



Why did Putin attack Ukraine and why is he so anti the West?

Dr Paul Dibb AM, ANU Emeritus Professor spoke to the USI of ACT and the Kokoda Foundation in Canberra at the Australian Defence College on 22 May 2014

The United Services Institute of the ACT and the Kokoda Foundation jointly hosted a presentation by Emeritus Professor Paul Dibb AM. Key points raised in his presentation were:

- *This is the worst crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War. It marks the return of a Russia hostile to the West that is prepared to reject international norms about state sovereignty and risk confrontation with NATO. Under Putin, we can expect protracted and wider confrontation with the West.*
- *Putin invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea because he regarded the threat of Ukraine's membership of NATO as undermining Russia's vital national security interests.*
- *Russia has significantly improved its military capabilities since its invasion of Georgia in 2008. This was demonstrated in the surprise occupation of Crimea. Moscow's positioning of 50,000 troops on the eastern Ukrainian border threatens further intervention, the risk of civil war and military conflict with Ukraine.*
- *The strategic implications for Australia are whether Washington's pivot to Asia will now be diverted to Europe and whether China also will be encouraged to greater territorial adventurism.*



RUSI Photo (l-r AVM Peter Nicholson of Kokoda, Dr Paul Dibb, AIRCDRE Kentish of USI of ACT) at the Australian Defence College.

PRESENTATION

Russia's invasion of Ukraine's Crimea territory in March 2014 has raised serious questions about the end of the post-Cold War era. The spectacle of Russian troops ignoring the sovereignty of Ukraine's borders and annexing Crimea has

taken us back to a world long forgotten – particularly in Europe. This is a world where the sanctity of internationally recognised borders is ignored, the use of military force is back in command and where a nuclear-armed major power acts with impunity in its own neighbourhood.

This COG paper¹ will analyse, first, the reasons why President Putin decided to invade Ukraine and annex Crimea; second, the implications of this for Russia's return as a major power; and third what the broader geopolitical policy implications are – not only for Europe but also in Asia. For Australia, this distant conflict has implications for the new Defence White Paper because it requires us to refocus on such issues as interstate conflict, the role of large authoritarian states with respect to smaller countries, and the use of military force for traditional realpolitik aims.

¹ Dr Dibb's unscripted presentation to the USI of ACT and Kokoda formed the basis for a wider article published by the ANU's Strategic and Defence Studies Centre in *Centre of Gravity series paper #16 2014* (which can be downloaded at <http://lips.cap.anu.edu.au/sdsc/>). This record is a slightly redacted version of that paper, published by permission.

The approach taken in this paper is to seek to understand what motivated Russia's President Vladimir Putin to use military force against Ukraine. This necessarily involves trying to divine the issue from a Russian mindset and get behind the reasons why Moscow now has such a hostile attitude towards the West. It must be stressed that this approach (which is a classical intelligence analysis methodology) is not to condone Russia's belligerence or to underrate the illegal challenge that has occurred to Ukrainian sovereignty. Nor is it to ignore the possible implications for other independent countries, such as the Baltic States, located in the strategic space of the former Soviet Union.

To a greater or lesser extent, most countries are prisoners of their geographic location, history and culture. This applies especially to Russia with its vulnerable geography, its experience of both invasion and imperial expansion, and its long history of authoritarian rulers. All these factors come into play given the special position of Ukraine in Moscow's perceptions of Kiev as 'the mother of Russian cities' and the cradle of the Russian Orthodox faith. Ukraine means far more than any other part of 'the near abroad' to Moscow because it is tied so closely to Russia's sense of itself. Even Russian liberals have trouble accepting the notion that Ukraine is an independent country and, in the eyes of many Russians, eastern and central Ukraine are historically Russian lands.

There is, of course, a quite different Ukrainian view of a long history of Russian and Soviet repression of their language and culture. In particular, the huge loss of more than 5 million people in the 1930s under Stalin's forced collectivisation campaign. The harsh treatment of alleged Nazi collaborators in the Second World War also looms large in the Ukrainian historical memory.

