



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 513

January 26, 2022

Deterring Eastern Storms

Dr. Keith B. Payne

Dr. Keith B. Payne is a co-founder of the National Institute for Public Policy, professor emeritus and former Department Head of the Graduate School of Defense and Strategic Studies at Missouri State University, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and former Senior Advisor to the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

The question of the hour is why both Russia and China are now behaving so aggressively in Europe and Asia, respectively. Some commentators lay blame squarely on the Biden Administration's humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan.¹ Others counter that a U.S. military retreat in one region does not shape aggressors' views of the United States in another region; so, the U.S. withdrawal from Kabul is unlikely to cause increased Russian or Chinese aggressiveness.²

It certainly is true that Russian and Chinese aggressiveness and expansionist designs on Ukraine and Taiwan, respectively, did not begin with the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. But their perceptions of the freedom to act on those expansionist aspirations likely were encouraged by the bungled U.S. withdrawal from its long-standing commitment to prevent a terrorist-friendly regime from returning to power in Afghanistan.³ Opponents' expectations of U.S. power and commitment are not shaped only by U.S. behavior in their own neighborhoods. There are many historical examples of foreign leaders with aggressive goals acting on their desires based on the lessons they could take from those events consistent with what they wanted to be true, wherever they could find them. Saddam Hussein, for example, reportedly referred to the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia following the 1993 Black Hawk Down incident as shaping his initial view of the United States as a paper tiger. That did not have to be the lesson learned, but leaders often will choose to see and believe that which is



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most consistent with their desires and wishes. If their favored goal is expansionism, they will find reasons to conclude that they can safely provoke others in the process of expansion. This tendency to see and believe that which fits desires is not just the case with leaders and aggressors; it is a well-known part of human cognition and decision making. Las Vegas is built on that facet of human decision making.

The path to today's looming crises in Europe and Asia is many decades in the making and there is blame enough to attribute to every U.S. administration since the end of the Cold War. In Europe, NATO allies share culpability at least comparable to Washington's. If NATO wielded the overwhelming power that it easily could have, given the unparalleled resources available to it, Putin would not be able to act on his aspirations to recover Ukrainian territory and would likely be deterred from trying. But resources potentially available are not the same as actual, existing power realities on the ground, and there appears to be no Adenauer, Churchill, Reagan or Thatcher anywhere willing to turn Western potential into power. Instead, the West again appears to be more interested in avoiding the inconvenient realities of Russia's revanchist aspirations and power on the ground, as if Russia's menacing drive to recover the lost position of the Soviet Union would end with Ukraine.

Viewing the prospective costs of a Russian conquest of Ukraine as being of monumental significance only for Ukraine is akin to viewing Germany's 1938 expansionism at the expense of Czechoslovakia as being of great significance only for Czechoslovakia. That parochial perspective among Western audiences had catastrophic consequences. The West's 1938 capitulation to Germany in Munich, i.e., essentially abandoning Czechoslovakia to Hitler's expansionist claims, certainly contributed to his subsequent underestimation of the Western allies' likely response to Germany's later attack on Poland.⁴ Whatever chance there may have been for deterrence to affect Hitler's planning to attack Poland in 1939 was lost at Munich in 1938.

The same dangerous dynamic appears to be operating in Asia. The combined resources available to the United States and its allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific region are so vast that China's Xi Jinping should, in principle, easily be made to understand that although he may want to take Taiwan, the correlation of forces would not permit him to act on that desire. That conflict should be deterred. But, again, Western resources available in principle and existing power realities on the ground are not the same. Beijing has shifted the correlation of forces on the ground in its favor for more than a decade while the West has largely stood by idly on the basis of the faulty argument that, "The risk of nuclear confrontation between the United States and either Russia or China belongs to the past, not the future..."⁵

Western leaders rightly complain about Putin's and Xi's excessive demands and military buildups, but many are, yet again, culpable of believing what they want to be true: that the liberal world order can be sustained without the needed Western power position vis-à-vis



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revanchist powers because the West's norms and rules are so objectively right and good for the world that all rational players ultimately will abide by them.⁶ In short, the liberal world order will not need serious defense against revanchist states because of its obvious mutual advantages, universal appeal and reasonableness.

