia has already begun the "second stage of military operation" in eastern Ukraine, the consequences of which are very difficult to predict, but which, no doubt, will claim thousands of more lives. The West is increasing sanctions against Russia and supplying Ukraine with more and more heavy weapons.

As a regular conflict, the ongoing Ukraine war is being fought with kinetic weapons in conventional operational battlefields. However, its impact exceeds the domain of military statecraft. It goes much further than phantom pains of Russia's imperial dreams. In fact, this unfolding confrontation must also be understood as a major clash in the rising strategic competition to determine the future architecture of the world order and security system—a dangerous gamble played for the highest stakes.

The Russian aggression in Ukraine has put an end to the rules-based world order as well as to the endless debates about a "new iteration" of Cold War together with all kinds of theorising about the differences and peculiarities of "cool" versus the cold wars.

For the first time since the end of the Second World War, the world got a real hot war in Europe in which Ukraine, practically single-handedly supported only by the provision

of the military equipment by several countries, has heroically and successfully resisted the aggression of an outnumbered and outgunned enemy.

“The past will be haunting us as long as we do not close all past pages that remain open.”

What are the root causes of Russian aggression in Ukraine and the catastrophic breakdown in the European security system? What are the options for the future world order?

Our main trouble is paradoxical in nature: our future is already with us, but our past is yet to come.

Disintegration of the Soviet empire was an unfinished business—look at the Russian borders where you will see many semi-legal entities—Luhansk and Donetsk “peoples republics”, Osetia, Abkhazia. The existence of these parastates is the symptom of the continuing disintegration of the empire—the borders are still unclear, flexible and debatable. And there might be further fault lines in the Caucasus, Kazakhstan and many other territories.

However, Russia is not unique. China and Taiwan, South and North Korea, Kashmir, Israel and Palestine, Syria, Afghanistan—you can easily continue the list of border conflicts, occupied territories, which are various forms of irredentism.

And the past will be haunting us as long as we do not close all past pages that remain open.

Actually, it was Gorbachev who warned prophetically (though in a different context) when he said in 1989 that “those who are late are punished by history”.

And late we were, catastrophically late, when after the end of the Cold War we missed the chance to craft a new world on the ruins of the dilapidated structures of the traditional balance of power system.

When Gorbachev overturned the Cold War chessboard it was not just the Russian elite who was not ready, which explains why Russia has taken the direction that led her into the current shape. The happily slumbering West, used to functioning in a bipolar world, was not ready either. Gorbachev’s actions caused consternation and even shock in Western establishments, disrupting as they did the customary rhythm of life and rising challenges the West was not ready for.

As Georgy Arbatov said to Henry Kissinger at one of the public debates, “Henry, we will do something really terrible for you (the US), we will deprive you of the enemy”. Later Senator Fulbright echoed this warning: “The USSR ... provided us with excuses for our own failures”.

However the West could not resist the temptation to declare itself the absolute winner of the Cold War and the sole heir to history.

For years since, analysts have debated whether the United States incited Russian interventions in Ukraine and other neighbouring countries or whether Moscow’s actions

were simply unprovoked aggressions. Now this conversation has been muted by the horrors of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

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However, although it is immoral to blame the United States or the West for Putin's brutal attack on Ukraine, to insist that the invasion was entirely unprovoked or at least not rooted in the preceding developments is also misleading.

This is in no way a blame-shifting attempt, Putin's Russia is alone responsible certainly for the aggression that has already cost colossal loss of life, but the invasion of Ukraine is taking place in a historical and political context in which the United States has played and will continue to play the leading (though far from hegemonic) role.

And if Russians are responsible for keeping Putin in power and thus for letting him start this Cain's war against Ukraine, the US and the West are responsible at least for failing to diagnose timely and offset the threat at a much earlier stage. After all, you need two for a tango.

So in what way might the United States have provoked Putin?

One thing should be clear: it was not by compromising the security of Russia. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has objectively enjoyed greater security than at any time in recent history.

