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INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT IN A WORLD 'RULED' BY PUTIN

By

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Abstract

Vladimir Putin's excesses in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova - where Russia occupies parts of these countries' territories - make him the 'ruler' of the world as no other country can boast of this record. Putin's atrocities all over the world are legion and are well documented. This paper, therefore, argued against Putin's reckless disposition towards constituted authorities. The International Community should rise to the occasion by censuring Putin. His mobilization of Russians all over the world to come together as it was in the past when they were all under the Soviet Union was the motivation for his unnecessary war against Ukraine. Allowing Putin to have his way through the use of force portends danger and threat to the international system. Putin's antics should not be tolerated by other stakeholders most of whom are conducting themselves in a very responsible manner. The absence of a central political authority in international relations is not a license for the coronation of a "World Tsar".

Keywords

Occupation, Motivation, Reckless Disposition, Stakeholders, Danger and threat.



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Introduction

The United States has completely mishandled the new ‘Hitler’ that is parading himself all over the global space with showy swaggering and relishing his recklessness and killings with unbridled ambition and perceptible untouchability. Like Hitler, Vladimir Putin hates America and “Americanism” with a disturbing passion. During the Reichstag elections of 1928, Hitler campaigned on what he regarded as the central issue of the day: Germany’s continuing enslavement by her wartime enemies as represented by the forces of western imperialism and international capitalism. Hitler stated: “Germany no longer has any sovereignty..... The American Union has created a power factor of such dimensions that it threatens to overthrow all previous state power rankings.¹ In a similar fashion, Putin attacked the US and its interventionist activities around the world. According to him:

After the dissolution of bipolarity on the planet. ...our western partners, led by the United States of America, prefer not to be guided by international law in their practical policies, but by the rule of the gun. They have come to believe in their exclusivity and exceptionalism, that they can decide the destinies of the world, that only they can ever be right. They act as they please here and there, they use force against sovereign states, building coalitions based on the principle “If you are not with us, you are against us”.²

This seemingly endless comparison, inspired by what has been termed “invariable allusions” by Thomas, has been elevated to a national war maxim by Putin’s Russia.³ There was nothing the US is doing that Putin is not cloning. All his actions and inaction are justified by drawing parallels between what the US did in Kosovo and what Russia is doing in Ukraine. Putin claimed that it was the West that created, with their own hands, a very similar situation when they agreed that the unilateral separation of Kosovo from Serbia, exactly what Crimea is doing now, was legitimate and did not require any permission from the country’s central authorities. Also alluding to what happened in Ukraine and in Yugoslavia, Putin, who said he personally witnessed the destruction of Belgrade in 1999, explained that the US never got any approval from the UN Security Council for its actions in Belgrade nor was any resolution passed allowing the actions⁴. In essence, Putin was justifying Russia’s attack on Ukraine without the authorization of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It was true that the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan told the BBC in an interview that US action in Iraq was illegal since the invasion did not conform with the UN charter on intervention, but Putin failed to tell the world that unlike what he did in Georgia and what he is doing in Moldova and Ukraine, the United States did not invade to occupy or annex people’s land. The Kosovo-Crimea parallel cited as example for his action in Crimea could not stand. The Kosovans were moving away from Serbia as an independent state while Russia was adding Crimea to its own territory. Crimea was given back to Ukraine in 1954 by Nikita Khrushchev to compensate for the horrendous killing of about 2.5 million Ukrainians during the Holodomor of 1932 and 1933. Khrushchev also took the decision partly as a kind of homage to the tercentenary of the Treaty of Pereiaslov.⁵

At present, Russia occupies the regions of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and the former South Ossetian Autonomous region of Soviet Georgia. In Moldova, Russia occupies Transnistria which the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognized on March 15, 2022 as Moldova’s territory. In Ukraine, the impunity continues with unrestrained laxness. Crimea was annexed in 2014, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Zaporizhia and Avdiivka have been added to Russia’s

occupied territories. Foreclosing the possibility of returning these territories back to Ukraine, Putin asserted with venturesome finality:

“Today, we are signing agreements on the admission of the Donesk people’s Republic, the Luhansk people’s Republic, the Zaporizhia Region and the Kherson Region to Russia. I am sure that the Federal Assembly will support the constitutional laws on the adoption and formation in Russia of four new regions, for new subjects of the Russian Federation, because this is the will of millions of people ... And this of course, is their right, their inalienable right, which is enshrined in the first article of the UN Charter, which directly speaks of the principle of equal rights and self-determination of people”.⁶