Vladimir Putin, however, sees things from the traditional perspective of a former KGB colonel. He believes that the West wants his overthrow - just as occurred in Kiev to former President Yanukovich. He deeply distrusts NATO and what he firmly believes are its attempts to encircle Russia, including by extending NATO membership to Ukraine. Putin has a deep sense of the loss of power and prestige of the former Soviet Union, which he describes as the greatest geopolitical

catastrophe of the 20th century. And he has an acute belief of Russia's need to protect its citizens living in the former Soviet strategic space. In an April 17 interview, Putin declared 'We have reached a point beyond which we cannot retreat.' The spectre of Ukraine under the post-Yanukovich regime joining the EU and NATO was unacceptable to him. And he well knows that the West has significantly lower stakes in Ukraine's fate than does Russia.

Putin states that the West has deceived Russia by the expansion of NATO to its very borders. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are members of NATO, as are Poland, Bulgaria and Romania. If Ukraine were to join NATO this would put NATO forces within 400 km of Moscow. NATO expansion has resulted in Russia losing huge areas of territory flanking its Western approaches, a traditional invasion route. Moscow is of the view that Russia's present borders are unnatural in the sense that they do not guarantee a reasonable level of national security. The defence of Russian territory would be directly threatened if Ukraine were a member of NATO, hosting NATO military forces.

The Russian naval base at Sebastopol in the Crimea is vital for the access of Russia's Black Sea Fleet to the Mediterranean. Putin decided he could not tolerate a pro-Western government in Kiev denying him this crucial military asset. He may well have convinced himself that such a government would include far-right leaders who would revoke Russia's basing agreement in Crimea and quickly move Ukraine to NATO membership.

There are ancient cultural and religious ties between Russia and Ukraine: Kiev is where Russian Christianity began over 1000 years ago. The Russians call their fellow Slavs in Ukraine 'Little Russians'. The eastern part of Ukraine (which historically the Russians called *Novorossiia* or New Russia) is predominantly Russian speaking, Russian Orthodox in religion and heavily industrialised, whereas the western part of Ukraine is predominantly Ukrainian speaking, Catholic and rural. Ethnic Russians account for 40% of the population in eastern Ukraine and almost 60% of the population in Crimea.

Historically, Poland dominated western Russia and present-day Ukraine for centuries: in the

early 1600s, in a period known as 'the time of troubles' (*smutnoe vremya*), a Polish army from Lviv invaded Moscow and placed a pretender on the czar's throne. This was a time of great social and political upheaval in the state of Muscovy, which faced uncertainty about its very existence. Many Russians see parallels with the upheavals of post-Soviet Russia. Putin's suspicious mind probably sees meddling by Poland in the overthrow of Yanukovich and the presence in Kiev at that time in February 2014 of the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorsky.

The bottom line is that the issue of Ukraine is central to Russians' identity of themselves. That is why Putin has promised to take all possible measures to defend Russian citizens in Ukraine and reserves the right to use force to protect Russia's interests there. He already appears to be using the powers of Russia's security organs and Special Forces covertly to foment instability and insurrection in the name of protecting Russian citizens living in the adjoining regions of Ukraine. There is a real risk of him seizing the Ukraine - or at least its eastern parts - if upheaval there threatens the lives of Russians. He has an army of 40-50,000 troops just across the border ready and prepared to intervene.

Putin's standing as a strong leader in the Russian tradition has grown enormously as a result of this crisis. He received numerous standing ovations during his speech on 18 March in the Kremlin. In the celebrations in Red Square to mark the return of Crimea to Russia there were frequent calls of 'glory to Putin'. The annexation of Crimea has huge support among almost 80% of the Russian people, including former leader Gorbachev.

