

War

In modern times, when major powers invade smaller countries, they usually end up losing. America failed in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq — and also beat humiliating retreats after smaller military interventions in Somalia and Lebanon.

The Soviet Union failed in Afghanistan; and Russia is now failing in Ukraine.

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The few exceptions to the rule that great powers lose small wars seem to occur when the fighting and objective are clearly limited. If the conflict is genuinely a “special military operation” (to use Putin’s disingenuous term for the invasion of Ukraine), then success is possible. In the 1991 Gulf war, the US-led coalition restricted its goals to expelling Saddam Hussein's Iraq from Kuwait.

Gideon Rachman, Financial Times, May 16, 2022