Warning all the western powers, including the United States, Putin declared: “I want the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West to hear me, so that everyone remembers this: people living in Luhansk and Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhia become our citizens forever.”⁷

The Dictator’s Shibboleth and Terror

Gioe accused Putin of trying to create an unthinkable new reality by believing that there is a Russian world in which a “common Russian Civilization has been unjustly divided into a fragmented Russian diasporas across artificial international boundaries.”⁸ By now, I think it is naïve to think that there could be a “Russian world”. There is nothing called “Russian world”. What we have is a “Putin’s World”. Putin is Russia and Russia is Putin. The ‘Mobster’ called Putin (in the language of Dina Khapaeva) has domesticated the whole of Russia by abridging the rights and freedom of the citizens and by establishing himself in the country as an absolute ruler with maximum power. “Russkiy Mir” (Russian world) a foundation created by decree by Vladimir Putin in 2007 was Putin’s strategic mantra to justify his unwarranted territorial expansionism.⁹ He has simply camouflaged his onslaught on the World with a nationalistic catch-phrase to present himself to diasporic Russians as their “Messiah” not knowing that Putin has just deployed and deceived them into a personal agenda promoted on the pedestal of irrational sentimentalism. Assuming that Putin’s wars in Georgia and Ukraine were stimulated by the persecution of Russians in the diaspora, what then could be the justification for his own repressive and authoritarian actions against the Russians at home?

In the Kremlin, Putin is the law and the constitution, a position that sets him up as the most fortified individual in Russia after Kremlin. In any case, Putin himself is Kremlin. When Putin talks about the Kremlin as a centre of authority, he is not being metaphorical, he is simply saying: “I am the Kremlin”. When foreign policy experts say the character of a country’s foreign policy is epitomized by the character of the country’s leadership, Russia is a theoretical typology. When a prominent communist strategist, Leonid Dobrokhotov exclaimed “this is the kiss of death” immediately Boris Yeltsin announced Putin as his new Prime Minister after kicking out Sergei Stepashin, nobody knew he was being prophetic.¹⁰ Between Chechenya (1999-2009) and Ukraine (2014-2024), the litany of deaths singlehandedly plotted and executed by Putin via wars and other unorthodox methods has been horrific. Inspired by the obvious complicit, indifference and inaction of the Western powers, Putin elected to threaten the World with his nuclear weapons which he moves around with frightening drama. .

Inside Russia, Putin's wrath and rot are countless. A US document/report prepared for the use of the US Senate stated thus:

More than 2 years ago, Vladimir Putin gained and solidified power by exploring blackmail, fears, terrorism, and war. Since then, he has combined military adventurism and aggression abroad with propaganda and political repression at home. All the while, he has empowered the state security services and employed them to consolidate his hold on the levers of political, social, economic power, which he has used to make himself and a circle of loyalists extraordinarily wealthy.¹¹

Despite all the notorious and nefarious activities catalogued against Putin in this comprehensive report, the United States did nothing to stop Putin from his serial killings of political opponents and human rights activists. The latest of his killings was Alexei Navalny, a frontline political opponent of Putin. Navalny died while serving a 19 year- prison sentence in corrective colony FKU 1K-3, in the village of Kharp I n the Russian Artic. As usual, President Joe Biden reacted immediately to the killing by attributing the killing to Putin. He said: "...make no mistake, Putin is responsible for Navalny's death. Putin is responsible. What has happened to Navalny is yet more proof of Putin's brutality. No one should be fooled-not in Russia, not at home, not anywhere in the world. Putin does not only target citizens of other countries as we have seen what is going on at Ukraine right now, he also inflicts terrible crimes on his people."¹²

Before Navalny, there were many casualties of Putin's brutality whose corpses were littered all over Russia. There was Alexander Litvenenco, a former FSB agent who was reportedly poisoned by Polonium 210, a radioactive material which included highly hazardous alpha particles. It was believed that it was Putin who ordered the assassination. Next on the list was Ana Politkovskaya, a Russian journalist who was killed in her apartment. She was an unrepentant Putin's critic. Before her death, she received so many death threats, according to reports, from anonymous people trailing her until she was finally assassinated. Boris Nemtsov, a former Deputy Prime Minister and a very strong opposition was assassinated near the Kremlin in Moscow in 2015. Putin was also mentioned in the case despite the conviction of some Chechen-origin citizens by a Russian court for the assassination.