What occurred was what frequently happens even in human relations—there was a failure to realise shared interests in a complex, evolving context.

Pope John Paul II warned as early as 1992 that “the Western countries run the risk of seeing this collapse of Communism as a one-sided victory of their own economic system, and thereby failing to make necessary corrections in that system.”

Instead the US and the West rushed to establish “the victory dividends”, quickly converting moral principles of liberalism and democracy into geopolitical instruments. As Condoleezza Rice wrote in the *Foreign Affairs*: “it is America’s job to change the world...Democratic state-building is now an urgent component of our national interest”.

Well, as they say “we wanted the best, you know the rest...”, many regions of the world are still facing the consequences of the “democratic state building” programs, imposed on the people and communities historically and culturally not being prepared for it.

As Fareed Zakaria famously noticed: “In the early twentieth century, Woodrow Wilson put before the United States this goal: to make the world safe for democracy. In the twenty-first century, our task is to make democracy safe for the world.”

But the new “promised” world looked wonderfully pretty. Democracy—and, indeed, decency—had triumphed (in reality in many countries it was largely a made-to-order imitation). Aggressors would be punished (not always and not everywhere). When difficulties appeared, America would ride in to the rescue, encouraged by an accommodating Russia and all sorts of other, newly acquired friends. The United Nations was flourishing, and seemed to be finally fulfilling its purpose—“to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war”.

“The NATO expansion that many point to as the main reason for the Russia-West discord was perceived by Russian people within a framework, not so much on the basis of security but rather disregard and disrespect.”

None of this lasted long. When the Cold War ended, half a century of certainties went out of the window. And the frosty clarity of the Cold War bipolarity had given way to the fog of peace.

Quite soon, after a bloodstained sequence of disasters—in Somalia, Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Rwanda, Albania and Algeria—the pattern looked neither pretty nor orderly. And the self-nominated victors of the Cold War seemed no more able to sort out the world than before.

Indeed, they were no more able to understand it. They found the rise of conflictuality largely incomprehensible and, when they took their eyes from the map, they did not even know what to look at—countries, regions, statelets or tribes, religious organisations, ethnic resentment? It looked as if the ages long conflicts have been “defrosted” in the new world and popping up unpredictably and with accelerating speed.

The West’s failure to recognise the new realities of the world after the end of the Cold War and the dismissive attitude to Russia planted the seeds of deep mistrust in the Russian political class.

It is helpful to remind that it is not only Putin, but also his predecessors Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev, who expressed their concern over the U.S. course. The former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott recalls in his memoir a conversation when then-President Bill Clinton put himself in Yeltsin’s shoes: “We keep telling Ol’ Boris, ‘Okay, now here’s what you’ve got to do next—here’s some more shit for your face.’ And that makes it real hard for him, given what he’s up against and who he’s dealing with.” And by the middle of his presidency, even initially pro-Western Yeltsin could not hide his bitterness, saying that President Clinton was treating Russia “like Haiti.” “I don’t like it when the U.S. flaunts its superiority ... Russia will rise again!” he said, “I repeat: Russia will rise again!”

Gorbachev similarly pointed that, after he let the Berlin Wall come down and worked to put an end to the Cold War, the United States kept trying to “push Russia out of geopolitics”, discarding all projects of inclusive European security system.

Neither Gorbachev's promoted project of the "common European home" part of which the reformed Soviet Union was to become, nor the later idea of creating new structures of collective security on the continent (including possible creation of the European security Council), which could have helped to avoid the tragedy of the bloody war in Yugoslavia, and the modern drama of Ukraine, was implemented.

And the NATO expansion that many point to as the main reason for the Russia-West discord was perceived by Russian people within this framework, not so much on the basis of security but rather disregard and disrespect.

