

Battleground Ukraine:

The West versus Russia

Editor: Raj Kumar Sharma

GEOPOLITICS | SECURITY | TECHNOLOGY & ECONOMY

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| NatStrat

Centre for Research on Strategic and Security Issues

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About NatStrat

NatStrat is an independent, not-for-profit centre for research on strategic and security issues.

Vision

The 21st century is upon us. The post-World War II global architecture is becoming unsustainable. The international security and strategic environment is changing. The centre of gravity of global influence is shifting, and new powers are emerging. India is one of them. Despite the odds, India has withstood internal and external challenges to preserve its democratic and constitutional ethos. Its diversity and pluralism have grown while being firmly rooted in its civilisational heritage. As a result, the states of India are more empowered today than before. More than half its population, larger than the combined size of Europe and the US, is under the age of thirty.

The transformation underway in India will unleash powerful impulses beyond India's borders. This will profoundly impact the world's political, social, cultural and economic systems. As India rises and finds its rightful place on the world stage, its unique identity, traditions and value systems will become critical to global peace and stability.

India is looking ahead to mark the centenary year of its post-independence existence. How India thinks will matter. How India acts will matter even more.

The success of India is crucial to humankind. We seek to understand the domestic and external security challenges facing India and what drives India's strategic calculations. We will ask the right questions without fear or favour and provide our views and insights fearlessly.

We will bring an authentic Indian perspective to understanding the world. We aim to make India's voice heard and count in the international community.

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NatStrat undertakes research on issues that impact India's security and foreign policy interests with a focus on three areas – geopolitics, national security, technology, and economy. NatStrat's research is objective, impartial and rigorous. It upholds the highest standards of excellence and scrutiny.

NatStrat seeks to reach out to decision-makers, policymakers, practitioners and the strategic community within and outside India. It engages with international counterparts and with institutions and scholars across India.

NatStrat produces a variety of material, including research papers, commentaries, monographs and policy briefs. Its contributors are among the most authoritative and experienced professionals with international repute and acclaim. It also promotes new and fresh perspectives by encouraging young thinkers to write and work for it. As part of its activities, NatStrat hosts seminars, round table discussions, lectures, podcasts and interviews.

Foreword

The Ukraine conflict has entered its third year. It has engulfed many other smaller and more brutal conflicts around the world that have caused untold death, destruction and misery and yet have been relegated to the margins.

For India, the conflict involves friendly partners and the question of how India navigated its approach elicited keen interest globally. The position India has taken has found growing understanding and support. India is able to communicate with all sides and assert its view that the solution to the conflict lies only in diplomacy and at the negotiating table.

The conflict signals a breakdown of East-West relations and return of US-Russia rivalry to the global centerstage. As this publication goes to print, Russia is headed towards consolidating its gains on the battlefield inside Ukrainian territory. The old security architecture in Europe may have to give way to a new one. There are efforts towards holding a “Peace Summit” but the contours of a settlement, much less Russian participation in a peace effort, look illusory at this point of time. From India’s point of view, there are other much more pressing global trends and crises that need attention, and an early termination of the conflict is preferred.

The world is today also at the edge of another potentially devastating conflagration in West Asia, with Israel and Iran one miscalculation away from a war that could engulf the region and the world. The impact on India of war in this theatre will be far more serious than in Europe.

This is a situation which no one imagined the world would be in 2024. For India, such instability could not have come at a worse time. India’s requirement to grow and accelerate its national development is urgent and of unprecedented scale.

This compilation brings together different views on the conflict from well-known experts and scholars who were kind enough to share their views for **NatStrat**, which at the very least lay bare the complexities involved.

At present there are more questions than answers. The festering of old wounds in Europe is creating a disproportionate degree of toxicity around the world. Peacemaking and peace building are today required more than ever before in that continent.

Pankaj Saran
Convenor, NatStrat

Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine conflict that was expected to last a few weeks has entered its third year. There are no signs of its immediate or near-term end. It has transformed into a conflict of attrition, impacting almost all the regions of the world. Apart from disrupting the food, energy and fertiliser supply chains, it has also demonstrated the use of finance, currency and trade as weapons of conflict.

Today, Russia is the world's most sanctioned country. Countries around the world are being forced to abide by the US led Western sanctions. The East-West divide has resurfaced with a ferocity not seen since the Cold War era. The post-war order is under threat with the difference that a new global power has arisen in the form of China. For India, this war has tested its diplomatic acumen to the hilt. The longer the war drags on, the more challenges India will face, and yet also the more strategic space it will have in its diplomatic, economic, technology and national security choices.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's remark that this is not an era of war captured global attention. Today, the talk of a 'Peace Summit' has gathered momentum, even as Russia consolidates its military gains in Ukraine.

Against this background, NatStrat invited leading international and Indian commentators to analyse these and other questions and offer their insights into the nature of the war, the direction it is headed and its impact on the world and on India.

In the first article, **“2024: The Last Chance for Ukraine”**, **Mykhailo Samus** of **New Geopolitics Research Network** argues that the Ukrainian military command identifies Crimea and its de-occupation as the focal point of the war. Based on this premise, initiating a blockade of Crimea and commencing a ground operation to reclaim the region would set the stage for a strategic turning point in the conflict. Without this pivotal moment, the continuation of the conflict in a 'strategic defence' framework, with the prospect of an offensive in 2025 or beyond, would only exacerbate the stalemate on the battlefield and create advantageous conditions for Russia to pursue its own strategic objectives. Ukraine's partners should strain their political and economic capabilities and

help Ukraine take a decisive step in this war in 2024. **Thomas Greminger** of **Geneva Center for Security Policy** in the second article, **“Five Scenarios for the Russia-Ukraine War”**, underlines that even if there is to be no return to the negotiation table, there are policy options to facilitate a de-escalation of tensions. There may be scope for conflict or battlefield management arrangements and channels of crisis communication, in particular military to military. Local ceasefires and confidence-building measures could support a transition to low-intensity warfare or a cessation of hostilities, buying time and creating a degree of trust that could enable negotiators to return to diplomacy. Assuming a ceasefire holds, peace talks could follow along two or more parallel or sequential tracks. On one track, Ukraine and Russia would negotiate a bilateral peace agreement. On another track, Western states would start a strategic dialogue with Russia on arms control and the broader European security architecture.

In the third article, **“US-Russia Relations and the War in Ukraine”**, **Thomas Graham** of **Council on Foreign Relations** highlights that neither the US nor Russia is inclined to constructively improve mutual ties. Even strategic stability talks, which earlier were insulated from downturns in relations, have ended. As a result, the new START treaty, the last remaining bilateral nuclear-arms control agreement, will expire in February 2026 almost certainly without a follow-on agreement in place. The war has dramatically impacted Washington's assessment of Russia and future relations. For all practical purposes, for at least as long as Putin is in power, it has abandoned hope of finding “stability and predictability” in relations or areas of constructive work. Irrespective of who becomes the President of the US after November 2024 elections, improvement in US-Russia relations is not on the horizon.

Andrey Kortunov of **Russian International Affairs Council** in the fourth article **“Preparing for the Worst, Working for the Best”** writes that in the 21st century, great powers can no longer afford to wage classical wars between themselves since such wars may well lead to a complete annihilation of humankind. Instead, they prefer to go for proxy wars which may last for many years and even

decades without defining the ultimate winner. Therefore, a new balance of power in the world is likely to remain manifestly uncertain, highly ambiguous and fiercely contested for a long time. But the new world order is unlikely to become a product of another Big Deal or Grand Bargain between major players. It is more likely to emerge as a combination of specific incremental multilateral arrangements like the BRICS and the SCO.

Former Foreign Secretary of India, Krishnan Srinivasan in the fifth article **“Ukraine War: An Update”** points out that neither a decisive victory for one side nor a compromise peace agreement seems likely in the near future. Western sanctions, illegal and unilateral according to international law, have boomeranged on Europe leading to the rise of right-wing parties. For the US, the Ukraine War is a setback for President Biden’s foreign policy, aggravated by the Israel-Palestine War. Facing these two problems, the White House will try to soften tensions with China to avoid opening another front on Taiwan or China’s maritime claims. If former President Trump regains the White House, he may change track to rebuild relations with Russia and resume his containment policy of China.

In the sixth article **“Many Voices: A Reality Check on How the World has Actually Reacted to the Ukraine War”**, **Pankaj Saran** and **Prateek Kapil**, of **NatStrat** highlight that the world’s reaction to the Ukraine conflict has been more nuanced and less monochromatic than what has been portrayed by mainstream media. The conflict did dominate global consciousness and attention, but regional and national reactions have been specific to circumstances of individual countries, except for the sides directly involved. The West has been able to weaponize normal inter-state activities, but it has not been able to demonise Russia in the eyes of the world. Western media commentary on Ukraine has been as definitive and self-righteous in its analysis as its coverage was of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and links with al Qaeda.

Sanjay Kumar Pandey, of **Jawaharlal Nehru University**, in the seventh article, **“The Russia-Ukraine War: Impact on the Global South”**, underlines that there are many reasons behind the indifference and opposition of the Global South to the Western position on Russia. The main concerns of the Global South relate to the disruption of global supply chains of energy, food grains and fertilisers due to this war. European

governments could largely shield their citizens from the price shocks following the war by spending more than \$640 billion on energy subsidies. However, many governments in the Global South did not have such fiscal resources to protect consumers from rising energy prices. The response of the Global South to the Russia-Ukraine War has been primarily based on historical and economic reasons, as opposed to the Global North which has responded mainly through political and security perspectives.

