



Can or should the  
West try to stop  
Vladimir Putin's  
attempts to reabsorb  
portions of the old  
Soviet Union?

# STRATEGIKA

CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

From the Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict at the Hoover Institution

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*Strategika* is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.

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# Ukraine Adrift Between East and West

*By Kori Schake*

Ukraine gained its independence with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, squandering the subsequent twenty years by corruption and poor governance. In 1994, the United States, Great Britain, and Russia took on an explicit responsibility for Ukraine's territorial integrity and political independence in return for newly independent Ukraine giving up the world's third largest nuclear arsenal. Neither NATO nor the EU was willing to admit Ukraine, and both attempted to blur the line of their commitment by encouraging future membership, which sadly did little to dent the invidious political and economic practices of elites. Real GDP per capita declined nearly 50% in Ukraine between 1993-2013.

Blatant election fraud in 2004 led to a popular uprising and aspirations of Ukraine overcoming its tragic history and prospering as a Western country. But the Orange Revolution foundered, sinking the country back into the mire of its decrepit politics: lack of reform, use of all branches of government for harassment of political opposition, concentration of power in the Presidency, crony economics. Freedom House decried "evidence of a broadly antidemocratic trend." The European Union (led by the Swedish and Polish governments) had been active in negotiating an Association Agreement with Ukraine, offering capital (Ukraine had been closed out of borrowing markets) in return for political and economic reforms.

The current unrest began when Ukrainian President Yanukovich unexpectedly rejected the Association Agreement in February, instead choosing a Russian offer of political alliance and economic assistance. Large-scale protests in Kiev were met with force, and snipers firing into the crowds killed over a hundred people. The U.S. and EU brokered a deal with protesters and the government to schedule elections, but it was overtaken by events when President Yanukovich

fled to Russia. Protesters succeeded in unifying around an interim government and scheduled elections for May 25.

The Russian government claims the new government in Ukraine is illegitimate, the product of an “illegal coup” against Yanukovich, funded and directed by the West. Russian media have been virulent, whipping up the fears of Russians in Ukraine. One of the first acts of the parliament (overturned by the acting President) was to pass legislation restricting the use of the Russian language, which the Russians have used as a pretext for protecting ethnic Russians in Ukraine.

Ukraine before the Russian seizure of Crimea was ethnically 78% Ukrainian, 17% Russian, and less than 1% each Belorussian, Moldovan, and Tatar. The Russian population lives principally in the eastern Ukraine, which borders on Russia, and Crimea, where Russian naval bases and forced expulsion of Tatars and Ukrainians made for a Russian majority.

On February 27, paramilitary troops began setting up blockades and taking over government installations in Crimea. They appointed as governor a pro-Russian politician who had garnered only 4% of votes in the previous election. Both houses of the Russian legislature overwhelmingly passed resolutions giving Vladimir Putin authority to use Russian military forces in Crimea. In early March, the Supreme Council of Crimea voted to secede from Ukraine; a hastily organized referendum on joining Russia passed with 95% of Crimean voters supporting. The Russian Duma voted to accept Crimea as a part of Russia.

Russian military operations in Crimea began with paramilitary forces and only transitioned to identifiable military units and vehicles when it was clear the moves would meet no resistance, either from Ukraine or intervention by the West. Russia currently has military exercises involving 40,000 soldiers ongoing along the Ukrainian border. Paramilitary forces are now replicating the Crimea pattern in several cities along Ukraine’s eastern border.





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The Kiev government is not in control of the east of the country. It had given militants an ultimatum to vacate government buildings on April 12th; yet the “large-scale antiterrorist operation” did not materialize. Instead, the government of acting President Oleksandr Turchynov took a conciliatory tack and offered a nation-wide referendum on increasing regional powers. At the time of this writing, it is not clear whether that decision was one of political amelioration or military necessity because the government in Kiev and the Ukrainian military were unable to carry out the threatened operations. There is, however, reporting of pro-Russian militants successfully recruiting entire police forces in Ukraine’s eastern towns of Sloviansk and Kramatorsk.