However, the feeling of "disrespect" was artificially cultivated in Russian society, it was a kind of its continuous psychological self-flagellation. The Perestroika and the end of the Cold War were seen as a "gift" that Russia had offered to the world that was not duly appreciated. But the world, welcoming Russia's return to "normality", did not feel "indebted" by its come-back rightfully assuming that Perestroika was an internal development even if it had some positive spin-off effects for the world at large.

Thus, this feeling of "disrespect" or rather disregard was nothing more than the pretext to release deeply engrained feeling of resentment, that is, slavish morality, when people consider themselves offended (even when they were not), morally inferior for a long time and, on this basis, ready to take revenge on the whole world. This is what Dostoevsky described in the "Notes from the Underground"—"extracting the sweetest juice from humiliation", but in this case self-imagined humiliation.

Russia felt humiliated because it has been dominated by post-imperial gene of submissiveness rather than responsibility. It does not want to control itself. It likes that someone (Tzar, Secretary General, President) decides for it all the time. The population has not become a nation, and consequently it experiences a strong inferiority complex and envies anyone who dares to decide its own fate.

And Ukraine has become an embodiment of all these complexes, which testifies to the Russian deep post-imperial trauma. The Ukrainians were too close, too similar, for Russia to let them go so easily. Throughout all of 30 years of independence, Ukrainian independence was perceived as a misunderstanding, an anecdote—the very word in Russia is usually pronounced with ironic overtones. The Russians accepted the Moldavian, Tajik, even Belarusian independence calmly, but they could not digest Ukrainian independence, and we are not talking about the imperial and "soil" minded society's fractions, but about the widest layers of the educated class, who looked at Ukraine as a "banana republic" and at the same time harboured a deep resentment against the "unreasonable younger brother who arrogantly denied consanguinity".

And when Putin came to power, he immediately realized that by riding these phobias and complexes, he would be able to endlessly control the society and remain in power. Munich speech (2007), Georgia war (2008), annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014) became the steps to the current invasion of Ukraine.

In March 2018, Putin fired up Russian national pride in a fiery speech boasting of powerful new nuclear weapons that “reconfirmed” the status of a great military power that had to be reckoned with, challenging the West: “You didn’t listen. So listen to us now.”

“The war in Ukraine is seen in Moscow as a stage in the destruction of norms, rules and institutions of the modern world system.”

At that point it became clear—he took the bit in his teeth. And if it were not for the COVID epidemic, he would have probably moved into Ukraine earlier.

Has Putin gone nuts? Russia’s invasion of Ukraine with its epic failures (the losses of Putin’s army in Ukraine are simply unbelievable: during the 50 days of the war, the “second army of the world” lost more than during the 8 years of the war in Syria) so far has prompted comments from numerous observers—from experts to political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic—and speculation that Putin has become either derailed, perhaps due to pandemic isolation or illness, or misinformed by his entourage and intelligence.

It is not wise to dismissively doubt Putin’s sanity or quality of his information, which inadvertently blurs his responsibility for criminal orders—after all he remains the President of the country. To analyse the essence of this aggression, one should not succumb to the temptations to deny Putin and his entourage’s rationality, fixing attention on the emotions behind their decisions. In any case, most of the steps taken by the Kremlin, both before and after February 24, 2022, look quite rational, if framed by the regime’s evaluation of the state of the world.

Firstly, Moscow has not been happy with its role in the liberal world system and its share of the benefits in terms of influence and power projection capacity, especially in comparison to that of “the weak and decadent” West. In the joint statement released by the Kremlin, Putin and Xi called on NATO to rule out expansion in eastern Europe, denounced the formation of security blocs in the Asia Pacific region, and criticised the Aukus trilateral security pact between the US, UK and Australia.

Secondly, according to Moscow the world system itself as a whole and its key elements—the key stakeholders—looked to be in decline. It was not Putin who authored this idea. Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed that “the well-trying and familiar framework of order is under strong pressure at the moment.” Many also argued that what is known as the liberal international order has been damaged to such a degree that it is hard to return to the status quo ante. As French President Emmanuel Macron puts it, this is not “an interlude in history before things return to normal [...] because we are currently experiencing a crisis of the effectiveness and principles of our contemporary world order, which will not be able to get back on track or return to how it functioned before.”