The absurdity of that self-serving view was demonstrated repeatedly throughout the 20th century. Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II consciously instigated a naval arms competition prior to World War I to help Germany overturn the existing order in Europe and secure Germany's rightful "place in the sun." One generation later, Adolf Hitler's National Socialist regime embarked on a reckless military course to destroy the liberal international order and replace it with a new world order dominated by a fascist Europe. The emergence of Russia's and China's revisionist goals has been apparent for many years. Russia forcefully violated its commitment to respect Ukraine's sovereignty and borders contained in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, and China has manifestly violated its commitment to respect a largely autonomous Hong Kong in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration.

It is an ethnocentric mistake to believe that Western norms and rules are so objectively right and good that all others, eventually, will choose to follow them of their own accord and reason; some foreign leaders see as their priority overturning the international order governed by Western norms and rules. Russian and Chinese leaders seek to change a world order they find unacceptable, not to be bound by it, and they pursue the hard power to do so. Nevertheless, turning a blind eye to such harsh realities is so comforting and convenient for status-quo powers that some Western leaders continue to cling to their preferred belief in a self-ordering liberal world order, and worse, conduct policy as if their preferred belief is true. Doing so has left the West with no easy options now that reality has once again reared its ugly head. The noted strategist Herman Kahn commented on this problem decades ago: "About all an unprepared government can do is to say over and over, 'the other side doesn't really want war.' Then they can hope they are right. However, this same government can scarcely expect to make up by sheer determination what it lacks in preparation."⁷

The looming crises in Europe and Asia are the result of predictable Russian and Chinese post-Cold War revisionist goals and associated military buildups, and the enduring wishful thinking of Western leaders. While Russian and Chinese leaders want the power and freedom to expand, and will likely interpret events accordingly, Western leaders want Russia and China restrained by sweet reason without the effort needed to enforce restraint. The United States again faces the inevitable consequences of the cosmopolitan illusion that Western norms and rules have universal appeal and that opponents will adhere sensibly to them and the associated Western definition of reasonable behavior. As a consequence, Washington and allies may not, in the near term, be able to strengthen their position in the correlation of forces sufficiently to deter current crises from escalating to conflict. Nevertheless, if Western leaders awaken to a sober recognition of the real threats to the



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liberal international order, it may not be too late to pursue the preparations needed to deter the subsequent crises that undoubtedly will follow.

¹ For example, see the comment by K.T. McFarland in, Adam Sabes, Biden's 'Green Light' to Putin on Ukraine Will Have 'Ripple Effects' Throughout the World, Critics Say," *Fox News*, January 22, 2022, available at, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/bidens-green-light-to-putin-on-ukraine-will-have-ripple-effect-throughout-the-world-critic-says>.

² See for example the discussion in, "Proceedings: Deterrence Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, forthcoming, 2022).

³ As is discussed in, David J. Trachtenberg, *Deterrence Implications of the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, *Information Series*, No. 502 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, September 11, 2021), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/IS-502.pdf>.

⁴ When asked about the possible Western military response to an attack on Poland, Hitler replied, "Our enemies are little worms, I got to know them in Munich." Quoted in, Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations 1932-1945*, Vol. III, *The Chronicle of a Dictatorship, 1939-1940* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), p. 1663. Had the West helped to resist Hitler at Munich and thereby essentially compelled Germany to go to war with Czechoslovakia over the Sudetenland, senior German military officers, including the Chief of the General Staff, Franz Halder, were prepared at that time to undertake a coup against the National Socialist regime.

⁵ James Cartwright, Chair, Global Zero U.S. Nuclear Policy Commission, *Modernizing U.S. Nuclear Strategy, Force Structure and Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Global Zero, May 2012), p. 6, available at http://www.globalzero.org/files/gz_us_nuclear_policy_commission_report.pdf.

⁶ This tendency in Western thought is not new. See, Lee Harris, "The Cosmopolitan Illusion," *Policy Review*, April & May 2003, p. 45-5; see also the discussion in, Adda Bozeman, "War and the Clash of Ideas," *Orbis*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring 1976), pp. 76-102;

⁷ Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 213-214.

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