



*"As Napoleon said, to know a nation's geography is to know its foreign policy."*

To understand Russia's foreign policy, its drive for strategic depth, first understand Russia's geography of exposure, writes Joseph E Fallon. Russia is an open plain stretching 6,000 miles from St. Petersburg on the Baltic to Vladivostok on the Pacific. Most of its population, agriculture, industries, and transportation networks are located in its west in a triangle bounded by the Baltic, Black, and Caspian Seas. This is Russia's heartland. Except for the Caucasus Mountains in its southwest, Russia lacks formidable mountains or deserts to defend its western and eastern borders or protect its core. There are no Alps like Italy, no Gobi like China.

With dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, for the first time in two centuries Russia lacked strategic depth - the distances between the front lines or battle sectors and the combatants' industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centres of population or military production. It is now open to invasion across 1,112 miles of open terrain extending from St. Peterburg in the north to Rostov-on-Don in the south.

Despite the end of the Cold War, and contrary to the promises made to Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990 by U.S. President George H.W. Bush, his Secretary of State James Baker, and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, that "there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east" of a reunified Germany, NATO expanded eastward.

This was an act which was, as George Kennan, U.S. Ambassador to Stalin's Soviet Union, and architect of Washington's containment policy of Soviet expansionism, lamented: "the most fateful error of American foreign policy in the entire post-Cold War era...I think the Russians will gradually react quite adversely and it will affect their policies. I think it is a tragic mistake. There was no reason for this whatsoever. No one was threatening anybody else... Our differences in the Cold War were with the Soviet Communist regime. And now we are turning our backs on the very people who mounted the greatest bloodless revolution in history to remove that Soviet regime."

Since 1999, NATO has admitted all former satellite Warsaw Pact countries, the three former Soviet Baltic republics, and has extended invitations to two other former Soviet republics, Ukraine and Georgia. If the latter two joined NATO, Russia's western borders would revert to 1598, with the Russian heartland exposed on the west and southwest.

In 1990, the distance between NATO and St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) was 1,267 miles. It is now 100 miles. In 1990, the distance between NATO and Moscow was 1,306 miles. It is now 500 miles. If Ukraine becomes part of NATO that distance shrinks to 300 miles.

Then there is Russia's maritime vulnerability. Despite possessing the fourth longest coastline in the world, 23,396 miles, Russia is "landlocked". Since most of its coastline rims the Arctic Ocean, it has few ports ice-free throughout the year. And the major ports of St. Petersburg, Kaliningrad, Novorossiysk, Murmansk, Arkhangelsk, and Vladivostok, are vulnerable to a NATO blockade, denying Russia access to the world's oceans.

In the Baltic Sea, St. Petersburg can be blockaded by Estonia and Finland (not a member of NATO but a participant in NATO-led operations since 1996); Kaliningrad by Poland and Lithuania. Novorossiysk on the Black Sea can be denied access to the Mediterranean Sea by Turkey closing the Strait of Bosphorus. Both Murmansk on the Barents Sea and Arkhangelsk on the White Sea can be denied access to the Atlantic Ocean by Iceland and Denmark closing the Denmark Strait between Greenland and Iceland; and Iceland, Norway, and the U.K closing the Norwegian Sea between Iceland and the U.K. Vladivostok can be blockaded by the U.S. Seventh Fleet from bases in Japan.

A precedent was established in World War I. The Ottoman Empire closed the Bosphorus; Germany blockaded St. Petersburg, and from 1918 to 1922, the Allies intervened against the Bolsheviks and occupied Arkhangelsk, Murmansk, and Vladivostok.

With the exception of the Volga River, the cradle of Russian civilization and home to ten of its largest cities, virtually all its longest rivers are more obstacles than arteries to trade and commerce and none constitute an effective barrier against invasion. Three of the longest, Ob-Irtysh, Lena, and Yenisey, flow into the Arctic Ocean.

Russia's geography is a geography of vulnerability. Its history is one of repeated invasions. This has defined the foreign policy of Russia from Czars to Commissars to Putin, the drive for strategic depth.

NATO is at its border. NATO members, U.S., Canada, Denmark, Iceland, and Norway reject Russia's territorial claims in the Arctic while advancing their own. Former U.S. presidential advisor, the late Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski called for abolishing Russia and replacing it with a loose confederation "composed of a European Russia, a Siberian Republic, and a Far Eastern Republic...[stating] a sovereign Ukraine is a critically important component of such a policy." This can explain Russia's actions in Crimea, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Arctic.

For Russia, its past is its present, and this present must not become its future. Kievan Rus, precursor of modern Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, arose in the late 9th century on the plains of East Europe. Throughout its history, it was subjected to recurring invasions from the east by nomadic Kipchaks and Pechenegs. It was finally destroyed, and half its population killed, by the Mongol invasions of 1237-1240.

