

## We Have Never Been Here Before



By **Thomas L. Friedman**

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The seven most dangerous words in journalism are: “The world will never be the same.” In over four decades of reporting, I have rarely dared use that phrase. But I’m going there now in the wake of Vladimir Putin’s [invasion of Ukraine](#).

Our world is not going to be the same again because this war has no historical parallel. It is a raw, 18th-century-style land grab by a superpower — but in a 21st-century globalized world. This is the first war that will be covered on TikTok by super-empowered individuals armed only with smartphones, so acts of brutality will be documented and broadcast worldwide without any editors or filters. On the first day of the war, we saw invading Russian tank units unexpectedly being [exposed](#) by Google maps, because Google wanted to alert drivers that the Russian armor was causing traffic jams.

You have never seen this play before.

Yes, the Russian attempt to seize Ukraine is a throwback to earlier centuries — before the democracy revolutions in America and France — when a European monarch or Russian czar could simply decide that he wanted more territory, that the time was ripe to grab it, and so he did. And everyone in the region knew he would devour as much as he could and there was no global community to stop him.

In acting this way today, though, Putin is not only aiming to unilaterally rewrite the rules of the international system that have been in place since World War II — that no nation can just devour the nation next door — he is also out to alter that balance of power that he feels was imposed on Russia after the Cold War.

That balance — or imbalance in Putin’s view — was the humiliating equivalent of the Versailles Treaty’s impositions on Germany after World War I. In Russia’s case, it meant Moscow having to swallow NATO’s expansion not only to include the old Eastern European countries that had

been part of the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, like Poland, but even, in principle, states that were part of the Soviet Union itself, like Ukraine.

I see many people citing Robert Kagan's fine book "[The Jungle Grows Back](#)" as a kind of shorthand for the return of this nasty and brutish style of geopolitics that Putin's invasion manifests. But that picture is incomplete. Because this is not 1945 or 1989. We may be back in the jungle — but today the jungle is wired. It is wired together more intimately than ever before by telecommunications; satellites; trade; the internet; road, rail and air networks; financial markets; and supply chains. So while the drama of war is playing out within the borders of Ukraine, the risks and repercussions of Putin's invasion are being felt across the globe — even in China, which has good cause to worry about its friend in the Kremlin.

Welcome to World War Wired — the first war in a totally interconnected world. This will be the Cossacks meet the World Wide Web. Like I said, you haven't been here before.

"It's been less than 24 hours since Russia invaded Ukraine, yet we already have more information about what's going on there than we would have in a week during the Iraq war," wrote Daniel Johnson, who served as an infantry officer and journalist with the U.S. Army in Iraq, in [Slate](#) on Thursday afternoon. "What is coming out of Ukraine is simply impossible to produce on such a scale without citizens and soldiers throughout the country having easy access to cellphones, the internet and, by extension, social media apps. A large-scale modern war will be livestreamed, minute by minute, battle by battle, death by death, to the world. What is occurring is already horrific, based on the information released just on the first day."

The outcome of this war will depend in large part on the will of the rest of the world to deter and roll back Putin's blitzkrieg by primarily using economic sanctions and by arming the Ukrainians with anti-aircraft and anti-tank weaponry to try to slow his advance. Putin may also be forced to consider the death toll of his own comrades.

Will Putin be brought down by imperial overstretch? It is way too soon to say. But I am reminded these days of what a different warped leader who decided to devour his neighbors in Europe observed. His name was Adolf Hitler, and he [said](#): "The beginning of every war is like opening the door into a dark room. One never knows what is hidden in the darkness."

In Putin's case, I find myself asking: Does he know what is hiding in plain sight and not just in the dark? Does he know not only Russia's strengths in today's new world but also its weaknesses? Let me enumerate them.

Russia is in the process of forcibly taking over a free country with a population of 44 million people, which is a little less than one-third the size of Russia's population. And the majority of these Ukrainians have been struggling to be part of the democratic, free-market West for 30 years and have already forged myriad trade, cultural and internet ties to European Union companies, institutions and media.

We know that Putin has vastly improved Russia's armed forces, adding everything from hypersonic missile capabilities to advanced cyberwarfare tools. He has the firepower to bring

Ukraine to heel. But in this modern era we have never seen an unfree country, Russia, try to rewrite the rules of the international system and take over a free country that is as big as Ukraine — especially when the unfree country, Russia, has an economy that is smaller than that of [Texas](#).

Then think about this: Thanks to rapid globalization, the E.U. is already Ukraine's biggest trading partner — not Russia. In 2012, Russia was the destination for 25.7 percent of Ukrainian exports, compared with 24.9 percent going to the E.U. Just six years later, after Russia's brutal seizure of Crimea and support of separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine and Ukraine's forging of closer ties with the E.U. economically and politically, "Russia's share of Ukrainian exports had fallen to only 7.7 percent, while the E.U.'s share shot up to 42.6 percent," according to a recent [analysis](#) published by Bruegel.org.

If Putin doesn't untangle those ties, Ukraine will continue drifting into the arms of the West — and if he does untangle them, he will strangle Ukraine's economy. And if the E.U. boycotts a Russia-controlled Ukraine, Putin will have to use Russia's money to keep Ukraine's economy afloat.

Was that factored into his war plans? It doesn't seem like it. Or as a retired Russian diplomat in Moscow emailed me: "Tell me how this war ends? Unfortunately, there is no one and nowhere to ask."

But everyone in Russia will be able to watch. As this war unfolds on TikTok, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, Putin cannot closet his Russian population — let alone the rest of the world — from the horrific images that will come out of this war as it enters its urban phase. On just the first day of the war, more than 1,300 protesters across Russia, many of them chanting "No to war," were detained, [The Times reported](#), quoting a rights group. That's no small number in a country where Putin brooks little dissent.