In the eighth article, **“The Ukraine-Russia War: Military Lessons for India”**, **Rakesh Sharma** of **The United Service Institution of India**, analyses the military takeaways for India. One of the main takeaways is the fallacy of the belief that economic engagement with adversaries decreases the chance of war. Energy interdependence between Russia and Europe could not ensure peace between them. Similarly, India’s growing trade with China cannot ensure a peaceful border between these two Asian giants. The lines between peace and war have been blurred into irrelevance and complacency will be detrimental for India’s security. Riding on its own strength and overconfidence of NATO support, Ukrainian security forces and intelligence establishment have been complacent. Complacency can lead to war-like situations.

In the ninth and last article, **“The Russia-Ukraine War: Takeaways for India”**, **Pankaj Saran** and **Raj Kumar Sharma** of **NatStrat** bring out the broad takeaways for India. They highlight that to wage and then win a war, a nation should be self-dependent to fulfil the military needs of its armed forces. India’s overwhelming dependence on any country, including Russia, for military hardware has to be reduced. Hybrid threats to national security need to be mainstreamed in national security strategy. The war has weakened Russia, but not defeated Russia. In fact, Russia’s military campaign is showing signs of visible success. The problem from India’s point of view is that it has taken global attention away from China and the Indo-Pacific, making Europe once again the epicentre of global politics. The focus on China must be retained. Meanwhile, India has no choice but to keep a close eye on the Russia-China relationship, as well as the evolution of US-China engagement.

Keywords: *India, Russia, Ukraine, War, Europe, US, Sanctions, Global South, NATO, Hybrid Warfare*

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A Ukrainian view

2024: THE LAST CHANCE FOR UKRAINE?

Mykhailo Samus



L to R: Russian President Vladimir Putin, French President Emmanuel Macron, Former Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, December 2019.

Introduction

A vigorous debate is taking place within Ukrainian and Western media, political spheres and expert circles. Certain publications and influential figures argue that Ukraine cannot expect to achieve success through offensive operations and should instead move to “strategic defense”.

Essentially, some Western allies believe that the Ukrainian-Russian front has reached a stalemate, a notion that has been circulating for some time within both Ukrainian and Western military and political contexts. This suggests that Russia has effectively transformed the conflict into a prolonged phase, contrary to the intentions of Ukraine and the West.

However, in light of this, one must consider: What if Ukraine indeed decides to transition to “strategic defense” in 2024, and begins gathering the requisite military assets and resources? Would

Ukraine then be in a position to shift to a “strategic offensive” by 2025? Will the military and international circumstances be favourable for such a move? Furthermore, could Russia (and the so-called “Axis of Evil”) exploit the year 2024 to bolster its military and military-industrial capabilities?

In my view, the outlook for this question is rather bleak.

The “Axis of Evil”, comprising Russia, North Korea, and Iran (with economic and conceptual support from China), is actively bolstering its capabilities to manufacture essential military resources, particularly artillery ammunition, missile systems, and long-range drones.

Notably, Russia is leveraging North Korea as a significant military production hub to fulfil the requirements of its Armed Forces

along the Ukrainian front. Concurrently, Russia is providing missile and nuclear know-how to North Korea, potentially enhancing the production of ballistic and cruise missiles for both nations.

While this Russian “military-industrial project” in North Korea has yet to reach full operational capacity, it's expected to peak by 2024. The ramifications of this collaboration will extend beyond the Ukrainian frontline, impacting East Asia profoundly. Threats to South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and the United States are poised to escalate significantly.

The dynamic of cooperation between Iran and Russia mirrors that of North Korea. Scaling up the production of long-range attack drones and, once more, ballistic missiles can bolster the Russian military's capabilities while enhancing Iran's capacity to disrupt the Middle East.

Such developments could have far-reaching implications on the global military-strategic and economic landscape. The menace posed by Iranian proxies frequently disrupts global oil and commodity transportation routes, thereby shaping geopolitical developments across entire regions.

Elections in the US and Europe

Meanwhile, Ukraine's Western allies are approaching an “election year” which, while not altering the strategic imperative to support Ukraine and counter Russian aggression, may prompt significant adjustments to specific approaches regarding the Russian-Ukrainian War.

The pre-election turmoil in the United States is already stirring up heated debates regarding the likelihood of Ukraine receiving comprehensive

support in 2024. Europe indeed feels a mounting responsibility to safeguard its own security and bolster Ukraine in its standoff with Russia. Regrettably, the EU will be unable to entirely make up for the decrease in US assistance in terms of both the quantity and variety of weapons and other military resources.

In my perspective, the suggestion from our partners to adopt a “strategic defence” approach reflects more of their own anxieties and the challenges of forecasting political developments in Europe and the United States, rather than a true reflection of the situation on the front lines or anticipation of shifts in the global military-strategic landscape.

If we envision a scenario where the Ukrainian defence forces halt active offensive operations within a year and focus on bolstering their capabilities in a “strategic defence” framework, it suggests that by the end of 2024, Russia will likely be even more prepared for significant hostilities.

This preparation could involve a new wave of mobilisation, extensive ammunition supplies from North Korea and Iran's Shahed attack drones, along with an amassed arsenal of missiles. It's around the autumn of 2024 that the Kremlin might be poised for a fresh attempt at a large-scale offensive, potentially including operations from Belarusian territory.

Moreover, if Ukraine refrains from initiating new asymmetric, more potent operations in the Black Sea, it would provide Russia with the opportunity to enhance its capabilities for countering Ukrainian naval drones and cruise missiles, thereby undermining the effectiveness of Ukraine's asymmetric “mosquito” tactics.

Concurrently, Russia has already initiated the production of its own maritime drones, capable of actively targeting civilian vessels, warships and other assets of Ukraine and NATO member states as early as 2024. Additionally, Russians may

escalate mining activities in the Black Sea near Ukraine's territorial waters, reviving efforts to impose a naval blockade on Ukraine.

In essence, when we revisit the fundamental parameters of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, it is important to highlight that the Ukrainian military command identifies Crimea and its de-occupation as the focal point (centre of gravity, per Clausewitz's theory) of this war.

Based on this premise, initiating a blockade of Crimea and commencing a ground operation to reclaim the region would set the stage for a strategic turning point in the conflict. Without this pivotal moment, the continuation of the conflict in a "strategic defence" framework, with the prospect of an offensive in 2025 or beyond, would only exacerbate the stalemate on the battlefield and create advantageous conditions for Russia to pursue its own strategic objectives.

Russia's Objectives

Russia's objectives stand in stark contrast to those of the Ukrainian military: they aim to breach the front lines in Donbas, thwart the Ukrainian Defence Forces' efforts to reclaim Crimea, and coerce Ukraine into negotiations (essentially, to freeze the conflict and capitulate on Russia's terms).

In reality, if Ukraine adopts a defensive stance for an entire year, it will significantly facilitate Russia's ability to accomplish these objectives compared to a scenario where the Ukrainian Armed Forces conduct active offensive operations (not necessarily of a strategic magnitude) throughout 2024, with a clear focus on the conflict's center of gravity.

Moreover, offensive operations in the southern direction should not negate the implementation of measures to fortify robust defensive lines in the east, north, and relevant areas of the Zaporizhzhia region. These areas demand

maximum attention to establish an impenetrable defence against Russian forces. The prospect of occupying the entire Donetsk region or launching a repeat assault on Kyiv should be rendered an insurmountable challenge for Russian generals.

Certainly, theory must always be supported by resources. Carrying out offensive operations with a focus on Crimea necessitates the provision of suitable tools, primarily modern aviation and long-range precision strike weapons. This brings us back to the initial point: if our partners do not furnish Ukraine with the requisite weapons systems now, our prospects for success in 2024—and consequently, for a favourable outcome in this war overall—will be exceedingly dim.

Conclusion

This leads us to the conclusion that our partners should abandon their hopes that Ukraine will abandon its plans to turn the tide of this war and agree to negotiate (surrender) with Russia. It is better to strain their political and economic capabilities (which, in fact, still have enormous potential, unlike Russia) and help Ukraine make a decisive step in this war in 2024 in order to continue to destroy the "Axis of Evil" and maintain global leadership in 2025, regardless of the outcome of the US and European elections. Because the alternative may not be as constructive and sound.



Mykhailo Samus

After 20 years in media as well as in security and defence analysis and consultancy, Mykhailo is an experienced researcher in the sphere of international relations, national resilience and new generation warfare. He served 12 years in the Ukrainian Armed Forces and gained his Master's Degree in International Journalism from the Institute of Journalism, Kyiv Shevchenko National University (2007).

Having started his career as a journalist at Defence Express, he became the Editor-in-Chief of the Export Control Newsletter magazine, and then the Deputy Director of the Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies. He was the founder (2009) of the EU CACDS office in Prague (Czech Republic) and was responsible for the coordination of CACDS international activities, its regional sections, and projects with NATO and the EU.

Now, Mykhailo is the chief of a new international project – The New Geopolitics Research Network. Since 2023, Mykhailo has been a Non-Resident Senior Expert at New Strategy Centre (Romania).

A European view

FIVE SCENARIOS FOR THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Thomas Greminger



Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy meets the US President Joe Biden, December 2022.

Introduction

There is no doubt that the military aggression against Ukraine unleashed by President Putin on 24 February 2022 represents the most significant disruption of security and peace in Europe since the end of World War II. The war has far-reaching repercussions affecting practically every aspect of our lives and impacting far beyond the European continent. In this article, I will first briefly assess the situation on the battlefield. I will then offer a few scenarios for how the conflict could evolve in the coming months.¹

Afterward I will mainly focus on what has been called “Plan B” thinking in the expert community:² What if the official narrative of both sides – a military victory – does not materialize? What if the parties, exhausted by a war of attrition, decide to return to the negotiation

table – or the high-intensity warfare transitions to low-intensity conflict leading to a de facto cessation of hostilities? What could a negotiated or a de facto ceasefire look like?

And what issues would have to be negotiated if – in the most optimistic scenario – the parties decide to proceed from a ceasefire to a conflict settlement process?

