

Survival is a universal instinct among all living creatures. Nature seems to give even mice a fighting chance (they can run fast and hide in holes). The squid, not a ferocious creature, can defend itself by blinding the predator (squid ink). The weak porcupine can erect painful quills that deter the enemy from taking a bite. The skunk has a foul spray that deters the unwise.

Human societies are no different. There are strong countries (our own), with the best geography, enough food, and wealth to do almost anything. And then there are countries with so many strikes against them that they need to be wily to survive. We need to understand that weakness can also be dangerous.

Russia is a weak country. It has a terrible geography, a declining population, and a paranoid anxiety about invasion from greedy neighbors. In an open conflict with NATO, they would be outmanned and outgunned (unless they used their nukes, which would be suicidal). The spread of NATO to the very borders of Russia has made them very anxious indeed. They do not believe our constant reassurances that we have no aggressive motives; just defensive ones. And they do not believe that we have no plans of "regime change." We say that we do not, but our actions have belied that denial. We have been promoting Western style Liberal Democracy (checks and balances) since the end of World War I.

So, what does Putin do? He must use asymmetrical warfare instead: the defense tactics of the weak. He intimidates neighbors that he can: creating revolts in Ukraine, for example, for the Russian speaking part of the country and before anyone can react, he snatches the Crimean peninsula. He creates such problems for his former colony, Georgia, that they drop the notion of joining NATO. And he takes a part of Georgia too. Finally, he interferes most cleverly in subverting the American election, destroying the campaign of the one person that he fears and resents: Hillary Clinton, and promotes the victory of Donald Trump, a person who owes him quite a few financial favors (such as bailing him out with Russian money when no western banks would lend to him some years ago).

North Korea is another very weak state. It lacks resources, often lacks enough food for its population, and is a threat to its neighborhood. They compensate for their weakness by developing and threatening to use nukes. They will not give them up, citing what happened to Libya when Gadhafi gave up his nukes. They see this as a step toward "regime change."

Burma (Myanmar) is another case of a weak state that is certainly no threat to its neighbors, but it is fighting what it sees as an internal threat: Muslims from Bangladesh. Burma has been condemned by the UN and from most Western countries for committing racial cleansing, and human rights observers cannot understand why. What is Burma's weakness? They are on the high ground, needed by neighboring Bangladesh, a country overpopulated (Burma is not) and increasingly under rising seas and torrential flooding. Any observer could see that if not constrained, Burma could eventually be overrun, and overrun by people with a religious culture that would persecute a Buddhist minority.

If analysts are sharp eyed, they could note that neighboring Buddhist state Thailand is also fighting a Muslim insurgency in the south. Muslim-majority nations do not tolerate other religions. The Buddhist countries think that they are fighting for their existence.

Russia and China, both countries with structural weaknesses, have also been ferocious when confronted with a challenge from Muslim minorities. The Russians have Chechnya, where its once mild Islam has morphed into Islamism. China fears its Central Asian Muslims, the Uigurs, who have gone militant.

And finally, there are the Palestinians who could have had a weak state, but instead have no state at all. They use the defenses of weakness: hijacking aircraft, car bombing, suicide bombing, and most cleverly, using a propaganda campaign to elicit sympathy from western Leftists. Sometimes, the underdog deserves to be an underdog.

678 words

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