

## GUEST ESSAY

# Putin Is Making a Historic Mistake

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**By Madeleine Albright**

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In early 2000, I became the first senior U.S. official to meet with Vladimir Putin in his new capacity as acting president of Russia. We in the Clinton administration did not know much about him at the time — just that he had started his career in the K.G.B. I hoped the meeting would help me take the measure of the man and assess what his sudden elevation might mean for U.S.-Russia relations, which had deteriorated amid the war in Chechnya. Sitting across a small table from him in the Kremlin, I was immediately struck by the contrast between Mr. Putin and his bombastic predecessor, Boris Yeltsin.

Whereas Mr. Yeltsin had cajoled, blustered and flattered, Mr. Putin spoke unemotionally and without notes about his determination to resurrect Russia's economy and quash Chechen rebels. Flying home, I recorded my impressions. "Putin is small and pale," I wrote, "so cold as to be almost reptilian." He claimed to understand why the Berlin Wall had to fall but had not expected the whole Soviet Union to collapse. "Putin is embarrassed by what happened to his country and determined to restore its greatness."

I have been reminded in recent months of that nearly three-hour session with Mr. Putin as he has massed troops on the border with neighboring Ukraine. After calling Ukrainian statehood a fiction in a bizarre televised address, he issued a decree recognizing the independence of two separatist-held regions in Ukraine and sending troops there.

Mr. Putin's revisionist and absurd assertion that Ukraine was "entirely created by Russia" and effectively robbed from the Russian empire is fully in keeping with his warped worldview. Most disturbing to me: It was his attempt to establish the pretext for a full-scale invasion.

Should he do so, it will be a historic error.

In the 20-odd years since we met, Mr. Putin has charted his course by ditching democratic development for Stalin's playbook. He has collected political and economic power for himself — co-opting or crushing potential competition — while pushing to re-establish a sphere of Russian dominance through parts of the former Soviet Union. Like other authoritarians, he equates his own well-being with that of the nation and opposition with treason. He is sure that Americans mirror both his cynicism and his lust for power and that in a world where everyone lies, he is under no obligation to tell the truth. Because he believes that the United States dominates its own region by force, he thinks Russia has the same right.

Mr. Putin has for years sought to burnish his country's international reputation, expand Russia's military and economic might, weaken NATO and divide Europe (while driving a wedge between it and the United States). Ukraine features in all of that.

Instead of paving Russia's path to greatness, invading Ukraine would ensure Mr. Putin's infamy by leaving his country diplomatically isolated, economically crippled and strategically vulnerable in the face of a stronger, more united Western alliance.

He's already set that in motion by announcing on Monday his decision to recognize the two separatist enclaves in Ukraine and send in Russian troops as "peacemakers." Now he has demanded that it recognize Russia's claim to Crimea and relinquish its advanced weapons.

Mr. Putin's actions have triggered massive sanctions, with more to come if he launches a full-scale assault and attempts to seize the entire country. These would devastate not just his country's economy but also his tight circle of corrupt cronies — who in turn could challenge his leadership. What is sure to be a bloody and catastrophic war will drain Russian resources and cost Russian lives — while creating an urgent incentive for Europe to slash its dangerous reliance on Russian energy. (That has already begun with Germany's move to halt certification of the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline.)

Such an act of aggression would almost certainly drive NATO to significantly reinforce its eastern flank and to consider permanently stationing forces in the Baltic States, Poland and Romania. (President Biden said Tuesday he was moving more troops to the Baltics.) And it would generate fierce Ukrainian armed resistance, with strong support from the West. A bipartisan effort is already underway to craft a legislative response that would include intensifying lethal aid to Ukraine. It would be far from a repeat of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014; it would be a scenario reminiscent of the Soviet Union's ill-fated occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Mr. Biden and other Western leaders have made this much clear in round after round of furious diplomacy. But even if the West is somehow able to deter Mr. Putin from all-out war — which is far from assured right now — it's important to remember that his competition of choice is not chess, as some assume, but rather judo. We can expect him to persist in looking for a chance to increase his leverage and strike in the future. It will be up to the United States and its friends to deny him that opportunity by sustaining forceful diplomatic pushback and increasing economic and military support for Ukraine.

Although Mr. Putin will, in my experience, never admit to making a mistake, he has shown that he can be both patient and pragmatic. He also is surely conscious that the current confrontation has left him even more dependent on China; he knows that Russia cannot prosper without some ties to the West. "Sure, I like Chinese food. It's fun to use chopsticks," he told me in our first meeting. "But this is just trivial stuff. It's not our mentality, which is European. Russia has to be firmly part of the West."

Mr. Putin must know that a second Cold War would not necessarily go well for Russia — even with its nuclear weapons. Strong U.S. allies can be found on nearly every continent. Mr. Putin's friends, meanwhile, include the likes of Bashar al-Assad, Alexander Lukashenko and Kim Jong-un.

If Mr. Putin feels backed into a corner, he has only himself to blame. As Mr. Biden has noted, the United States has no desire to destabilize or deprive Russia of its legitimate aspirations. That's why the administration and its allies have offered to engage in talks with Moscow on an open-ended range of security issues. But America must insist that Russia act in accordance with international standards applicable to all nations.

Mr. Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, like to claim that we now live in a multipolar world. While that is self-evident, it does not mean that the major powers have a right to chop the globe into spheres of influence as colonial empires did centuries ago.

Ukraine is entitled to its sovereignty, no matter who its neighbors happen to be. In the modern era, great countries accept that, and so must Mr. Putin. That is the message undergirding recent Western diplomacy. It defines the difference between a world governed by the rule of law and one answerable to no rules at all.

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