Five Phases

As we approach the end of the second year after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, we can identify five distinct phases of the war to date. The first centered on the battle for Kyiv in February-March 2022, followed by a second stage, marked by the invasion of the Kherson and Zaporizhia regions in the South and the battle for the Donbas in the East. The third phase began in September 2022 when the Ukrainian Armed

Forces (UAF) successfully liberated important parts of the occupied territory.

They advanced first in the Northeast, in the Kharkiv region, and then in the Southwest, regaining the city of Kherson. Still, the Russian Armed Forces maintained control over most of the Donbas and the South of Ukraine and decided to annex the four regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia and Kherson, although Moscow still does not have full control within the administrative borders of the regions. Moreover, Russia has been attacking targets throughout Ukraine with missile and drone launches.

In December 2022, partly caused by the cold season, the fourth stage of the struggle began, characterized by an unabated intensity of warfare but few territorial gains on either side. The situation on the battlefield began to look like a stalemate, recalling images of the battle of Verdun or at the Somme in World War I.

The fifth stage of this war was then marked by attempts to break out of this deadlock throughout 2023: the Russian Armed Forces launched their early spring offensive and finally in summer the Ukrainian Armed Forces began their long-awaited counter-offensive. Both were expected to bring movement again to the battlefield. However, this did not happen.

The conflict has therefore reverted to the realities of the previous phase: a war of attrition with hardly any territorial gains at all for more than a year now. While some experts perceive the current situation on the battlefield only as a temporary standstill, many characterize it as permanent stalemate.

Ukraine's former Commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi admitted that "there will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough," but argues that there are ways of transitioning back to the "manoeuvrable nature of hostilities" with the help of advanced western weaponry.³ Asked if Ukraine or Russia is winning, former senior

National Security Council member Fiona Hill said: "We can actually say that Ukraine has won in terms of securing its independence and has won by fighting Russia to a standstill."⁴ She is, however, very concerned that the US, mainly for domestic reasons, will not maintain the current level of support to Ukraine.

While I share Hill's assessment that it will become more challenging for Kyiv to mobilize the necessary financial and military assistance to sustain its war effort, Ukraine will, for the foreseeable future, still be able to count on strong political resolve from its Western partners to help it defend its sovereignty.

Five Scenarios

Given the unexpected turns that the war has already taken, one should be careful in predicting further developments. Reflecting on scenarios therefore continues to be the most sensible approach.

The most likely scenario, at least in the short- to medium-term, is that the war will continue at high intensity, with the Russian Federation trying to gain complete control of the Donbas region as well as the two annexed regions in the south, and Ukraine attempting to liberate as much of the occupied territory as possible. Both sides seem convinced that time is on their side and that they will eventually prevail (cf. scenario 4).

Neither party is currently in a mood to settle. However, despite heavy fighting, this scenario remains characterized by a virtual standstill. There is a 1,350kilometre-long frontline, but two thirds of the line is effectively static. In addition, both sides are increasingly focusing on consolidating defensive positions through the construction of fortifications and laying of mines.

The second scenario is a transition to a low-intensity conflict due to the gradual

exhaustion of the armed forces of both sides. This may happen with a formal cessation of hostilities agreement or without one. We may see a temporary stop to the fighting or a more permanent ceasefire. This scenario could bring us to a state comparable to what we witnessed in the Donbas between 2014 and 2021.

We cannot exclude a third scenario that would involve different forms of escalation. Having reached a stalemate on the battlefield but unwilling to compromise diplomatically, each side may see escalation as the best way of achieving their political aims.

There are scores of means of escalation: targeting critical civilian infrastructure of strategic relevance within or outside Ukraine, taking the on-going cyber war to another level, kinetic action against military or dual-use assets in outer space, or the use of tactical nuclear arms. The latter represents a scenario that is seen by most experts as highly unlikely, but not totally impossible should President Putin at some point face strategic defeat. There is a risk of escalation from mutually targeting nuclear power facilities (Zaporizhia, Khmelnytskyi, Kursk nuclear power plants).

An escalation could also be triggered through unintended confrontation – conventional or nuclear – between Russia and NATO member states. And finally, in a medium to long-term perspective, escalation could also occur through conventional military means by, for instance, Russia launching a major offensive operation to push towards Odessa and Transnistria in the South, pursuing the concept of Novorossiia (“New Russia”).

For the Ukrainian Armed Forces, advancing from Zaporizhia in a southerly direction through Melitopol down to the Black Sea would represent a major strategic gain, since it would cut off Russia’s land access to Crimea.

The fourth scenario is equivalent to the official narrative of both parties: a clear military victory brings the war to an end. However, the current

stalemate on the battlefield makes it seem quite unlikely that one of the two parties will achieve a clear victory. At the same time, we cannot totally rule out that the standstill could be overcome at some point if, for instance, one side’s morale breaks and the frontline collapses, similarly to what happened during World War I, when what looked like a stalemate of trench warfare eventually saw the return of manoeuvre warfare.

The fifth scenario would be a negotiated end to the war, at first through a negotiated ceasefire that goes beyond a sheer cessation of hostilities as described in the second scenario and then ideally a peace agreement.

A settlement would mainly have to be negotiated between Russia and Ukraine. Yet, some dimensions like security guarantees for the two belligerents or the future European security order go beyond bilateral conflict settlement and would have to include what Moscow calls “the collective West”.

Reflecting on Plan B

As momentum in the commentariat further shifts in favour of some negotiated outcome, how might we move toward the fifth scenario? Against the backdrop of an apparent bloody stalemate on the ground and the sense that this may not change in the future, there have been growing calls from the expert community to reflect on a plan B since the beginning of 2023.

Countries like China, Brazil, the Vatican, or South Africa have offered their good offices to bring both sides to the negotiating table. More importantly, the tone of discussions in Washington has started changing. Renowned experts like Richard Haass, Charles Kupchan or Samuel Charap have reflected publicly on what a sensible course of action could look like if it became clear that neither side would prevail militarily.

Haass and Kupchan have advocated a two-pronged approach that consists of continuing to bolster Ukraine's military capacity while preparing for the moment when both parties warm up to the idea of a settlement. This means getting ready to broker a ceasefire and perhaps a follow-on peace process. According to their argument, it would be critical to minimize Russian gains to demonstrate that aggression does not pay, and territorial conquest is a costly enterprise.

In case of a negotiated ceasefire, both Ukraine and Russia would pull back their troops and heavy weapons from the new line of contact, effectively creating a demilitarized zone. An international organization — either the UN or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) — would, as a joint venture, send in observers to monitor, verify and stabilize the ceasefire and pullback. An accountability mechanism would have to be developed to deal with violations.

It should be better designed than the “Joint Centre for Command and Control (JCCC)” that Russia and Ukraine operated in the Donbas between 2015 and 2017. For example, it could be inspired by the model of Joint Military Commissions (JMC) that worked well in many peace processes.

A contact group representing key political stakeholders would have to be set up to monitor compliance and discuss ongoing concerns on a political level.⁵ The West could offer some limited relief from sanctions and approach other influential countries, including China and India, which would create incentives for the Russian Federation to abide by a ceasefire.

De-escalation Measures

If there is to be no return to the negotiation table, what policy options might still facilitate a

de-escalation of tensions? A group of ceasefire experts gathered recently by the Geneva Centre for Security Policy identified measures that could be taken by the parties even under conditions outlined in scenarios one and two.

Despite continued high-intensity warfare, there may be scope for conflict or battlefield management arrangements and local stabilization measures. Channels of crisis communication, in particular military to military, could be created. A transition to low-intensity warfare or a cessation of hostilities could be supported by local ceasefires such as along the Ukrainian-Russian border between Chernihiv and Kharkiv or in the region south of Odessa.

Temporary ceasefires could buy time and create a degree of trust that could enable negotiators to return to diplomacy. Confidence-building measures could consist of specific mutual restraint for instance in the Black Sea region focusing on port security and freedom of navigation, or an agreement that Russia would not launch attacks from the Black Sea and Ukraine would not attack Russian ships in the Black Sea.

Matching Means and Ends

While the official narrative among Western states has not changed and continues to follow President Biden's line of supporting Ukraine for “as long as it takes” to achieve its military objectives, parts of the expert community have begun to embrace “Plan B” thinking and calls for a fundamental reappraisal of the current strategy that Ukraine and its partners are pursuing.

This new way of thinking sees “an unsustainable trajectory, one characterized by a glaring mismatch between ends and available means.”⁶ It calls for a strategy centered on Ukraine's readiness to negotiate a ceasefire and simultaneously switching the military emphasis from offense to defense.

In a recent article, German military

expert Wolfgang Richter criticizes a war of attrition without an exit strategy as being unrealistic and irresponsible toward Ukraine and, given the risks of escalation, also irresponsible toward European security.

He recommends an exit strategy that addresses the three lines of conflict – within Ukraine, Ukraine-Russia and Russia-NATO – looking for a way out of the impasse that respects Ukrainian sovereignty as well as Russian security interests toward NATO.⁷ Another important question has recently been raised by a former Ukrainian top diplomat: Would key Western allies today support a Ukrainian decision to return to the negotiating table?⁸

Settlement Talks

This takes us back to settlement talks: Assuming a ceasefire holds, peace talks could follow along two or more parallel or sequential tracks. On one track, Ukraine and Russia would negotiate a bilateral peace agreement. On another track, Western states would start a strategic dialogue with Russia on arms control and the broader European security architecture.

A good precedent for this approach is the “2 plus 4” talks in 1990 that helped end the Cold War. East and West Germany negotiated their unification directly, while the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union negotiated the broader post-Cold War security architecture.

There are different platforms that could be created or reinvigorated for this purpose: a contact group may serve as a negotiation or a coordination body. Its composition would have to be more inclusive than the Normandy Four where key actors like the United States or the European Union were missing.

