

Hal Brands - What Happens Next
Sunday, March 13th, 2022

Larry Bernstein:

Hal, how do you compare the beginning of the Cold War with today?

Hal Brands:

One of the really striking parallels is that during the early Cold War, the United States is often pushed along faster by its allies. NATO itself was a European initiative. Creating a transatlantic alliance was about the last thing that Harry Truman had in mind. We did it because that was the only way of reassuring the Europeans.

In the Ukraine crisis, we've experienced about 10 years of history in 10 days. We've seen pledges to dramatically increase German defense spending, much more assertive foreign policies from countries in the European Union. Crisis catalyze big departures in American foreign policy. The threats that a communist insurgency to Greece and the Soviet pressure to Turkey led Harry Truman to go before Congress in March 1947 and give his famous two ways of life speech where he outlined the ideological rationale for the Cold War. It was the Korean War that led to the approval of NSC-68 and much higher defense spending along with a global network of alliances.

America's approach evolve in fits and starts. And those are often prompted by unexpected crisis like the ones we have today.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of John Mearsheimer's argument that it was a mistake to push our NATO alliance to Russia's borders because it scared Putin and forced his hand?

Hal Brands:

His argument was NATO expansion that antagonized the Russians and have caused them to lash out violently in Georgia and Ukraine.

I don't find that argument particularly persuasive. Russia has long sought to create a sphere of influence in its near abroad. It didn't need NATO expansion to want to exert that influence as it started to recover from the extreme weakness of the 1990s.

Larry Bernstein:

Yale professor John Lewis Gaddis wrote the definitive history of cold war strategy in his book Strategies of Containment. Gaddis describes two different methods to undermine Soviet aggression: The symmetric and the asymmetric approach. Symmetric implies that if the Russians attack the Ukraine, then we defend it. The asymmetric approach would be to challenge the Russians in a different way, economic sanctions, attack Russia somewhere else.

How could the US use asymmetry against Russia in the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

I think asymmetric response is almost always desirable in principle. The idea of playing to your strengths, choosing areas of the competition where you can really thrive, not reacting to your

opponents every thrust. That's really compelling, and has a strong logic as John points out in that book, which is the Bible of strategic studies from a historian's perspective. There were a number of US initiatives during the Cold War that employed that asymmetric logic to very good effect.

The Marshall Plan was a great example of asymmetric containment. We're going to use money, technology, expertise, to revive the economies of Western Europe in a way that the Soviets cannot hope to match in Eastern Europe. The military strategies that the Reagan administration pursued in the 1980s as an example of asymmetric strategies. Make investments in missile defense, accurate precision-guided munitions that the Soviets can't match.

I don't know whether the economic sanctions are going to work, in terms of pushing Russia out of Ukraine. That's a big ask, but they have certainly shown that the United States and its allies can do an incredible amount of damage to a relatively significant economy in a short amount of time. This is the most comprehensive sanctions package ever put in place on a great power.

Russia has been almost totally disconnected from the world in the past 10 days, and the speed and severity of it has just been striking. It's a testament to the strength of US economic and financial power, especially when you combine us with our allies, and I'm sure the Chinese are taking note of this right now. The problem with asymmetric strategies is that they require leaving things undefended. If an asymmetric strategy doesn't succeed in getting the Russians out of Ukraine, then you've still got to deal with that problem. During the Cold War, asymmetric strategies didn't deal with the North Korean invasion of South Korea, which is why we ended up in a symmetrical response.

Larry Bernstein:

Will there be a peace deal in the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

I don't think that Putin is going to go to the Ukrainians with a set of demands that they can accept. The minimal Russian demands still involve the destruction of Ukrainian sovereignty, the recognition of Russian sovereignty over Crimea and the Donbas, probably pretty severe constraints on Ukraine's political autonomy and its foreign policy.

I don't see the Ukrainians accepting that sort of settlement right now, because they would leave themselves vulnerable to the utter destruction of the Ukrainian state, and probably the murder of most of their political leaders.

Putin motivated his enemies in Ukraine. They're not going to give up. They're actually doing fairly well, militarily. I mean, shockingly well compared to what most expectations were at the outset.

