



U.S. fighters fly over oil fires set by Iraqis during the Gulf War in 1991. (History/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



A Ukrainian tank fires at Russian position near Bakhmut in January 2023. (Anatolii Stepanov / AFP via Getty Images)

Bookending the Post-Cold War Era: A Tale of Two Fateful Invasions

Shibley Telhami

Two invasions have bookended the post-Cold War order as we have known it since the Berlin Wall came down in 1989: the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The tale of the two wars, and what happened in between, tells us a lot about the current state of international politics.

Both invasions took the international community by surprise, and both were followed by robust international responses, led by the United States. The decisions to invade seemed improbable by rational analysis and were shocking to many. In the case of the Iraqi invasion, even Baghdad's patrons in Moscow were surprised, having assumed that the concentration of forces on the Kuwaiti border was more of a bargaining

tool to extract Kuwaiti concessions on a disputed oil field. As then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker put it, "The fact that (Soviet) intelligence services had been so wrong about it, the fact that a client state with Soviet military had, in an unprovoked way aggressively moved against a small neighbor like this. They were genuinely embarrassed and I think they felt what we were doing was the right thing to do."¹ The Soviet Union ultimately voted yes on United Nations Security Council Resolution 678² authorizing a coalition of over 40 allied nations³ to "use all necessary means to uphold and implement" the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait and "to restore international peace and security in the area."⁴ A decade later, after the 9/11 attack on the U.S., Russia also voted yes on U.N. Security Council Resolution 1386 authorizing "the



establishment of an International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan” in 2001.⁵

In the case of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, even the Ukrainians seemed surprised by the invasion, despite clear and unusual warnings by the United States that the action had become inevitable.⁶ The shock was predicated on the assessment that Russia had a lot more to lose than to gain, even if its military campaign had been more successful than it turned out to be.

In the case of Iraq, the invasion of Kuwait came just as the Cold War ended, with its patron, the Soviet Union, on the verge of collapse. And there were clear signs that Iraq’s president, Saddam Hussein, understood that this was America’s moment: In a speech he had delivered a few months earlier, in February 1990, the Iraqi leader warned that the end of the Cold War was not good for Arabs, and that the U.S. would be even more inclined to take Israel’s side and might actually embark on “stupidities”⁷ given the absence of Soviet restraint. And counter to the argument that former American Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie gave Iraq the greenlight to invade, evidence since has discounted that reasoning, as I showed.⁸ Looking at records of meetings between Saddam Hussein and his advisers and with foreign leaders, “There is no evidence to support the theory that Saddam thought he received a green or yellow light from the United States, and much evidence that he expected hostile American reactions.”⁹

In the case of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the moment was different. America had weakened, in relative terms, since its pinnacle in the 1990s, and Russia was more assertive and ambitious. Surely America was still strong economically and militarily, but its deep divide at home, including about relations with Russia; the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on democracy; and the black eye that America still carried internationally from its 2003 invasion of Iraq, had suggested to Putin different reactions, including in Europe. As an example, even the threat to democracy that the United States sought to seize on to counter Russia’s invasion was seen differently internationally: A 2021 public opinion poll¹⁰ in 55 countries showed that the U.S. was seen as presenting a greater threat to democracy in their own countries than Russia and China (though most ranked economic inequality as the biggest threat).

But the international reaction to both invasions was not what Iraqi and Russian leaders had expected. Gulf Arab rulers may have been unhappy about American policy, but once Iraq invaded Kuwait they felt more threatened by Iraq than by the United States. And those in Europe who had wanted some distancing from the United States and had built economic ties with Russia feared Putin even more once he invaded Ukraine. That fear, combined with aggressive diplomacy by the Biden administration, revived the NATO coalition¹¹ and propelled states like Finland and Sweden to seek membership.¹² If Russian President Vladimir Putin’s fear of NATO expansion was a driver of his invasion, the outcome could not have been worse for him. This in turn made Putin and the Russian elite even more insecure, and more fearful about the prospect of Ukraine itself joining NATO at some point. As former U.S. Ambassador to Russia, now director of the CIA, William Burns put it in his book “The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal,” Ukraine is not only Putin’s issue, it’s a redline for Russian elites: “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all redlines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin’s sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.”¹³

In generating international coalitions to counter each invasion, the winning message was the same, though it resonated more in 1990 than in 2020: that countering invasions was essential for defending a rules-based international order.

Of course, Russia in 2022 is not Iraq in 1990, but neither is it today a great power. When the Soviet Union collapsed as a superpower, it was in part because its economic capacity didn’t match its military ambition. Many decades later, Russia’s economy remains modest for superpower ambition, comparable to that of South Korea.¹⁴ Beyond its nuclear arsenal, its military budget is less than one-tenth of that of the United States and one-fourth of that of China.¹⁵ But Putin may have counted on real challenges facing the United States at home and abroad as limiting American reaction, apparently misjudging his ability to exploit them.



But Russia remains an influential power. It may be weakened, but it's hard to know what defeat would mean. Its leaders may not pay the price even as the country suffers; even in the case of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, he survived defeat in 1991 and more than a decade of stringent international sanctions — and was dislodged only by a devastating and costly war a dozen years later. Of course, Putin could fall, but we shouldn't count on it.

