



The Culture of Modernity and Strategic Violence: Ukraine as a testing ground for US and Russia

T Suresh Kumar

PhD Scholar

*Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies,
School of International Studies,
Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India*

Abstract: Modernity, which is commonly described as the period following the French Revolution, has been marked by extreme violence. Starting from the Great French War through the conventional method of warfare to the First World War through the modern scientific method of warfare, the world has only witnessed an unprecedented level of slaughter and the loss of humanity. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, modern scientific and systematic research in industrial production could not overcome the optimism that prevailed among the enlightenment thinkers who outlined a transformation in the coming era that envisioned man's perfection.

Following 1945, the United States sought a new Enlightenment project with a global system of free trade and an American-guaranteed peace, which sounds like a new form of independence for developing countries. Such an enlightenment project can also be seen as a new culture of modernity that the West has started to impose on non-western countries in the name of freedom and democracy. However, the post-1991 period saw a New World Order at the end of history. The spread of strategic violence through war crimes in Europe and new forms of techno-violence against developing countries form an anti-Western attitude. In an international perspective, it is also an attempt to maintain the status of great power stability among the two competing political models of our era: liberal democracy and authoritarianism. For both the US and Russia, Ukraine is just a testing ground to demonstrate their strength.

Key words: Modernity, Strategic Violence, anti-Westernism, New World Order, Liberal Democracy, Authoritarianism.

Introduction

Modernity, which is typically defined as the time after the French Revolution, has been marked by extreme violence. Starting from the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic War through the conventional method of warfare with the use of conventional weapons and battlefield tactics to the modern scientific and systematic method of the use of

biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction with radically more destructive means of warfare, the world has only witnessed an unprecedented level of slaughter and the loss to humanity throughout this entire process of shift in the nature of the warfare.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, these modern scientific and systematic research in industrial production could not overcome the optimism that prevail among the enlightenment thinkers who outlined a transformation in coming era that envisioned man's perfection. Starting with Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Spinoza, Voltaire, and many other Scottish and French Enlightenment thinkers, a new age was declared in which the inherent conflicts of the past would be resolved and Man would appear with more rational, free, productive, and just.

The Enlightenment project rooted with the idea that through the application of rationality, reason and scientific methodology, humans could make sense of the natural and social world. This is the idea of modernity that the intellectual ruling elites in Western liberal democracies have promoted and implemented. Through this school of thoughts and the idea of modernity, western social and economic practices spread across the globe. The spread of modernity seemed to be natural and the inevitable consequences are inherent, although it spread risks, violence and destructions, the only belief was that modernity would bring a better future, the process of modernization was worth the price and they conceive the new order as peaceful. Neither have they addressed a terrible destruction nor do they regret for the forms of life it destroyed. This is the cultural program of modernity they wished to spread across the globe (Eisenstadt, 1995).

They consider the progress of modernity and the development of capital industrial society as peaceful because in nineteenth century Europeans were largely voided war and developed a new project of violence thousands of miles away from Europe with their colonial campaign. The victims of this violence were not white Europeans but they were the non-whites who are not even in the picture of the cultural program of modernity and who were excluded as an irrelevant 'other'.

Strategic violence

The modern culture that originated in a specific region of Western Europe contributed significantly to the spread of violence, not only in the adjacent regions but in other parts of the world. They followed certain strategy to spread violence through the actions and attitudes that create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people with discriminatory practices. The beginning of such violence with discriminatory practice was 'racism' which has been central in the cultural program of modernity that generated an image of the enemy in warfare to justify severe forms of brutality (Lawrence, 1997). For example, the oppression of African Americans in the United States and their history which is still largely absent in the official histories of US and largely ignored in spite of the evidences of the role of a populist and racist culture in justifying the forms of military slaughter. The wars against American Indians, the Pacific War and the war in Vietnam, racism have been used to explain how they generated an image of 'other'. As Lawrence (1997) argued in his writing on "Modernity and War", 'racism is not the only cultural form which generated images of the other which are critical to war'. But, in late nineteenth century nationalism played a crucial role in

spreading the great risks of conflict and war and also to defend the narrative of the slaughter on the Western front between 1914 –1918. The atrocities and killings of the 1914-1918 war outweighed the available forms of discursive legitimization. The Great War, for many, exposed myths about modernity's intentions of progress.

Following 1918, proponents of modernism discovered a means to save conflict through the doctrine of strategic air warfare. The First World War was more about the fact that white Europeans had turned their war machinery against one another than the actual killing. With the air war, it was anticipated that one could be able to eliminate the adversary with little casualties on one's own side. Another advantage of air war was that it would keep Westerners away from the fallout of their own side's atrocities. It would be less damaging to a progressivist sense of self-righteousness. During World War II, the concept of strategic air warfare was prominent in democracies. Britain and the United States showered death and ruin on Germany and Japan. The atomic blasts on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which concluded World War Two still remain unproblematic for US. However, the atomic bomb was extremely problematic for a modernist understanding of war. The main contradiction with nuclear weapons was that while they were impressive in the development of scientific technology, they also posed a threat to a modernist view of the future.