Putin is demonstrating that Russia as a major power is back in business. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said that 'Russia is a big power that knows what it wants'. The Russian bear is flexing its military muscle, but we should not be deceived that this is a return of the old Soviet Union as a global military power. There are still real limitations on the capacity of Moscow to project conventional military power at any great distance. However, since its invasion of Georgia in 2008 Russia's military forces have undoubtedly improved — especially its airborne troops and Special Forces. Moscow appears to have used the cover of a large military exercise involving 140,000 troops to disguise its pre-

emptive strike in Crimea. This was a classic Soviet use of masking operations (*maskirovka*). In addition to Ukraine, other countries adjoining Russia's borders - such as Moldova, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - must now see themselves at risk.

Retired former US NATO commander, Admiral James G. Stavridis, has remarked that there has been a significant shift in how Russian ground forces have deployed. They skilfully used 21st-century tactics that combined cyber warfare, an energetic information campaign, and the use of highly trained special operations troops to seize the initiative from the West: he states 'They have played their hand of cards with finesse.' It is a military that is a far cry from the Army disparaged for its decline since the fall of the Soviet Union. Its strength in the occupation of Crimea lay in covert action combined with sound intelligence concerning the weakness of the Kiev government and their will to respond militarily.

According to NATO commander General Philip M. Breedlove, the Russian forces disconnected the Ukrainian forces in Crimea from their command and control. They used a so-called snap military exercise to distract attention and hide their preparations. Then specially trained troops, without identifying patches, moved quickly to secure key installations. Once the operation was underway, Russian forces cut telephone cables, jammed communications, and used cyber warfare to cut off the Ukrainian military forces on the peninsula.

This sort of strategy will work best in areas close to Russian territory where a large and intimidating force can be assembled and where there are pockets of ethnic Russians to provide local support across the neighbouring border. Such a force can be used in the whole former Soviet space, including the Baltic countries, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the former Soviet Central Asian states. Admiral Stavridis argues that NATO now needs to study and factor into its planning Russia's deft use of cyber warfare, Special Forces and conventional troops: 'In all those areas they have raised their game, and they have integrated them quite capably'.

None of this is in any way to approve of Putin's use of military force and what it means for the future of an independent Ukraine. But unless we

understand what is inside Putin's head, the West will continue to be surprised by his actions. In my view, he will not be deterred by the West's economic sanctions, which he will simply stare down. And he will seek to drive wedges between America and European countries that are heavily dependent upon Russia for energy supplies, such as Germany. We need to understand that Putin's popularity is at an all-time high and he is very much in charge and driven by his view of what Russia should be as a great power and how it should act.

It remains to be seen how this confrontation between Russia and NATO is resolved. NATO is increasing its combat air patrols along the border between Russia and the Baltic states and NATO warships are being deployed to the Baltic and Black Seas. America is sending small army units of about 150 troops each to Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. It is unlikely that Putin is planning a military confrontation with NATO, which - short of the use of nuclear weapons - he is unlikely to win. But if he invades the eastern part of Ukraine there is a real risk of escalation. As Henry Kissinger has noted, understanding US values and psychology are not Putin's strong suits, nor has understanding Russian history and psychology been a strong point of US policymakers. There is a dangerous risk here of mutual incomprehension.

I do not accept that all this implies we are returning to the dangers of the Cold War. But it does mean the view in the West that state-on-state conflict is an obsolete idea is no longer tenable. Europe, in particular, needs to relearn the fact that the use of force majeure by the dominant regional power has returned. There is now a risk of a direct Russian clash with NATO if Ukraine slides into civil war and Putin decides to intervene. Putin's response to European appeals for him to recognise the sanctity of international borders is to sarcastically cite how the European Union encouraged Kosovo to separate from Serbia, another Slavic country. He has also noted how, in his view, America ignored international borders in its own interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. The fact is that big powers, including China these days, tend to act like big powers and this is a real wake-up call for the contemporary strategic era.

Any idea of bringing Russia into the community of democratic nations is now dead. And we

cannot rule out the further use of Russian military force in eastern Ukraine, with all the risks of miscalculation that implies. However, those who are urging the United States militarily to confront a heavily nuclear-armed Russia - whose doctrine is for the early use of tactical nuclear weapons in the event of being faced with superior conventional forces - need to contemplate the risks involved. As former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has said 'There is no real military option'. And other American commentators have declared that there are no US vital interests in Ukraine (despite the precedent-setting effect of Russia's annexation of Crimea and potentially eastern Ukraine).

