

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The Upside of Putin's Delusions

Moscow's Disastrous Invasion of Ukraine Will Reinforce the Norm Against War

By John Mueller

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When Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that he had ordered a “special military operation” against Ukraine on February 24, Europe had been substantially free of international war for nearly 80 years. That is likely the longest the once most warlike of continents has gone without such a war at least since the days of the Roman Empire.

In recent decades, the aversion to international war, following Europe's lead, has spread. The result is that, over the last 30 years, there have been only three other interstate wars, conventionally defined as armed conflicts with at least 1,000 battle-related deaths per year. Ethiopia and Eritrea fought one such war in the last years of the twentieth century. The two others were the United States' brief 9/11-induced regime-toppling invasions of [Afghanistan](#) in 2001 and [Iraq](#) in 2003, which then devolved into extended counterinsurgency—or counteroccupation—conflicts.

Some analysts now fear that the long decline of interstate war may be about to reverse. In an article for *The Economist* published shortly before the Russian invasion, the Israeli writer Yuval Noah Harari declared the decline in international war to be “the greatest political and moral achievement of modern civilization.” But he also worried that a war in Ukraine could bring about “a return to the law of the jungle.” In an [essay](#) published in May in *Foreign Affairs*, the political scientist [Tanisha Fazal](#) expressed concern that Putin's war could result in “an increase in not only the incidence but also the brutality of war.”

But five months into the current phase of the [war](#) in Ukraine, it seems more likely that Putin's venture will reinforce and revitalize the aversion to and disdain for international war. The key objective is not so much about winning as making sure that the country that started the war is far worse off than if it had not done so. That has already been substantially achieved.

GLOBAL CONDEMNATION

The world has responded to Putin's [invasion](#) of Ukraine with nearly universal revulsion, much as it responded to Saddam Hussein's seizure of Kuwait in 1990: as Fazal notes, “the outrage has been swift and broad.” Although some policymakers have expressed concern that China might find inspiration for an invasion of [Taiwan](#), there doesn't seem to be a groundswell of prospective imitators. Any would-be aggressors cannot help but notice the high costs the war has imposed on Russia in terms of casualties, economic losses, and international isolation. The kleptocratic Russian economy had already been on the skids for most of a decade, and Putin's war, even if it is somehow settled, will likely alienate prospective buyers and investors for at least as long as he is in charge—and probably a lot longer.

Would-be aggressors may also note that even if Putin can hang on to his territorial gains in Ukraine, he will have to rebuild, subsidize, and rule them. In areas that Russian forces have occupied since the war began, they have struggled to govern: the Russians, it seems, are not very good at occupation and civil administration, and Russian forces seem inclined to commit the kinds of brutal acts that increase hostility toward foreign occupiers.

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Without a durable and reliable cease-fire, Russia will have to defend its new acquisitions, possibly for years or decades. Putin has repeatedly expressed outrage that Ukrainian forces have for seven years harassed and bombed the small Donbas enclaves that seceded from Ukraine in 2014 and then embraced Russian protection. The lands Russian now seeks to conquer and control—including the entire provinces of Luhansk and Donetsk—would present an even richer target for increasingly better armed and much more intensely hostile Ukrainian forces. There is also the prospect of having to defend the newly captured areas against years of partisan urban warfare from Ukrainian insurgents. To a degree, this has already started. For example, a Ukrainian man whom Russian forces had appointed as the new head of the Department of Youth and Sports in the city of Kherson was recently killed in a car bombing.

DELUDED HUBRIS

In his speech announcing the invasion, Putin stressed that “Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today’s Ukraine,” which he analogized to the one presented by Nazi Germany before World War II. He argued that a showdown was inevitable, claiming even that Ukraine was seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

Putin is scarcely unique among world leaders in allowing himself to be consumed by such delusions. U.S. Presidents George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton absurdly insisted that a coup in Haiti presented “an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States,” and their predecessors, U.S. Presidents Harry Truman and Lyndon Johnson believed that a U.S. failure to intervene in civil wars in Korea and Vietnam would lead to world war. But Russia’s war against Ukraine has backfired and proved to be counterproductive in ways that will likely give pause to any would-be imitators.

Putin noted in his war kickoff speech that “with NATO’s eastward expansion, the situation for Russia has been becoming worse and more dangerous by the year.” Whether his war was to push NATO away from Russia’s borders, to create disunity within the alliance, to provide a stepping stone for further advances, or somehow to enhance Russia’s status (except as a pariah), it has been a massive failure. It has even inspired Russia’s long-neutral neighbors, Sweden and Finland, to seek admission. Thus, NATO enlargement has scarcely been stopped. The alliance has become far more hostile, united, and better armed, and it has effectively moved closer.

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Putin’s war has also failed at another of his pronounced goals: keeping Ukraine from embracing the West and moving toward joining the European Union and NATO. But his efforts over the last decade have driven Ukrainians to look more to the West. In December 2012, according to a poll conducted by the Kyiv-based Democratic Initiatives Foundation, a scant 15 percent of Ukrainians favored joining NATO. By January 2022, on the eve of war, that figure had risen to 64 percent, according to a survey conducted by the Ukrainian Institute of the Future. It has surely risen far higher since the invasion. In addition, under the impetus of the war, Ukraine has now been allowed

to enter the formal process of joining the EU. And it is possible that the war, by enhancing Kyiv's desperation to be admitted, might even cause it to finally deal with its endemic corruption problem, which had previously hampered its embrace by the West.

Putin has also said his goal in the war was "to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine." Demilitarization has obviously failed as arms pour into the country. And if de-Nazification means establishing a compliant regime, projecting a sphere of influence, or, as some suggest, destroying democracy in Ukraine, the Russian failure has been total. Hatred for, and hostility toward, Russia may well last for decades.

Putin has also declared that he wanted to rescue and protect Russian speakers in Ukraine. "It's essentially impossible," one insider told Newsweek, "to convince the people around power in Moscow that Russian speakers in Ukraine are not being discriminated against" and that "people can have a national identity that is separate from their linguistic identity." Some Russian speakers in Ukraine have welcomed the Russian invasion. But the overwhelming majority have taken Ukraine's side—something the government in Kyiv should be doing more to celebrate. As such, Russian-speaking Ukrainians will continue to be productive contributors to their country—although it is possible that the use of Russian, the language of the hated invader, will continue to slide as the country looks increasingly to the West.

During the crisis with Ukraine in 2014, Putin bragged that he had "1.2 million soldiers armed with the world's most sophisticated weaponry" and that, if he wanted them to do so, "they could be in Kyiv in two days." Over the ensuing years, he built up his army even more. If one goal of the current war was to display the might and effectiveness of the Russian military, the result could be chalked up as yet another failure. Corrupt, poorly led, and undermotivated, the Russian military was repelled from Kyiv by defenders with far less training and equipment. Any Russian gains in Ukraine's southeast have been accomplished by pulverizing the territory from a distance and then taking charge of the substantially depopulated rubble.

For all these reasons, it seems unlikely that other countries will find much inspiration in Putin's "self-inflicted debacle," as Steve Chapman of the *Chicago Tribune* puts it. Putin admires the Russian leader Peter the Great and apparently wishes to emulate a version of his imperial rule. But Russia's current tsar will likely go down in history not as Vladimir the Great but as Vladimir the Fool. And his failed and spectacularly counterproductive war seems unlikely to augur a new era of interstate war—rather, his folly will likely make other rulers even more trigger shy, and the decline of international war will continue.

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