I'm not entirely sure whose side time is on at this point. Maybe the Russians will get it together with their operations. Maybe they will start fighting in an even worse way, where they're just leveling major Ukrainian cities and ramping up the pain to where Zelenskyy feels that he has to yield, but the Russians are going to start absorbing pretty high casualties. That's going to take a toll. They're starting to lose significant amounts of equipment.

They have 100% of their force that they mobilized committed in Ukraine. You can only keep that going for so long because people and equipment starts becoming combat ineffective, and the sanctions are going to bite harder with time.

Larry Bernstein:

Should the Ukraine consider hitting the Russians on their home turf to escalate the fight in an asymmetric way?

Hal Brands:

I don't think it helps the Ukrainians, militarily. Their problems are in Ukraine, not in Russia, and it hurts them politically, where they've been incredibly shrewd so far at garnering the sympathies of the democratic world, at positioning themselves as sort of the plucky underdog against the Russian Goliath, and if they start taking shots at major cities that could change relatively quickly.

I don't know that Ukraine has the offensive capabilities. The Ukrainians are going to be hard-pressed just to defend the major cities, prevent their forces from being encircled in key places.

There is a political dynamic here, the longer and the costlier the war gets for Russia, the more Putin has to worry about his own political standing at home. If not with the Russian people, then with the group of intelligence, military, and economic elites whose support he relies on to remain in power. And, one exit scenario from this war is that somebody in Moscow gets tired of Putin's costly war and takes matters into their own hands.

Larry Bernstein:

John Mearsheimer has stated that the real enemy is a great power that can challenge America's international order and today that is China and not Russia. So, we should try to get Russia on our side to balance the Chinese.

Hal Brands:

I think it's hard to argue right now when Russia has unleashed the largest interstate war in Europe since World War II that Russia doesn't present a significant threat to the existing international order. There are times when you really don't have an alternative but to take on multiple enemies at once.

During the early Cold War, the United States sought to contain communist China and the Soviet Union simultaneously. We should look for opportunities to play on differences between the Russians and the Chinese. If the Russians ever have a change of heart about their alignment, we should certainly welcome greater cooperation with them, but that's a pretty distant prospect. We have to reconcile ourselves with the fact that we face two big threats to the international order that we've created, and we've got to deal with them both.

Larry Bernstein:

Since the end of the cold war, the US has combined hard military power with soft economic or cultural power, and the Europeans have encouraged diplomacy and soft power and objected to the use of hard power to solve disagreements, probably because Europe lacks hard power. And now, with the invasion of the Ukraine, soft power seems useless. Has this realization been the driving force for the European desire for moving toward acquiring hard power?

Hal Brands:

Well, Putin accomplished in a few days what the United States had failed to accomplish in about 10 years, which was to get Germany to take defense seriously. Ukraine is a really big country that has frontage on a bunch of Eastern European states. It's not that far from Germany. Putin's invasion has really driven home to European leaders in a very visceral way that they still live in a dangerous neighborhood, and there's no way of making the military math add up if Germany's going to spend 1.4% of GDP on defense.

If Putin had rolled through the Ukrainian defenses like a lot of people had expected, and had effective control over the most of the country right now, Europe's security situation would be a lot worse, because combined with the effective Russian occupation of Belarus, you would have a much-enhanced Russian ability to apply pressure against NATO states from the Baltic all the way down to the Black Sea.

And that really would be an epic security crisis for Europe that we haven't seen in decades.

Larry Bernstein:

Why didn't Putin find a diplomatic solution instead of attacking the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

The Biden administration tried to give Putin a decent off-ramp. If you're really worried about NATO military deployments in Eastern Europe, we're willing to talk about that, and we're willing to address concerns about long-range strike systems. Putin was interested in the destruction of Ukraine as an independent state, and we shouldn't be surprised, because he's been telling us that for a number of years. Putin wanted war in this crisis, or he wanted a complete Ukrainian capitulation, which he probably only could have gotten through war. His behavior throughout this crisis simply reveals that.

Larry Bernstein:

It seems that the Russian military was caught off guard by the sudden invasion, as if they expected Putin to be only blustering.

Hal Brands:

As amazing as it sounds, I think the answer to that is yes. I think there was a very small circle of people around Putin who understood this was real, and most of the Russian military, perhaps even much of the high command thought it was diplomatic posturing, and I think that helps explain why a lot of the operations have been so shambolic.

