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THE INVASION OF UKRAINE: DOES IT MATTER?

WAKING up to the BBC news notification that Russia had invaded Ukraine is a morning I will never forget. It prompted an emotional response; one of shock and anger. This surprised me. My usual scepticism about the righteousness of the West has often placed me at odds with more hawkish peers. I saw ambiguity around the justification of the Global War on Terror, but I felt that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was different. It was a clear act of unprovoked aggression from an autocratic state against a western liberal democracy. It was good versus evil. Closer to Hitler invading Poland than

anything we'd seen since 1939.

I also assumed that my hawkish peers would feel the severity of the event. I was wrong. An intelligent friend whose opinion I deeply respect challenged me. He's a bright thrusting officer working high up in Defence and well read into the invasion but disagreed with me on the significance of the event. Why did I think it was more significant than 9/11? Why more significant than Russia's invasion of Georgia? Why more significant than the annexation of Crimea? I believed it was, but I didn't have the answers at my fingertips. I also realised that if someone of his calibre questioned the significance of the event many

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others would too. Clearly, it's difficult to judge the importance of an event when it's only recently taken place. Historians argue over the importance of events centuries after they occurred. However, if we want to influence the course of history, we must understand that “how we respond today will set the pattern for this new era” (Truss, Atlantic Council Speech, 10/03/22).

I believe the importance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is based on three elements. Firstly, the colonial character of the expansion that is rooted in the desire to absorb both people and territory into Russia. Putin famously said to Bush that Ukraine is not a country. He does

not view it as a legitimate state but rather an aberration which he can correct and secure his legacy. Seizing territory through military means is an event closer to that of Hitler going into Poland than Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia. A key difference was in the motivation behind the invasion of Georgia which ended with annexation of territories. In Ukraine the absorption of the breakaway regions happened prior to the invasion just to help create a pretext for the rest of the invasion¹.

Secondly, the level of western support and involvement in Ukraine prior to the invasion raises the stakes of Ukrainian failure. It is not Russia vs Ukraine it is autocracy versus democracy. It is Russia versus the West. Following the 2014 annexation of Crimea the West invested its political capital in Ukraine. We trained Ukrainian troops and supplied them with weapons. We made strong statements of support and championed Ukraine as a western liberal democracy. Suggesting it would join the EU and NATO. Should Putin succeed in Ukraine without bearing sufficient costs then the Rules Based International System (RBIS) which has provided the framework for peace and prosperity will be shattered

¹For a fuller explanation of the differences (and similarities) of each invasion see: *Limits of the Georgia Prism in Ukraine.*



Picture: Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona/Unsplash

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because we said we would support Ukraine but have stood by as their sovereignty was violated. International relations are based largely on precedent therefore what happens in Ukraine will guide how these rules are interpreted. No doubt China and Taiwan are watching closely.

Finally, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine 9/11 was held up as the biggest paradigm shift in my lifetime. It was a tragedy watched the world over and led

to the Global War on Terror. A campaign that was unique but the threat was never existential. There is a real risk that the war in Ukraine could embroil NATO. If not, immediately an emboldened Russia may seek to take more territory, in Estonia or across the Suwalki gap. The key lesson of 1939 was that appeasement does not work. Every step Putin took in preparing to invade Ukraine NATO went in the other direction to 'de-escalate'. This was only seen as weakness which gave Putin the green light to invade. In these situations, we are faced with the stark choice. Either we can engage in a war between nuclear powers or we back down

accepting that the RBIS which the world relied on so much since WW2 has been obliterated.

This is not a comprehensive argument. I've only tried to point to some areas that I believe are central to the significance of the invasion. Over time the significance can be judged with more clarity but for the time being we must make our best assessment and act (or not) on it. Critically, I believed the significance of the invasion was clear and obvious. It felt that way to me. The fact that intelligent, rational, well-informed individuals disagree is proof that this argument cannot be taken for granted.



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