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# What the Mighty Miss

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## The Blindspots of Power

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*Ngairé Woods*

**F**or two decades, Russian President Vladimir Putin has been both admired and feared as a shrewd strategist, a strongman who has cemented his rule at home and doggedly advanced Russian interests abroad. Whether suppressing domestic opposition or annexing Crimea, Putin has appeared as an uncompromising and implacable leader. The Western media may vilify him as a thuggish autocrat, but numerous Western politicians have also admitted their respect for Putin's ability to command.

His invasion of Ukraine in February, however, has gone some way toward undoing this reputation. Putin assumed that he would win a quick victory, but his forces have stumbled badly. The war has had terrible repercussions for Russia, devastating its economy and its standing in the world. The war has also galvanized an anti-Russian coalition while winning little support of any significance for the Kremlin. Putin has turned Russia into a pariah state without achieving any of the goals of his invasion.

Why would such a powerful leader make such a major blunder? The answer

lies in the very nature of power itself. Leaders in positions of tremendous authority often wear blinders that can cause them to make profound mistakes. Power can mislead insofar as it prevents the powerful from taking full stock of the consequences of their actions.

Putin's assault on Ukraine has demonstrated many of the pitfalls of power. The powerful often imagine themselves to be above the rules, and Putin has sought to exempt himself from international law, even as he has deployed legal language to justify his actions. But in flouting international law, Putin has eroded Russian security. Leaders often think they are stronger than they really are; in Putin's case, he misjudged the true fighting prowess of his military, plunging his country into a war of attrition that some Russian planners had assured him would be a cakewalk. That failure may stem in part from another pitfall of the powerful: an unwillingness to seek counsel and countenance criticism. Putin did not consult across his own government or with Russia's neighbors and partners in planning for the war and its aftermath, and the repercussions of that mistake have hit Russia hard.

Putin's errors are not unique to him, nor are they simply the bad habits of dictators. Leaders of all powerful states, including major democracies, have also been blinded by power and made ill-advised decisions. Putin's struggles in Ukraine should remind all policymakers of the perils of power and how governments are liable to make terrible errors when they are enamored of their own might.

### ABOVE THE LAW

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**NGAIRE WOODS** is Professor of Global Economic Governance and Founding Dean of the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford.



Power often convinces its wielders that they are exceptional, that the rules don't apply to them. Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February breached the code enshrined in the UN Charter that prohibits any use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state. The Russian president has variously insisted that the incursion was a preemptive strike to prevent a Ukrainian attack, a sacred defense of the Russian motherland, and a continuation of the Soviet fight against Nazism. These justifications ring hollow, of course. Putin's claims that he is responding to ostensible attacks by Ukrainian forces in the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, at border crossings, and on Russian territory are not persuasive to anybody outside Russia. Still more spurious and self-serving are his assertions that Ukraine is committing genocide in Donbas and that its government is stuffed with neo-Nazis.

Such delusional—or cynical—arguments to justify violating international law are not just the preserve of autocrats. It is tempting to believe that democracies have built-in protections that stop policymakers from committing flagrant breaches of the most foundational international legal norms. But this is not the case. In 2003, U.S. and British forces invaded Iraq. U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair sought to legitimize the invasion by invoking international law, pointing to a 1990 UN Security Council resolution that authorized the use of force against Iraq after it invaded Kuwait and arguing that Iraq's failure to comply with weapons inspections was a "material breach" of the cease-fire

agreed to over a decade earlier. Therefore, they asserted, the United States and the United Kingdom had the right to suspend the cease-fire and to continue hostilities against Iraq under the original 1990 UN Security Council resolution. The United States also asserted the right of preemptive self-defense in its strike against Iraq. Peter Goldsmith, the British attorney general at the time, disavowed these claims as a basis for war, but the British position, as expressed by a later attorney general, Jeremy Wright, in 2017, moved closer to the American one. International lawyers remained skeptical that these justifications amounted to much more than window-dressing, a view echoed in 2016 by the findings of the Chilcot Inquiry, the British government's investigation of the country's role in the war.