The U.S. and European countries have refused to recognize either Crimea’s independence or its accession. They have also refused requests from the Ukrainian government for military assistance. In lieu of providing the small arms and intelligence Ukraine asked for, the U.S. government has given 300,000 meals-ready-to-eat (MREs), delivered commercially rather than by military transport. The U.S. and EU have also provided loan guarantees to Ukraine to see it through the near-term economic crisis. The West, led by the Obama Administration, has clearly stated that it will not use military force to turn back the Russian invasion, either of Crimea or other parts of Ukraine. President Obama himself said, “We are not going to be getting into a military excursion in Ukraine.”

Their policy relies on diplomatic isolation of Russia and an escalating level of economic sanctions. These sanctions so far have extended only to individuals marginal to Vladimir Putin’s administration and one bank. Other sanctions under consideration are restrictions on Russian

banking and property, boycotting Russian oil and gas, travel restrictions, and across the board bans on commerce with Russian firms. Even if strongly advocated by the Obama Administration, these are unlikely to be adopted, however, because the economic penalties fall so unevenly, and predominantly on European allies. Germany in particular is ambivalent about sanctioning Moscow—two-thirds of the German public opposes sanctions on Russia, and the figure among German businesspeople is much higher.

The challenge of a policy of economic leverage is that it takes considerable time for effect. Russia's aggressive use of economic blackmail against Ukraine has already commenced a move by Europeans to reduce their reliance on Russian oil and gas. Achieving that goal is at least a decade away, and Russians may calculate that as an inevitable outcome anyway, so not alter their behavior. Europe's own economic health is so fragile that governments will be hesitant to pull the trigger. And the same goes for investment bans that will hit London's City particularly hard, or manufacturing restrictions that weigh on German companies.

NATO has rescinded all military cooperation with Russia. The Supreme Allied Commander Europe, General Breedlove, is to report to NATO nations this week with recommendations for strengthening NATO's defenses in response to Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Poland has requested the stationing of two brigades of U.S. troops as reassurance Russia will not be able to replicate its Ukraine tactics against a NATO ally; other security reassurances are sure to be wanted by European allies still smarting from the Obama Administration's loudly-announced pivot to Asia.

U.S. and European policy since 1991 has been to consolidate countries of the West into NATO, encourage them into the EU, and create a sense of security in transitioning countries by involvement with them. With Russia, the U.S., and Europe have been trying to have it both ways: acting against Russia's expressed concerns about NATO expansion, protecting Kosovo against



Serbia, deploying missile defenses, while still cajoling Russia into a western cooperative security mindset. That policy has reached the end of its road. We now have to choose whether to try and conciliate Russia or protect countries from it.

Russia has increased defense spending 79% in the last decade. It now spends 4.5% of GDP on defense, roughly three times the NATO average. NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen sums up their approach as “a revisionist Russia trying to redraw the European map by force.” Perhaps we ought to have listened more carefully and revised our policies in 2005, when Vladimir Putin declared the break up of the Soviet Union “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.”



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# For Putin, Eastern Europe Is Still Up For Grabs

*By Thomas Donnelly*

One of the first rules of sound strategy-making is “don’t fight for the same ground twice unless forced to.”

If this sounds more “19th-century” than “21st-century,” it’s because human affairs and international politics have yet to transcend geography in the way that Secretary of State John Kerry would have it. Ceding bits of the former Tsarist empire back to Vlad the Impaler is the very worst sort of weakness, and the “West”—even the languid reflection of a once-muscular liberal civilization—could easily freeze this Russian revanche in its tracks if it could summon the will to do so.

The West—but particularly the United States, which has been, since World War II, the creator and leader of what once described itself as the “Free World”—has an existential set of interests in halting and reversing Putin’s land grabs. One interest is as material and as “real” as anything contemplated by Castlereagh, Talleyrand, or Bismarck: the balance of power in Europe and the security of Germany. The second is global and systemic, more “reputational” but still very real: the credibility of the United States as the guarantor of the international order.

The apples of Putin’s eye—Crimea, Ukraine, Transnistria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia—may seem a long way from Walla Walla or Paris, but they are not that far from Berlin or Warsaw. And Europe’s eastern marches, a swath of land running slightly northwest to southeast from Gdansk on the Baltic to Odessa on the Black Sea, is open ground with few natural boundaries or defenses. This space has been fought over, won, lost, and won again for millennia. The political order and the



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states of the region have been weak and transitory. If the Marx Brothers' "Freedonia" were real, it would live here.

