

The folly of humiliating Russia
Andrew Latham (Opinion Contributor) - The Hill



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Calls that nothing short of a “true defeat” be visited on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s are growing in both frequency and intensity. And nowhere is this on more prominent display than in Anne Applebaum’s recent Atlantic piece calling for a victory over Russia that is rapid, comprehensive (involving military defeat, economic pain and even some type of NATO membership for Ukraine) and, above all, humiliating.

According to Applebaum, only such a profound and profoundly humiliating defeat will permanently chasten Russia. Only such a true defeat will “force the reckoning that should have happened in the 1990s.... the moment when Russians should have realized the folly of Moscow’s imperial overreach, when they should have figured out why so many of their neighbors hate and fear them.”

Only such a true defeat, she avers, will end the historical pattern of Russian aggression and bring about permanent peace on its periphery.

But while it might be emotionally gratifying to issue such calls, and even to fantasize about inflicting terrible pain on such obvious malefactors, the goal of inflicting such a defeat on Russia must not become allowed to become policy. For if history teaches us anything relevant to the current conflict, it is that inflicting such a defeat would most definitely not have the salutary effect on international security that its advocates assume.

Indeed, quite the opposite. Inflicting a comprehensive and humiliating defeat on Russia would be far more likely to set the stage for further discord, conflict and war on Europe’s eastern marches than to usher in an era of regional peace and tranquility. To put it bluntly, indulging fantasies of inflicting near-total defeat on Russia would be a terrible mistake — one that we can, and must, avoid making.

To understand why inflicting a devastating defeat on Russia would be such a terrible mistake, it is necessary to pay attention to a motivating factor that is often overlooked or minimized in conventional accounts of foreign policy and grand strategy: humiliation.

Most theories of international relations, of course, tend to assume rational actors, either anthropomorphism states or actual state officials seeking to rationally advance or defend the state's national interest. While not entirely blind to "non-rational" factors in individual or collective decision-making, these approaches tend to systematically downplay or ignore the role of emotion in shaping the foreign policies of states.

But, as Clausewitz cautioned us long ago, emotions in general (or the passions, as he called them) can and do play an important role in foreign policy, especially when it comes to war.

And as Joslyn Barnhart argues in her recent book "[The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics](#)," historically, the specific emotion of "humiliation" has proven to be a major driver of foreign policy – especially the kind of revanchism and revisionist foreign policy that all too often leads to war.

Barnhart's compelling argument begins with a definition: Humiliation "is a complex and negative self-conscious emotion, which combines the sense that one has been mistreated with a painful sense of self-doubt and helplessness in the face of this injustice."

It is the substrate for "national humiliation," which "arises when individuals who identify as members of the state experience humiliation as the overwhelming emotional response to an international event."

National humiliation occurs, Barnhart further argues, either when a state suffers "rapid defeat to a state with lesser military capability" or when it has "been unfairly undermined by ill-intended others."

Either way, such humiliation involves a "loss of status or prestige which they [policy makers] believe has undeservedly threatened the state's image on the world stage."

Finally, Barnhart shows how humiliated states have historically attempted to overcome their humiliation and restore their status and prestige by engaging in "the use of force against the state responsible for one's humiliation or against third-party states that were not involved in the original humiliating event."

Although Barnhart's book was published before Russia re-invaded Ukraine earlier this year, its implications for today's Russo-Ukraine war are perhaps obvious.

Indeed, it doesn't take much imagination to see how inflicting a devastating defeat on Russia of the kind Applebaum advocates would both humiliate the country's leaders and incentivize them to take whatever steps they deem necessary – up to and including starting another war – to overcome this humiliation.

The strategic implications of this are perhaps obvious. As Barnhart notes in her conclusion, prudent policy that seeks to minimize both the humiliation of defeated states and all of the undesirable consequences of such humiliation should “avoid the codification of inferiority within formal and informal treaties and negotiations.”

They should avoid, in other words, imposing punitive treaties and settlements that formalize inferiority or that seek to diminish the defeated nation’s status or standing beyond some unavoidable minimum. In the absence of a 1945-scale total victory by one side or the other (which is obviously not in the cards), this suggests that the goal now should be a negotiated settlement that leaves both Russia and Ukraine

(a) exhausted,

(b) relatively satisfied and

(c) \ (c) as little humiliated as possible.

This doesn’t imply letting Russia off lightly, of course. But then, at this point, there is simply no way that Russia could be let off the hook lightly. It has already been chastened by its devastating battlefield defeats and the biting economic sanctions it incurred following its invasion.

It has already been broken as a conventional military power and seen its soft and sharp power capacities sharply diminished. In short, it has already been made to pay a significant price for its war of aggression. Indeed, it has probably already suffered a significant national humiliation, though nothing compared to what it would suffer if near-total defeat on the battlefield were to be amplified by near-total defeat at the negotiating table.

One way of thinking about the current war in light of Barnhart’s argument is to conclude that perhaps a Russian battlefield defeat – which I will define as a failure to win consequential battlefield victories or to make significant post-Feb. 23 territorial gains, while incurring significant human and material losses – is enough to chasten Moscow without raising the level of national humiliation to the point where a future war is guaranteed.

Perhaps history teaches us, in other words, that now is not the time to follow Applebaum’s advice and dial Russia’s national humiliation up to eleven. Perhaps, instead, it is the time to strike a deal — to offer Putin a “[golden bridge](#)” that allows him to bring the war to an end without amplifying Russia’s humiliation to the point where, following a protracted period of seething and rebuilding, Moscow unleashes another war on its western neighbor.

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