The rise of anti-Westernism and New World Order

Following 1945, the United States led a new Enlightenment with a worldwide free trade system and an American-guaranteed peace. Yet the very future of the United States and the West is shrouded in darkness by Soviet nuclear weapons. After the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the question of arms control was put on hold, but the grave concern over nuclear weapons soon reappeared. The consequences of nuclear war and the acceleration of the arms race were repeatedly foreseen in pessimistic ways in Western culture. Culture began to imagine the end of the world. Ultimately, the fall of the USSR brought in a New World Order at the end of history, where the only viable political model was liberal democracy. They are credited with their victory culture. During post-1991, the new war crimes in Europe and new forms of technological aggression against developing nations proliferated that spread anti-Western sentiment among developing countries with the rise of an unpredictable and unjustifiable terrorism. Currently, 100 million people have died in wars since the turn of the 20th century. There is still a chance that the developed nations will continue to impose their way through utter brutality because of their self-righteousness and might.

In this context, it is important to understand that the Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not just an attempt to seize the power in Ukraine and overthrow its government, for its advance to join the Western defensive alliance NATO. But in an international perspective, it is also an attempt to maintain the status of great power stability of the two competing political models of our era: liberal democracy and authoritarianism. For both of these great powers Ukraine is merely a testing ground to demonstrate their strength either through soft or hard power.

Hard and soft power

In general, more than two decades ago Nye (1990) defined power as the “ability to affect others to get the outcomes one wants”. Hard power is built on coercive diplomacy, economic sanctions, and military involvement and relies on

physical power resources like armed forces or economic means (Wagner, 2014). Examples of the use of hard power include the German invasion of Poland in 1939, the UN economic sanctions on Iraq after the First Gulf War in 1991, and more recently, the US and UN economic sanctions against Russia. In contrast, "soft power is the capacity to persuade others to do what one wants" (Wagner, 2014). According to Nye, persuasion is "connected with intangible power resources like culture, ideology, and institutions" that based on attraction and emulation (Nye, 1990). Here, the culture indicates to the cultural program of modernity that the West has spread across the world. The dispersion of American culture of soft power and more recently the process of EU enlargement within the eastern bloc during the Cold War indicates the soft power possessed by Western countries to attract small developing countries in the name of peace building but in reality their interest is larger.

Role of US in Central-Eastern Europe countries

For a number of reasons, US has been strongly supportive of the Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) and their international ambitions. The primary reason is the political liberation of Communist Europe and the military protection of Western Europe. These two were significant outcomes of the Cold War and American involvement in the security of Europe. No doubt, the successful development of democratic politics and market systems in Europe was seen as a major triumph of US foreign policy over decades of active diplomatic engagement and financial investment in that region. For such reasons, the capitals in CEE, started recognizing America as leader of the "democratic community," which has made enormous investments in the region's transition and is still crucial to ensuring stability across Europe. The leaders of CEE believe that a tight partnership with America will help shield these new democracies against Russian demands in the present and in the future because it is the only Western force that Moscow supposedly respects. Washington's presence in Poland and three Baltic nations is seen as essential given Vladimir Putin's Russia's increased regional assertiveness with the aim of forging a neighborhood of client states. In contrast, CEE officials view EU policy as being inconsistent and ineffective, and the Kremlin does not fully regard the Union as a major global power. In addition, Moscow has been successful in exploiting its bilateral ties with nations like France and Germany to split the Union.

In recent years, among CEE countries a clear convergence of resentments has been visible against American economic domination, military hegemony, and widespread cultural influence. Now that many Europeans associated globalization with Americanization, fears about economic hegemony and cultural imperialism have increased. The CEE countries started losing their hope with EU and America which they belief as the leader of the democratic community. The new EU members started questioning the Union's ineffective foreign policy towards Ukraine, or Russia. Moscow gained the strength and their ability to take advantage of such division. Although the three Baltic republics are now members of the Union, many CEE countries assert that the EU as a whole has even neglected to condemn continued Russian pressure against them. Several EU countries treat them as if they are unimportant while Moscow refuses to recognize them as fully sovereign states.

Russia's response to US strategy in CEE

Russian leaders are concerned about the EU's eastward expansion for a variety of reasons, including the fact that it was excluded from the process of creating a unified Europe, that it admitted allegedly Russophobic nations, and that it incited Russia's "near abroad" to push for EU membership. The constitutional loss will undoubtedly be used by Kremlin officials to demand that the EU acknowledge Russia's primary responsibility in the Eastern European region which are not yet part of EU and to ask for a halt to further enlargement eastward.