But Putin's purpose is less to acquire this real estate at a bargain price than it is to exploit the geopolitical weakness of modern Germany. Whereas the fear of modern statesmen from the 1860s has been a Germany that is too strong, German weakness has been the more common problem, and one that is equally dangerous. Increasingly divorced from an inward-looking America, Angela Merkel seems less like a blood-and-iron German chancellor than

a dazed and confused Holy Roman Emperor. The European Union—the modern European imperial structure—is rapidly

devolving from a collection of strong national states into a congeries of principalities, palatinates, and duchies. The combination of German weakness and American distraction is an opportunity that Putin does not want to miss.

Putin also benefits when the West doesn't recognize the connection between the eastern European marches and the security of Germany. The now-common alliance between isolationist Right and the Left is strongly sympathetic to Putin; the Cato Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter and The Nation's Katrina vanden Heuvel agree that the United States should cede—nay, welcome—a rebuilt sphere of Russian influence, no matter the way in which it is achieved.

It has been the special mission of the United States and the United Kingdom—the "Anglo" powers of the West—to be not "offshore balancers," but meddlesome engagers with continental powers to preserve what has been variously called the "liberties" of Europe or a "balance of power that favors freedom." But President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron are punching

that Russia “reset” button as often and as hard as they can, anxious to achieve peace in our time and get back to business as usual.

The rest of the world—particularly in the Middle East and East Asia—is watching the West quail and quiver, coming on the heels of Syria’s ignored “red lines,” the half-measures of Libya, the bug-out from Iraq, and even the halfway measures of the deadline-driven Afghanistan “surge” of 2009. Barack Obama is not so much leading the West from behind as to the rear.

But perhaps the most telling measure of Western weakness is the way that the United States and NATO have talked themselves out of any meaningful use of military force. To some degree, the we-have-no-options complaint is true: the West has all but disarmed itself, with the United States simply a lagging edge indicator. In the face of Putin’s aggression, the White House and congressional Republicans have seen no reason to halt the combination of budget cuts and “sequestration” that is laying the U.S. military to waste. Yet even these self-inflicted wounds don’t in fact mean that there aren’t options for halting Russian revanche—they’re just not the no-risk options that have become the new norm for any Western employment of military power.

The Western triumph of the Cold War was not complete. The Russians have chosen their dreams of greatness over our hopes for reform. Until now, they have little dared to realize those dreams, but now they see that the No Man’s lands of Eastern Europe can be had cheaply, and would permanently fracture NATO and the Western alliance it represents. For a generation, the West has failed to do what any platoon-leading lieutenant would do after a successful engagement—consolidate on the objective. There is still a chance to do so, but a diminishing one.



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# Vladimir Putin, Murderer of Myths

*By Ralph Peters*

Can the West stop Vladimir Putin's re-conquest of the former empire of the czars, plus some bonus acreage? Yes, but not east of the Dnieper River. Should the West stop him? Indisputably. But will the West stop him? To that decisive question, the answer is "No, not until it's too late."

Today's strongest leader of a major state, Putin is an alarming stupor mundi to the Western intelligentsia: He has singlehandedly murdered five of our liberal elite's foundation myths (several of which were already on life-support). And our handsomely educated, feeble intelligentsia is left breathless and witless (although such creatures are never rendered speechless).

The first myth lying in a pool of Ukrainian, Georgian, and Chechen blood holds that individuals cannot change history, but only the broadest human collectives do. Even the most-restrained members of the Annales school of a depersonalized past were stained by the stylish Marxism of their time (and thus, paradoxically, they had to ignore such questions as, "What if Lenin had not been on that train to the Finland Station? What if Stalin had been fonder of the seminary?"). While many a useful point was made about the effect of harvests on human behavior, the rigid adherence to theory—that snarling foe of mercy—meant dismissing protean figures from Alexander through Hitler. But wheat blight in Macedonia or hyperinflation in Germany never quite explained what drove one to the Indus and the other to the Volga.

Now behold Putin, whose vision, ferocity, strength of will, and enthusiasm for slashing through diplomacy's Gordian knots have left our leaders and their courtiers stunned: How could he? How dare he?