A reinvigorated NATO-Russia Council could serve as a platform for arms control discussions and the OSCE (perhaps complemented by

non-traditional partners like China, India, Brazil, or Saudi Arabia) for the broader conversation on European security.

Moving on to peace negotiations is obviously the ideal outcome. However, we cannot exclude ending up with another frozen conflict for years or even decades to come: Russia would agree to a ceasefire to maintain its territorial gains, but without any intention of negotiating in good faith a lasting peace settlement.

Provided the ceasefire holds, this would produce a status quo like the one on the Korean Peninsula or in Cyprus. A frozen conflict is not a desired outcome, but it may be preferable to a high-intensity long war.

In such a case, Ukrainian territorial integrity could only be re-established after Moscow fundamentally changes its positions.

Issues to Cover in a Settlement Process

What would settlement negotiations have to cover?⁹ There is no doubt that they would have to come up with responses to significant and legitimate Ukrainian claims for reparations. Frozen funds of Russian oligarchs or Central Bank funds may contribute to a reparation fund, direct restitution being politically not very realistic.

This could be negotiated at least partially in exchange for sanctions relief. A settlement process will also have to cope with accountability for war crimes and thereby deal with the enormously challenging peace and justice dilemma.

Negotiations would have to deal with highly contentious territorial issues: the four annexed

territories in the Donbas and the South and Crimea. As we know from the Istanbul Communique of 29 March 2022, a tentative agreement had been reached on leaving the status of Crimea undetermined for the next fifteen years and on a still-to-be-defined special status arrangement for the occupied territories in Donbas.

While we assume that these Istanbul proposals are politically not valid anymore, agreeing on a temporary special status may still turn out to be a way forward.¹⁰ When it comes to minority issues, the war has strengthened a Ukrainian national identity that is monocultural and monoethnic, while Russia seeks legal guarantees for the cultural, religious, and political rights of Ukraine's Russian speakers.

Here the trade-off could be guarantees of non-interference by the Russian Federation in line with the OSCE's Bolzano Recommendation¹¹ and amendments of Ukrainian nationality, language, and education legislation, also in line with OSCE commitments.

Security Guarantees for Ukraine and Russia

Settlement negotiations would have to provide an answer to the primordial security challenge: addressing the dilemma between two fundamental principles of European security, the right of any state to freely choose its security alliance and the indivisibility of security (that is, the principle that states should not enhance their own security at the expense of another). This leads us to the question of security guarantees for both Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

What would they look like for Ukraine? Ukraine understandably expects something better than the violated Budapest Memorandum of 1994. The option of choice by President Zelensky and a large majority of the Ukrainian population is NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) membership and thereby protection through Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.

As long as the war is ongoing, this will not happen as the NATO Vilnius Summit clearly

stated. There are, however, those that doubt that Washington or Berlin would ever offer Article 5 protection to Ukraine. Needless to say, Ukrainian NATO membership would be unacceptable to Russia.

The argument recently prominently promoted by the late Henry Kissinger that Ukraine's NATO membership would provide security guarantees to both Russia and Ukraine because it would contain a heavily armed Ukraine is intellectually appealing, but politically not realistic.

Not least because preventing Ukraine's NATO membership is ostensibly why Russia started this war in the first place, and Putin refuses to lose this war. This said, Russia would expect some practical NATO control over the Ukrainian military as a safeguard against forms of revanchism.¹²

Today the most realistic form of security guarantees for Ukraine seems to be security arrangements as offered by the G-7 at the Vilnius Summit in August 2023. They pledged adequate and reliable means of self-defense to Ukraine.

The United States is currently negotiating such security arrangements with Ukraine, while the United Kingdom just announced the conclusion of the "U.K.-Ukraine Agreement on Security and Cooperation"¹³, the first of its kind among the G-7.

This is a format that resembles Israel's defense relationship with the United States or the relationship that Finland and Sweden enjoyed with NATO before they decided to join the alliance. The pact may also include a provision similar to Article 4 of the NATO treaty, which calls for consultations when any party judges its territorial integrity, political independence, or security to be threatened.

These essentially bilateral security guarantees could eventually be combined with specific reciprocal arms control measures that would take account of Russia's security concerns. There remains the crucial issue of whether Ukraine would formally agree to forgo its NATO aspiration.

The neutrality of Ukraine and the formal renunciation of NATO membership was at the core of the Istanbul Communique but seems to be politically off the table for the foreseeable future. In addition, it contradicts the right of every state to freely choose its security arrangement and would run against a fundamental NATO policy (the "Open Door Policy").

The ingredients of a compromise could consist of strong and codified security guarantees for Ukraine, an EU accession process for Ukraine unimpeded by Russia (as outlined in Istanbul), a predictable moratorium of NATO membership of Ukraine, and a set of arms control measures taking account of Russia's and Ukraine's security concerns.

Conclusion

The current realities on the battlefield paint a clear picture: a war of attrition with few territorial gains for more than a year. However, since wars tend to take unexpected turns, reflecting on scenarios remains the most sensible approach in trying to look ahead. The most likely scenario remains, at least in the short-to-medium term, that the war will continue at high intensity.

We cannot discard the possibility of further escalation: Having reached a stalemate on the battlefield but unwilling to compromise diplomatically, each side may see escalation as the best way of achieving their political aims.

At the same time, given the extremely high toll of the war on the armed forces, economies and

societies on both sides, moving to a cessation of hostilities or even a return to the negotiation table with the aim of reaching a ceasefire has become more likely in the foreseeable future and should be seriously thought through without further delay.

Experts such as Wolfgang Richter consider pursuing a war of attrition without an exit strategy as irresponsible both toward Ukraine and European security. Such an undertaking would not come without risks: We cannot exclude ending up with another frozen conflict for years to come and thereby rewarding the aggressor. Yet while a frozen conflict is not a desired outcome, it may still be preferable to a high-intensity long war.

Even if there is to be no return to the negotiation table, there are policy options to facilitate a de-escalation of tensions: There may be scope for conflict or battlefield management arrangements and channels of crisis communication, in particular military to military. Local ceasefires and confidence-building measures could support a transition to low-intensity warfare or a cessation of hostilities, buying time and creating a degree of trust that could enable negotiators to return to diplomacy.

Assuming a ceasefire holds, peace talks could follow along two or more parallel or sequential tracks. On one track, Ukraine and Russia would negotiate a bilateral peace agreement. On another track, Western states would start a strategic dialogue with Russia on arms control and the broader European security architecture.

Settlement negotiations would have to cover a broad range of contentious topics: territorial issues, reparations, accountability for war crimes, minority rights, sanctions relief and security guarantees. The issue of security guarantees is a particularly notable prerequisite for progress on other issues – for both sides.

Ukraine expects, understandably, more reliable

guarantees than what the violated Budapest Memorandum of 1994 offered. Its preferred solution is guarantees based on Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. However, full NATO membership does not seem to be in the cards in the short to medium term.

This makes security arrangements as offered by the G-7 at the Vilnius Summit in July 2023 the most realistic form of guarantees for the time being. It would resemble Israel's defense relationship with the United States. For Russia, Ukrainian NATO membership would clearly be unacceptable, even if it would have an interest in NATO exerting some ability to restrain a heavily armed Ukraine.

This may offer an option to find modalities whereby Ukraine would be closely associated with NATO without becoming a full member, combined with a range of arms control measures that specifically take account of Russia's security interests.

Endnotes

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An American view

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Thomas Graham



Russian President Vladimir Putin meeting the US President Joe Biden, June 2021.

US-Russia State of Play

The United States and Russia are adversaries once again. Mutual animosity has plumbed depths not seen since the darkest days of the Cold War, as the war in Ukraine poisons all aspects of relations. Sustained, substantive bilateral dialogue lies in the distant past.

The two presidents have not spoken since before Russia's invasion, and the foreign ministers have had just one cursory face-to-face meeting on the margins of an international conference.

Even strategic stability talks, which earlier were insulated from downturns in relations, have ended. As a result, the new START treaty, the last remaining bilateral nuclear-arms control agreement, will expire in February 2026 almost certainly

without a follow-on agreement in place.

Neither side appears inclined to put relations on a more constructive track. For Russian President Vladimir Putin, deteriorating relations have an upside. He postures now as the leader of a global anti-West crusade, determined to erode American hegemony in favour of an allegedly more just and democratic world order.

He claims to be protecting Russia from the corrosive influence of a decadent West. Standing up to the United States, and the West in general, lies at the core of his political appeal at home and abroad, at least in the Global South.

The situation in Washington is more complex. President Joseph Biden took office in January 2021 assuming some tension with Moscow was inevitable. He had no intention of seeking a reset, in part because he did not consider Russia to be a foreign-policy priority.

Rather, his goal was to stabilise relations, to prevent a sharp deterioration, so that he could focus his energies on managing relations with China, America's only strategic competitor in his eyes. The contrast in the language his administration has used in describing Russia and China is stark and revealing.

The latter "is the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective," as in the words of the Biden Administration's 2022 National Security Strategy. Meanwhile, the Strategy notes, Russia, without the wherewithal to remake the world order, only "poses an immediate and persistent threat to international peace and stability."

Putin's actions, however, compelled the Biden administration to accord Russia a much higher priority. His build-up of troops along Ukraine's borders led Biden to call for an early summit in June 2021 to ease tensions and put relations on a more constructive track.

Agreed talks on strategic stability and cyber security made some limited progress, but evidently not enough to satisfy Putin. That fall, he began to ramp up military forces near Ukraine, and Washington began to warn its allies and partners, including Ukraine, of an impending invasion. A brief, intense diplomatic effort failed to defuse the crisis, because, Washington is convinced, Putin was not interested in finding a peaceful resolution: He was dead set on invading Ukraine and anchoring it in Russia's orbit.

