

DEFENSE & SECURITY

The Flaw in Putin's Strategy and How the West Can Exploit It

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Putin made clear that his goal is to absorb all of Ukraine, effectively re-unifying a key part of the old Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, Putin believes absorbing Ukraine — its resources, economy, and over 40 million people — will increase Russia's relative power and enable still more bold geopolitical expansion in the future.

However, there is a crucial flaw in Putin's strategy: Conquest does not pay in the modern world. As Gorbachev and China realized in the 1980s — and America learned at great cost since 2001 in Iraq and Afghanistan — the cost-benefit calculation of ruling over medium-size countries of tens of millions of people — whether first world or third world — is dramatically negative. Countries may be easy to conquer in the short term, but most of the people resist the occupier so successfully through passive means like shirking and active resistance, that the conquest never “adds” to the conquering country's power.

Consider the American invasion of Iraq. Vice President Cheney was famous for holding meetings with oil company executives in the spring of 2001 about the cheap oil available in Iraq (just \$3 a barrel to pump out of the ground). While the conquest of Iraq would have seemed to offer a major economic windfall, it never materialized.

Afghanistan too was said to be “mineral-rich” but again no strategic windfall.

Same story Gorbachev saw in Eastern Europe — which was costing the Russians more to occupy with its million-man army than the countries ever added in usable power.

Why not? The answer in all these cases is the same: the occupied population refuses to pay their part in contributing to the occupier's overall power, resisting in thousands of ways, big and small.

China has learned the lesson. For decades, China's economic and geopolitical power has risen up like a rocket. Why? Not because it has conquered economically rich areas — it hasn't expanded an inch. The reason for China's growth and power is its internal economic modernization, which turns on technological advancement.

So, we should respond to Putin's conquest of Ukraine — whether he takes part or all — with a simple strategy — build up the economic capacity of the population of Ukraine. In short, let the people of Ukraine find 40 million ways to tie the Russians in knots — and for years.

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