The Iraq war represents a conundrum. The United States and the United Kingdom, two countries that had done so much to set up the rules-based international order, flouted its rules and undermined that order. Why? Psychology offers one answer. The powerful often break the very rules they have made and from which they benefit, because they think they can. Psychologists have found that wealthy people are more likely to lie and cheat when gambling or negotiating, to cut people off when driving, and to endorse unethical behavior in the workplace. It is not that the rich oppose the existence of rules: rules safeguard their property, enable gambling, and make driving less dangerous for them. In fact, the rules are probably more advantageous to them than to others, since they have more property to protect, more leisure pursuits to enjoy, and a greater interest

in preserving the status quo. But wealthy people's status leads them to believe that their own needs and desires are more important than any rules, so much so that they absolve themselves from complying with the rules altogether.

A similar phenomenon exists in international relations. The leaders of powerful states who are the creators, enforcers, and beneficiaries of rules are often tempted to break them. Of course, international rules take many forms, from trade agreements to demarcations of fishing rights. And not all rules are equal. International lawyers debate with great sophistication why states obey international law; utilitarians point to the influential role of direct interests, Kantians to the weight of shared moral and ethical obligations, and the disciples of the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham to the incentives created by the collective process of building international law. Realists, from the Renaissance-era Italian writer Niccolò Machiavelli to Cold War-era U.S. policymakers such as George Kennan and Henry Kissinger, insist that certain rules can and should be broken when it is in a state's interest to do so. But some rules command a particular legitimacy and force that make their breach more costly than the violation of other ones. The UN Charter is such a rule, emanating from an instrument of international law ratified by 193 countries that codifies the most basic principles of international relations.

This legal order anoints the powerful by giving them special responsibilities for upholding it. Enforcement of the UN Charter lies in the hands of the UN Security Council and, more specifically,

its five permanent members—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—whose unanimous consent is required for any enforcement action. Whereas weaker states that breach the UN Charter might be punished by the Security Council, the permanent members can veto any Security Council enforcement action against themselves. Effectively, they can act (or so they might believe) with impunity.

Great powers still pay costs for breaking these laws, even if they think they are shielded from repercussions. The most obvious cost of falling afoul of the UN Charter is that it signals to other countries that the violator cannot be trusted to abide by core international law. The fear could spread that other states will do the same, weakening the resolve of all countries to comply with the rules. The UN Charter constructs an international society to which states belong and in which they can forge some baseline expectations about the behavior of others. If the most powerful break the very rules they have created, they end up undermining and fundamentally threatening the existence of that social order.

Consider the rival neighbors Argentina and Brazil, each of which has nuclear capabilities it could weaponize. If one acquired or developed nuclear weapons, the other would likely follow suit. Instead, they rely on nonproliferation rules and carefully monitor each other's compliance through the Brazilian-Argentine Agency for Accounting and Control of Nuclear Materials. If Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro espoused his son's declared support for nuclear weapons, it would

change Argentina's calculation, weakening the restraints on behavior that the rules encourage. Violating such laws introduces an insidious kind of chaos into international relations. This is why the Chilcot Inquiry found that U.S. and British actions in 2003 dangerously undermined the authority of the United Nations.

Putin's rule-breaking during his invasion of Ukraine has already rebounded against him, hurting Russia. He had long accused the United States of threatening Russian security by advancing NATO's expansion toward Russia's borders. But until May, only five of the 14 countries bordering Russia were members of NATO. Putin's actions have changed those numbers. Finland and Sweden have now applied to join NATO, reversing long-standing policies of neutrality. Putin's invasion has damaged Russian security by breaking the rules on which the neutrality of Finland and Sweden had for so long been premised.

International law plays an equally important role within governments, where it provides guidance and guardrails to officials often working in conditions of high pressure and uncertainty. It cuts through ambiguity. It creates predictability within and among governments. Disrupting that predictability risks unraveling the order and discipline of a government. When U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signaled after the 9/11 attacks that the United States might not comply with the strictures of the Geneva Conventions, he thrust his government and armed forces (already working in difficult situations) into a legal wilderness. This grey area allowed egregious abuses, such

as those committed by U.S. troops in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, and greatly damaged the United States' standing in the world. The United Kingdom announced in 2020 that it might not comply with the withdrawal agreement it had signed with the European Union in 2019, a move that paralyzed its own officials, who no longer knew what parameters they were working within.

Putin invaded Ukraine knowing that the UN could do little to punish him for violating its charter. The leaders of the world's most powerful countries will sometimes be tempted to flout international laws because they can. But they fail to see the true costs to their international relations and to their own governments.

