

The Strange Fear of Russia

by George Friedman - December 29, 2025

There is talk of Russia moving into Belarus, launching attacks on Latvia and Lithuania, and preparing a massive operation in and around the Black Sea. Many fear that if the Russia-Ukraine war ends without Russia being forced out of the relatively small territory it now holds, Moscow will surge into other areas to restore the borders of the former Soviet Union.

What is strange, given the Russian military's performance in Ukraine, is that it still inspires such fear. Nearly four years since its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia controls only about a fifth of the country and is bogged down in fighting over a handful of towns and villages along the front line. The fact is that Russia failed in its original mission, which was to occupy all of Ukraine, as shown by its failed attempt to capture Kyiv, far from today's battlefield.

It is true that Ukraine cannot drive the Russians out of the territory they now hold. But it is also true that Russia in four years has failed to break Ukrainian resistance or gain substantial ground. Its inability to achieve its stated goals raises serious questions about Russian military power. Russia expected to take far more territory and did not imagine the war would still be going on today with so little to show for it. This cannot be the war Moscow planned.

Russia is now recruiting soldiers in Afghanistan and other developing countries, offering large payments and Russian citizenship in exchange for service. It is also drafting men in their 40s and 50s to fight or free up younger men for front-line duty. Its strategy of relying on mercenaries – including the Wagner Group, which tried to stage a coup to overthrow President Vladimir Putin in 2023 – has proved dubious.

Some would argue that while the Russian army was ineffective, it has the ability to devastate other nations with drone attacks. There are two responses to this argument. One is that many nations have drones now, and Russia is also vulnerable to drone attacks. But the more important and interesting response is that the bombardment of cities has a history of failure. During World War II, London, Hamburg and other cities were overwhelmed with such attacks. Whether cities are bombarded by manned aircraft or by drones, the outcome is the same. What is interesting is that neither the bombardment of London nor the attacks on German and Japanese cities forced capitulation, at least not until Japan was hit by atomic bombs. The same is true of U.S. air attacks on Hanoi. It was ground

forces taking territory that really won wars. Explosives, from aircraft or drones, cause massive damage and suffering, but by themselves, they do not lead to defeating an enemy.

Russia has not held back significant forces or capabilities, aside from nuclear weapons. It used everything it reasonably could and still failed to defeat a much smaller country with a much smaller military. Moscow's refusal to quit the war and its grinding attempts to capture marginal territory reveal how limited its forces are. Ukraine cannot force a Russian retreat, but defending small areas is much easier than conquering large ones. Russia's rejection of potential settlements – even on favorable terms offered by U.S. President Donald Trump – reflects political fears in Moscow, where ending the war now would be seen as an admission of failure, with possible consequences for Russia's leaders. That Ukraine has withstood Russia's assault without any foreign troops to aid it, only material and intelligence, makes the Russian failure even more striking.

Therefore, the question is: Why are so many afraid that if Russia were allowed to keep the limited territory it has taken, its next step would be major offensives in all directions to regain what it lost after the Soviet Union fell? Russia lost far more than the Baltic states. It also lost Central Asia, whose five countries are now independent, as well as the South Caucasus. Meanwhile, the United States has gained considerable influence in these areas, as shown when the leaders of the five Central Asian countries came to Washington last month for a pleasant meeting with Trump at the White House.

Under Putin, Russia has been a geopolitical trainwreck. Economically, its per capita income ranks in the 50s in the world, limiting its capacity to rapidly rebuild its military. This is the reality, and ending the war in Ukraine while permitting Russia to keep a sliver of the country – paid for with the lives of more than 150,000 Russian soldiers – would not suddenly make its neighbors vulnerable.

The question I am asking is why there is a feeling in both Europe and the U.S. that ending the war by ceding a relatively small amount of Ukrainian territory would mean that Russia would strike wider and deeper into other countries. The war is dragging on because Putin can't admit his failure without risking his political survival, and he needs something – anything – to show for it. His political survival does not change the reality. The Russian army has failed in its mission in Ukraine, and Russia has lost influence over significant parts of the former Soviet Union. The army that failed in Ukraine would be no better at taking these other countries. The war with Ukraine revealed Russia's weakness, not its strength.

The dread of Russia arises from the Cold War, when the U.S. and its allies looked at the Soviet Union as an enormously powerful military. Some argued that the Soviet Union was not particularly

capable in conventional warfare, even though, with U.S. aid, it defeated German forces in Russia during World War II. But on the whole, fear of Russian power shaped the political culture in the West. Today's fears that any concession to Russia would unleash more Russian aggression are a product of that legacy.

But it is essential to recognize how weak and damaged Russia actually is, how strained its military is, and how its economic weakness makes rapid rearmament improbable. A settlement would cost Ukraine some territory and save many lives, but it would not empower Russia to strike out in different directions. To its west, east and south, Russia has suffered massive reversals since the Soviet collapse. Yet some outside Russia cannot come to terms with this new reality, and Moscow's entire strategy in Ukraine is to pretend it does not need to end a war it cannot win.

Russia's tragedy is that to convince outsiders of its strength, it must keep pretending it is holding back a force that would change the world. There is no such force. After the war, Russians will have to decide what they will do with the leadership that brought them to this place, not pursue more unwinnable wars. A settlement based on the reality of Russia's failures is the lowest-cost option. But it requires a clear-eyed understanding in the West of the reality of Russia's weakness.

Author: George Friedman

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