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He did.

President Obama, especially, should have seen Putin coming, given his own masquerade as a man of destiny. But members of our ruling class hold it to be self-evident that only their own kind can be valid leaders. And along comes Putin, who gleefully substitutes force for finesse

and who does not care which prep school our secretaries or ministers attended. A great, if frightening, man, Putin has managed, in fifteen years, to return a moribund Russian Federation to at least the semblance of great-power status. He has won every confrontation with the West. He has redirected Russian society, bending it to his will, and rekindled Russian nationalism to burn with dreadful heat. Now he has embarked upon naked conquest.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Ivy League, Oxbridge, and related collectives of distinguished graduates were supposed to guide the world toward enlightenment. Instead, we have foul-mouthed Putin casting himself as a mythic bogatir, a warrior from Russian legend, even posing bare-chested on horseback. Western elites mock him, just as the most-refined of the late-imperial Romans surely mocked the manners of the barbarians.

Putin is changing Eurasia's borders by force, and we lack the courage to complicate his economy. The "man on horseback" has, literally, returned.

The second myth hacked to bits is that nationalism is dead. In a late-March address in the Netherlands, President Obama belittled Putin as having no ideology. But Putin wields a powerful ideology, one for which men are willing to kill and, if need be, die as we watch from the sidelines.



He's a self-proclaimed Great-Russian nationalist, a leader who sees a special destiny—indeed, a manifest destiny—for his people. Misled by his poker face and taste for sports, we miss the mystical depth of his conviction and the ease with which he fits into the tormented (as well as tormenting) Russian identity as the “Third Rome,” redeemer of Slavs and bastion of Christianity.

Bankrupt of ideas and discomfited by facts, Western and émigré pundits still dismiss Putin as an apparatchik, a middling KGB officer, a *chinovnik*, a petty clerk—ignoring all he's accomplished, as well as his phenomenal support among his own people. But mourn as he may for the territory lost with the Soviet Union, there's nothing Marxist-Leninist in his philosophy. He's closer to the Russian Orthodox Church than to Russia's last, grumpy Communists, and his model as a ruler owes far more to Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great than to Leonid Brezhnev. He has made his fellow Russians proud again; unsettlingly, given the echoes of Hitler and Germans shamed by the Second Reich's collapse.

This, too, befuddles Putin's Western victims, since they have been taught that nationalism is an outmoded “construct,” a malicious fiction from the age of empires. Now “malicious” it certainly can be, but nationalism's no “fiction.” Surely, we should have drawn that lesson from the 1990s Balkans, or from Eastern Europe's present revival of xenophobia. But nationalism, like the Great Man theory of history, is *déclassé*, unacceptable in the polite society of first-class cabin elites: One no more speaks of national pride than of an indisposition of the bowels.

Yet, nationalism's the only ideology that may have killed as many humans as Marxism and its offspring. Indeed, the rejuvenation of nationalism perfectly suits the craving of those psychologically displaced by the pace of change, by the unraveling of traditions, and by the endless banquet of seductive-but-indigestible information served up by the gigabyte. In this age of endless disruption, we first saw the default to baseline identities of ethnicity and faith. Nationalism's the offspring of their marriage.

The human need for a protective identity is stronger than any theory of international relations we have concocted (our models of diplomacy and statecraft are the intelligentsia's substitute for astrology—albeit without the latter discipline's rigor).

A third myth exploded by Putin (and many another whom we rush to dismiss) is the core Western conviction that humanity can be socially engineered to reflect our liberal values. The amount of hogwash spewed in this intellectual pigpen is simply remarkable, ranging from the inane insistence that “all men want peace,” to our conviction that, once they see the benefits of our enlightened lifestyle and Starbucks, even Afghan tribesmen will sign up.

Once “free” post-Soviet Russians tasted our freedoms, they were supposed to westernize their values and ambitions. Those of us who protested two decades ago that Russians would remain Russians were derided as Cold War bigots. National character—to the extent such a thing existed—was yet another Western “construct” destined to wither with the advent of democracy and the introduction of supermarkets. Surely, the people of Russia would insist on freedoms identical to our own...