### **THE FOLLY OF STRENGTH**

Power can also convince leaders that they are too strong to be constrained by any rules. Putin's early military moves in Ukraine suggest that he was counting on a rapid victory. He commands one of the largest militaries in the world, with some two million personnel and reservists and the largest arsenal of nuclear weapons. Russia's military is experienced, having deployed in recent years in the intervention in Crimea, in covert operations in eastern Ukraine, and in supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Further, Putin's "New Look" military modernization process, launched in 2008, and a rearmament program, begun in 2011, led him to believe that he had significantly improved Russian ground, naval, and air forces. In fact, these programs were riddled with corruption and inefficiency.

Leaders of great powers can revel in

the assembled might of their military. They can measure their strength in terms of the numbers of aircraft carriers, attack submarines, advanced aircraft, armored vehicles, and experienced divisions of troops they have at their disposal and the scope of their intelligence and cyber-capabilities. They imagine that they can easily flex their muscles to take control of a situation and shape the outcome of a conflict.

But over and over, the leaders of great powers discover that they are fantasizing. European colonial powers with overwhelming superiority in military capacity were beaten by nationalist forces in the aftermath of World War II: the Dutch were expelled from Indonesia in 1949, and the French were ousted from Indochina by Vietnamese nationalists in 1954 and from Algeria by Algerian nationalists in 1962. The Americans tried in the 1960s and 1970s to prevail in Vietnam. The Soviets fought and bled from 1979 to 1989 to no avail in Afghanistan, where the Americans did the same after 9/11. In 2003, the United States swiftly toppled Saddam Hussein in Iraq, but the war quickly turned into a doomed occupation. Now, Putin is learning a similar lesson. The Russians moved into Ukraine in February, assuming they would capture Kyiv in a matter of days; instead, Ukrainian forces have delivered a chastening reminder to Putin that his military is not nearly as effective as he thought it was.

Robert McNamara, the former U.S. secretary of defense, suggested in his 1995 book, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, that great powers fail to see the inevitable limitations of their sophisticated and ultramodern militaries

when confronting unconventional insurgencies led by popular, highly motivated groups. As McNamara discovered while running the Pentagon, the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong were able to repulse far more powerful U.S. forces. He later concluded that Washington had underestimated the power of nationalism to motivate a people to fight and die for their beliefs, values, and land. And it had underestimated the corrosion of morale among its own forces, who had no such motivation. Putin has experienced this same dynamic in his bungled invasion of Ukraine.

The truth is that military power is better at achieving negative goals than it is at achieving positive goals. Force can be effective in stopping an action, such as one country invading or threatening a neighbor, as when the United States and its allies rapidly drove Iraqi forces from Kuwait. But military power is not very good at forcing actors to do specific things. Achieving that requires a long-term presence and a wider and more nuanced range of capabilities. Although military intervention can remove a regime, it cannot necessarily guarantee a stable replacement. As the United States and its allies discovered in Afghanistan in 2001, in Iraq in 2003, and in Libya in 2011, bringing down the old system was the easy part; far harder was building a new one. In Ukraine, Putin was convinced that the might of the Russian military would allow him to achieve his political goals through an invasion. In hindsight, that conviction looks terribly misguided.

#### **LONELY AT THE TOP**

Just as power can make leaders think

they are stronger than they actually are, so, too, can it isolate them and encourage them not to listen to others. In preparing to attack Ukraine, Putin seemed to have refused to consult in any meaningful way with his subordinates, including his spy chief, Sergei Naryshkin, whom he humiliated on national television just days before the invasion. The spectacle exposed how difficult it would be for someone to criticize Putin's plans and still retain influence in his inner circle. As the invasion began to go wrong, *The Times* of London reported that Putin had removed eight Russian generals and fired 150 officers of Russia's Federal Security Service, the country's principal security agency, imprisoning its former chief. By mid-March, Ukrainian media outlets were claiming that he had also fired and detained Roman Gavrillov, the deputy chief of the Russian national guard. Putin has cut himself off from accurate information and instead surrounded himself with people who tell him what he wants to hear.

