

What Does a Weakened Russia Mean?

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The best statesmen understand what less worldly and less experienced people often overlook: Wars are mainly political and economic endeavors, and they involve the use of brute force to obtain political and/or economic objectives. The best statesmen also realize that it is just as important to win the peace that follows the conflict as it is to win the military struggle itself.

Few wars end like World War II did, with the victors so overpowering and the vanquished so thoroughly destroyed and humiliated that the victors could occupy the vanquished's territories after hostilities ended and could literally remake their societies in the image of the victors. The end of most wars is a far more messy affair, with neither side fully victorious militarily and some sort of negotiated peace being agreed upon by the former antagonists that must then be made to work by the survivors. Indeed, few countries have lost a war as thoroughly as the French nation lost World War I, yet its people were told they were the victors. The ramifications of that dichotomy became obvious in 1940, when the French Army, the largest and best equipped in the world at that time, collapsed in just six weeks to Adolph Hitler.

Barring something truly disastrous, like the resort to tactical nuclear weapons or chemical warfare, it has become increasingly likely that we will face such a messy and inconclusive situation over the next few months in Russia's war against Ukraine. Clearly, Russian President Vladimir Putin grossly miscalculated when he launched his "special military operation" in February. In just six months, both he and the Russian nation have become markedly diminished, both militarily and also politically/ economically. The once fearsome Russian army that quickly had taken the Crimea and chunks of eastern Ukraine and Georgia with seeming little effort has appeared clumsy and downright incompetent in the face of unexpectedly strong resistance from Ukraine. No doubt Ukrainian successes have been helped by US and other NATO support, including the receipt of advanced weaponry, intelligence, and other logistical support, not to mention humanitarian assistance and similar largesse to help the Ukrainian people. However, regardless of whether Ukraine would have been where it is now without such help, the fact remains that Russia's campaign is not where Russia had hoped and promised it would be when it started the war.

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Indeed, as recently as two months ago, it was possible to imagine Putin ascendant, having gained control of a virtual land bridge from Russia proper to the Crimea and in control of the most prolific grain producing region in the world. Now it appears more likely that Putin's goal will be rebuffed, and Putin may face an agonizing choice of military humiliation or further escalation, each of which would be fraught with danger for both Russia and its current leadership.

If, as appears more likely now, Putin and Russia's stature is further diminished and their military goals are further thwarted, what would that mean for one of the world's largest energy producers and exporters?

First, economically and politically, Russia will become more dependent on those countries that remain willing to buy its oil and gas, in this case meaning mostly China and India and practically no one else. Already ridiculed as a "Gas Station with an Army," Russia will become almost complete subservient to anyone who will agree to buy its energy. Geo-politically, that means Putin will slip more and more into the role of "Xi's Puppet." Russia's days of unilaterally controlling its own foreign affairs will be over. To the West, this would have been much more frightening had it occurred two years ago, when China seemed so ascendent. However, we can be sure Beijing has been watching events in Ukraine closely, including the behind the scenes support that Ukraine has been receiving from the US and its NATO allies, and it will be less likely than before to initiate hostilities in Taiwan itself – more frequent acts of intimidation and increased sabre rattling, maybe still yes; outright commencement of hostilities, likely no. Further, interminable COVID lockdowns will make the Chinese economy less formidable and the nation will be more risky to do business with overall.

Second, Ukraine likely will be ascendent. In believing Ukraine was not really a nation and would not resist, and launching his war, Putin ironically may have solidified Ukraine's nationhood and self-identity. It now has a modern, proud tradition of sacrificing for its national identity – what all cohesive governments have. That won't be dissolved easily. Key oil and gas pipelines that start in Russia traverse through Ukraine on their way to Western Europe, and Ukraine gets transshipment payments for this energy. We should expect Ukraine's bargaining position and resolve to be greatly strengthened in future negotiations.

Third, and somewhat counter-intuitively (until it is considered more carefully), we should expect that there will be more pressure on NATO to justify its existence. In the immediate aftermath of the Russian attack against Ukraine, NATO was enlarged by the membership of longtime holdouts Sweden and Finland, and it was strengthened, at least temporarily, by the cooperation of its members to aid and support Ukraine's resistance. Now, however, an alliance whose primary goal is to prevent Russian aggression will be forced to explain its continued purpose and existence when Russia can't even defeat non-member Ukraine.

Fourth, the world ecology will be even more threatened. Russia has shown an utter lack of concern for the environment in its self-enriching economic pursuits. As it feels more economically threatened, expect its concern for the world environment as a whole to decrease further. We in the West may fret about climate change. That seems to be of little concern for Russia or China – at least right now and until it may become too late to undo the harm that has already occurred.

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Fifth, Russia will become politically unstable. Putin may be weakened to a point not seen since 1905, when the last Tsar, Nicholas II, was humbled by the Japanese. Twelve years later he lost his crown, then his head. Putin knows that his country does not deal kindly with failed military leaders. His grip on power, so dominant in February, now is questionable. But quite ironically, this may not be good news for the West, despite widespread Western disdain for Putin. History is filled with examples of the removal of failed despots whose countries and regions became even more unstable after the despot was removed. In the recent past, we can look at the demise of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Ghaddafi in Libya as examples of this. Historically, there have been others.

What can the West do? Clearly, any attempt to exert control over Russia's politics would be doomed to fail. The Russians will no doubt sort this out for themselves.

If Putin does fall, then our interest is in assisting any potential for a true democratic transition. That would mean a quick end to energy embargoes and other trade restrictions on a post-Putin Russia. This need not impact specific Russians targeted by the West. Those who have helped Putin crush Russian pluralism, invade Ukraine, and turn Russian democracy into a literal joke, can be left to their deserved fate.

One idea may be to offer the Russians assistance in extracting their energy resources in a more environmentally friendly manner. To be sure, this will face opposition from Western environmentalists, who oppose any fossil fuel development. However, the Russians are going to drill for gas and oil whether we like it or not. Assuring that this is done as environmentally benignly as possible makes sense environmentally, politically, and economically.

Despite its economic and social difficulties over the last 100 years, Russian science has made great strides. This might be another area that the West can latch onto. For this we might look for a model with the International Space Station, about which there have been many bellicose Russian threats but which remains an island of international cooperation and mutual dependency. Marrying Russian and Western technology to energy development looks on the surface like a winner for everyone, provided it does not put more money into a Russian leader's pocket for military use against his neighbors.

In short, if we can help turn the disaster that is the Ukraine war into a model for international cooperation and environmentally sound energy development, we will have done the Russians, ourselves, and the planet a large service. The question remains, of course, can we really do this, or will human greed, the desire for power, and a lack of interest in the environment and the ecological legacy that we are leaving for our children and grandchildren continue to thwart common sense and worldwide interest in saving ourselves and our planet. Only time will tell.

ATTORNEYS MENTIONED

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