But Russians did remain Russians, after all: a bitterly self-destructive people whose salient characteristics are jealousy and suspicion, vainglory and brutality. (The spectacular high culture of Russia's Golden and Silver Ages under the late Romanovs was born of a strain of creative DNA methodically exterminated in the GULag. Putin's Russia is not the Russia of Chekhov: That cherry orchard was cut down long ago.)

The fourth myth bludgeoned to death by Vladimir Putin is that negotiations are a miracle cure, the universal solution, asking only patience and understanding. Again and again, Putin and his henchmen have turned our credulity against us, with chitchat buying time for Putin's current

scheme or dragging out a third-party confrontation until we lose interest. Negotiations are the opium of the intelligentsia, and our leaders are beyond rehabilitation.

We are talking ourselves to death.

Whether the issue is Ukraine (with Crimea already forgotten), Iranian nuclear weapons, regime misbehavior in Syria or, for that matter, “peace in the Middle East,” we see talking as a fully valid substitute for action, for courage, for risk, even for thinking. Led by an American president who appears to believe we could reason with cancer tumors, we are no match for a man of action like Putin.

The fifth butchered myth—related to the previous one—is captured in a cluster of incantations we recite to dispel reality: Again and again we’re told that problem X, or Y, or Z has “no military solution,” the refined version of the undergraduate howler that “War doesn’t change anything.”

In fact, quite a few problems have only military solutions. Warfare always has been humankind’s primary means of changing a situation at least one party finds unsuitable. From bands of prehistoric warriors to Putin’s artful invasion of Crimea, warfare has been the preferred approach to disputes over territory, faith, culture, or wealth...or simply something an armed group felt would be a good use of their time. Although our records are, admittedly, incomplete, we have yet to pinpoint a Mongol crisis of conscience, nor do most of us pant to revisit the fluffy closing act of Henry V: We remember the king’s Agincourt speech and the battle. Warfare is as deeply engrained in the human animal as is the religious impulse (another factor discounted by our elite).

Now Putin, through skillful clandestine, covert, and overt uses of force—as well as the mere threat of force—has taken and continues to take what he wants to further his vision of a Russia

restored to greatness. Our pleas for negotiations accomplish nothing beyond self-amusement: We not only have not deterred Putin, our fecklessness has encouraged him. And we cannot persuade our petit bourgeois European counterparts of the need for even minor financial risk to deter a conqueror.

Force works. Violence determines outcomes. Power rules.

If Putin is not stopped soon, the price of stopping him later will be far higher. At present, meaningful sanctions would not save all of Ukraine, but could undercut Putin's economy and personal authority in the longer term. We should stop him and could stop him, but we won't.

In closing, one feels compelled to defend poor Neville Chamberlain, so often invoked by pundits appalled at our lack of resolve when Putin confronts us. Comparing that British prime minister to our current president is awfully unfair to Chamberlain. The latter knew, when he flew to Munich to meet "Herr Hitler," that Britain was not prepared to fight and needed more time for the desperate re-armament belatedly underway to produce weapons (such as the Spitfire) to counter the German juggernaut. President Obama, by contrast, is disarming.

Vladimir Putin is, without question, the man of this decade. Let us hope he is not the man of the century.



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# Putin Pushed Against An Open Door

*By Angelo M. Codevilla*

Vladimir Putin is making big geopolitical changes strictly by exploiting his adversaries' unwillingness to confront him. His Russia has no political or economic capacity to withstand any U.S. secondary trade boycott. But Putin bet that U.S. economic sanctions would be a joke, and won. His Russia has neither the military nor the political capacity to invade and occupy Ukraine. Putin knows that, outside of Crimea, a Russian army occupying Ukraine would be met by bloody resistance from a population every household of which lost relatives to Russia's genocidal campaigns in Ukraine that began in the 1920s and did not end until the 1960s. And so, to take over government offices in Eastern Ukraine, Putin sent Russian special forces transparently disguised as, and mixed with, local sympathizers. He bet that the West (and the Ukrainian government that was looking to the West for help) would pretend to doubt that these fighters-without-insignia are Russian troops, while respecting them as if they were rather than treating them as what they are under international law: bandits to be shot on sight. Putin did not send them into Eastern Ukraine to fight—only to prove his opponents' fecklessness.