Putin's isolation from his lieutenants can appear absurd; the unusually long table he often sits at for meetings only highlights his remove from others. His disdain for his lieutenants is palpable. But democratic leaders can also be guilty of such behavior. Heads of the world's most well-established democracies have at times ignored or even humiliated their cabinets. In a 2019 article for *The New York Times*, James Comey, the former director of the FBI, chillingly described how U.S. President Donald Trump co-opted Comey's colleagues into a silent circle of assent. In Comey's words, "Mr. Trump eats your soul in small bites. It starts with

your sitting silent while he lies, both in public and private, making you complicit by your silence." In a much subtler way, Prime Minister Blair, ahead of the Iraq war, eschewed formal cabinet meetings in favor of informal one-on-one chats with each cabinet minister. Without properly circulated papers and formal collective meetings, it was difficult for the ministers to bring to bear the views of different parts of the government or to challenge the prime minister's view. This informality reduced the scope for informed collective political judgment, according to the findings of the 2004 Butler Review, a government investigation into the intelligence behind the claims that Saddam possessed weapons of mass destruction. The result was an ill-advised decision to go to war.

The powerful make a grave mistake by refusing to countenance dissenting views. Putin was probably not prepared for the various reactions his invasion would incur. Soon after his forces moved into Ukraine, Russia was hit with unprecedented economic sanctions. The intensity of the penalties and their expeditious application surprised many, as did the speedy withdrawal of Western companies from Russia. The ruble crashed, the Russian stock market closed, and Russians began to line up at ATMs to withdraw U.S. dollars from their bank accounts. Russia's economy is expected to contract by at least 11 percent this year. The sanctions increasingly isolate Russia, depriving it of the imports it needs for its own economy to function, including microchips, other high-tech goods needed in producing advanced weaponry, and even shirt buttons.

Only a handful of leaders, whose countries are highly dependent on Russia, issued statements of support. These included Myanmar's generals, who rely on Moscow as an arms supplier; Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, who cited Russia's supposed encirclement by hostile forces; and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, who supported Putin's right to recognize the two Moscow-backed separatist regions in Ukraine. Such backing hardly constitutes a helpful vote of confidence.

Russia's most important friends seemed taken aback by the invasion. China initially recognized the importance of Russia's security concerns, but Chinese President Xi Jinping later said he was "pained to see the flames of war reignited in Europe." India abstained in votes to condemn Russia at the UN, but the Indian government later issued sharper and critical statements upholding the principle of national sovereignty. Serbia, normally close to Russia, even voted to condemn the invasion in the UN. Israel, another Russian partner, called Russia's move "a serious violation of the international order." Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Moscow's military actions amounted to a "heavy blow" to regional peace and stability. The leaders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, post-Soviet countries that Putin imagines in Russia's orbit, refused to back the Russian intervention. Putin may well have thought he did not need to round up his allies to support his invasion. After all, he essentially got away with annexing Crimea in 2014. Yet, as sanctions bite, and the Kremlin feels increasingly hemmed in, Putin has scrambled to find support.

No doubt Putin underestimated how profoundly his invasion of another sovereign country would rankle the world. But the United States and its allies who wish to sanction him would be mistaken to assume that other countries will simply fall in line behind them. An effective sanctions regime will take ongoing diplomacy, negotiation, and compromise with a wide variety of countries. It will need to be built on common interests. Most countries share an interest in upholding the sovereignty of Ukraine. But they balk at the goal, expressed by U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in late April, of weakening Russia. The prospect of a coalition setting out to weaken another sovereign state fills some with the fear that they might be next. Wider international cooperation will take more inclusiveness and a more disciplined focus on action in areas for which there is broad agreement.

Sanctions against Russia were imposed at first by a coalition of the willing, consisting primarily of Western countries. But many countries, including some democracies, did not immediately fall in behind the coalition. In March, 141 countries voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution that condemned the Russian invasion. Although just five states voted against it, some 35 abstained. Coming just two weeks after a summit between the EU and the African Union at which Europeans showcased their willingness to invest in and assist the continent, it was notable that 18 African countries were among the abstainers. Publicly, many of them have voiced skepticism about the principles being invoked by the Western powers. South African officials have

accused the EU of double standards and called for it to condemn aggressors in other cases such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the war in Yemen. Other African commentators have pointed out that wars in Africa do not get the same attention as those in other parts of the world. These conflicts typically elicit statements of concern and the dispatch of special envoys but no wall-to-wall media coverage, no impassioned televised statements from global leaders, no enthusiastic offers of help.