The war had a dramatic impact on Washington's assessment of Russia and future relations. For all practical purposes, for at least as long as Putin is in power, it has abandoned hope of finding "stability and predictability" in relations or areas of constructive work, which a senior administration official early on had identified as the goals with Russia.

No Detente with Russia

On the two issues that have dominated relations for decades, strategic stability and European security, Washington sees little scope for positive engagement with Russia. The National Security Strategy suggests that the administration is prepared to pursue strategic stability without Russia and that European security will have to be designed as protection against Russia, and not as the cooperative effort it had been since the late Soviet period.

As I have written elsewhere, "never since the end of the Cold War has the United States held out so little hope for relations with Russia and so thoroughly rejected it as a possible, albeit limited, partner."

Instead, Washington worked closely with its allies and partners in Europe and East Asia to develop and implement policies to isolate Russia diplomatically and cripple it economically. Diplomatic ties were cut back to the bare minimum.

Western firms were urged to exit Russia—and hundreds did, if not out of moral outrage, then out of concern for the reputational risks that would arise in more lucrative markets from association with the Russian aggressor. The United States and Europe coordinated the rollout of an accumulating series of sanctions aimed at starving Russia's war-making potential. Russian assets, including its foreign reserves held in Western banks, were frozen.

A price cap was eventually placed on exported Russian oil, in an effort to reduce the revenue Moscow received from this critical export without precipitating a sharp reduction in the level of exports and thereby destabilising global oil markets.

American and Russian Adaptation

As the war enters its third year, it is clear that Washington's policies have fallen far short of expectations. It might have engineered large scale

condemnations of Russian aggression in the UN General Assembly (garnering the vote of more than 140 of the UN's 193 member states) and led a successful effort to strip Russia of its seat on the UN Human Rights Council.

But the major countries of the Global South—Brazil, India, and South Africa—have maintained close relations, as has China and NATO member Turkey. In 2024, five countries—Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—joined the BRICS, which Russia took the lead in establishing in the 2000s.

Moscow has also found creative ways to evade sanctions, including building a “shadow fleet” to evade the price cap on oil exports and reengineering supply chains for critical technologies. It has put the economy on a war footing.

As a result, the economy did not crater by double digits in 2022, as many had predicted; it fell only by a little more than 2 percent. It then grew by 3.5 percent in 2023, and the International Monetary Fund is estimating growth of 2.6 percent in 2024. Meanwhile, Chinese and Turkish businesses, among others, have moved in to fill the consumer niches abandoned by Western firms.

Against the background of the failed Ukrainian counteroffensive last fall, mounting Ukraine fatigue in key Western countries, including the United States, and Russian resilience, Washington is now reassessing its strategy toward Russia and the war.

Some pundits argue that it should double-down on the original strategy, pressuring countries to attenuate ties with Moscow and ratcheting up sanctions while cracking down on evasion.

Why that would produce better results is not clear. What is clear is that it runs a great risk of alienating

countries of the Global South, which do not want to be forced to choose between Russia and the West.

Other pundits advise the administration to abandon Ukraine's goal of liberating all the territory seized by Russia to focus on defending the current line of contact and rebuilding the economy of the territory Kyiv does control in partnership with Western allies.

The hope is that a stout defence will eventually convince Putin of the futility of further military operations and bring him to the negotiating table. The administration's approach will likely be between these two extremes, borrowing elements from each one.

Election Year

The one thing the Biden Administration will not do, however, is talk to Russia. It does not trust Putin to engage in good faith. It sees little evidence that he is inclined to bring the conflict to an end through a negotiated settlement.

And yet, it also understands that at some point it will have to talk to Russia, not only to resolve the Ukraine conflict but also to deal with the broader question of European security.

In the end, Russia and the United States are the only two countries that can reshape the balance of power in Europe. In this light, the administration's primary goal in the months ahead, with regard to the war in Ukraine, should be creating the conditions in which talks can commence.

Would Donald Trump's victory in this November's presidential election change this assessment in a fundamental way? There is a widespread belief that Trump as president would abandon Ukraine, handing Putin a major victory. But that is far from certain.

Trump has said little about Ukraine or Russia in the past year, other than to boast that he would resolve the Ukraine conflict in 24 hours, without giving a plausible explanation of how.

Conclusion

That provides little guidance as to how Trump would act if he occupied the White House. What we do know is that for all his fawning over Putin, his administration's Russia policy was actually tougher than his predecessor's. He sent Ukraine the lethal aid President Barack Obama refused to provide to avoid gratuitously provoking Putin.

Trump expanded sanctions against Russia, expelled its diplomats, and shuttered its diplomatic missions. Against this background, the best bet at the moment is that Trump would not depart radically from the Russia policy he inherited from Biden. And that means no improvement in relations is on the horizon.



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A Russian view

PREPARING FOR THE WORST, WORKING FOR THE BEST

Andrey Kortunov



Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Introduction

“Hope for the best and prepare for the worst”. The old English proverb is probably the most evident way to approach world politics two years after the outbreak of the military confrontation in the center of Europe.

All of us would like this fratricidal conflict between Russia and Ukraine to end as soon as possible and therefore, we are desperately trying to find at least some grounds for optimism in every new statement coming out from Moscow, Kyiv, Washington or Brussels, in every new peace initiative presented by various state leaders, international organisations and independent scholars.

However, time flies, the conflict goes on and on; a ceasefire, not to mention a conflict settlement, is moving further and further away like the horizon line moves away once you approach it.

All the parties directly or indirectly involved in the conflict have demonstrated a degree of resilience that was hard to imagine two years ago, all seem to believe that with time their position should get stronger, and peace narratives on the two sides remain incompatible with each other.

Though the widely advertised Ukrainian counteroffensive that started in early summer of 2023 was clearly unsuccessful, its failure so far has not resulted in any new flexibility of the Ukrainian leadership; the so-called ‘Zelensky Plan’ that implies a de-facto capitulation of the Kremlin remains firmly in place.

Vladimir Putin, in his turn, does not seem to be motivated to change his overall approach to the conflict, especially when the strategic initiative seems to be back in his hands with the Ukrainian forces retreating.

In fact, since 2023, one could observe a further escalation of the conflict with the Ukrainian side trying to bring war deeper into the Russian territory and the West providing Kyiv with more and more sophisticated weapons, including modern tanks and long-range missiles.

If the idea behind these efforts was to demoralise the Russian population and to boost political opposition against the Kremlin inside the country, it clearly did not work out. After the presidential elections in mid-March 2024, Putin's political position remains strong and his domestic powerbase is solid, to the extent any criticism of the Kremlin does exist in Russia, it comes more from impatient militant hawks than from frustrated pacifist doves.

In 2023, Moscow swiftly moved ahead in increasing its military hardware production in recruiting more contract servicemen and also intensified massive missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.

Future Prospects

Is there any light seen at the end of the tunnel? Some analysts argue that the forthcoming US election in November 2024 might become a turning point in the conflict, especially if Donald Trump beats Joe Biden and the Republicans gain full control of Congress.

Others disagree, reminding us that US foreign policy has a bipartisan nature and that the Washington Deep State cannot afford to lose in Ukraine, no matter who sits in the White House or on Capitol Hill.

Some believe that given the growing frictions within the Ukrainian leadership, there might be a political regime change in Kyiv. Others consider such predictions to be absolutely arbitrary and ungrounded; they interpret the recent removal of the top Ukrainian military commander, General

Valery Zaluzhny by President Volodymyr Zelensky as yet another proof that the latter is still in full control of the political decision-making in Ukraine.

In sum, there are many independent variables at play, but in any case, the third year of the conflict is likely to be another very difficult year for Russia, for Ukraine, for Europe and for the rest of the international community.

Even if there is no further escalation on the battlefield, the crisis in Europe is doomed to spread instability and chaos across the world like a stone thrown into a pond creates ripples on the water. The difference is that in the physical world, ripples die down as quickly as they form, as the surface tension of the water dampens their efforts. In the modern international system, there is no such tension to damper them.

True, not all of the conflicts in various corners of the planet are directly related to the Russian-Ukrainian confrontation, each of these conflicts has its own roots, dynamics and beneficiaries. Still, the impact of what is going on in Europe is felt everywhere - in Gaza and in the West Bank, in Yemen and in Sahel, in the Korean Peninsula and in the South Caucasus.

Anyone with open eyes can see the daunting writing on the wall. The US-Russian strategic arms control is completely stalled and the chances that it could be resumed are disappearing literally with every passing day. The non-proliferation regime is not in much better shape, given the failure of great powers to resurrect the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement with Iran or to keep North Korea's nuclear and ballistic ambitions at bay.

Last year's US-China mini-detente remains very fragile and might turn into another cycle of escalating tensions at any moment. The global economy is exposed to high risks of further

fragmentation, protectionism, trade wars and unilateral sanctions.

All these unfortunate developments have a strong negative impact on the performance of international multilateral institutions, on the climate change agenda, on global food and energy security, on transborder migration management and on fighting international terrorism.

Sceptics would say that humankind has seen hard times more than once before but the world has not come to an end and the international system has always demonstrated a remarkable flexibility and adaptivity. One could refer, for instance, to the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, or to the Arab Spring of 2011, to the migrant flood in Europe in 2015 or the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021.

True, the modern international system managed to survive through many lean times and has absorbed numerous shocks. However, all of these shocks, whether the Soviet disintegration in 1991 or the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, were largely limited to either one dimension of global politics or to one region of the world. Conversely, the ongoing crisis in Europe is rapidly acquiring a truly global scale and a multidimensional nature.

Furthermore, during previous disasters there has always been a strong chance that great powers could quickly get together, put aside their disagreements and work hand in hand with each other in tackling common threats and challenges. This is no longer the case – under the current divisive geopolitical circumstances, great powers are much more likely to work against one another than together with each other.