Thirdly, Kremlin believed the erosion of governance institutions system has gone beyond repair, since the principles of the 20th and 21st centuries intertwined in it have been largely irreconcilable. In fact, it was also not entirely baseless. The institutional architecture of globalisation failed to develop as had been hoped. The World Trade Organization, established in 1995, found itself in agony, just 25 years after its creation. Plans for global institutions to oversee investment, competition, or climate and environment are shelved. The whole system of the basic international arms control and security agreements (from NPT to Open Skies and New START treaties) was in limbo, etc. It was not incidental that on April 19 a group of more than 200 former senior UN officials wrote to the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, warning him that unless he takes personal leadership in trying to mediate peace in Ukraine, the UN risks not just irrelevance, but its continued existence.

Consequently, fourthly, the Russian ruling class reckoned that triggering the system's collapse should bring dividends to its perpetrators. Putin, who considers USSR implosion "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe", concluded that the time has come for decisive action. And if South Ossetia and Abkhazia could be considered elements of a (bad) foreign policy, and the seizure of Crimea could be considered an (illegal and ill-conceived) attempt to secure the Russian fleet in the Black Sea, then the attack on Ukraine was no longer even draped. Putin considered the scores for the collapse of the USSR unresolved, and the post-Cold War transformations required revision.

Therefore, the aggression is not just about Ukraine, in fact Russia tests in Ukraine the US and the West's "acceptability red lines".

Thus, the war in Ukraine is seen in Moscow as a stage in the destruction of norms, rules and institutions of the modern world system: it was supposed to show the insignificance of NATO, the EU, the OSCE, the transatlantic partnership in the face of a Russian attack, the inability of the West to present a united front. And even the failure of the blitzkrieg and the level of sanctions unexpected for the Kremlin do not weaken the grim determination to break the old world, but rather exacerbate it: people familiar with the situation at the top say that they are now in euphoria from the "historical moment", from the global collapse of institutions, rules, norms, from the disastrous Karamazov's "everything is permitted."

Also this decision fits into the general logic of public administration in Russia. Its perniciousness was due not to the specifics of Russian policy towards Ukraine, but to more fundamental factors that include:

- the characteristics of the Russian political regime,
- the mechanisms of governance of the Russian state,
- misconceptions about the possible consequences of decisions made, and
- likely assessments of the consequences of one's own actions based on previous war experience.

It is very important at this moment to take a sober and balanced look at the situation, to be conscious of the existence of both external and internal core reasons of the crisis. And let us not forget that many western observers used to say that Putin played a weak hand skillfully.

However, Putin has played a weak hand well exactly because the United States and its allies have let him, tolerating Russia to violate arms control treaties, international law, the sovereignty of its neighbours, and the integrity of elections in the United States and Europe.

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Actually, Putin had outmaneuvered the United States and its allies, who played a strong hand poorly.

Washington and Europe stood by as Putin increased Russian military capabilities, and did little as he probed and tested Western resolve, first in Georgia in 2008 and then in Ukraine in 2014.

They did not act when Putin consolidated Russia’s position in Belarus or when he established a robust Russian presence in Syria, from which his weapons could reach the southeastern flank of NATO.

And if his “special military operation” in Ukraine had gone as planned, with the country subdued in a matter of days (even the US intelligence expected initially that Kiev would fall in 48-72 hours), it would have been a triumphant coup, the end of the first stage of Russia’s “comeback” and the beginning of the second. And rather than excoriating him for his inhumane folly, the world would again be talking about Putin’s “savvy” and his “genius.”

But he is neither savvy nor a genius. Simply the western political class has never faced a thug among their ranks before. And Putin has the psychology of a thug. If he starts a conflict, then this conflict must end with the complete destruction of the opponent. He cannot back down and he will not back down. He never allows himself to show weakness, he never admits mistakes, he never compromises, he never agrees to anything, he only increases the pressure.

