

## The New Post-Invasion World

By Graham Gudgin

Right up until the last few weeks it was just about possible to see Vladimir Putin as someone determined to restore a sense of Russian power and greatness but to pursue this aim through absorbing territories bordering Russia with Russian-speaking majorities rather than invading countries opposed to his rule. Past incursions included two small parts of Georgia and then the Crimea plus the Russian majority parts of the Donbas industrial region of the Ukraine. All of these were welcomed, indeed promoted, by majority local populations. In Crimea the majority for absorption into Russia was 96%. This week's recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway areas was met in those areas with jubilant fireworks and Russian flags. Putin's apparent anxieties about Russian security could be viewed in light of his personal history, with a brother dying of diphtheria in the siege of Leningrad and three family members dying in the terrible circumstances of the eastern front in WW2.

Each of Putin's earlier incursions was opposed by the western world but with limited determination since the west has an inconsistent approach to regions breaking away from their national state. Scotland or Northern Ireland are fine to go if they wish, but Catalonia must stay part of Spain, Turkish Cyprus goes unrecognised but Kosova can detach itself from Serbia. Kashmir remains part of India against the wishes of its population without much interest in the west. The general principle seems to be to back states which oppose secession by regional minorities and certainly to oppose the secession of regions into states perceived as actual or potential enemies, whether Russia, Serbia or Turkey.

On this view of Putin's ambitions, it would have been sensible for Ukraine to make arrangements for a successionist referendum in the Donbas soon after the coup installed a pro-western government in Kyiv in 2014, and for the west to accept the wishes of the Crimean and Donbas majorities. Clarity on Ukrainian neutrality would also have been wise. However, in light of the unprovoked and utterly indefensible invasion of the Ukraine it is obvious that such compromise measures would have made no difference to Putin. His rambling, and deluded speech in Moscow with its distorted view of history, made it clear that he does not recognize any Ukrainian right to independence and that his ambition is to restore the pre-1990 boundaries of Russia.

After Feb 24<sup>th</sup> the world looks very different and much more dangerous. There is now an aggressive and not fully rational dictator on the loose and we cannot be sure where his ambitions will end. As Robert Tombs writes [on Briefings for Britain](#), aggressors have to make assumptions about their opponents and as in 1914 or 1938 these can easily be wrong. If Putin has calculated that the west is too dissolute to mount much opposition to his ambitions, this will surely prove wrong if he attempts further expansion. Although the west has made it clear that it will not put boots on the ground in Ukraine, Russia now presents a clear and present danger. NATO will now have to be strengthened and its members will need to refresh their vows on article 5 of the NATO treaty. Dependence on Russian oil, gas and minerals will have to be reduced. All of this will be expensive and at a time of emergence from a pandemic not to mention the earlier banking crisis. Even so it will have to be done.

This will be a test of western resolve. Just as Germany thought the Britain was a burned-out fading imperial power in 1914 and again in 1939, the calculation now that neither Britain, the EU or USA have any appetite for a real war of defence will be proved wrong. Admittedly, the fact that Britain's defiance in 1939 worked out well, depended heavily on luck as both Germany and Japan made huge

miscalculations in widening the war to take on much stronger enemies. It is true that the USA may now decide that Ukraine is a European matter of limited concerns to themselves, and Germany may continue behaving like a rabbit caught in the headlights, but Putin has issued the clearest of warnings. It would be foolish in the extreme to ignore this.

The world is beginning once again to resemble the one that the founder of geo-politics, Sir Halford MacKinder warned about in 1904. He viewed the heartland of Eurasia as a strategic core from which any controlling power could strike at any point on the Eurasian rim which contained 80% of the world's population. His views struck a chord at the time because the recent completion of the trans-Siberian railway allowed Russia to move troops to the Far East in a fraction of the time it took Britain by sea. The resulting security panic came to nothing as the 'rim' powers of Germany and Japan demonstrated their military superiority over both Russia and China and remained on top until 1945, and the USA became globally predominant thereafter. Communism continued to hold back the economic development in both Russia and China but since the fall of the Soviet Union and the abandonment of communist economic organization in China, Russia has recovered and China has grown in strength.

The recent pact between Russia and China at the winter Olympics appears to herald a revival of the conditions that led to Mackinder's warnings. Russia has shown that it is able to exploit its geo-strategic position by intervening in Syria, Kazakhstan and now in Ukraine. China is extending its power by claiming large swathes of the South China sea as well as financing naval bases in Sri Lanka and as far as Greece. The Russian base at Tartus in Syria, although not large, gives Russia a foothold in the Mediterranean and is capable of expansion. Sino-Russian military co-operation represents a potential threat but also contains contradictions. The two countries have natural points of competition, not least among the central Asian republics.

The only answers in an increasingly uncertain world in which autocrats have greatly increased their power is for the west to increase its own military resources and to widen its military alliances. India, Turkey and the independent nations of South East Asia will be important. At the same time economic resilience must be strengthened. Dependence on Russian natural resources or on Chinese industrial components is now too risky. Western gas production can be ramped up in the UK as well as the USA. Local opposition to fracking in Britain can met by realistic compensation for any loss in amenity or decline in property prices. Irrespective of whether Ukraine stands up to Putin's troops or instead loses the war and becomes a satellite of Russia, the invasion is a valuable wake-up call to a west that has been sleep-walking for too long.

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