Larry Bernstein:

Ok, let's say that the Russian military was taken by surprise by their supreme leader and now realize that they are in for the long haul in the Ukraine, can they regroup to win the battle?

Hal Brands:

That's a really interesting question. Militaries do typically learn in wartime. We're only, what 12 days into this conflict? They don't appear to be learning very fast, though, and that's a puzzle for me, and, and I can't tell whether that indicates that their heart isn't in it, or there's some other pathology that's preventing them from getting smart fast.

Larry Bernstein:

In the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union did not fight directly but instead used proxies and provided arms to their respective proxies, is that what we will see in the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

I think you're seeing a similar pattern today. Putin attacks countries that are not US allies. He doesn't attack countries that are US allies. The US provides the arms. It provides intelligence. It provides other forms of support to the Ukrainians. It doesn't send its own troops into combat. So far, there seems to be at least a semi-tacit agreement on the rules of the game on what each side can do without eliciting a military response. The question is, will it break down if Putin gets more desperate as the conflict goes on?

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think that the Russians will attack the NATO supply lines to the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

Right now, he doesn't have the forces to cut down through western Ukraine and basically sever the land bridge between NATO countries and Ukraine. They might wish to do that, and if you get into a situation where there's a Ukrainian insurgency or something like that that's being supplied from the west, the Russians would certainly try to apply various forms of pressure to do that.

During the 1980s, the Soviets occasionally went across the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan to try to clean out some of the sanctuaries that the anti-Soviet guerrillas had created there.

Larry Bernstein:

If the Ukrainian masses are engaged in street-to-street fighting, do you think that Putin will get frustrated and turn to massive civilian attacks?

Hal Brands:

Well, he is already killing lots of civilians, unfortunately. There have been bombardments of civilian areas in major cities, targeting of civilians fleeing the fighting. It could get a lot worse obviously in the way that you allude to.

Vastly higher numbers of civilian casualties would provoke a really anguished debate in the United States and other societies about whether we should be doing more to defeat Russia in Ukraine. Any use of force in Ukraine obviously brings nuclear dynamics into play and not something that should be taken lightly.

I don't have sympathy for proposals for a no flight zone. But if this thing gets as ugly, then it would raise questions about whether deeper Western involvement in the war is warranted.

Larry Bernstein:

What Happens Next with the military engagement in the Ukraine?

Hal Brands:

The Russians have some major decisions to make in the next couple of weeks. Are they going to commit more forces to the fighting? Are they going to level the major cities as a way of coercing capitulation?

Putin is not going to give up. I don't think the Ukrainians want to give up either right now. I would not be surprised if we end up in a conflict that drags on. I'm driving in the dark as well as anybody.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you make of the private firms choosing to leave Russia?

Hal Brands:

This was relatively unexpected. I don't think many people predicted that you are going to see Russia isolated from the international economy as thoroughly over such a short period. And, this is provoking some degree of introspection, if not Putin then among people around him that they may have miscalculated the cost of this whole thing.

Private sector sanctions are not new. They played an important role in the end of an apartheid in South Africa, for instance, when major banks stopped rolling over South African debt in the late 1980s.

The Chinese have sanctioned entities that do business with Lithuania because Lithuania opened a Taiwan representative's office in Vilnius.

Larry Bernstein:

Has the Ukraine situation changed the Chinese calculus for invading Taiwan?

Hal Brands:

I think there are a bunch of interesting lessons. The Chinese need to double down on indigenous technological development. They've probably also been shocked by the ferocity of the international response.

This episode has shown the importance of talking in advance about what economic and technological sanctions you might put in place, if China were to jump Taiwan. It probably indicates that you want to strengthen your forward position in the Western Pacific. It's just a big reminder that major war is not passe.

Larry Bernstein:

I end each session on a note of optimism. Hal, what are you optimistic about?

Hal Brands:

Putin has reminded us of the fragility of the international order that served us very well. And it's already eliciting extraordinary efforts to shore up that international order against countries that are trying to destabilize it.

I'm optimistic that the West could end up in a stronger place if it uses this crisis as an opportunity to invest in a way that allows us to defend an international order that's come under strain.