The international system is rapidly sliding down towards a dangerous zero-sum game (some would even argue that this is a negative-sum

game), making it exceedingly difficult to come to a mutually acceptable compromise.

Of course, all the pain, penury and strife that the world goes through today notwithstanding, life does not stop at this juncture. It is inherent in human nature to hope for the best; if our species had consisted mostly of pessimists, it would probably have not survived in its sometimes quite harsh and hostile environment. This is not the first time in history, when the international system faces the prospect of a radical transformation. It is probably not the last one either. Transformation might be painful and costly but it should not be lethal. So, as Steve Jobs once put it, “Let’s go and invent tomorrow rather than worrying about yesterday”.

Conclusion

However, how exactly can we invent tomorrow? In the past, fundamental transformations of the international system usually came as a result of major wars between leading actors – be it the Thirty Years war in the mid-17th century, the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century, or the first and the second world wars of the 20th century.

The outcomes of these large European or even global conflicts allowed to fix a new balance of powers, and the victorious actors were able to set new rules of the game for themselves and for the rest of international players.

Not this time. The 21st century reality is that great powers can no longer afford to wage classical wars between themselves since such wars may well lead to a complete annihilation of humankind. Instead, they prefer to go for proxy wars (like the one that the West now wages in Ukraine against Russia) or economic and technological wars (like the one that the United States has launched against China).

Such wars may last for many years

and even decades without defining the ultimate winner. Therefore, a new balance of powers – in Europe, in Asia or in the world at large – is likely to remain manifestly uncertain, highly ambiguous and fiercely contested for a long time.

A new world order and a new level of global governance should sooner or later emerge, if humankind has not yet completely lost its instinct of self-preservation.

But the new world order is unlikely to become a product of another Big Deal or Grand Bargain between major players, it is more likely to emerge as a combination of specific incremental multilateral arrangements. In this sense, institutions like the BRICS or the SCO, attempts to regulate AI, efforts at preserving the WTO or at democratizing the global financial system deserve careful attention.

A lot can and should be done at the expert level paving the way for future official negotiations on critical security and development matters. It would be morally unacceptable and politically short-sighted to stay caught in a gloom and doom mood lamenting about the unravelling crisis. Fragile sprouts of a new globalisation should gradually break through the hard shell of stone and concrete that geopolitics covered the international system with over the last couple of years. The urgent task of today is to locate these sprouts, to water, to fertilise and to tend them so that they will grow and bear fruit.

To cut it short, preparing for the worst should not be a reason to procrastinate with working for



Andrey Kortunov

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Indian views

UKRAINE WAR: AN UPDATE

Krishnan Srinivasan



40-nation meeting at Ramstein Air Base to coordinate Western military aid to Ukraine, April 2022.

Introduction

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar deserve praise for their adroit handling of the Ukraine War, which has placed India in a sweet spot in world affairs. This happened despite intense covert and overt external pressure from the West, and the Indian media with rare exceptions repeating western stories of alleged Ukrainian success while portraying Russian President Putin as a threat to both the democratic value system and world order.

The United Nations Charter's Article 2.4 urges nations to refrain from the "threat or use of force", each contingency having equal validity. The deliberate eastwards expansion of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) after 1990, despite innumerable protestations from Moscow, threatened Russia's security with encirclement, obliging it to retaliate forcefully, and setting preconditions of Ukraine's demilitarisation and

neutrality.

Initially, both NATO and Russia made grievous errors; Russia's drive towards Kiev with inadequate manpower and weaponry was wrongly based on the belief that resistance from a fellow Slav and former Soviet state would be minimal, while NATO and the United States underestimated Russia's economic and military resilience against countless packages of unilateral sanctions, and believed that the rest of the world would unite behind Ukraine.

What is clear, after 24 months, is that Russia will not be defeated, and it is most unlikely that Ukraine will ever recover the almost 20 percent territory it has already lost.¹ The longer the war continues, the greater will be the loss of territory by Ukraine.

Western Aid to Ukraine

Ukraine was never to be a push-over for Russia; in July 2022 it had an active military strength of 700,000 and with para-military added, close to one million.² Ukraine benefitted from billions of dollars of military equipment and training from NATO, operational planning, support, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, and as yet unknown levels of NATO manpower.

At every stage, the USA has escalated Ukraine's weaponry with controversial depleted uranium and cluster munitions, and lately ATACMS missiles and F-16 aircraft. America has so far donated to Ukraine over \$64 billion in funding the Ukrainian military and civil establishment, including \$46 billion in military equipment.³

The EU has expended \$96 billion, including military aid, and another \$54 billion is promised.⁴ US President Biden is asking Congress for an addition \$66 billion for Ukraine.⁵ All these efforts for Western aid come in the face of mounting donor fatigue, when Ukraine's President Zelensky is regarded less a martyr and more an Oliver Twist forever asking for more.

In Europe, NATO members Slovakia and Hungary are opposed to arming Ukraine, and join Poland in raising trade barriers with neighbouring Ukraine. In the US Congress, many far-right Republicans are voting against more aid, seeking from the Biden administration the estimated costs and length of the war, an audit of money provided, the shape of a possible victory and assurances of European burden-sharing.

A poll conducted by CNN suggests that 55% of Americans oppose further funding for Ukraine.⁶ The debate is also informed by noted investigator Seymour Hersh⁷, citing CIA sources, that the Ukrainian president and his entourage embezzled around \$400 million last year,⁸ and according to Forbes, Zelensky himself is worth some \$20 million.⁹

Essential to future support for Ukraine is the progress, since early June 2023, of a Ukraine offensive to

regain areas lost to Russia. But Ukraine scarcely dented Russian defensive positions and was nowhere near cutting off Russian land access to Crimea. A blame-game then developed, with Ukraine accusing NATO of inadequate supply of weapons and NATO criticising Kiev's war strategy. Zelensky dismissed Ukraine's army commander in February this year.

Human Costs of War

The human cost of the war has been extreme. There are 6.5 million internally displaced Ukrainians, 7.7 million refugees from Ukraine and 15.7 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.¹⁰ Roughly 10,000 civilian deaths, 7000 missing and 18,500 wounded are estimated by the UN.¹¹ According to the New York Times, the US places Ukrainian military deaths at 70,000 with 120,000 injured,¹² and Russia's dead and wounded at 315,000.¹³

Russia itself was relatively untouched by the war, but recently is targeted by Ukraine drone strikes, land penetrations by undefined 'anti-Russian elements', drone, missile and maritime attacks on its Black Sea fleet and Crimea. Moscow maintains that any peace deal will have to recognize the "new territorial reality" that the incorporated regions of Crimea (since 2014), Donetsk, Lugansk, Kherson, and Zaporozhye will not be returned to Ukraine.¹⁴

Potential Future Scenario

Neither a decisive victory for one side nor a compromise peace agreement seems likely in the near future. In the battle of attrition on the 1000-mile front line, Russian forces are lately advancing in certain sectors but very slowly. The Americans and NATO promise Ukraine support "for as long as it takes": in effect this means as long as Washington wants it to continue, because it is able to prolong the proxy war indefinitely due to economic strength and geostrategic

invulnerability.

However, US public consensus is fraying and the presidential election this year will have a bearing on its attitude. It needs recalling that NATO vetoed a Ukraine-Russia peace deal in March 2022 and a Gallup poll shows 70% of Ukrainians oppose peace talks with Russia.¹⁵

What is the likely scenario for the Ukraine War? Ukraine is short of fighting personnel and weapons, and even if the \$ 66 billion held up by Republican Party Congressmen is passed, it is unlikely to make much difference.

The only question is where the Russian front line will be when the war ends. The Russian economy in 2023 grew faster than any in the G-7, and the sanctions by the West, illegal and unilateral according to international law, have boomeranged on Europe, which is hard hit economically and divided socially, leading to the rise of right-wing parties.

For the United States, the Ukraine War is a setback for President Biden's foreign policy, aggravated by Israel's onslaught on the Palestinians. Facing these two problems, the White House will try to soften the tensions with China to avoid opening another front on Taiwan or China's maritime claims.

If former President Trump regains the White House, he may change track to rebuild relations with Russia and resume his containment policy of China.

Conclusion

Hypocrisy is intrinsic to foreign policy. State sovereignty and integrity are invoked against Russia in Ukraine, but every UN Security Council member has violated this principle in the interest of security, and so have notable global players like Ethiopia, India, Israel and Turkey.

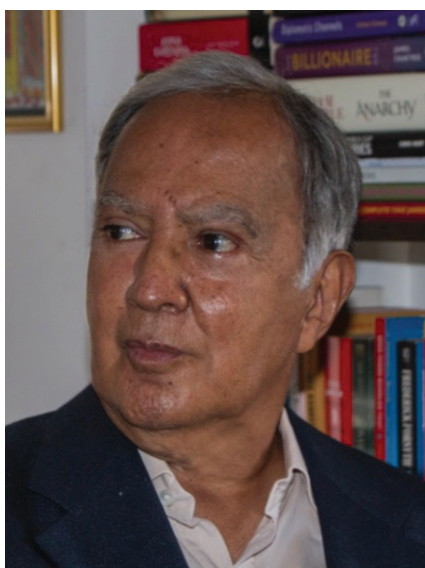
The West has condemned the referendum by which Ukrainian territories have been annexed to Russia, but many European countries and the USA themselves invoke the same principle of popular will for their overseas territories.

The distancing of the Global South from a pro-Ukraine stance in the war has enabled India and the non-western world to act independently when Western nations are unmindful of how their actions adversely affect the rest of the world. These are among the factors that will reset the international order with a new agenda for world stability.