Unlike the victors in the Second World War, who joined together to write new rules of international politics and give the loser an opportunity to forge a new path, the United States failed to seize the moment of American primacy in the 1990s to lead the revamping of international institutions, including the United Nations, that no longer reflected the distribution of power that prevailed at their inception, preferring instead to exploit the benefits of American power to focus on the economy at home and utilize this power to advance American trade interests globally, including through missions abroad.¹⁶ As I noted back in 1993, the post-Cold War moment for transformation of international institutions had probably passed by that date already:

“If a fundamental transformation of the United Nations became possible following the collapse of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry (and it is not clear that it ever was possible), the most opportune moment for change—the months immediately following the Persian Gulf War of 1991 ... that moment may have passed. As new patterns and new rivalries have emerged in international relations, it has become clear that perceptions of U.S. power far exceeded reality.”¹⁷

The most consequential and ruinous moment of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, however, was the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Nothing damaged perceptions of a rules-based international order more than that war. Coupled with the perception that the United States was complicit in the rules-busting decades-old Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, the war made it harder for the U.S. when it acted in the name of protecting such an order.

The Obama presidency helped America recover only mildly, mostly in relief after the Bush presidency and



A machine gunner aboard a U.S. Marine Corps V-22 Osprey scans the terrain as the aircraft flies near a French artillery base near al Qaim in Iraq's western Anbar province, a short distance away from territory held by Islamic State in February 2019. (Daphné Benoit / AFP via Getty Images)



Obama's credible opposition to the Iraq war. But the American president was more focused on doing no harm than on reshaping the international order, with America's weakened hand and events beyond his control, such as the Arab uprisings that spanned most of his years in office, constraining his actions. American-backed NATO actions in Libya in 2011, in the meanwhile, angered Russia further. Russia's abstention from the Security Council vote had allowed the passing of UNSC Resolution 1973, calling for nations to take all necessary actions to protect civilians, including by implementing a no-fly zone in Libya.¹⁸ But as NATO actions escalated, ultimately resulting in the end of the regime of Russia's former client Moammar Gadhafi, Moscow complained that "[t]he U.N. Security Council never aimed to topple the Libyan regime. ... All those who are currently using the U.N. resolution for that aim are violating the U.N. mandate."¹⁹

Donald Trump's presidency was the antithesis of a rules-based order, even as it maintained amicable ties with Moscow.

So even before Russia invaded Ukraine, the order that followed the end of the Cold War, especially in the 1990s, had substantially weakened – and certainly not only due to American behavior. Russia too had surely violated the rules, as in the incursion of Russian forces into Georgia²⁰ in 2008, and its annexation of Crimea in 2014.²¹

But if the post-Cold War rules-based order meant maintaining a degree of Russian-American cooperation, even in the face of obvious violations by both, the Russia-Ukraine war has, for now, ended that era.

Russia will remain a factor in the global order as a midsize power with a substantial nuclear arsenal. But the new rules of the game will mostly depend on the ways the United States and China conduct their business, and whether they move toward more confrontation or more cooperation. China is a clear winner of the Russian invasion, aided globally by anger with Putin and lingering international discomfort with American policies.

My comparison of the two invasions and their impact on perceptions of the global order has focused

principally on the policies and relative influence of the big powers, with an eye to the distribution of military and economic power that remains central in much of world politics. But the degree of the internal strengths and cohesion within the big powers can present greater challenges to them than to other big powers.

The reasons for the collapse of the Soviet Union go well beyond the pressure applied by the United States during the Cold War years. In fact, one of Saddam Hussein's miscalculations in 1990 had to do with a stunningly superficial assessment of the internal structural conditions that ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Hussein understood that a big part of the Soviet Union's troubles was economic; this weakness not only reduced Soviet military potential but also the role of the generals, who were key interlocutors in the Soviet-Iraqi relationship. But his proposed remedy gave a hint of his lack of understanding of the depth of the USSR's troubles: To help revive the USSR, Hussein proposed that some of the "hundreds of billions invested by the Arabs in the United States and the West ... may be diverted to the USSR and East European countries. It may prove even more profitable than investment in the West, which has grown saturated with its national resources. Such a course of action may yield inestimable benefits for the Arabs and their national causes."²²

As for the United States, there are lessons to be learned even as the Russian invasion of Ukraine has focused attention on potential threats from big powers. The greatest threats America faces today are from within: the deep divisiveness that goes far beyond partisanship, raising the prospect of civil conflict. American democracy, which, despite its flaws, has been an anchor of a successful system that fed American economic and military power, is being severely tested.

This internal aspect of weakness in America's posture has been visible to the rest the world for some time. In fact, as Fiona Hill notes, Putin had come to see "that despite the lofty rhetoric that flowed from Washington about democratic values and liberal norms, beneath the surface, the United States was beginning to resemble his own country ... The fire was already burning; all Putin had to do was pour on some gasoline."²³ As it turned out, in fact, despite the deep



American partisan divide, there was robust American public backing for U.S. support for Ukraine,²⁴ but since then, there has been further evidence of reduced support among Republicans,²⁵ with many influential Republican voices criticizing the Biden administration posture on Russia and Ukraine. Putin surely

miscalculated on many levels, but the verdict is out on how the invasion will ultimately play out in American politics. For now, even this momentous invasion failed to transcend the American divide at home. One can only imagine how things may look in 2024, if Donald Trump, or someone like him, is elected president.



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