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Ukraine and the Lessons of the Iraq War



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Leaving aside the manufactured justifications, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003 to reassert U.S. power in the Middle East and reduce the influence of Iran. It wasn't terrorism or yellow cake or even Saddam Hussein's appalling human rights abuses that motivated one of the most tragic of U.S. foreign policy blunders.

It was geopolitics, stupid.

According to the fevered imaginations of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and their neocon compatriots, Saddam would be the first domino to fall, followed by other autocrats

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(Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Muammar Qaddafi in Libya) until, boom, democracy upended the ayatollahs in Iran as well. They even imagined, by the mere inclusion of it in an “axis of evil,” that North Korea too would soon experience a Pyongyang Spring.

Saddam did indeed fall. And then Iraq fell apart, thanks to the failure of the Bush administration to develop a coherent post-war reconstruction plan.

But democracy did not take hold in the region, much less in North Korea. Some autocrats have squeaked by, in the case of Assad by ruthlessly suppressing a civil uprising, while others have emerged like Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt and Abdelmadjid Tebboune in Algeria. And several putative democrats, like Kais Saied in Tunisia and Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, have moved solidly into the illiberal camp.

Here’s a *koan* for the neocons: what’s the sound of one domino falling?

The ayatollahs, meanwhile, haven’t gone anywhere. Iran, by all estimates, increased its regional standing after 2003, becoming a major player in post-war Iraq, growing its influence in Lebanon and Syria, raising its profile among Palestinians through support of Hamas in Gaza, and backing a Shiite faction in Yemen.

So, the invasion of Iraq produced the exact opposite results than intended, despite the loss of over 4,400 U.S. soldiers and the outlay of as much as \$2 trillion to fight the war and repair the broken country. Iraqis, of course, have suffered even more: around 300,000 deaths and a state currently hobbled by corruption and in-fighting.

Okay, Saddam is gone. But Iran and terrorist entities like the Islamic State have filled the regional vacuum, not the United States or democracy.

U.S. declining influence in the region was on display in the recent agreement that Iran inked with Saudi Arabia. The two perennially adversarial powers agreed this month to restore diplomatic relations, and the king of Saudi Arabia even invited Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to visit Riyadh. This extraordinary development, between two countries that have fought through proxies in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, has the potential to remap the region.

The United States, the most powerful country in the world and the post-World War II hegemon in the Middle East, had nothing to do with the rapprochement.

It was China that brokered the agreement, a country with a single overseas military base and little history of involvement in the Middle East.

On the twentieth anniversary of the Iraq invasion, the United States has discovered once again how the mighty can be brought low by their hubris.

Who Is Learning the Lessons of Iraq?

The United States has lost a large measure of its global influence, thanks to its fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan. Have subsequent administrations learned the lessons of these misbegotten incursions?

Barack Obama famously tried to pivot from Iraq to “winning” the war in Afghanistan. Today, the Taliban once again rule that country.

Donald Trump pretended as if he’d never supported the Iraq War as part of a half-assed attempt to paint himself as a critic of U.S. military interventions. In fact, it was only because of the concerted efforts of marginally more sensible members of his administration that Trump didn’t plunge the United States into war with Iran or Venezuela.

Biden seems to have partially learned the lessons of Iraq. He followed through on the pullout of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and he has resisted sending U.S. troops to Ukraine. On the other hand, he has pushed the U.S. military budget ever higher and doubled down on containing China.

But the person who has truly not learned the lessons of Iraq comes from a different country altogether: Vladimir Putin.

Last year, Putin did a credible impersonation of George W. Bush by launching a “shock and awe” attack on Ukraine that he thought would be such a cakewalk that it wouldn’t even need proper preparation like updated maps or food enough to feed the invading troops. The “limits of military force” that has become a catchphrase among U.S. policymakers and pundits obviously never penetrated the walls of the Kremlin or the nationalist mindset of the Russian leader.

Strangely, pundits in the West have been slow to draw this obvious parallel. In *The Guardian*, Jonathan Steele notes that “in spite of the resurgence of US power in Europe as a result of the war in Ukraine, the era of US supremacy in the rest of the world may soon be over.” Well, the erosion of U.S. power been a long time in the making. But what about the end of Russian supremacy in its own sphere of influence? Wouldn’t that be a more apt comparison between the Iraq and Ukraine wars? The Biden administration has learned at least some lessons from the dreadful blunder. The same can’t be said for Putin, and Russia will inevitably suffer the same geopolitical consequences.

Ishaan Tharoor, in *The Washington Post*, muses that the United States is unable to build a more effective global coalition against Russia because of its hypocrisy going back to the Iraq War. True, but much of the world is skeptical of U.S. intentions because of U.S. foreign policy misadventures going back a century or more—and also because Russia still

has some influence in important countries like China, India, and South Africa. And it is Russian hypocrisy—Putin’s ridiculous claims that he is upholding sovereignty rather than violating it—that’s the more salient feature of the current war. Imperialism is never having to say you’re sorry (or make sense, for that matter).