Putin's historic assault on the people of Russia and Russia's democratic institutions has become a global reference when talking about citizens persecution by their governments.. Government's repressive actions and measures have reached a hopeless zenith with critics and "innocent citizens" being jailed for ridiculous offences like lampooning government officials and their mode of dressing. The story of Masha Moskaleva, a 12 year-old girl from Tula region, Moscow, depicts the decline in the substance and form of powerless humanity living in Russia. The little girl had drawn a picture in her school art class which the military authorities claimed was "discrediting the military" – an offence that is considered criminal by Putin and his men. For her radical and audacious effrontery, Masha would have spent a maximum of five years in prison if she was not a minor. But her father was not that lucky. He was arrested, beaten, fined and placed under house arrest while the daughter was sent to state care. What was the whole picture drama about? The picture showed a woman and a child, hand in hand, next to a Ukrainian flag. Missiles fly towards them from a Russian flag, on which is written "No to War". The teacher who instructed her pupils to produce something celebrating the "special military operation in Ukraine, was the first to invite the police acting in cahoots with the school head.

The United States and its allies will have to act beyond political rhetoric if they really want to stop Putin from further atrocities. The Western powers need to move fast to save the life of Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Kremlin critic who was found guilty of treason among other charges. For this crime, he was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Kara-Murza, a key proponent of the Magnitsky Act who holds both Russian and British Passports was detained in April 2022 and charged with criticizing the Russian Army. He may be Putin's next target. The list of Putin's victims in Russia, dead or alive, is as long as the entire population of the Republic of Palau.¹³

Conceptualizing Putin's International Conflict

Galvanized by the inaction and aloofness of the international community, including the United Nations, to his domestic atrocities and authoritarianism, Putin forayed into the international space with a more aggressive negative energy, provoking and stoking international conflict in some parts of Europe. Conscious of his new profile and status as the "troubler" of the world, Putin designed a framework for his mission and exploits abroad. First, what is international conflict theory? It has been defined and described as a new 'conflict approach' that would replace the Cold War order which ceased to function since 1989. It assumes a clash of civilizations that would eventually throw up a new world to replace the different political ideologies that characterized the Cold War years. In a seminal presentation Yaqing theorized: "Think about two important theories, one at the beginning of the Cold War and the other at the end of it. At the end of the Cold War, when the world witnessed a collapse of the conflictual bipolarity, the argument of "clash of civilizations" was put forward. It divided the world into several major civilizations and discussed the differences among them".¹⁴

Alluding to Kennan's famous "Long telegram",¹⁵ Yaqing explained that the conflictual relationship formed after the Second World War between the United States and the Soviet Union, the two countries that had risen as the Superpowers out of the war, was what eventually led to the Cold War between the two giants. "Then he concluded: "Once two actors, whether they are individuals, groups, or nation-states, are different, they tend to conflict with each other. In other words, difference causes conflict".¹⁶

As a nuclear armed-state, Russia's conflicts with Georgia and Ukraine have followed the asymmetric dyads. In these two cases, Putin has deployed Russia's nuclear weapons against his adversaries and, on several occasions, he has threatened to use them should the Western powers contemplate intervening in his war with Ukraine. Though the nuclear irrelevancy school led by John Mueller, maintains that the possession of nuclear weapons confers no bargaining advantage on the nuclear-armed power engaged in a confrontation with a non-nuclear state,¹⁷ the same nuclear weapons have given Putin the audacity to continue with the acquisition and occupation of other countries' territories. Putin's strategy was to hide under a manipulative interpretation of Articles 61-63 of Russia's constitution which define the Russian Federation's obligation to protect its citizens abroad.¹⁸ Though this provision does not specifically entail protection of all ethnic Russians, articles 62 and 63 make possible the extension of citizenship to Russians living abroad.¹⁹ One of the allegations against Russia in respect of this constitutional obligation was that it uses this interpretation to undermine states with large pro-Russian populations through the possibility of offering citizenship retroactively as a means to justify intervention. One of the means of doing this was through the issuance of passports to citizens of another country. The Russian government used this method with great effect in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and may have replicated it in Crimea and the Donbas.²⁰ To a very large extent this accusation could be true in view of the action of the International Criminal Court (ICC) against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian Commissioner for Children's rights for the war crime of unlawful deportation and transfer of children during the Russo- Ukrainian war.²¹ According

to the prosecution of the ICC, Karim A.A. Khan KC, the charges against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova are based on reasonable grounds that the two are responsible for unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation contrary to article 8(2)(a)(vii) and article 8(2)(b)(viii) of the Rome Statute.²²