One possible scenario is that this crisis will be resolved by Ukraine declaring that it will never join NATO and conceding substantial regional autonomy to the heavily Russian-speaking parts of eastern Ukraine. That will involve a serious loss of independence for a separate Ukrainian state. In effect, Ukraine would become an integral part of the Russian sphere of influence and be within Moscow's orbit of what is deemed permissible. Another alternative is the spectre of Russia invading Ukraine and re-incorporating it into Russia. If that happens, the bear will have arrived back as a dangerous major power risking military confrontation with the West.

For Australia, there is little we can do other than condemn this blatant act of aggression and join any sanctions the West imposes. But we need to factor into our calculations that large authoritarian countries like Russia and China are flexing their muscles and will not necessarily abide by the norms of international behaviour. Resisting coercion should be an important element in the strategic thinking of our new Defence White Paper. In particular, we need to consider whether Beijing will be emboldened in its attitude to the US by Russia's successful use of military force and the weak response by Washington to Putin's military adventurism.

In the last couple of years China has started to throw its weight around with territorial issues in the East China Sea and the South China Sea. If Beijing perceives Washington's defence of its European allies as weak in the face of Russian aggression, might it be encouraged to push harder against Japan and the Philippines in Asia? China may well see parallels in EU and NATO weakness against Russian aggression

with the inability of security organisations in Asia, such as ASEAN, to respond to current Chinese military adventurism.

There is a further complication about whether the US may now be forced to deploy more of its military forces to the European theatre at a time when there is increasing questioning in Asia about Washington's so-called 'pivot' to the region. Will the distraction of Russia further hinder Washington's rebalancing of military forces to the Asia-Pacific region and divert its attention from a rising China? Japan will be closely monitoring this issue for any implications for its alliance with the US. Much will depend upon how much further the crisis between Russia and Ukraine goes and how NATO, and particularly America, responds.

Another consideration is whether Russia now will be more dependent on a good relationship with Beijing and will this see an even greater coincidence of anti-Western views by Putin and China's President Xi Jinping? China has signed a huge natural gas agreement with Russia worth \$400 billion over the next 30 years, which will significantly lessen Russia's economic dependence on Europe. The prospect of Russia getting closer to the West in order to balance China has become distinctly more distant.

For Australia, our defence planning now needs to factor in more the risk of conventional threats to international security and not be lulled into a false sense of security by believing that the only credible foreseeable threats are insurgencies, terrorism and non-traditional security issues.

The post-Cold War era in Europe has now ended; it remains to be seen what its strategic impact might be on Asia. A new era of nationalist resurgence and territorial occupation unconstrained by international laws and norms might well be Putin's legacy. And this may be the necessary wake-up call for Washington that brings geopolitics back into play in the world order with a vengeance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- Australia's defence strategy should now take account of how major powers such as China and Russia might use conventional force, or threats of use of conventional force, to challenge territorial sovereignty and impose their will more generally.
- Canberra also needs to factor into its strategic assessments the impact of the Ukrainian crisis on a) China's strategic policy and regional ambitions and b) the US military commitment to Asia.
- Given the rise of military capabilities and nationalism in our region, the new Defence White Paper should give appropriate priority to policies of countering conventional threats and coercion, including from major powers.



Biography:

Dr Paul Dibb AM is Emeritus Professor of Strategic Studies at The Australian National University where he was head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre from 1991 to 2003. His previous positions include: Deputy Secretary of the Department of Defence, Director of the Defence Intelligence Organisation, and Head of the National Assessments Staff (National Intelligence Committee). He was made a member of the Order of Australia in 1989 for his contribution to Australia's defence policy and intelligence work. During the Howard Government, he was a member of the Foreign Minister's Foreign Policy Council. He has represented Australia at eight meetings of the ASEAN Regional Forum's Experts and Eminent Persons Group with the most recent one being in Malaysia in February 2014.