Russia and Central Europe compete with one another strategically over the states that emerged from the Soviet Union. Since the CEE states began joining NATO and the EU, this competition has become much more intense. A countervailing political, economic, and security system has been developed by Russia.

The long-standing conflict between Warsaw and Moscow over control of the regions between their respective boundaries has intensified. In order to encircle Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova with the West, Poland is working to strengthen its position within the EU, NATO, and close ties to the United States. Russia is committed to retaining a dominant influence on these nations, particularly over their security and foreign policy, and to preventing their integration into Western organizations.

Given these facts, US is in a challenging situation where three opposing interests are at stake: a core of CEE-based new allies looking to the US for support on their top foreign policy priorities; an alliance of older EU countries that is wary of a new Cold War with Moscow; Russia, which backs American anti-terrorism measures but is edging closer to authoritarianism and pursuing imperialist tactics toward its former states. The US administration found it challenging to strike a balance between these conflicting objectives and even pushed CEE nations to advance freedom and democracy as a separate national interest.

Russia's War in Ukraine and threat to Europe's security

As a result of the West's combined negligence, or at least tolerance, and Russia's radical approach to dealing with its frustrations and perceived threats, the entire post-Cold War era has been ruined the security architecture in Europe. There were no longer any European nuclear or conventional arms control agreements and even the functioning of the OSCE, a platform Putin's predecessors were interested in had been blocked by him and other authoritarian leaders (Haesebrouk, Taghon & Coppenolle, 2022).

Following the annexation of Crimea, NATO began to focus more intently on how to defend its eastern member nations, establishing multinational armed troops along its eastern frontiers. Despite their small size, they provided more demonstration of NATO's hostility in Moscow's perspective. With Putin's war in Ukraine, we are not even back in the Cold War, because no European big power has attacked a smaller neighbor in order to grab its land since 1945, as we witnessed in 2014 and again in 2022 (Haesebrouk, Taghon & Coppenolle, 2022). Putin's application of step-by-step methods (invading Georgia first, then annexing Crimea and creating the Donbass puppet governments, and now the war in Ukraine) has created an alarming threat to Europe's security. After fourteen years of anticipated NATO membership for Ukraine, the West was unable and, for good reason, unwilling to defend it, instead, the West

indirectly supported by supplying weapons to Ukraine. This implies that the West is attempting to repeat the same error it made with Vietnam and Iraq for which it is universally blamed. It is not willing to defend openly but instigating to continue war by arms support and thus leaving Ukraine to the mercy of Putin.

Conclusion

From an ethical standpoint, there is a fundamental distinction between invading an independent country on the one hand and failing to take the threat of such an invasion seriously on the other. It's like if Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, rather than the British and French, who approved the Sudeten annexation a year earlier with the intention of preserving peace. Putin invaded Ukraine not the West. Nobody compelled Putin to do so. The thirty-year-old frustrations over how the West treated Russia in the 1990s, while occasionally justifiable, do not excuse this because it was his decision. Many writers who blame the West for Russia's invasion of Ukraine have used similar arguments as I have in this piece of writing. Ukraine is now paying the price for what has been missing in creating an inclusive order in Europe together with Russia.

References:

- [1] American interest in Central Eastern Europe. (2006, February) @ Euractive. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/american-interests-in-central-eastern-europe/>
- [2] Boyle, M. J. (2009). Explaining strategic violence after wars. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 32 (3), 209-236.
- [3] American interest in Central Eastern Europe. (2006, February) @ Euractive. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/opinion/american-interests-in-central-eastern-europe/>
- [4] Eisenstadr, S. N. (1995). *The cultural programme of modernity and democracy*. London: Routledge.
- [5] Haesebrouk, T., Taghon, S., & Coppennolle, H. V. (Eds.) (2022). *The war in Ukraine*. GIES Occasional Paper, (2022, March/April). Retrieved from <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/359972788>
- [6] Lawrence, P. K. (1997). *Modernity and war: the creed of absolute violence*. London: Macmillan Press LTD.
- [7] Nye, J. S. (1990). *Bound to lead: the changing nature of American power*. New York: Basic Books.
- [8] Wagner, J. P. N. E. (2014). *The effectiveness of soft and hard power in contemporary international relations*. Bristol/England: E-International Relations Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/2014/05/14/the-effectiveness-of-soft-hard-power-in-contemporary-international-relations/>
- [9] Wilczewska, A. P., & Sakwa, R. (2016), *Ukraine and Russia: people, politics, propaganda and perspectives*. Bristol/England: E-International Relations Publishing. Retrieved from <https://www.e-ir.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ukraine-and-Russia-E-IR.pdf>
- [10] YILMAZ, M. E. (2008). "The new world order": An outline of the post-Cold War era. *Turkish Journal of International Relations*, 7 (4), 44-58.