Putin's reason for confidence in American and European leaders' fecklessness came from his 2008 military raid into Georgia, which practically annexed two of its provinces to Russia, put Eastern Europe on notice that Russia could work its will in the region unopposed, and led Americans as well as Europeans to work even harder at getting along with him.

Putin couches his demand regarding Ukraine inoffensively: "federation." In practice, "federation" means that Putin's people will own Ukraine's eastern regions excluding Western influence. But these Russian-run regions will have a substantial say in what happens in the rest of Ukraine. They will be the handle by which Putin will handle Ukraine. Obama and the European Union are

poised to agree to this, and to congratulate themselves on having avoided a Russian invasion—which was never in the cards.

Putin will then press the “federation” model on the other Eastern European lands that contain Russian minorities. Thus he will have re-created, if not the Soviet Union, then at least something like a Russian empire.

In absolute terms, it won’t be much of an empire. But against present-day Western statesmen, it will do as it pleases.

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# Putin, Russia, and New Russia: Dealing With an Unconstrained Tyrant

*By Paul R. Gregory*

Vladimir Putin has headed Russia for 14 years, during which he has muzzled his few political opponents, gained control of state television, and created a “power vertical.” In his Kremlin office, he is surrounded by fellow kleptocrats, whose shared goal is wealth accumulation and power. Any thoughts of national well-being come in a distant third. They wrap themselves in the cloak of nationalism, and they offer “bread and circuses” paid for by oil revenues. The business class, unprotected by a rule of law, flees Russia at first chance. There is no hope of durable economic progress.

Putin is the first world leader trained in and with a mindset for subversion, diversion, black ops, masking of operations, and outright lying. He, along with the Russian people, was humiliated by the Soviet collapse. He understands that a bad economy can be compensated for by military expansion and other tricks. His decade-long anti-American tirades have created a sturdy base of hatred of the West, particularly among pensioners, skinheads, ultra-nationalists, and anti-Semites. His propaganda machine, likely more potent than Goebbels’, can drum up patriotic frenzy, which the few liberal protesters cannot counter.

Putin’s covert and overt attacks on Ukraine fit perfectly into his KGB mindset: Western democracies are weak, restoration of empire deflects attention from arbitrary kleptocratic rule, and we can always stop if we encounter real resistance. We can live with a bad economy, and I can play one opponent against another with my energy levers.

Putin's foreign aggressions take place one step at a time, testing the level of resistance before the next move. The Georgian and Crimean campaigns were covert special operations with the use of regular troops only at the end, if necessary. The ongoing attacks on southeastern Ukraine have so far been conducted by black ops officers and agents aided by local mercenaries and the few true believers. Putin would like to take all of southwestern Ukraine using only covert operations, but the large territorial mass will probably require some of the 40,000 or so regular troops amassed along the border.

Russia, swallowing one half of Ukraine using special operations alone, would represent, in my view, a landmark in military history, thanks to Putin's KGB background, training, and worldview.

Putin's answer to "Why Georgia? Why Ukraine?" is simple: "Because I want to and no one will stop me."

Europe and the West do not know how to deal with an unconstrained tyrant who cut his teeth on the Soviet KGB. If they fail to learn how, Putin and Russia will soon hold sway over virtually all the former Soviet Union from the Baltic States to the Chinese border and then on to the sea routes and natural resources of the Arctic. States in this vast territory will either be formally ruled by Moscow or will know to make no significant decisions without Russia's consent.

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# A Show of Force Needed to Stop Putin

*By Peter R. Mansoor*

Vladimir Putin, that old KGB apparatchik, is unlikely to halt his campaign to reestablish Russia as the dominant force in Europe. He views power very much in the Old School sense: territory, military force, oil, and money. Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine have all felt the back of his hard hand. Putin believes—no, he knows—the West will not lift a finger to protect the non-NATO states in the Russian “near abroad.” His policy is calculated, not reckless. He will push until forced to back down by real power, not the soft diplomacy exhibited to date by President Obama and European leaders.