Rather than reduce the intensity of his attacks on Ukraine as a result of the criminal case against him, Putin has remained defiant and unrepentant. He has continued to pummel Ukraine by killing babies, children, adults and the elderly with his missiles of death. In one of its recent attacks on Odesa, Russia's missiles came within few metres of killing the Greek President, Kyriakos Mitsotakis and Vladimir Zelensky almost sparking a Third World War. Shortly before that, Putin had threatened to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine saying boastfully that "this is not a bluff". This was during Russia's altercation with Ukraine over the shelling of the Russian-controlled Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant in Ukraine. There is no doubt that Putin is excited about his "weapons of mass destruction", however, he needs to be guided by a recent empirical study that examined the effects of nuclear weapons on conflict interaction patterns undertaken by Organski and Kugler.²³ Both authors identify 14 deterrence cases that occurred between 1945 and 1979 in which nuclear weapons could have been used. According to the study, seven of these cases involved a nuclear power in confrontation with a non-nuclear state (or a state with an ineffective nuclear force). Their findings indicate that in only one case out of the seven did the nuclear-armed state win: "Nonnuclear powers defied, attacked, and defeated nuclear powers and got away with it."²⁴ They also state in their study that in the six cases that the nuclear power lost to a nonnuclear state, the winner was estimated to have conventional military superiority at the site of the confrontation.²⁵

In a related work by Kugler, he isolates 14 cases of extreme crisis that occurred between 1946 and 1981, in which nuclear weapons were available to at least one party in the dispute. Of these 14 cases, nine involved confrontations in which only one state had access to nuclear arms. In all nine cases, the outcomes of the crises favoured the nonnuclear challenger. Kugler stated that the balance of conventional military capabilities not nuclear weaponry –provided the best predictor of crisis outcome.²⁶

The paradox of Putin's nuclear intimidation of Ukraine will forever haunt the Ukrainians. In 1991, Ukraine was one of the Republics that proclaimed their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed. Consequent to this break-up, Ukraine became the inheritor of many of the Soviet's nuclear armaments which made it (Ukraine) the World's third-largest power for a very brief period. At this time in question, Ukraine was in possession of 176 intercontinental ballistic missiles armed with 1240 nuclear war heads, as well as 42 nuclear bombers with hundreds of nuclear cruise missiles and bombs stockpiled for them and some 3000 tactical nuclear weapons. Though the operational control of the weapons remained in Moscow's hands, Ukraine had physical custody.²⁷

On December 5, 1994, the United States, Russia and Britain signed the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, which France and China also endorsed in separate official statements. In recognition of Ukraine's voluntary surrender of its nuclear weapons, the five major nuclear powers promised to "respect Ukraine's independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine."²⁸ Unfortunately, the same Russia today is terrorizing Ukraine with its nuclear armaments. Russia not only disrespects Ukraine's sovereignty, it has discountenanced the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances of 1994. Despite the fact that this Memorandum was signed by Boris Yeltsin, the man who appointed Vladimir Putin as his Prime Minister, Putin has thrown caution and decency to the dogs by invading Ukraine, its "nuclear benefactor". When Putin accuses the US of gross violations

of formal agreements and understanding, what can he say about the abandonment of the Budapest Agreement under his watch?²⁹