And who knows how those images will affect Poland, particularly as it gets overrun by Ukrainian refugees. I particularly mention Poland because it is Russia's key land bridge to Germany and the rest of Western Europe. As strategist Edward Luttwak pointed out on Twitter, if Poland just halts truck and rail traffic from Russia to Germany, "[as it should](#)," it would create immediate havoc for Russia's economy, because the alternative routes are complicated and need to go through a now very dangerous Ukraine.

Anyone up for an anti-Putin trucker strike to prevent Russian goods going to and through Western Europe by way of Poland? Watch that space. Some super-empowered Polish citizens with a few roadblocks, pickups and smartphones could choke Russia's whole economy in this wired world.

This war with no historical parallel won't be a stress test just for America and its European allies. It'll also be one for China. Putin has basically thrown down the gauntlet to Beijing: "Are you going to stand with those who want to overturn the American-led order or join the U.S. sheriff's posse?"

That should not be — but is — a wrenching question for Beijing. “The interests of China and Russia today are not identical,” Nader Mousavizadeh, founder and C.E.O. of the global consulting firm Macro Advisory Partners, told me. “China wants to compete with America in the Super Bowl of economics, innovation and technology — and thinks it can win. Putin is ready to burn down the stadium and kill everyone in it to satisfy his grievances.”

The dilemma for the Chinese, added Mousavizadeh, “is that their preference for the kind of order, stability and globalization that has enabled their economic miracle is in stark tension with their resurgent authoritarianism at home and their ambition to supplant America — either by China’s strength or America’s weakness — as the world’s dominant superpower and rules setter.”

I have little doubt that in his heart China’s president, Xi Jinping, is hoping that Putin gets away with abducting Ukraine and humiliating the U.S. — all the better to soften up the world for his desire to seize Taiwan and fuse it back to the Chinese motherland.

But Xi is nobody’s fool. Here are a couple of other interesting facts from the wired world: First, China’s economy is more dependent on Ukraine than Russia’s. According to [Reuters](#), “China leapfrogged Russia to become Ukraine’s biggest single trading partner in 2019, with overall trade totaling \$18.98 billion last year, a nearly 80 percent jump from 2013. ... China became the largest importer of Ukrainian barley in the 2020-21 marketing year,” and about 30 percent of all of China’s corn imports last year came from farms in Ukraine.

Second, China [overtook](#) the United States as the European Union’s biggest trading partner in 2020, and Beijing cannot afford for the E.U. to be embroiled in conflict with an increasingly aggressive Russia and unstable Putin. China’s stability depends — and the legitimacy of the ruling Communist Party rests — on Xi’s ability to sustain and grow his already massive middle class. And that depends on a stable and growing world economy.

I don’t expect China to impose sanctions on Russia, let alone arm the Ukrainians, like the U.S. and the E.U. All that Beijing has done so far is [mumble](#) that Putin’s invasion was “not what we would hope to see” — while quickly implying that Washington was a “culprit” for “fanning up flames” with NATO expansion and its recent warnings of an imminent Russian invasion.

So China is obviously torn, but of the three key superpowers with nuclear weapons — the U.S., China and Russia — China, by what it says or doesn’t say, holds a very big swing vote on whether Putin gets away with his rampage of Ukraine or not.

To lead is to choose, and if China has any pretense of supplanting the U.S. as the world leader, it will have to do more than mumble.

Finally, there is something else Putin will find hiding in plain sight. In today’s interconnected world, a leader’s “sphere of influence” is no longer some entitlement from history and geography, but rather it is something that has to be earned and re-earned every day by inspiring and not compelling others to follow you.

The musician and actress Selena Gomez has twice as many followers on Instagram — over 298 million — as Russia has citizens. Yes, Vladimir, I can hear you laughing from here and echoing Stalin’s quip about the pope: “How many divisions does Selena Gomez have?”

She has none. But she is an influencer with followers, and there are thousands and thousands of Selenas out there on the World Wide Web, including Russian celebrities who are [posting on Instagram](#) about their opposition to the war. And while they cannot roll *back* your tanks, they can make every leader in the West roll *up* the red carpet to you, so you, and your cronies, can never travel to their countries. You are now officially a global pariah. I hope you like Chinese and North Korean food.

For all these reasons, at this early stage, I will venture only one prediction about Putin: Vladimir, the first day of this war was the best day of the rest of your life. I have no doubt that in the near term, your military will prevail, but in the long run leaders who try to bury the future with the past don’t do well. In the long run, your name will live in infamy.

I know, I know, Vladimir, you don’t care — no more than you care that you started this war in the middle of a raging pandemic. And I have to admit that that is what is most scary about this World War Wired. The long run can be a long way away and the rest of us are not insulated from your madness. That is, I wish that I could blithely predict that Ukraine will be Putin’s Waterloo — and his alone. But I can’t, because in our wired world, what happens in Waterloo doesn’t stay in Waterloo.

Indeed, if you ask me what is the most dangerous aspect of today’s world, I’d say it is the fact that Putin has more unchecked power than any other Russian leader since Stalin. And Xi has more unchecked power than any other Chinese leader since Mao. But in Stalin’s day, his excesses were largely confined to Russia and the borderlands he controlled. And in Mao’s day, China was so isolated, his excesses touched only the Chinese people.

Not anymore — today’s world is resting on two simultaneous extremes: Never have the leaders of two of the three most powerful nuclear nations — Putin and Xi — had more unchecked power and never have more people from one end of the world to the other been wired together with fewer and fewer buffers. So, what those two leaders decide to do with their unchecked power will touch virtually all of us directly or indirectly.

Putin’s invasion of Ukraine is our first real taste of how crazy and unstable this kind of wired world can get. It will not be our last.

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