

For Conservative Home

Ukraine: Crisis and Politics

Jeremy Black

Real people fear, suffer and die. That is the nature of war. Conflict is also intensely political, not just because war is waged in order to enforce policies and determine decisions, but also because observers recalibrate their world, its hopes, fears, opportunities and nightmares. What yesterday appeared of great consequence is rendered redundant and new contexts provide the basis for judgment.

The Ukraine conflict will not end like the Falklands invasion did with the fall of the aggressive government and a situation that can be readily policed. Instead, whatever the short-term outcome and resulting position, this situation will fester, which will pose major challenges for statecraft, and for the stability both of Ukraine and of surrounding areas.

Russia has taken on a huge task, one that ultimately depends on installing a pliant government. Ukraine (233,031 square miles) compares to such previous areas of intervention as the Korean Peninsula's 85,232, Vietnam's 128,066 and Czechoslovakia's 78,871. Moreover, whereas the Soviets invaded Manchuria (390,625) in August 1945 with two million troops, Putin, who cannot draw on the same land forces as Stalin, has deployed fewer than 200,000. Moreover, Russia cannot draw on the support of the Warsaw Pact allies as the Soviet Union did when invading Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, modern missiles offer little for the control of over 40 million people, and you cannot have a secret policeman at everyone's elbow.

So, due to arrogance and stupidity, Putin, with his unprovoked, illegal, and totally unnecessary aggression, has put Russia in a very difficult position. Yet, however badly it goes, it is hard to see any Russian government letting Ukraine become a member of NATO because, although neither is a threat to Russia, that is not how they are considered by the paranoid Russian leadership.

On the mega-strategic level, this Russian attitude to Ukraine is made more difficult because of the range of other crises in which Russia could play a more or less hostile role, from East to South-West Asia and the Balkans to the Caribbean. A hostile Russia could make such issues as Iranian aggression, Chinese expansionism, and North Korean volatility far more difficult, and could further empower dictatorial allies or would-be allies, a list by no means limited to Belarus, Cuba, Syria and Venezuela, none of which offer a pleasant prospect for Ukraine.

Western policymakers are going to have to consider the knock-on impact of the specific crisis and the need to recalibrate tripwires elsewhere, both diplomatic and military.

The ability of the West to act with unity in this crisis will require continual care which means the need for real skill on the part of the Foreign Office and its ministers, and a Prime Minister able to devote sustained attention.

There is also the political wake within Britain. Covid costs and attention hit hard at this government, forcing the jettisoning of projects, such as the Yorkshire spur of HST2, and, more seriously, weakening its attention and energy. Differently, the same is the case with the Ukraine crisis, which, with Putin's talk about nuclear alert, makes the relative inconsequence of the covid pandemic more apparent.

Domestic governance will be harder as projects are cancelled and hopes brought low, and, aside from resulting problems, it would be unrealistic not to assume that Russia will meddle in domestic politics, not least by continuing to support separatist movements.

This situation ensures a need for maturity and judgment in the short term, but also consideration of the degree to which our democratic system is undermined from within by anti-democratic forces. The Soviet Union did so with some success during the Cold War, not least through providing assistance via allies to the Provisional IRA and the NUM, and it is naïve to expect that the same will not recur. This provides a particular need for government to consider how best to monitor, assess and, if necessary, counter dangerous, if not treasonable, domestic opposition.

As with the Cold War, this is a task that ranges widely, to include intellectual division. Indeed, there is a clear context in terms of culture wars, which the Left repeatedly appears to be winning, not least in the universities. Many who denounce a long past of the British empire and of the Atlantic slave trade appear all-too-oblivious about Russian imperialism and about the enslavement of the Ukrainians. What might appear a troubling absence of values is in fact a commitment against our country.

(730 words)

Jeremy Black's books include *Imperial Legacies* and *A Short History of War*.