For the next two centuries, Tatars ruled most of Kievan Rus, now fragmented into a number of tributary states of the Golden Horde. A few principalities avoided direct occupation by the Tatars - Galicia-Volhynia in the southwest, Pskov in the north, and Novgorod in the northwest.

But because they were situated on the East European Plain, they were exposed and at risk. Galicia-Volhynia was invaded and annexed by Poland in 1349. Between the 13th and 16th centuries, Pskov was invaded by the German Livonian Order, Denmark-Norway, Poland-Lithuania, and Sweden. Novgorod repulsed a Swedish invasion in 1240 and another by German crusader-knights two years later.

The Grand Duchy of Moscow emerged as the strongest of the successor states to Kievan Rus. It successfully challenged the power of the Golden Horde on the Ugra River in 1480. From that date, the power of the Golden Horde declined, and the Grand Duchy of Moscow continued ingathering the remnants of Kievan Rus - Yaroslavl (1463), Rostov (1474), Novgorod (1478), Tver (1485), Chernihiv (1503), Pskov (1510), Volokolamsk (1513), Smolensk (1514), Ryazan (1521), Novgorod-Seversky (1522) - into a unified state, a new Kievan Rus, Russia.

In 1547, Ivan IV ("the Terrible") was officially crowned first Czar of Russia. From then until now, regimes would come and go, boundaries would expand and contract, but "Russia" remained, intact and independent.

Russia remained but so did its geographical liability - no defensible borders. This poses a constant danger to its independence. Threats began in the south, then came from the west.

The Ottoman Empire invaded Russia in 1517, 1521, 1533-1547, 1552, 1555, 1562, 1568-1570, 1571, 1572, 1591, and 1592, plundering, torching Moscow twice, and abducting Russians for the slave markets in Crimea - known as the "harvesting of the steppe".

Russia's turmoil during the "Time of Troubles", 1598-1613, led to more invasions, incursions, and raids by Turks and Tatars. So many Russians were kidnapped, estimated at 200,000, the price for a slave in the Crimean slave bazaars plummeted.

While repulsing Turk and Tatar invasions from the south, Moscow began to drive east, annexing successor states of the Mongol Empire - the Khanate of Kazan (1552), the Khanate of Astrakhan (1556), and the Khanate of Siber (1598). By 1649, Russians had reached the Pacific Ocean. There were many motives for expansion, including need to create strategic depth and defensible borders against threats from the East. What nature did not provide, Russians created with forts and settlers.

Victory in the east faced defeat in the west. During the Polish-Muscovite Wars, 1605-1618, Poland annexed Smolensk, occupied Moscow and sought to Polonaise and Catholicize the Russians.

From 1610-1617, Sweden invaded Russia, attempted to make a Swedish duke the Russian Czar, captured the historic principalities of Novgorod and Pskov, and annexed the Russian province of Ingria, site of present-day St. Petersburg, depriving Russia of its only port on the Baltic Sea.

Beginning mid-century, Russia's western border stabilized. In 1648, Cossacks in southern Poland, Zaporizhia, present-day central Ukraine, revolted against Polish rule. When they sought Russian support, it ignited the Russo-Polish War of 1654-1667. From which, a victorious Russia acquired all lands east of the Dnieper, including Kiev.

Sweden invaded Russia again in 1700 and 1707. But the Swedish army was defeated at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 in central Ukraine, having first been decimated by Russia's Winter and left to starve to death by the Russian practice of "scorched-earth", whereby Russians burn their own crops to deprive the enemy of sustenance. With its defeat in the Great Northern War (1700-1721) Sweden ceased to be a major European power and Russia's drive westward accelerated.

Strategic depth was achieved with the third partition of Poland in 1795. Russia extended its border westward. It now stretched from western Latvia in the north to all lands east of the Nieman River in Lithuania and Belarus in the centre, to Volhynia in Ukraine in the south.

By defeating Sweden, again, in 1809, Russia acquired Finland, providing St. Petersburg with protection from invasion from the north.

In 1812, Napoleon invaded Russia. His Grande Armée, 500,000 troops, was destroyed by Russia's Winter and defeated by Russian forces, military and civilian. It was a victory achieved as a result of strategic depth, the distance between the invasion front and Russia's capital, which insured fatal logistical problems for Napoleon's march from Warsaw to Moscow. Problems compounded by the Russian tactic of "scorched earth". After six months, Napoleon was forced to retreat. His army shattered. "According to the popular legend only about 22,000 of Napoleon's men survived."

After Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and exile to St. Helena in the mid-Atlantic, the Congress of Vienna in 1815 awarded much of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, a French client state created by

Napoleon, to Russia. This extended Russia's strategic depth an additional 300 miles to the west from Brest, Belarus to Kalisz, Poland.

As a result of World War I, strategic depth was lost by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, March 3, 1918, between the Central Powers and the Bolsheviks. The Baltic states, Finland, Poland, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan became independent. Russia's western and Caucasus borders reverted to those of 1598. But strategic depth had protected the Russian heartland from German invasion during World War I for three years until Russia's military collapsed at the end of 1917. By 1922, however, much of the strategic depth was restored with the Bolshevik conquest of Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan and their incorporation into the new Soviet Union.

In World War II, strategic depth similarly hindered the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union by putting distance "between the front lines or battle sectors and the combatants' industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centers of population or military production."

As a result of World War II, the Soviet Union expanded its strategic depth two ways. The first was direct. The Soviet Union annexed the Baltic States, and parts of Finland, Poland and Romania. The second was indirect through the establishment of a series of buffer states on its western border (the "satellites"). Between 1944-1949, facilitated by Soviet military occupation, Communist regimes were installed in nominally independent states in Central Europe and the Balkans. This extended Soviet strategic depth 1,000 miles farther west. It was 1,054 miles from Białystok, Poland at the Soviet border to Moscow, but 2,068 miles from Erfurt, in the western part of East Germany to Moscow.

Russia no longer enjoys strategic depth at a time when NATO maintains its eastward expansion is to defend "the freedom and security of all its members by political and military means." Since most countries in Europe (31 of 44) are either members of NATO (28) or non-member participants in NATO-led operations (3), NATO is implying the security threat to Europe is Russia, thereby justifying NATO's continued existence.

In addition to NATO positioning itself along Russia's exposed border in the northwest, west, and southwest, Russia's economy is suffering from U.S. and EU imposed sanctions (tightened further in April 2021) inter alia for supporting the break-up of Ukraine (Crimea and Donbass) and Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

Yet, the U.S. and the EC (precursor to EU) supported the break-up of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia in violation of the Helsinki Accords of 1975. Later, the U.S. and EU supported the break-up first of the Serbia-Montenegro Union, then of Serbia. Respect for international law is undermined when rights, such as the right to self-determination, are not applied consistently.

It has been argued sanctions are a form of war. NATO expansion and economic sanctions can be seen as complementary tactics for a strategy von Clausewitz described: "to overthrow the enemy—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please."

This cold war of attrition has failed to render Russia "politically helpless or militarily impotent" so now there is dangerous sabre rattling over Ukraine. On March 24, 2021, Ukrainian President Zelensky, amid falling approval ratings over government corruption, signed Presidential decree No. 117/2021. The decree, declaring the official policy of Ukraine effective immediately is the "deoccupation and reintegration of the temporarily occupied territory of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the city of Sevastopol", amounts to a declaration of war on Russia.

It was bookended by two Biden Administration statements. The decree was issued one month after U.S. President Biden asserted "Crimea is Ukraine". Then after being issued was immediately endorsed by Biden's Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, "a chief architect of the US-backed coup against Ukraine in 2014," who pledged "full US support for the 'territorial integrity' of Ukraine." The three announcements confirm the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the U.S. during World War II, "In politics, nothing happens by accident. If it happens, you can bet it was planned that way."

Russia responded to the Ukrainian decree with a military buildup on Ukraine's eastern border. The Ukrainian president, citing the military buildup, then requested NATO quickly admit Ukraine into the alliance. NATO "firmly supports Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity", but it is not united in how to respond to the crisis. While Paris and Berlin called on Kyiv and Moscow to avoid provocative steps, Washington is actively supporting Ukraine. On April 5, 2021, Ron Paul, former U.S. Representative from Texas for over twenty years, wrote in Eurasia Review, "As the US considers Crimea to be Ukrainian territory, this is clearly a clear green light for Kiev to take military action. Washington is also sending in weapons. Some 300 tons of new weapons have arrived in the past weeks and more is on the way."

Why does the U.S. seem to be provoking a war? President Biden, who declared Russian President Putin "a killer", is an admirer of the late Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, the man who called for the U.S. to "abolish" Russia. In 2017, Biden was recipient of the Zbigniew Brzezinski Annual Award for geostrategic thinking. Upon Brzezinski's death, Biden took to Twitter to declare, "Zbigniew Brzezinski's brilliant strategic mind enriched American foreign policy for decades- his distinctive voice will be greatly missed."

If war erupts, Russia has the military means and has been given the opportunity by Washington's actions to regain strategic depth by expanding from Donbass to the Dniester, making Ukraine landlocked and a strategic liability for NATO. That is if such a war doesn't escalate into a nuclear exchange between NATO and Russia.

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