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RUSSIA'S WAR MAXIM AND PARANOID PARALLELISM

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ABSTRACT

The international system is gradually sliding into another form of war. This study interrogates the national tendencies and personal idiocies at play when a major power and a global power involved in the Cold War, the US and Russia (the substance of the collapsed Soviet Union) are again engaged in a simmering altercation capable of leading to a 'Colder War' a la KatusaMarin. The paper discusses the fragility of the system's fundamentals and the behavioral latitude of the actors' traction and energies towards strategic cooperation. The objective of the study is to draw attention to the operational inadequacies in the international system whose basic function is to guide the world in shaping a global order that will engender peace and stability among the various state actors and non-state actors. Unfortunately, some of the actors within the system have exploited the abstraction of the system for their benefit by appropriating its vital mechanics through sublime and egotistic substitution of roles. The study then submits that the endless parallelisms animating the constant conflicts between the two powers and their allies within the system will not abate until the actors see peace as an obligation they owe humanity. The pursuit of personal desires by leaders via simulated national interest is a major albatross to an international system created to stimulate global peace and promote stability.



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INTRODUCTION

Vladimir Putin's Russia always has allusive justifications for its wars with both traditional and new adversaries. The same way it rationalizes its interventions in some of its past and present wars around the globe. Putin's invariable allusions are fixatedly – as if it's a national creed – directed at the US and its European allies. As far as Putin is concerned, the international system's volatility is precipitated and provoked by the United States' drive for hegemonic domination despite enjoying the status of a unipolar power. Putin is not one to be persuaded or convinced that the US adventurism and activities in the international system are driven by any universal philosophy relating to global peace and security. No matter how much the US belabours itself to demonstrate to the world that it has good intentions in stemming down the tension endemic in the international system, some of its actions in Eastern Europe, Middle East and Asia are too contentious to agree with this position. Until the US reduces its ubiquity in the local affairs of some of these countries such as Israel, Japan, Ukraine, South Korea, Norway, Australia, its sincerity about working for global peace and security will remain unbelievable. Russia, Iran, North Korea, China see only one enemy of peace in the world: the United States of America.

By undermining liberal and democratic institutions in Russia, the possibility and likelihood of the US and Putin working together becomes very remote. After some initial gestures of cooperation and understanding, Putin developed a more suspicious interpretation of Western intentions. At times, America's actions helped to fuel some of these suspicious interpretations of western intentions. Consequent upon this, Putin redefined Russia's role in the world, largely but not completely in opposition to the United States and the West.¹ Though the invasion of Iraq by the US diverged the two countries on certain strategic issues and geopolitical coalitions, Putin's dissimulations from the moment he became Russia's President till he parted ways with President George W. Bush suggested that he had his game plan well mapped out. However, the invasion of Iraq by the US was very controversial not just from Putin's perspective but the then Secretary-General, Kofi Annan was also categorical in his description of the war as illegal. In September 2004, in an interview with BBC on the invasion, Annan retorted:

I have indicated that it was not in conformity with the UN Charter from our point of view and from the Charter point of view, it was illegal.²

Annan's position was dismissed by the Australian Prime Minister who said that the legal advice they had on the table at that time was that the action was entirely valid in international law terms. Australia was one of the countries that joined US in the invasion. Randy Scheumamann, a former adviser to US Defence Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld remarked that Annan had no right to question the legal judgement of UN member states. If Scheumamann said Annan cannot question the legal judgement of UN member states, but here is the Russian President, Putin confirming the illegality of US action in Iraq:

But the example that stands apart...is of course, the invasion of Iraq without legal grounds. They used the pretext of allegedly reliable information available in the United States about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. To prove that allegation, the US Secretary of State held up a vial with white powder publicly for the whole world to see assuring the international community, that it was a

chemical warfare agent created in Iraq. It later turned out that all of that was fake and a sham, and that Iraq did not have any chemical weapons.³

Putin is not done with his accusation of US atrocities in some countries. He also referred to the distortion of all the UN Security Council decisions on Libya. According to Putin, the US through his distortion ruined Libya, “created a huge seat of international terrorism, and pushed the country towards a humanitarian catastrophe and into the vortex of a civil war”. Putin attributed the tragedy, starvation and the large scale exodus of people from the Middle East and North East Africa to Europe to US action and activities in Libya”.⁴

Putin’s uncharacteristic emotionalism and sentimentalism about the situation in Libya would have been accepted as a sincere emotive gesture but unfortunately, his reckless and needless attack and invasion of Georgia three years before the US stormed Libya contradicted his theatrical empathy for the Libyans. As usual, Russia’s regular excuse for the invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was that it wanted to defend Russian and Ossetian citizens who were in danger of becoming victims of genocide. This Russian excuse holistically captured the full force of Russian exploitation of ethnicity, and a crystallization of a cohesive Russian strategy aimed at accomplishing Russia strategic objectives.⁵ Though, Putin keeps denying his nostalgic aspiration for hegemonic domination as it was in the days of the Soviet Union, his annexations of most of the “conquered territories” in Georgia (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) and Crimea (Ukraine) are clear testaments to his desire and ambition for territorial expansionism.

