

The Grains of Time?

March 2022

As the eyes of the world are fixed on Ukraine, the obvious question would be: where next? But not necessarily in a sense of the continuation of Putin's war further into the former Soviet states. His invasion is proof that no number of international systems and repercussions will ultimately stop one country invading another if it wants to – but the weight and scale of the condemnation levied against Russia will be keenly watched by other countries who may have been



contemplating an incursion of their own. Whether or not Russia ultimately 'wins' this war, it will unquestionably shape the destiny of countries around the world. The only question is how.

There are two possibilities for how international incursions will proceed from this point. The first takes its cue from Russia's actions: actually taking the plunge and committing to all-out military action on the understanding that there is little real chance of anyone stopping you with a military response of their own (this is particularly true if the invading country happens to have nuclear weapons). While NATO, the EU and so on, have enacted heavy sanctions – to which we will come – they have ruled out the possibility of a military response all the while Russian forces do not go beyond Ukraine. The mere fact that Putin has done this, will embolden those states looking to do the same and 'retake' territory if they make the political calculus that the world is unwilling to pitch in and defend just one country if the security of the planet is at stake.

The second, to pay more attention to the size, speed and import of the response to the Russian invasion: almost invariably, one of political and diplomatic shunning, outright displays of support for Ukraine and a parcel of sanctions and punishments that took everyone somewhat by surprise. While Russia may yet achieve her political and military objectives, on the world stage she has made herself a pariah for decades to come and would find it difficult to regain moral legitimacy and acceptance, even if a full-scale withdrawal were to happen right this minute. All countries (particularly those run by dictators), talk a good game but very few are practically prepared to cut themselves off from the world in the political, economic, and cultural spheres given the interconnected demands of globalisation (just look at North Korea for how well this works in practice). After Ukraine, will the cost be viewed as no longer worth it?

China serves as the most suitable example. Beijing has made no secret of either its absolute conviction that the Republic of Taiwan should be a part of China, nor that it will be again one day. The parallels to Russia and the Ukraine are clear. And the Chinese threat is taken seriously; not for nothing does Taiwan operate regular air raid drills and military training of its citizens in preparation for 'urban defence'. But looking at the response to Russia may make China think twice: not only in terms of the greater resistance and loss of life that any government would find to defend, but the critical reaction and response. Alternatives would be sought, and these would likely take the form of greater cyber-attacks, fighting the 'PR war' and focusing on turning international acceptance your way through strategies that do not involve sending in the tanks. China has already been doing this to a great extent, by winning ever-more state-level recognition of itself as the successor state of the Republic of China in 1949, requiring corporate entities (much less countries) to recognise China over Taiwan as a condition of doing business, and ramping up the misinformation campaign and cyberattacks.

This shows the difference between the two great Eastern superpowers: whereas Russia will eventually go in 'hard', befitting Putin and his predecessors' self-positioning as strongmen, China seeks to manipulate and influence through its soft power. There is an old story told about Russian and Chinese battalions tasked with gaining intelligence from a beach: the Russians send in tanks and troops *en masse* and gouge the beach out from the cliff; the Chinese send individual agents to stroll down the beach one at a time and each return with a handful of sand until they have everything. Putin's war has arguably made this second approach far more likely: not only is it more palatable to win friends and influence by not sending in tank divisions in full view of the world, but the net result of a significant extension, and expression, of power is ultimately the same. We should expect an upswing in economic and diplomatic warfare. Not for nothing is politics viewed as simply warfare by other means.

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