Beneath the rhetoric, powerful interests are at stake. The past two decades have seen both China and Russia actively engage with countries across Africa. China has overtaken the United States as the world's largest direct investor in Africa. Russia is now the source of half of all arms coming into Africa, and it increasingly provides military and security assistance to the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan. Many developing countries are thus wary of joining a U.S.-led coalition of the willing against Russia. A "coalition of the rest" was even more in evidence in April, when a special emergency session of the UN General Assembly was called to expel Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Seven G-20 countries did not vote with the United States. Twenty-four countries voted against the resolution and 58 countries abstained from the vote, including Brazil, India, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa. Only ten African countries voted with the United States.

The coalition of the rest has the power to thwart other international actions. For example, Ukrainian Presi-

dent Volodymyr Zelensky has called on the International Monetary Fund to expel Russia. But this would require an 85 percent vote in favor of expulsion in the IMF. A simple tally of the voting power of the countries that abstained or voted against the expulsion of Russia from the UN Human Rights Council suggests that they could veto any attempt to expel Russia from the IMF. They command about 30 percent of the votes in the IMF, which are distributed according to the size of a country's economy.

The United States, the G-7, and the EU are moving fast to widen their economic sanctions on Russia. But their attempts to get other rising powers to join them have been less successful. Their blind spot is an overestimation of their position in the world. They have clung too long to the idea that the G-7 countries are the rule-makers and the rest are the rule-takers, even as the global balance of economic power has shifted. Countries outside the G-7 now have other ideas, and they have reason to doubt the intentions of powerful countries that have often failed to abide by the very rules they've set. The United States and other G-7 states must be wary of dividing the world into good guys and bad guys, democracies and authoritarian regimes, lest they become blind to the concerns of other countries that don't see the world in the same way.

### **SEEING CLEARLY**

But these blind spots are not inevitable, nor are democracies doomed to them. The leaders of powerful countries can protect themselves from the pitfalls of power and make sure that short-term

expediency doesn't get in the way of the big picture.

A first line of defense from error lies in the group around a leader. Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States each have a cabinet comprising ministers who are selected by the head of government. China has the Politburo Standing Committee. In theory, these bodies take collective responsibility for the decisions a government makes. That needs to happen in practice. Beyond the cabinet, other institutions need to be fully functioning. Public officials and technocrats, the courts, legislatures, the media, and public opinion each play a role in making sure the leader is not blinded by power.

In Russia, each of these secondary institutions has been steadily brought under Putin's control, sweeping away restraints on his power. The economist Sergei Guriev and the political scientist Daniel Treisman have studied the way Putin controls his citizens by distorting information and simulating democratic procedures. Along with Erdogan and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, Putin is one of a new breed of media-savvy strongmen whom Guriev and Treisman call "spin dictators." Governments need institutions that protect against politicians who find it expedient to politicize the judiciary and browbeat, threaten, and fire their civil servants and technocrats for truth telling. The leaders themselves need these checks and balances so that someone will tell them when the emperor is wearing no clothes.

International relations and institutions also play an important role in preventing a powerful leader from miscalculating. The 2021 U.S. with-

drawal from Afghanistan might have gone better had Biden chosen to act multilaterally, not unilaterally. In the pressure and urgency of the moment, blinded by the significance of the decision, the administration failed to adequately consult and coordinate with allies. Likewise, Western leaders should consult with Russia's other major trading partners and neighbors in crafting a response to Putin's invasion.

International cooperation is becoming both more important and more difficult: more important so as to limit war, stop climate change, and mitigate the perfect storm of debt, famine, and economic retrenchment now hitting the poorest in the world and undoing decades of progress on health, education, and opportunity; more difficult because of tensions between China and the United States and the international political divisions arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even the G-20 finance ministers and the policy-setting body of the IMF—two forums that can usually be relied on to issue an agreed statement (however anodyne) during moments of global tension—failed to find that consensus in their April meetings in Washington.

Yet international cooperation can still offer vital restraints to leaders blinded by power. Convinced of their own unarguable influence on the world stage, heads of powerful states are often tempted to take the fast and seemingly easy and decisive route to achieving their aims, however reckless it may be. Diplomacy and open discussion with other countries can provide information, perspective, and, indeed, a check on the actions of a leader. At this volatile juncture in world politics,

leaders should commit to a back-to-basics approach centered on adherence to the core UN Charter. They should eschew broader interventionist agendas that lack global support. The clarity of international law will help even the most powerful actors see clearly. 🌍