For the Global South, restrictions on the use of illegal sanctions which have a damaging collateral effect and action to reduce the dominance of the US dollar on the world's financial transactions must be considered a high priority.

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MANY VOICES: A REALITY CHECK ON HOW THE WORLD HAS ACTUALLY REACTED TO THE UKRAINE WAR

Pankaj Saran & Prateek Kapil



United Nations General Assembly.

A War of Narratives

The Ukraine war has entered its third year. Whatever else it may or may not be, it has most definitely been a “war of narratives”. It has also been an “information war”. It is said that words matter, but the world received a crash course in diplomatic lexicon in the aftermath of the “War”. Some called it a “Special Military Operation”. Others called it quite simply a “War of Putin’s choice”, an “unprovoked military aggression” and still others chose to use the word “conflict” to describe the events that unfolded on 24 February 2022.

In Western mass media headlines, the Russian military action in Ukraine eclipsed the catastrophe

that had engulfed Afghanistan six months earlier. There was outrage, indignation and a strong sense of the “world” being wronged on every cannon of international law. The reaction was, in a sense, a reminder to the world where power rested and what mattered. There was no space for the countless number of innocent people who were being killed in fratricidal conflicts in different parts of the world.

India woke up, late, but nevertheless fearlessly, to voice the feelings of the “rest of the world” – the Global South. India sought to press the pause button on western hysteria and the self-consuming East-West conflict to say that this was not the end of history.

There were other real problems, equally existential and explosive, that were hurting the vast majority of countries. Their voices were being drowned out. The “South” was yet again becoming collateral damage of major power rivalry. India asserted that this was not the era of a weak and helpless post-Colonial world. The fact that developing countries came together to emphasize the destabilizing nature of the conflict and the effect on their core development agenda has emerged as fundamental an aspect of today’s geopolitics as the invasion itself.

The nuances in global reactions to the war have been lost in the high decibel official reaction from western capitals and accompanying media coverage. These have been marked by intolerance for dissent, half-truths and vilification. Western media commentary on Ukraine has been as definitive and self-righteous in its analysis as its coverage was of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and links with al Qaeda.

A closer look at global reactions shows that the world beyond the immediate sides has not bought into the “cancel Russia” project, or the line that US/NATO actions had no role to play in what Russia did.

The world is not prepared to get divided once again between the West and the rest or into rival blocs. This is evident in national positions as it is in voting patterns in the United Nations. The Voice of the Global South Summit during India’s G20 Presidency was the high point of the South’s assertion of strategic autonomy.

The most populous democracies¹ in the world in addition to India – Indonesia, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and Argentina – have refused to side with NATO. Almost all countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America have voiced discomfort, if not opposition, to unilateral sanctions against Russia. Those who have complied, in varying degrees, are close friends of the West or its allies.

Dissonance in the UN

An analysis of the main UN resolutions since February 2022 shows the complexity of world opinion and how countries have steered their way through the diplomatic labyrinth, juggling national positions, their bilateral relationships with the parties to the conflict, their values and interests. Voting patterns indicate that Russia could not be isolated, at least within the UN.

The very first Resolution condemning the Russian aggression against Ukraine on March 2, 2022, when both tempers and emotions were running high, was adopted by a vote of 141 in favour to 5 against (Belarus, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Eritrea, Russian Federation, and Syria).

Yet it was the 35 abstentions that attracted global attention. These were systemically significant countries. They included India, South Africa, Mexico and China, apart from Russia’s neighbours in Central Asia. The number of votes in favour could not go beyond 141 even a year later, when a similar Resolution was introduced in February 2023 to mark the first anniversary of the war.

Voting on the Resolution calling for Russia’s suspension from the Human Rights Council in April 2022 was even more divided. While the Resolution received a two-thirds majority of those present and voting, numbering 93, the fact also was that as many as 58 countries abstained. The abstentions were not the “rogue gallery” of international politics.

They included India, Brazil, South Africa, Mexico, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Pakistan, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia and Cambodia. 24 countries voted against the move. Thus, if 93 countries had voted to oust Russia

from the Human Rights Council, 82 countries did not.

International opinion was further divided on the November 2022 UN General Assembly calling on Russia to pay war reparations. 94 countries supported the Resolution but 73 abstained, including Brazil, India and South Africa, and 14 voted against.

As past record shows, numbers in the General Assembly do not really serve either as a barometer of international support to an issue or of a country's international standing. For decades, similar resolutions in which the vast membership have voted overwhelmingly against Israel have neither solved the Arab-Israeli dispute nor led to Israel's isolation.

To quote a recent example, in December 2023, 151 countries voted against Israel on a Resolution demanding "immediate humanitarian ceasefire" in Gaza but this and many earlier resolutions have not made any significant impact on how countries have conducted their bilateral relations with Israel. The world has dealt with Israel regardless of the rights and wrongs.

This is not an Era of War

No comment sums up the global reaction better than the comment made by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to President Vladimir Putin at the SCO summit in Samarkand in September 2022. The comment was welcomed on both sides of the aisle.

India has abstained on resolutions in the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly against Russia except the one which argued against targeting civilians. In South Asia, countries were evenly divided, with four supporting the Resolution of 23rd February 2023 upholding the principles of the UN charter underlying a just and lasting peace in Ukraine (Afghanistan, Bhutan, the Maldives, and Nepal) and four abstaining (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan,

and Sri Lanka).

Indian media coverage of the war was based primarily on western news agencies and western media coverage. They were only isolated cases of Indian media reporting either from the battleground or reporting all points of view, including the Russian. The Athens Journal felt it worthwhile enough to conduct a review² of Indian media coverage.

The Battle between Democracy and Autocracy

Comments by President Biden within a month of the outbreak of the conflict in March 2022 in Poland framing the Ukraine War as the battle between democracy and autocracy were short lived in their currency. The world refused to see the conflict in binary terms. The characterization had to be tempered and then withdrawn in the light of global pushback and even opposition from within the US political system.

Mainstream Republican Presidential candidates have questioned the US Administration's Ukraine strategy. Today, the US Administration is faced with a moral crisis in dealing with Israel's retribution in Gaza after the October 7 terror attacks by Hamas.

Europe

Beneath the expansion of NATO and veneer of European unity lie intensive negotiations on the approach to Russia. There are different views originating from different subregions of Europe and governments of different political complexions. The streak of realism runs strong which will not allow Ukraine to become a NATO member and bind NATO allies to Article 5 of the Treaty.

Even Ukraine's EU membership is going to be a long haul. Hungary and Turkey have their own irons in the fire. European unity is fraying as the conflict drags on and the economic, military and social costs of supporting Ukraine to the last Ukrainian become more visible. Europe may be liberating itself from Russian energy but the

winds of recession are blowing across Europe.

Europe's dependence on China is growing as fast as it is losing its competitiveness to China. President Macron has received less than lip service to his suggestion about the possibility of European boots on the ground. Europe does not want a Russia-NATO war nor a Third World War.

The trans-Atlantic alliance is much more complex than headlines suggest, and for good reason, and could get into more trouble under a Trump White House. Instead the idea of a peace summit is slowly gaining traction.

Central Asia

Russia's "near abroad" was, not unexpectedly, the first to feel the heat of the "Special Military Operation". The balancing act it has had to engage in so as not to offend Russia either during the voting on various UN Resolutions or in bilateral statements or in national media coverage while being upset over the Russian military action has been taxing. Russia has managed to hold its periphery with it.

Central Asia did not mount a "revolt" against Russia. This would be a matter of satisfaction for Russia, but Russia could pay a price in the longer term. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan abstained on the UN resolutions condemning Russia while Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan did not vote at all.

Latin America

While the majority of Latin American countries responded to the war in keeping with their customary and strongly held commitment to international law, there were notable exceptions. Even those who condemned Russia within and outside the UN chose not to join the sanctions against Russia, nor join in the supply of weapons to Ukraine.

Some leaders³ have also taken actions that contrasted with their UN votes—such as Brazil's Lula da Silva, who has ascribed blame to Ukraine for Russia's aggression, or Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who raised eyebrows by inviting Russian troops to march in the country's Independence Day parade. President Lula da Silva has been pushing to form a "peace club" for Ukraine comprising "neutral" countries of the Global South.

Africa

Africa's position has been nuanced and varied. Despite being an immediate victim of food, fertiliser and energy shortages due to the conflict, and being far more vulnerable to Western pressures, African countries have not participated in the "cancel Russia" campaign or in the sanctions against Russia.

They have made their reluctance known to get sucked into another Cold War while also raising the demand for a grain deal and food security. African leaders went ahead with their second Leaders' summit with President Putin in 2023, although the turnout was much lower than in the past. Yet, Egypt and a few other large countries made it a point to show up.

An African Peace Mission consisting of leaders and representatives from seven countries met President Zelensky and President Putin in June 2023.⁴ Working with all major powers of the world, the African Union has brought the focus to global governance reform. Africa has forcefully argued that Ukraine and Gaza are symptoms of global power imbalances and historical injustices.

While Kenya has been critical of Russia, South Africa has taken an equally aggressive stand of support to Russia, including abstaining, like many other African countries, in the UNGA vote. It has recently linked western double standards on Gaza with the Ukraine conflict.

West Asia

The reaction in the West Asian region has been among the most interesting and revealing of current geopolitical fault lines. Contrary to their established pro-West positions, the Gulf Kingdoms while maintaining their voting stance with the West in the UN have maintained open lines with Russia.

Gulf Arab officials⁵ do not share the Western understanding of Russia's rogue conduct in Ukraine as the greatest threat to the international rules-based order in the contemporary period. GCC leaders perceive the Ukraine war as one of many armed conflicts.

Qatar and Kuwait have been slightly more aligned with the West in terms of outright condemning Russia's invasion. The United Arab Emirates⁶ (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman have not referred to the Russian aggression against Ukraine as an "invasion" and they have called on all actors involved in the war to negotiate a settlement.

