

OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *Invading Ukraine Is a Trap for Vladimir Putin*

Russia can't be an empire without it, but it can't even be a great power if it overreaches.

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By Christopher A. Hartwell

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Russian troops take part in drills in the Rostov region in southern Russia, Dec. 10.

PHOTO: /ASSOCIATED PRESS

Russia has stepped up its belligerence toward Ukraine, with troop movements, frequent attacks through state propaganda channels and direct threats from Russian leadership. The likelihood of a major European war is at its highest since the end of the Cold War.

If Russian aggression toward Ukraine does expand militarily, however, it could spell the end of the authoritarian experiment that Vladimir Putin has fostered for the past two decades. In any scenario, it will also result in a much-diminished Russia.

Historically, Ukraine has suffered under Russian domination since it broke free from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 17th century. It was eventually absorbed into the Russian empire, then the Soviet Union. The Holodomor, the deliberate starving of millions of Ukrainians under Stalin's orders, weighs heavily in modern Ukrainian narratives—and made Ukrainians highly suspicious of Russian attempts to portray the two as “brother Slavs.”

More-recent events have further diminished any idea of Slavic solidarity, as Russia has waged war on Ukraine since the latter broke away from the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union in 2014. The aggression has been both overt (illegally annexing Crimea and invading the Donbas region) and covert (including sabotage, propaganda and cyberattacks). Unseen in much of the West, and erroneously referred to as a civil war or an effort by separatists, the conflict has been directed and sustained by Russia.

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But the origin of Russia's current saber-rattling is different from that of the events of 2014-15. Mr. Putin's seizure of Crimea in 2014 was done from a position of weakness, as an opportunistic move that proceeded as the West, especially the U.S., pulled back from Central and Eastern Europe. Today Russia is in a better position economically and strategically than it has been since 2016, aided by U.S. policy. President Biden's refusal to impose sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline handed Mr. Putin a geostrategic win that, coupled with the restrictions placed on America's own energy producers, has also created a cudgel with which to strike Western Europe. Simply put, Mr. Putin has many more diplomatic and military levers for pressure that didn't exist even two years ago.

So why Ukraine, and why now? Most analyses focus on the prospect of Ukraine's joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. But another key issue can be found in Russian domestic politics. An unpopular Mr. Putin is a dangerous Mr. Putin.

His 2000 war with Chechnya, 2008 invasion of Georgia, and 2014 seizure of Crimea were all popular, raising the president's approval ratings from low levels. In 2021 Mr. Putin's popularity has been declining precipitously, first and foremost because of Moscow's

egregious mishandling of the Covid pandemic. With an estimate of excess mortality close to 800,000 since the start of the pandemic (the official report of Covid deaths is 278,000), Russia has been hit badly by the virus. At the same time, Russian disposable income declined more than 10% from 2014 to 2020. With his popularity waning, Mr. Putin has been anxious to rally Russians around the flag.

Unfortunately for him, Ukraine is also a much stronger actor, both economically and militarily, than it was in 2014. Unlike Russian actions before seizing Crimea and Donbas, the current Russian military buildup is out in the open, giving Ukraine time to respond. Any direct military strike would inflict massive harm on Russia in a manner similar to what the U.S.S.R. suffered in Afghanistan, but with the added complication of being on Europe's doorstep, with clear supply lines from NATO countries. While there is little hope of direct NATO intervention, the threat of guerrilla war and bloody, protracted insurrection for years may serve as a deterrent to any rash moves.

Russia can't be an empire without Ukraine. But Russia will cease to be a great power if it tries to acquire the rest of Ukraine. Moscow is simply far too dependent on primary commodities, and Covid has weakened popular support for a regime that can deliver "international prestige" but little else. Any armed incursion into Ukraine will push the still-fragile Russian economy to the brink and likely over the edge.

It is thus imperative that the West present a united front against Russia and continue to ratchet up the costs of any aggression. This means, against the instincts of Mr. Biden and likely the German Foreign Ministry, not handing Mr. Putin an easy win for his belligerence. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, sacrificing Ukraine to keep Europe's unstable equilibrium would be to choose dishonor without necessarily preventing war.

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