Putin and his entourage see the world as a map with borders, zones of influence, fortified objects and bomb and missile targets. Next to each country name there is a relevant “caliber” tag. There are powerful and independent powers with the prefix “super-”, there are simply great powers, there are regional—and, of course, “just ordinary” countries—pawns in the “super league” games. People on this map do not count as they simply do not exist: they are indistinguishable at this scale, when the world is looked at through the bomber sight.

And now it is naive to expect anything else from him. He may pretend to compromise for tactical purposes, to gain breathing space, to regroup the troops, to rebuild military supply infrastructure, or simply to mislead the enemy.

Therefore, in Putin's case, it is impossible to seriously count on compromises—he has crossed the Rubicon, his total defeat is required. Otherwise instead of the UN proclaimed “perpetual peace” ideal we will face perpetual unpeace in reality, because this war has all the chances to fit into 60% of the modern wars that have lasted for at least a decade.

From Afghanistan to Libya, Syria to Congo DRC. Neat and tidy wars endings, even if sometimes illusory, are rare these days. As the defence strategist Sean McFate warned: “Future wars will not begin and end; instead, they will hibernate and smoulder”. But in this particular case we have the war that is not sealed against nuclear escalation unfortunately. Otherwise we will have another endless war but this time with a nuclear power's participation or involvement.

Henry Kissinger famously stated: “The new World Order is not installed as an emergency measure. But for its emergence the world needs extraordinary circumstances.” It looks with COVID-19 and now full-scale war in Europe we are not in short supply of them.

However, global governance indeed begs not just for modern institutions' reform because their credibility has been substantially eroded by inaction and lack of solidarity, but for revision and remodelling because their inadequacy and inefficiency has become ever-present, crying and overwhelming—redefining multilateralism will not be enough; we will have to reinvent it.

The notion of interstate relations no longer captures the entirety of global interactions. Look at The Black Lives Matter movement spreading across the world like a wildfire...it is not just antiracist or national, it is more profound, and to large extent this was provoked by the existing global governance system's inadequacies. A key driving force behind them is a deep awareness of the need for radical change—not reforms to a “perfectly engineered system”, but the desire to replace the entire mechanism and start anew.

Traditional world order seems to be too tight for development of humankind, it is like when a teenager all of a sudden finds his jeans too tight having simply grown out of his clothing.

The article is not a proper place to talk about the details of a new system of international relations, but *de facto* its outlines are dimly visible. The emerging system resembles a hybrid of a bipolar and Vienna “concert” system, with only two “concerts” playing at the same time—authoritarian and liberal. This looks like a new iteration of a familiar balance of power system in a new disguise.

However, we need to change not just our clothes. Instead of interstate world system we need to develop inter-social forms of effective multilateralism to face global challenges and opportunities.

Today's circumstances call for an updated “operating system”—call it “effective multilateralism” or “pluri-lateralism”—that is based not only on the Westphalian sovereign states pattern but involves also nascent stakeholders of the global international society.

The gap between the expanding networked pluri-lateral world and governance, traditionally understood and applied within post-Westphalian concepts, is widening and feeding disorder and disruptiveness of the global system. And this gap will not be bridged by any new iterations of a traditional uni-, bi- or even multi-polar global world order.

Albert Einstein said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. As a historian, I have the rather disappointing impression that this is a very fitting description of how we have dealt with the crises inevitably producing two new ones replacing the one we dealt with, at the end.

We are all now deeply, deeply interconnected and the current model of multipolarity with the diverging perspectives of its states as the only poles has become not only obsolete but dangerous on many counts.

And the prescription was given 100 years ago by President Woodrow Wilson: “There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organised rivalries, but an organised common peace”.

We have been trying to achieve it by reshuffling states based governance system over and over again with the same outcome. Maybe its time to listen to Einstein and try something new?

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