The honest truth is that if Putin is not stopped now and the international community remains apathetic to his *Russkiy Mir*, he may eventually clash with the United States over Alaska. Historical accounts had it that immediately after their victory against Great Britain in the Revolutionary War of 1775-83, the pre-occupation of both leaders and citizens of US was with their own survival. They showed no interest, at least for the time being, in giving the impression of being a beacon of hope for anyone overseas, however downtrodden or oppressed. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were in agreement over this decision. This “introverted” policy which the Americans lauded as deserving isolationism, was disrupted by some zealous expansionists who felt that for a country like America, surrounded by a restless, adventurous and tempestuous Europe, a foreign policy was imperative. This group was led by Will Seward, America’s Secretary of state. In 1867, Seward purchased the Alaskan territory from the Russians for \$7.2 million-about two cents per acre. What some Americans called “Seward’s Folly” then “lunged the country into the future at breakneck speed”.³⁰ This purchase and American intervention in the Spanish-Cuban crisis of 1898, which later resulted in the Spanish-American War, changed the dynamic of US domestic policy from self-protection to the issue of human rights abroad.

Thomas postulates: “Considering the trend in Putin’s regular justifications for his serial aggressions, the defence and protection of the Russians in Alaskan territory would become an excuse to attack the US at a point in the future... At a moment when Putin feels so hurt about US interference in his affairs, he can also re-open the transaction by questioning the ridiculous price Seward paid for the territory. With Putin, nothing is impossible.”³¹

Putin’s *Russkiy Mir* and Hitler’s *Lebenstraum* have some parallels. Throughout 1930-31, in public and in private, Hitler stuck to *Lebenstraum* as the universal panacea, the same way Putin goes about pursuing his *Russkiy Mir* all over Europe with strategic calculation. Hitler rued the ostracization of Germany in the scheme of things in Europe. He complained: “We had to watch...how nations such as the Portuguese and the Dutch divided up the World with the British... If a people is starving, then it has the right to seize territory for itself...There were only two ways of feeding the German people. Either one pursues export which means competing with the world or we create ourselves a new market through the expansion of our living space”.³²

During the annexation of some strategic regions in Ukraine, Putin also rued the fall of the Soviet Union:

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West decided that the World, all of us, would forever have to put up with its dictates. Then in 1991, the West expected that Russia would not recover from such shocks and would fall apart on its own. Yes, it almost happened-we remember the 90s, the terrible 90s, hungry, cold and hopeless. But Russia resisted, revived, strengthened, again took its rightful place in the World... I want the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West to hear me, so that everyone remembers this: People living in Luhansk, Donetik, Khivson and Zarapozhzhia become our citizens forever”.³³

Conclusion

Putin is an unpredictable enigma whose personal ambition for global relevance transcends that of Russia which he superintends. At his convenience, he indulges in conventional extremism or systemic hibernation. He oscillates in every school of thought for as long as he finds solace and comfort in their theoretical protectionism. On one hand, he behaves as if he is a true adherent of international society romancing fetishily with Martin Wight's norms and values and institutions. Despite his fascination for apostasy, Putin cossets in cultures, religions, laws, cults, oracles, ideologies, ethical ideas, customs, propaganda and "whatever else shaped human outlooks and provoked human activities jurisdiction".³⁴ Wight and Bull espouse three traditions for those who act as agents of states including President, Prime Minister, and Secretary of State namely: devotion to one's own nation and the well-being of its citizens: respect for the legitimate interests and rights of other states and for international law; and respect for human rights and for common reality.³⁵

Of these three, none is sacrosanct to Putin. Though Putin claims that he is so passionate about the well-being of his citizens, this contradicts his use of repressive measures against the same citizens whom he claims to love intimately. Secondly, Putin has no respect or honour for the legitimate interests and rights of other states and for international law. This is very obvious in his unjustified and arbitrary invasion of Georgia and Ukraine. As a member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia cannot feign ignorance about the existence of the UN Charter Article 2(4) which prohibits "the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity nor political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the purposes of the United Nations". That Putin is a fugitive of the law is evident in the criminal charges slammed on him and his Commissioner for Child Rights by the International Criminal Court (ICC). Thirdly, Putin's disobedience and disregard for international law is unsurpassable. He sees himself, he conducts himself and he parades himself as the "god" of the International system that should be worshipped and revered by all and sundry. Putin's Russia sees itself as the country that must not be touched or scolded.

The only warning one can give to other members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is that now that Putin has won another 6-year term as Russia's President, the peace and security for which the UN was instituted will remain elusive. If the system does not collapse as a result of Putin's excesses, there is every indication that Putin will likely usurp the functions of the international system and effeminate the Council with his frequent exercise of veto power.

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