

The World and a Small War

by George Friedman - April 19, 2022

No war is small when you are living in it, but the world is large, and large wars are rare. At the same time, wars reverberate in unexpected ways. A small war here might make another war elsewhere deadlier, or it might help prevent a war elsewhere. No war can be understood simply in and of itself. Therefore, the war in Ukraine must be considered not only in its own terms but also in terms of its reverberations. And since reverberations are by definition disorderly, in terms of their connection to both the primary war and its ultimate importance, I will arbitrarily embed the reverberations into my model of the world.

Poland has emerged, for the moment, as the leader of Europe. Geographically, it is closest to Ukraine, and therefore much of NATO's force has been stationed there. Most important, the U.S. 82nd Airborne Division is there. That means that the 82nd is working with Polish forces, many of whom have already trained for several years with U.S. armored forces in Poland. For the U.S., that means its forces are made aware of the terrain they may be fighting on and get the chance to develop some familiarity with Poles. Their mission is to deter or repel a Russian invasion of Poland or, if ordered, to move into Ukraine and engage and defeat Russian forces there.

After World War II, to ward off Soviet domination of the Continent, the United States had to position its forces in Europe by placing a main force in Germany. Inevitably, this wove the two previously hostile countries together politically and socially. It also created necessary investments that had a role in the German economic miracle, a miracle that eventually made Germany the leading power in Europe – something inconceivable in 1945. German well-being became a strategic requirement for the United States, and being an American priority in a shattered Europe meant a great deal.

The situation today is not as stark as it was in 1945. The basing of U.S. forces in a country makes the host country's stability and predictability a U.S. strategic interest, and Polish geography and interests now link to American interests in a relationship that is blossoming from what it was. The United States has felt alienated from Europe because of Europe's reluctance to fulfill its financial commitments to NATO, and Europe felt alienated from what it saw as American hyper-militarism. Ukraine has generated a shift in Europe that may or may not last. But what will likely last is the presence of American troops in Poland. The U.S. still has troops in Germany more than 30 years after the end of the Cold War. For the Americans, deployments are habit-forming.

Poland's geography and its memory of the consequences of war bond it with the Americans. The end of the Ukraine war will imprint a model on the U.S. of future threats that aligns with Poland's own view. Poland is under threat of de facto expulsion from the EU for violating EU judicial standards. That is a minor test of how the European balance of power might shift.

Elsewhere, the Turks have done an interesting thing, sortieing a substantial part of their navy into the Black Sea, where the Russian ship Moskva was sunk. Turkey has kept its distance from much of the Ukraine war, although it made some drones available to Ukrainian forces. Turkey is historically hostile to Russia but lately regards the U.S. as unpredictable. It has balanced carefully there. But the poor performance of Russian forces in Ukraine has likely caused the Turks to reevaluate Russia's threat. Turkey likely no longer equates Russian and American strength. From Turkey's point of view, if Russia were able to use its navy to impose itself on the Black Sea while eliminating or forcing Ukrainian forces armed with anti-ship missiles farther away from the coast, this would ease Russian operations in the Black Sea. Such an outcome would also pose a potential threat to Turkey. Turkey is a member of NATO, and Russia may eventually decide Turkey's fleet is a threat and strike its ships and ports. The Turks have moved into the Black Sea to preempt a Russian move by raising the risks beyond what Russia can incur. At the same time, this will involve a degree of coordination with Ukraine.

In challenging Russia in the Black Sea, another avenue is opened up. Turkey has significant interests in both the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Russia has been advancing its interests there to the concern of Turkey. Russia is in no position to pose a military challenge to Turkey at the moment, nor is Turkey likely to move militarily. Covert actions and diplomacy are the key. And given Russia's performance in Ukraine, countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan might reconsider their relations to Russia. The weakness of Russia to this point opens the door to strategic realignments, forces Turkey to assert itself in the Black Sea and potentially clears a path for Turkey to pursue

other interests.

Then there is China. China entered into a relationship with Russia to create a massive counterweight to the United States. But despite their public statements, the Chinese have realized that a relationship with Russia is a liability and not an asset. Russia does not have the weight to draw the U.S. away from threatening China. It lacks the military force to execute the Ukrainian campaign without calling on Syrian reinforcements. China is not in a position to send forces to aid Russia. First, saving Russia's campaign would provide no direct benefit to China, and a Chinese intervention could be disastrous. Second and more important, China has seen the impact of U.S.-led economic warfare. Becoming active in Ukraine or providing significant aid to Russia might trigger a similar economic attack on China.

China, like Russia, is not nearly as powerful as it appears. Its per capita gross domestic product ranks 81st in the world. (Russia's is 85th.) Its domestic market for sophisticated goods is limited. It must have the ability to export, without which it destabilizes. The United States, even with tariffs on Chinese goods, is China's largest customer. Facing both a loss of exports and an economic war at a time when China's economic growth rate is contracting and social tension over wealth inequality is rising would be dangerous. Invading Taiwan would be insane, as it would give China the only thing it has enough of – land. It could also fail. And the U.S. economic response would be intense at a time when China's economy cannot withstand it.

So we see Poland and Turkey taking on greater significance as a result of the war, and China losing significance. There are many other reverberations. I chose these three, if it is not already obvious, because in my book **“The Next 100 Years”** I predicted the rise of Poland and Turkey and the decline of China. So while there are many other effects, there is no reason not to start with these.

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