This view is reinforced by the submission of Bernard – Henri Levy, one of the West’s leading intellectuals who condemned the US for its indulgent proclivity towards Russia and Putin. According to him, Putin is not far from having quietly reconstituted the frontiers of the Soviet empire whose implosion was, in his eyes, the most significant geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.⁶ He mentioned some of the intrigues and strings of anti-West actions that Putin had done against the US and the European Union. He was of the opinion that Putin’s goal for coming up with the Euro-Asian project was indeed to present an alternative to a European project deemed to be decadent and doomed. Also, Putin offered a Greek gift to Prime Minister Alexis Tsiparas of Greece during the Greek crisis of 2015. He made it known to Tsiparas that he was ready to print the drachmas were he to abandon the Euro. Lastly, Russia made tangible military threat against Europe when its bombers were sent to the airspace of Estonia, Latvia, Sweden and Norway at the same time that a Russian nuclear submarine went to Syria from Murmansk, cruising through the Bay of Biskay, very close to the coast of France.⁷

Taking a recourse to history and still trying to justify Russia’s anti-West policy, Putin reminded the West that it began its colonial policy back in the Middle Ages, followed it up with the global slave trade, the genocide of Indian tribes in America, the plunder of India, Africa, the wars of England and France against China. It was this that led to the opening of Ports for opium trade. In his words:

What they did was to put entire nations on drugs, purposefully exterminated entire ethnic groups for the sake of land and resources, staged a real hunt for people like animals. This is contrary to the very nature of man, truth, freedom and justice.⁸

Still fuming at what happened to the Soviet Union, Putin accused the West of pillaging their resources in the 20th century after they have devastated and bifurcated the Union. Explaining how they were treated like inferior entities, Putin stated that the West called them friends and partners but that in actual fact, they were treated like a colony, siphoning trillions of dollars out of the Soviet Union, later Russia, under a variety of schemes. In an angry tone, he blared: “We all remember everything, we have not forgotten anything”.⁹

Putin’s fury at US actions and domineering posturing was evident in his response to the opposition of the West against the annexation of Crimea. Referring to a document-the written statement of the United States of America of April 17, 2009 – submitted to the UN international court in connection with the hearings on Kosovo, Putin quoted the statement: “Declarations of Independence may, and often do, violate domestic legislation. However, this does not make them violations of International Law”. Worried about the attendant double standards in the application of the law, Putin asked rhetorically: “For some reason, things that Kosovo Albanians were permitted to do, Russians, Ukrainians and Crimea Tatars in Crimea are not allowed. Again, one wonders why”.¹⁰ Indirectly, accusing the US of gun-boat diplomacy, Putin alleged that the US has a way of legitimizing their aggression through the use of force which they exert on international institutions. And that on so many occasions when this does not go their way, “they simply ignore the UN Security Council and the UN overall”.¹¹ He alluded to what happened in Belgrade in 1999 when NATO carried out air strikes against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo war. The aerial bombardment which started on 24th March, 1999 lasted till 10 June 1999. The Alliance later established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo after reaching an agreement that led to the withdrawal of Yugoslavia from Kosovo. Though Putin was right that there was no UN resolution approving this intervention, NATO claimed that its action was prompted by the bloodshed in Yugoslavia as a result of the ethnic cleansing of Albanians, an action that drove the Albanians into neighbouring countries and had the potential to destabilize the region. Still not impressed with the reason for the intervention, Vladimir Putin replied:

They (the west) 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”.¹²

Blaming the US for the nuclear race and nuclear recklessness, Putin reminded the World that the US is the only country in the world, to use nuclear weapons twice. He alleged that they set the precedent with the destruction of two Japanese cities namely, Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6, 1945 and August 9, 1945 respectively. As if threatening the US with its new power, Putin stated that Russia has more modern weapons than NATO and that Russia is on the alert to defend its territorial integrity by all the systems available to its country.¹³

BUT WHAT IS THE CRIME OF CRIMEA?