However, there is one tangible action President Obama can take in conjunction with NATO to head off the next crisis: station a reinforced U.S. Army heavy brigade combat team in Poland. Poland is the most strategically important (and most economically vibrant) state in the old Soviet bloc. For historical and realpolitik reasons, it is imperative that NATO make Poland secure against Russian pressure and threats. The recent deployment of a battalion of airborne infantry to Poland and the Baltic states is a laughably small gesture that will only embolden Putin to overreach. Putting real capability in Poland on a permanent basis—say, a heavy brigade combat team reinforced by an attack helicopter squadron—would send the kind of message that Putin cannot ignore: NATO is here to stay, and the United States will defend its allies with more than just words and pinprick sanctions.

Had Great Britain and France backed Czechoslovakia in 1938 during the Munich crisis, Germany would most likely not have had the run of success that propelled it to European domination

between 1939 and 1942. Putin is no Hitler, but the echoes of Munich reverberate in his actions today. It is time to put an end to Putin's run, before he causes real damage to the liberal international order that the United States and its allies have expended so much blood and treasure to create and defend.

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# Russia: Weaker than What?

*By Victor Davis Hanson*

Our elites often diagnose Vladimir Putin as acting from “weakness” in his many aggressions.

A list of Russia’s symptoms of feebleness follows: demographic crises, alcoholism, declining longevity, a one-dimensional economy, corruption, environmental damage, etc. But weakness is a relative concept in matters of high-stakes aggression.

Hitler was clearly weaker in 1938, when he doomed Czechoslovakia, than were Britain, France, and an isolationist United States. His subsequent serial invasions were powered by tanks that were initially inferior to those of the French. His fighters were no better than their British counterparts. He lacked a credible surface fleet and a four-engine bomber, and his munitions industries were far less competently run than those in Britain.

But a weak Germany was surely stronger than an individual Poland, Denmark, Norway, Luxembourg, and Belgium—and even France, given that the British and French never coordinated a serious military front. Until Hitler’s May 10 attack on Western Europe, many had still prayed for the continuance of the Phony War.

Saddam Hussein was weak in 1990. His army had recently been battered in Iran. He was bankrupt. His Soviet patron had all but disappeared. But Iraq was stronger than any of its neighbors other than Iran, which is why Kuwait collapsed quickly and the rest of the Gulf sheikdoms might have as well, without U.S. intervention.

Weak aggressors are not unusual in history. They invade (usually neighboring) countries because in their immediate landscape they feel that they are stronger, that outside interventions from

stronger states are unlikely, and that their aggressiveness is an asset that can somewhat offset their material liabilities. A Hitler or Saddam was locally successful until their border aggressions began to threaten the interest of stronger powers, which either preemptively intervene or were unwisely provoked. The 1942-45 de facto alliance of the United States, the Soviet Union, and Britain destroyed the Third Reich (whose new acquisitions by June 1941 had rivaled the geographical extent of the present EU) in less than four years. Saddam was defanged in a brief air war, and an even briefer land battle.

Putin is weak in geostrategic terms, but powerful when compared to any single contiguous neighbor or small groups of adjoining states. The only mystery of his aggression is how many additional states—two, three, four?—will he have to absorb, before he overreaches and incites now reluctant stronger powers to act.

VICTOR DAVIS HANSON, the Martin and Illie Anderson Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, is a classicist and an expert on the history of war. He is a syndicated Tribune Media Services columnist and a regular contributor to *National Review Online*, as well as many other national and international publications; he has written or edited twenty-three books, including the *New York Times* best seller *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power*. His most recent book is *The Savior Generals: How Five Great Commanders Saved Wars That Were Lost - from Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Bloomsbury 2013). He was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President Bush in 2007 and the Bradley Prize in 2008 and has been a visiting professor at the US Naval Academy, Stanford University, Hillsdale College, and Pepperdine University. Hanson received a PhD in classics from Stanford University in 1980.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Can or should the West try to stop Vladimir Putin's attempts to reabsorb portions of the old Soviet Union?

1. Has there ever really been a viable and autonomous Ukraine independent of Russian influence?
2. Does Russia have legitimate historical rights to a warm water port in the Crimea?
3. Are Putin's expansionary policies any different from those of the 20th-century Soviet Union?
4. What will the borders of the Russian Federation probably look like in ten years?

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CONFLICTS OF THE PAST AS LESSONS FOR THE PRESENT

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



Can or should the West try to stop Vladimir Putin's attempts to reabsorb portions of the old Soviet Union?

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