

Reflections on World Politics #4

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A Context for War

Russia's Political Context: When trying to understand Russia's motivation for the invasion of Ukraine, it is important to consider Russia's geographic location and its current status since the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991. Russia is approximately 1.8 times the size of the United States and shares borders with 14 different countries. In contrast, the United States shares borders with only two neighboring countries. Four of Russia's neighbors are members of NATO (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland) and two are Central Asia nations with substantial Muslim populations. In addition, Russia shares a border of over 2,500 miles with China - a relationship that has been problematic for Russia for several centuries.

There is another set of political relationships that also poses challenges for Russia. After World War II, when the western powers organized the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Communist Party leadership constructed the Warsaw Pact, which included seven nations in Central and Eastern Europe that had come under Soviet control after the defeat of Hitler's regime. One important historical fact is that the only invasion these nations ever faced came from the Soviet Union, not some outside intruder – the Soviet attacks on Hungary in 1956 and on Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Since 1991, six Warsaw Pact countries and three former Soviet states (the three Baltic republics) have joined NATO. Six remaining post-Soviet republics, four of which border Russia, could also apply for membership in NATO. The largest of these is Ukraine, which shares a border with Russia of over 1,200 miles. When neighboring countries and former allies consider Russia a threat, that tells us something about how Putin and his cronies in the Kremlin are viewed.

In April 2005, Vladimir Putin declared the collapse of the Soviet empire “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.” [SR1] Since then, his increasingly aggressive actions have made it clear that he intends to rebuild the Russian empire and return the country to its position as a leading Eurasian power. When he ordered the invasion of Crimea and intervened in the pro-Russian areas of eastern Ukraine in 2014, his popularity ratings soared. Russians approved of his muscular diplomacy, and he met no resistance from the Western democracies or NATO when making these radical changes. Unfortunately for him, his popularity has faded as the Russian economy has stalled and internal repression has been stepped up against dissidents.

Ukraine is hated by Putin and his hardline advisors because it could potentially develop into a successful democracy with a vibrant economy and become a model for what Russians don't have. It could lead to a coup that would topple his dictatorship. Twice, in 2004 and again in

2014, Putin intervened in Ukraine and tried to impose pro-Russian leaders. Both efforts failed. In February 2022, Putin decided that the West was weak enough that he could now be successful at invading the country and quickly overtaking it. He was wrong. His unrelenting pressure on the Ukrainians for the eight years since 2014 did not break their democracy; instead, it made them more united, as highlighted by President Zelensky's landslide electoral victory in 2019.

Ukraine's Geography: Because most of us have little knowledge of Ukraine's geographical location, I suggest you download a map of Ukraine from the Internet, a map that gives you the location of its major cities and the countries on its borders. If you look at this map, it will help you understand some of the dynamics of the conflict – where the fighting began and is now concentrated, and where Ukrainians are fleeing from the violence.

As noted above, Ukraine shares a long border with Russia as well as Belarus, which is one of Putin's allies. But a map will also allow you to see that Ukraine's western borders are shared with four NATO countries (Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia). These are the countries that have opened their borders to millions of Ukrainians, mostly women, children, and elderly people, which has resulted in greatly reducing the number of war casualties. What is also important about these neighbors is that they will provide ways of getting military equipment and humanitarian support into Ukraine, with NATO forces protecting their access. You will notice that comparatively little fighting has taken place so far in the western regions of the country and that is important to understand.

Military experts have noted that U.S. and Ukrainian officials have been planning for years how to organize a resistance movement against Russian occupation, should Putin decide to occupy much of the country and install a puppet government. As one analyst noted, "supporting an insurgency is in the CIA's DNA."

Signs of Hope: In their struggle to survive a vicious attack by Russian forces, there are signs of hope for Ukrainians. The unified support of NATO and the European Union has enabled the four neighboring NATO-member countries to supply needed weapons, food, and medicine into Ukraine. The generous support of the United States, in close cooperation with European leaders, is a major factor, and as long as Congressional leaders from both parties continue to work together, this also provides reason for hope.

But the most significant reason for hope is the incredible bravery of the Ukrainian people, their commitment to independence from Russia, and their desire to live as free people – not under a Russian dictator. They have become heroes to people around the world and have helped to revitalize democratic movements on every continent. They need our daily prayers and our financial support.