Confident of his newly assembled war armaments and military technology, Putin annexed Crimea on the 14th of March, 2014 and from there went to the Eastern part of Ukraine to unleash another attack on Ukraine. Aside from the motivation Putin got from his military equipment and nuclear weapon assemblage, Putin wanted to create Euro-Asian Economic Union (EEV) as a countervailing force to the EU. Russia’s move was on the excuse that if the US and the West could come up with the idea of

a European Union, nothing should prevent Russia from establishing a similar body with some former states in the Soviet Union – without the Baltic States which had already joined the EU. When a country like Russia starts instituting a countervailing force, it could only have been stimulated by strong imperialist and expansionist desires. Though the history of Russia and Ukraine has been complicated considering their cultural attractions, the Russians have always believed that Ukraine was part of them. When Ukraine asserted its independence in 1918 with its capital in Kiev, Russia decided to establish another capital in Kharkov. This led to a serious fighting between the two of them with Russia finally gaining the upper hand. This was what led to the establishment of Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, one of the founding Republics in the Soviet Union in 1922.

The Holodomor of 1932-1933 signposted the detestation of the Russians - let's just say the Russian leadership to avoid unfair generalization – for the Ukrainians. That was the period that Stalin subjected the Ukrainians to one of the cruelest genocidal machinations in human history. Holodomor, meaning “extermination by hunger”, was a contrived catastrophe meant to provoke mass starvation of the Ukrainians to force Ukrainian farmers into collectivization.¹⁴ The Holodomor has gone down in history as a massive human disaster considering the number of deaths that resulted from the famine that was induced by the confiscation of grain from farmers by Stalin's soldiers. The death rate was put at 2.5 million, and perhaps as many as 7 million.¹⁵ In order to mitigate for this horrendous action and compensate the Ukrainians for their tribulations in the hands of Russia and the Germans who were also part of the chronicle of evil and horror the Ukrainians ever suffered in their history as they were ruled by the Nazi terror machine between 1941 and 1944 when it was recaptured by the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev Soviet Premier in 1954 decided to transfer Crimea, (then Russian territory) to Ukraine. Khrushchev saw it as the only way he could delegitimize the cult of Stalin and his atrocities on the Ukrainians during Holodomor. Most significantly however, was that Khrushchev took the decision partly as a kind of homage to the tercentenary of the Treaty of Pereiaslov.

This treaty was signed in late June 1630 between rebellious Cossack forces of Taras Fedorovych and Polish forces led by hetman Stanislaw Koniecpolski. The official interpretation was that Russia saw the transfer as token of eternal Russo-Ukrainian friendship.¹⁶

Putin's agenda to recapture Crimea, or better still, to annex Crimea to Russia was a component of a concept tagged New Russia (Novorossia). Some years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, some Russian politicians started a new Movement to stimulate nationalistic sentiments that would address their nostalgia for some of the “departed” Republics under the collapsed Soviet Union. They also wanted a situation that would make it conveniently possible for the Russian leadership to protect Russians and Russian-speakers living in the other former Soviet republics, especially in the Baltic States, Ukraine and Central Asia.¹⁷ Though this new Russian sentiment for historical reunion and geographical realignments elicited a corresponding agreement from Putin, those clamouring for this kind of adventurism failed to take cognizance of the fact that achieving this dangerous ambition under the extant contemporary realities and arrangements was an invitation to anarchy. The step to that anarchy had started with the annexation of part of Georgia and the whole of Crimea. Now, it has moved to Ukraine again after 2014. When Khrushchev returned Crimea to Ukraine, it was said that he did it in celebration of the 300th anniversary of the country's unification with Russia. When Putin annexed Crimea in 2014, it was exactly 60 years after Khrushchev's kind gesture in 1954. But what is Putin celebrating with his “wasteland agenda” in Ukraine? He probably delayed the celebration until he was able to have the whole of Ukraine in his pocket. Not long after the annexation of Crimea, Russia army entered Donbas hoping to attack Ukraine from there. The attack was preceded by some phoney referenda by both Donesk province (89.07 percent) and Luhansk province (96.2 percent).