And in the *Boston Globe*, Andrew Bacevich makes the off-base argument that “Biden appears to believe that the Ukraine war provides a venue whereby the United States can overcome the legacy of Iraq, enabling him to make good on his repeated assertion that ‘America is back.’”

Really?!

The war in Ukraine has less to do with the United States than with Vladimir Putin’s quest for power and imperial might. The United States is not the only superpower whose reach exceeds its grasp. Moreover, the Biden administration has responded with arms and support for Ukraine not out of any effort to overcome the legacy of Iraq but *to come to the defense of a democracy that has been invaded*.

These arguments are all part of an obsessively U.S.-focused “whataboutism” that has permeated the U.S. left’s discourse in particular around Ukraine. Instead of focusing on Russian actions, the anti-war critics will say “what about the U.S. invasion of Iraq?” as if there can only be one badly behaved country in the world and only one touchstone of evil. Bacevich, again, has tried to make a virtue out of this rhetorical irresponsibility – Giving Whataboutism a Chance—by concluding that “however grotesque, Putin’s ambitions in Ukraine seem almost modest by comparison” to the U.S. crimes in Iraq. Though Bacevich agrees that Putin’s “actions have been those of a vile criminal,” he is effectively arguing that the stakes in Ukraine are somehow not so great as to justify providing the country with sufficient means to defend itself.

The fact that the United States, among others, have failed to do the right thing in the past—or in other parts of the world today—should in no way diminish the importance of doing the right thing right now in Ukraine. Would Bacevich argue that the Biden administration shouldn’t pursue major carbon reductions at home because the United States pumped so much carbon into the atmosphere in the past or is failing to help, for instance, India from kicking the fossil fuel habit today? At its heart, whataboutism provides an intellectual veneer for a paralyzing passivity in the face of evil.

And What About U.S. Influence?

Even as they note the declining global influence of the United States, some analysts nevertheless believe that Washington can somehow wave a magic wand to end the war in Ukraine.

Take George Beebe, in *Responsible Statecraft*, who makes the problematic assertion that this summer “Ukraine might well have less bargaining leverage, as its battlefield position stagnates and its confidence in enduring American support erodes.” Thus, the Biden administration should press

the accelerator pedal on negotiations with Russia. For example, signaling discreetly to Moscow that we are prepared to discuss the thorny issue of Ukraine’s membership in NATO – an issue Putin regards as central to the war, but which Biden has so far refused to discuss – might help to change these dynamics and reshape Russia’s attitude toward a settlement.

This assertion is based on several faulty assumptions. Beebe urges the Biden administration to act now because of something—a battlefield stalemate—that *might* happen this summer and would be more likely to happen if Biden listens to Beebe (talk about self-fulfilling arguments).

Sure, Washington could signal that it will talk about NATO membership with Russia. But Putin actually doesn’t care that much about NATO *per se*. What the Russian leader wants is to fully incorporate as much of Ukraine into Russia as possible. Barring the installation of a Kremlin-friendly administration in Kyiv, he’ll settle for a structurally weakened country that will never pose any kind of threat—military, economic, political—to Russia. Finally, what Beebe doesn’t say but rather implies is that the Biden administration should exercise its influence by leaning on Ukraine to negotiate with Russia, particularly if it doesn’t feel compelled to do so by circumstances on the ground.

Yes, of course, the Biden administration could seriously weaken the Ukrainian military by cutting off military supplies. Proponents of this view believe that this will somehow produce a negotiated settlement. The more likely scenario would be a redoubled Russian military assault accompanied by war crimes on a scale that would dwarf the horrors of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. The recent indictment of Putin by the International Criminal Court focused on the forced relocation of Ukrainian children. But that’s just a small part of what Putin has wrought: executions of prisoners of war, slaughter of civilians, bombing of civilian infrastructure. Full-scale war against a weakened opponent will bring full-scale war crimes.

All of which suggests that the “pro-peace” critics of Biden’s policy toward Ukraine—from the left and the right—are really the ones who have not internalized the lessons of the Iraq War. The refusal of the United States to make any serious post-invasion plans, the effort to occupy Iraq and dictate its political and economic future, the implicit belief that the invasion would solidify U.S. standing in the region—these all plunged Iraq into years and years of civil war. Anything short of drastically reducing Russian influence in Ukraine will condemn the country to the same.

The U.S. left continuously called for U.S. troops to leave Iraq. Only those who have failed to learn the lessons of the Iraq War would fail to make the same demand of Russia as a prerequisite for a just peace today.

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