

## Ukraine: Strategic **and** Moral Dimensions

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The strategic crisis created in the 2000s Sino-Russian rapprochement has now been brought to another stage. It underlines anew a host of factors, not least the Nixon Presidency's skill in exploiting the earlier Sino-Soviet split, but, more gravely, the degree to which the Eurasian 'heartland' to adopt the term of Halford Mackinder with, to adopt another of his terms, its 'pivot' in western Russia, remains a core geopolitical challenge. For Mackinder and others, for example the Imperial General Staff in 1919, this challenge was taken further with concerns about Russia and Germany being allied, and this indeed was to be a key issue in successive crises, and alignment with Hitler enabled both to divide up Eastern Europe in a bloody fashion, the ultimate appeasement of Nazi Germany and one that robbed the Soviet system of any claim to moral standing in international relations. Putin's calls for the deNazification of Ukraine have a richly ironic tone given his past praise for Stalin, who also considered peace with Hitler in 1942 and 1943.

The postwar Soviet geopolitical order spanned from the Elbe, where the occupation of East Germany provided a crucial base for armies able to threaten Western Europe, to the East China Sea, as the Soviet Union under Stalin both supported Mao Zedong's victory in the Chinese Civil War and encouraged Chinese intervention in the Korean War.

This range made the Soviet Union a particularly challenging geopolitical threat, and it is one that is important to Putin's worldview. For him, as for many Russians, Russia is either an empire or it is nothing; and Ukraine is the principal obstacle to this pursuit. This is not a defensive interpretation of Russia's position, but one, to Putin, of a necessary imperialism. Putin definitely wants to install a pliant system there. This goal is central to his new European order, an order not only of territorial change but also of a force-based logic in international relations. Sermons about international law are irrelevant as far as he is concerned. Indeed, the force of contempt that he feels and expresses is one that is further engaged by such a response. It is a natural consequence of dictatorial policies, for the consequences of dictatorship are international as well as domestic. There is a common psychology in which restraint, from within and without, is not only not acceptable, but also contemptible. As such, there is an inherent 'moral' character to international relations, however much 'realists' might seek to ignore or circumvent it.

Morality as a context provides us with another approach to the Ukraine crisis and the more general geopolitics of ideology. In recent years, and culminating with a cultural 'takeover' at the current time, there is a critique of the West based on its role in Atlantic slavery. This is then used as the basis for a set of intellectual and public-activist strategies that serve, directly and indirectly, to call into question Western culture and more generally to suggest that it is simply a hypocritical value system and therefore of no moral consequence domestically or internationally. Indeed, this provides a key adjunct to a 'realist' position adopted by those who find all governance deeply flawed. In a repetition of left-wing activism during the so-called 'woke' agenda helps the opponents of Western values, and the enemies of our countries, by suggesting some form of moral equivalence or the West as in some way worse.

This is particularly malign in the case of slavery. The account of slavery that is offered relates to the Atlantic slave trade, a terrible period in which over eleven million Africans were enslaved by other Africans, sold to Westerners and transported in miserable circumstances and to miserable ends in the New World. This was appalling, and a stain on the history of Western and African societies in that

period. Somewhat less attention is devoted to the prevalence of slavery today, conservatively estimated as over twenty million people, and, even less, to the extent to which there is public slavery in the shape of those brutalised by autocratic states. The acme is North Korea, where the entire population are in effect slaves. Conquest is a particularly dramatic form of enslavement, and notably so when one democratic nation is conquered by another. Thus, Putin's invasion of Ukraine represents a form of enslavement that has moral as well as geopolitical consequences. The degree to which that is not grasped by Western commentators who see slavery as a matter only of private ownership is striking. It represents a failure not only in the assessment of slavery, but also one of the moral character of international relations, more particularly the true meaning of self-determination.

This provides a key to the justifications employed by Putin. None relate to matters of popular consent, even in the perverse form of Soviet on-party republics. Indeed, Putin is critical of the Soviet presentation of Ukraine. His democratic deficit obliges him to use a historicised ramble through a Russian vision of geopolitics, one that is based on a call to fear.

(836 words)