Obviously, receiving instructions from the Kremlin, the two provinces announced their merger into the Federation of New Russia.¹⁸ They went ahead to proclaim their confederation on June 24, 2014. Wary of the backlash of annexing Crimea and Donbas the same year, Putin refrained from slicing Donbas from Ukraine but still went ahead to attack Ukraine under a military –intelligence veteran Igor Girkin who styled himself the Commander of the Armed Forces of New Russia and Minister of Defence of the Donesk People’s Republic.¹⁹

The Ukrainians were able to resist the Russians and also prevent them from taking over the Donesk International Airport. A ceasefire was later signed by the two countries in Minsk Belarus. This audacious attempt by Russia to take Donbas from Ukraine distressed the Ukrainian politicians who became anxious about the capability of their military to forestall future Russia’s aggression against their country. This fear was confirmed on February 24, 2022 when Putin ordered a military invasion of Ukraine without any provocation. Putin’s major reason for the aggression was that NATO was gradually and dangerously moving its military infrastructure closer to Russia’s border. Though Putin had been building up his military for the attack for so many weeks, when the Russian Army eventually attacked Ukraine, the international community was bewildered by the suddenness of the invasion and the recklessness of Putin’s action. Many world leaders, including President Joe Biden, concluded that President Putin has gone doolally. It had been speculated that Putin’s initial objective and political calculation was to remove President Volodymyr Zelensky from power and put his own stooge in power. Unfortunately, this was a serious miscalculation as the Ukrainian Army put up a very stiff resistance that has today stretched the war for more than a year. Zelensky is still in power. The Russian Army are yet to move beyond Bakhmut. The war still goes on with no clear victory for the Russians. The NATO allies keep increasing their military support for Ukraine and also continue to intensify their strategic and logistic supplies for the Ukrainian military. Initially when the war started, nations like China and India were still giving some form of support to Russia. But as time went on, India started waning in their support for Russia. It has at the same time reduced its visibility because of the implication of inextricable association. Though still non-Committal to give his support to Ukraine, India’s president, Narendra Modi met with Zelenski at the G7 summit in Japan. Despite Russia’s puissance in the international system, the Ukrainians have shown remarkable dexterity in military and diplomatic mobilization with Zelensky undertaking risky trips to the US and Europe to lobby for continued military support from the US and its allies and to also solicit for undelayed membership of the European Union. Puzzled by the Ukrainian stubborn opposition to his aggression, Putin came up with a weird scheme entailing the slicing of some parts of Ukraine via some fraudulent referenda conducted at gunpoint.

Rationalizing the illegality of the annexation of Zaporizhia, Kherson, Donesk and Luhansk, President Putin told his unctuous audience at the annexation ceremony:

Today, we are signing agreement 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, four new subjects of the Russian Federation, because this is the will of millions of people... There is nothing stronger than the determination of these people to return to their true historical Fatherland.²⁰

Putin accused the West of dishonesty and indulging in so many blatant and flagrant agreements on cooperation and partnerships. He went as far as disclosing that the US and its allies threw agreements

on strategic security into the wastebasket. He told the World that the West had on so many occasions denied signing agreements reached at the highest political level. There was also the controversy about promises made by the West to Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin.

Conclusion

Putin amplified that these promises were made by past leaders of the West only for their successors and proteges to renege on the promises. However, what Putin called the “promises” were a mere slip in a conversation between James Baker, US Secretary of State (1989-1992) and Mikhail Gorbachev.

According to the official recording of the meeting in Arkhyz, Gorbachev thought he had Baker’s word that NATO would not expand eastwards. Baker had indeed talked about America’s consideration on the matter. But nothing had been signed and sealed.²¹Gorbachev failed to corner Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of Germany (1982-1998) about this in Arkhyz or later to get the Americans to include a guarantee in the treaty on German unification. According to Robert Service, a renowned Biographer and author of *Lenin: A Biography*; “even Gorbachev’s supporters were to regret this omission in the 1990s when several ex-member states of the Warsaw Pact joined NATO”²²

Russia’s allusions to what the US and its Western allies did in Iraq, Libya, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Yemen, Belgrade and Afghanistan would have been a very good justification for its actions in Ukraine. But unfortunately, while Russians invasions of Georgia, and Ukraine ended in a buffet of annexations of some parts of these places, the US and its allies never annexed any parts of the countries they had interventions. Most times, the US and its allies would plant democracy, supervise the transition process; ensure the stability of the polity before withdrawing from those countries. This happened in Yugoslavia when Operation Allied Force of NATO destroyed the Yugoslav military infrastructure to halt the ethnic cleansing going on in Bosnia and Kosovo. Despite what was going on in Czechoslovakia, the US refused to intervene because it would constitute a rollback of communism in Eastern Europe. And it never wanted a collision or conflict with the former Soviet Union.

Putin’s reasons for invading Ukraine were largely unfounded, egocentric and vengeful. It had always been part of his hidden agenda, on assuming power, to redress what he considered “predecessors unforced errors” over the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 and the termination of the Cold War in 1989-cum-the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991. Both of his predecessors, Khrushchev and Gorbachev – whose actions he was trying to reverse – went down in history as men of peace. On his part, Gorbachev won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990 for his leading role in the peace process in the international system; the peace that Putin is fiendishly working hard to rubbish.

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