

PUTIN'S LONG GAME

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Nobody wants to be a has-been. This is the feeling of Russia under Putin. Many are saying that we have to understand him; that the collapse of the USSR was such a trauma, the biggest catastrophe of the 20th century, and that Russia needs to be somewhat appeased or understood. What of the other countries? The liberated ones, especially in Europe. How do they feel?

Once an empire is not always an empire, although the thinking and reflexes may be harder to change. Of course, there is history and there may be lingering historical connections. Nevertheless, that is where it should rest. The end of the First World War divided and diminished the Austria-Hungarian Empire. It has been a century since the demise of the Ottoman Empire. World War II took care of the British and French empires. The Spanish and Portuguese empires have long since gone. Only those that look forward make progress, Germany being the prime example.

Empires do not come back. The hardest part is giving up on this nostalgia. There might be those that harbor such thoughts of revival but they are usually a minority. Russia is a different story. The Russian Empire collapsed, only to be re-built into the Soviet Union. But does Putin want to revive the empire or does he want its reputation - or just to be a world player as before?

We know that President Obama's comments on Russia being a regional power hit a national nerve. What added salt to the wound was the pivot to China. It must have bothered Putin much more than European leaders when the United States announced its priorities lay in the Far East.

So what does that all mean for Ukraine?

The threat is real. With small but sure steps, Russia is trying to take back what it can. It has returned to the Middle East and is trying to influence the Balkans. It knows its limits and plays the long game. It will not touch NATO. That is too much, but he will go as far as he can. As it stands, for him, Ukraine is legitimate grounds.

Putin would do well to remember the Soviet experience in Afghanistan. Parts of Ukraine may welcome Russia, but there are those that will resist. Is Putin ready for a protracted conflict that will cost Russian lives? Even during the Afghan episode, when there were other nationalities within the Soviet army fighting, the body bags returning home turned into a backlash even in such a tightly controlled state. An invasion of Ukraine will be a repetition of that period.

Will Putin grab a bit of Ukraine in the east - a piecemeal approach? Putin saw that after Crimea, it did not take too long for the EU to reach out once again to Moscow. It was semi-legitimized by explaining that it was a mistake that Crimea was given to Ukraine as a gift by Khrushchev. The breakaway 'statelets' in Georgia are too far away for the West to bother with. The turning point was the so-called red line of using chemical weapons in Syria and US reticence to act in response. Russia became emboldened and acted on it. Putin may be counting on a similar non-military reaction with only some sanctions if he grabs the Donbass.

Yet if Russia is counting on the US debacle in Afghanistan, it should think twice: Ukraine is much more crucial and a Western response is assured.

A miscalculation is always possible. Hitler saw himself as a master tactician when he went into Saarland, Austria and Czechoslovakia without any real counter response until he went too far. Putin may not be so foolish but he has also seen similar non-action in Georgia, Crimea and Donbass, as well as in Syria. So what does he really want?

Does he just wish to be treated as a global player alongside the US and China? He may have nuclear weapons and a big army, but is this sufficient for such a role? Maybe that is what he believes. It is true that hard power has swept away any last vestiges of soft power. Yet an invasion, or even threats thereof, will only mark Russia as a disruptive power.

The situation puts Turkey into an unenviable position. President Erdoğan has already suggested acting as an intermediary. Turkey sold drones to Ukraine, which caused Russian annoyance to say the least. Turkey bought S-400 missiles that continues to frustrate NATO. Would Russia accept to give Turkey such a role? If Putin aims for equal treatment by another global player, it will only deal with the US. French President Macron's suggestion to negotiate with Russia separately will only feed Putin's ego, but his real goal is sitting at the table with the US and China.

Even if this crisis is somewhat overcome in a peaceful manner, the threat of Russia will continue to hang over the West. Russia will maintain pressure in trying to divide the West by intimidation or other methods, both subtle and not so subtle. Already the distance between Turkey and the EU, as well as with the US, is helping Putin. It is not only China that looks with interest on how the West will react, but also the Balkan countries. They have been waiting too long to be part of the EU. Will the EU remain as attractive as before if Russia's influence increases?

The situation in Ukraine opens up so many questions and the answers will depend on how Russia is countered. If the EU is to be relevant and self-reliant, it has to overcome its differences and change its structures. It is doubtful that the Conference on the Future of Europe is up to the task. However, a crisis can also be an opportunity. An opportunity to push for changes that would be more difficult in calmer times.

Nevertheless, this is also our chance to unite once again as never before. Neither Russia nor China can be an example for global governance. Their aim is solely power. Thus, it befalls on those who truly want peace to show that they are ready for deterrence at any cost.