

Putin Whisperers

The Dogma Fuelling the War in Ukraine

The consensus amongst Putin whisperers in the United States and Europe is that the small man at the big table may be eventually be pacified once he sees and feels the folly of his misventure in Ukraine. In this reading of the Russian president, Vladimir Putin is but an opportunist, seizing the day and the moment (and land) whenever and wherever he can. By denying Mr Putin opportunity, so the narrative continues, he will eventually cease and desist since the price of war will have become too high or even unaffordable.

However, evidence suggests that Mr Putin is not for turning. He seems determined to prevent Ukraine from becoming a citadel symbolising western strength, freedom, and prosperity. Seen from Moscow, the rise of a fairly large, strong, vibrant, and successful neighbour on the southwestern flank of the empire represents a direct threat to its stability and endurance.

President Putin does not fear an attack by NATO forces - the idea is patently ridiculous - but worries all the more about the threat of the sort of soft power that helped bring down the Berlin Wall. Mr Putin is intimately familiar with the concept and witnessed how soft power triumphed over the armour and guns of the world's mightiest army.

He was there when East Germany crumbled in 1989 and he saw how the appeal of the West with its festival of lights, well-stocked department stores, and big cars seduced people and made them fearless.

Lethal Force

Mr Putin watched history take an abrupt turn from his perch as a junior KGB officer in Dresden. Calling for help from a Soviet tank unit stationed nearby whilst demonstrators threatened to overrun the local KGB office, he was told that no armour would be moving on the city unless ordered by Moscow; and Moscow, the commander informed him, was silent.

Though the crowd eventually turned away upon being informed that the building's few guards had orders to use deadly force, Mr Putin later admitted to the 'maddening' impotence he felt as the Soviet Union's most prized and most loyal satellite state pivoted away from its master.

As was shown by the events of 1989 in East Germany, and similar revolutions throughout the Eastern Bloc of Soviet allies, soft power follows people power. Mr Putin fears both much more than he does bombs, torpedoes, and missiles if only because a people rising as one cannot be put down and a people seduced by freedom cannot be controlled.

A student of history, Mr Putin realises that the Soviet Union was ultimately defeated by the exact same forces that induced its birth in 1917 - the year of the Russian Revolution and another of history's pivotal moments.

In the first years after obtaining its (nominal) independence in 1991, Ukraine showed no unsettling signs of enmity towards Moscow. The country struggled with corruption, organised crime, poverty, and a faltering economy, in addition to suffering supreme (and malicious) administrative incompetence. As such, Ukraine posed no threat and remained safely locked in Moscow's orbit.

That all changed in February 2014 with the Maidan Revolution, culminating in the ouster of president Viktor Yanukovich and the fall of his puppet regime. Again, people power had proved decisive. The Maidan Revolution had begun three months earlier after Mr Yanukovich rejected a political association and free trade agreement with the European Union and opted instead for closer ties with Russia.

Déjà Vu

This was Mr Putin's déjà vu moment and the one on which he decided to stop history in its tracks. Whilst the countries of the former Eastern Bloc had been mere allies, coerced into that role yet still quite foreign and in theory sovereign, Ukraine was different. Though a battle ground of multiple powers throughout the centuries, the region was considered part of the Russian heartland. In a 2021 essay, Mr Putin waxed lyrical about 'the historical and spiritual space' shared by Russia and Ukraine.

Next-door Belorussia is also part of that space. Its people, he writes, are all descendants of 'Ancient Rus', then the largest state in Europe bound together since the ninth century by a common language (Old Russian), the Rurik Dynasty, and the Orthodox faith. Mr Putin cites *The Tale of Bygone Years*, commonly known as the Russian Primary Chronicle, to explain his position.

The book, written in the early twelfth century and of which only five codices survive, recounts the origins of Kievan Rus as the source and seat of power of Ancient Rus - and Kyiv as 'the mother of all Russian cities'. In other words: for Moscow, Ukraine is not a foreign country but a territory in denial of its own roots and one that, moreover, insists in repudiating its history and heritage.

With the experience he lived in East Germany foremost on his mind, Mr Putin simply cannot be persuaded to let go of Ukraine, in his thinking an essential part of the Russian motherland and therefore of her 'spiritual space'.

Off the record, most policymakers in the United States and Europe are baffled that Mr Putin has not buckled under their pressure. Sweeping economic sanctions and massive military support for Ukraine have failed to impress Moscow, let alone cause a change of heart or increase a willingness to engage in negotiations - or contemplate a settlement.

The Dogmatist

The idea that raising the cost of war high enough will eventually see President Putin come to his senses must be discarded. The premise that the Russian leader is a mere opportunist who will desist once losses accumulate is mistaken. Such a man, a pragmatist, would soon recognise that his bet failed to pay off and cut his losses whilst an ideologue, a dogmatist, simply doesn't care and refuses to budge.

Now contrast this to the prevailing opinion in the West which is derived from the infamous domino doctrine that predicts the fall of one country after another to an aggressive ideology. The assistance offered at significant expense to embattled Ukraine is justified by the fear that once Russia has finished there, it will turn its lustful eye to the Baltics, Moldova, or other deserters from the Soviet empire.

Whilst that fear is fully justified, it also doesn't address Ukraine's plight. To ensure Ukraine's sovereignty, the West can and must continue to support the country with the military hardware and intelligence necessary to avoid its collapse whilst it waits for Mr Putin to (somehow) surrender the levers of power in Moscow. However, he has made sure that no successors are waiting in the wings. Mutineer Yevgeny Prigozhin and opposition leader Alexei Navalny have been eliminated whilst others went, sometimes literally, out the window.

The hope of forcing Russia to quit its 'special military operation' through attrition seem unrealistic given the country's heft and natural resources. The long haul beckons. Western powers can do little more than to play for time, hold the line, and wait for a pragmatist to replace the dogmatist currently in command. That too may be unrealistic, but the only other option available - a direct engagement of NATO forces - is as unthinkable as are its consequences.