President Putin paid visits to the United Arab Emirate and Saudi Arabia in December 2023, marking his first trip to the Arab world since the Ukraine War. UAE has emerged as the new entrepot for Russian trade and investment activities, bypassing sanctions and offering its currency and financial system for settlement of transactions involving Russian entities, and even hosting them. Traditional Russian friends such as Iran, Syria and even Iraq have of course sided with Russia, which has not been a surprise.

The role of Turkey, a NATO ally, is a case study in balancing and multi-alignment. It played a key role in the Black Sea grain deal and almost succeeded in brokering a peace deal in 2022. It has since maintained channels of communication with both Russia and Ukraine and has again offered to mediate.

But more profound than Turkey is the case of Israel. President Putin and PM Netanyahu have enjoyed good relations. Israel and Russia worked together in the Syria operations. Russia kept Iran and Israel at bay from each other. In November

2022, Israel did the unimaginable by abstaining from a UNGA Resolution demanding reparations from Russia for invading Ukraine. Before that Ukraine had voted in favour of an anti-Israeli Resolution.

South East Asia

A common ASEAN position on the war has come under similar strain. Russia is not an influential player in this region, unlike China and the US. It does not have the image of an evil empire and does not arouse strong sentiments. Positions of ASEAN countries have ranged from those of Singapore, which backed some of the sanctions, to Myanmar, which has supported the Russian position. In Indonesia and Malaysia, media narratives have accused the West of hypocrisy because of the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s.

Vietnam and Laos have had historically close ties with Russia, and this was evident in their abstentions in the UN. There were cases where Myanmar voted with Russia and there were others where anti-Russia Resolutions were co-sponsored by Cambodia and Singapore.

In the first year of the war, Indonesian President Joko Widodo visited Russia and met President Putin to build consensus during the G20 Presidency. Despite intense Western pressure, Indonesia did all it could, with the help of India, to prevent the breakdown of the Bali G20 Summit.

China

China has abstained on majority of the UN resolutions and has blamed the US and the West for dismissing Russian security concerns in Ukraine. It has repeatedly refuted claims of supplying military aid to Russia. The Chinese "Peace Plan" released on the first anniversary of the war has been a non-starter because it was seen as a mask to secure Russian interests.

Conclusion

The world's reaction to the Ukraine conflict has been more nuanced and less monochromatic than what has been portrayed by mainstream media. Absolutist interpretations of the principles of international law have coexisted with regional and national reactions that have been specific to circumstances of individual countries.

The West has been able to weaponize normal inter-state activities, but it has not been able to demonise Russia in the eyes of the world. The “global street” has not bought into the “you are with us or against us” framework that it was subjected to during the Cold War. In addition, the Afghanistan crisis, and many others, were pushed out of the headlines and double standards in western media coverage to Israel's response to the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas are all evident.

The position India took on the Ukraine conflict is today gaining support. The conflict has to wind down with a return to diplomacy and dialogue.

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THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: IMPACT ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Sanjay Kumar Pandey



BRICS summit meeting, July 2018.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine war has once again highlighted the chasm between the Global North and South. While it has united the Western democracies and the transatlantic alliance in opposing Russian action, the Global South has not been on the same page in endorsing the Western position. From the very start of the conflict, a group of 35-40 countries, representing more than half of the world's population, including China, India, many West Asian and Latin American countries and 17 countries from Africa, have maintained equidistance from the two belligerents. These states abstained during voting at the United Nations General Assembly that sought to condemn Russian action.

These and many other countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America have been designated as the Global South or the Third World.

In 1969, an American critic of the Vietnam War, Carl Oglesby, denounced the war as “the domination of the North over the Global South.”

He was referring to the geopolitical entity described by French demographer Alfred Sauvy in 1952 as the “Third World”.¹ In April 2022, in the wake of evidence of serious human rights violations in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, 50 members voted against expelling Russia from the Human Rights Council. These countries insisted that, instead of fixing the responsibility for starting the war, the UN should try to bring the conflict to an immediate end. There are many reasons behind the so-called indifference and opposition of the Global South to the Western position on Russia.² The main concern of the

Global South has been the disruption of global supply chains of energy, food grains and fertilisers due to this war as explained below.

Food Security

The most serious challenge has been food (in)security. According to a US Department of Agriculture (USDA) report, in May 2022, Russia and Ukraine were the number one and five top wheat exporters in the world.³

According to another estimate, if wheat exports from Russia and Ukraine are completely stopped; yearly per capita wheat consumption would be reduced by 19 percent in South Asia, 57 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 26 percent in Southeast Asia, nearly 39 percent in Central Asia, West Asia and North Africa, and 27 percent in other areas. In terms of daily per capita calorie intake, the decrease would be more than 3 percent in South Asia, 6 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2.2 percent in Southeast Asia, in Central Asia, West Asia, and 14 percent in North Africa, and 6.2 percent in the other countries.⁴

The negative impact on agricultural commodity markets has created pressure on wheat supplies and stocks and consequently on food prices. Ukraine was also the largest Sunflower seed exporter accounting for nearly 20 percent of total world exports.⁵

From the perspective of continents, Asian countries accounted for purchases valued at \$30.8 billion or 42.8 percent of the global total in 2022, followed by African countries at 26 percent while Europe imported only 17.7 percent worth of worldwide wheat.

What is more important is that imports from Russia and Ukraine accounted for more than 38 percent of the wheat imported by countries in

Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 23 percent of imports in Southeast and East Asia, and more than 48 percent of imports by countries in Central Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. This clearly highlights the high dependence of the countries of the Global South on Russia and Ukraine for their food security.⁶

The problem of food security is most serious for the African countries. With over 65 per cent of the world's uncultivated land, Africa is still a net food importer, and hence, has been severely impacted by the rise of global food prices due to the war.

According to figures from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), staple food prices in Africa “surged by an average 23.9 percent in 2020-22—the most since the 2008 global financial crisis.” On an average, food items account for about 42 percent of African household consumption, reaching as high as 60 percent in countries affected by conflict and insecurity. One can contrast it with France and the United States, where food items represent 13 percent and 6 percent of household consumption, respectively, according to the United Nations.⁷

According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), in the year 2020, 15 African countries imported over 50 percent of their wheat products from the Russian Federation or Ukraine (Eritrea, Egypt, Benin, Sudan, Djibouti, and Tanzania imported over 70 percent of their wheat from the region).

The UN's 2023 World Economic Situations and Prospects Report shows that in 2020, 26 per cent Africans are facing severe food insecurity. During the ‘Dakar 2 Summit on Feeding Africa: Food Sovereignty and Resilience’ held from 25 to 27 January 2023, the AfDB reported that this number has increased to nearly one-third (about 300 million people) of the global population that is currently facing hunger and food insecurity.⁸

Energy Security

Russia has been one of the top energy suppliers in the world. In 2021, Russia was the largest

natural gas-exporting country world over, the second-largest crude oil and condensates-exporting country after Saudi Arabia, and the third-largest coal-exporting country behind Indonesia and Australia. Although OECD Europe was the largest importer of Russia's crude oil and natural gas, countries in Asia and the Oceania region imported most of Russia's coal exports.⁹

The EU used to be the largest importer of natural gas in the world and imported 90 percent of its needs in natural gas, of which 41 percent came from Russia, and the rest primarily came from Norway (24 percent) and Algeria (11 percent). The EU also used to import 27 percent of its oil and 46 percent of coal from Russia.¹⁰

The European governments could largely shield their citizens from the price shocks following the war by spending more than \$640 billion on energy subsidies. However, the weak African economies did not have the fiscal resources to protect consumers from rising energy prices.

The 2022 World Economic Outlook painted a stark picture of the state of global energy, saying that it is “delivering a shock of unprecedented breadth and complexity.”

For the African economies still struggling to emerge from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, this was a bolt from the blue, for which they did not have enough resources to cope with. The situation was worsened due to fluctuations in exchange rates, double digit inflation, and high indebtedness (seven to fourteen African countries are in the high risk zone). The gravity of the situation can be understood by the fact that half of African households, according to the IMF, spend over 50 per cent of their overall consumption on food and energy.¹¹

Fertiliser Crisis

In 2020, the most recent year for which fertiliser

trade data are available, Russia and its neighbour Belarus were the world's top fertiliser exporters, accounting for nearly 20 percent of the three major types globally: nitrogen, phosphate, and potash.¹²

As a key input in food production, rising fertiliser prices can negatively impact food supply. If farmers limit their use of fertiliser because of higher costs, their yields could decline. Farmers in low and lower-middle income countries tend to use less fertiliser, so reducing the application may further reduce their crop yields. Although by March 2023, fertiliser export prices had returned to levels seen before the invasion, the fluctuation and uncertainty remain.¹³

At the start of the Ukraine War, fertiliser prices were already high due to increasing demand after the pandemic, during which there was a decline. Moreover, increases in prices of natural gas and coal, key inputs in fertiliser production, also led to hikes in prices. The shortage impacted the small low income countries more than the rest.

Large fertiliser importers from Russia and Belarus were able to diversify their imports. Brazil, the second largest importer of potash, started importing from Canada; Morocco, the fourth largest global ammonia importer, stepped up imports from Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At the same time, Russian fertiliser exports also increased dramatically to countries, such as India. However, smaller low-income countries in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) faced serious shortfall in fertiliser availability after the invasion. The good news is that fertiliser prices are coming back to 2021 levels.¹⁴

Andrei Guryev, head of the Russian Fertilisers Producers Association claimed that Russian mineral fertiliser production and exports in 2024 could recover to their 2021 levels. Russia produced 58.6 million tonnes and exported 37.5 million tonnes of fertiliser in 2021, which fell more than 7 percent to 54.3 million tonnes and exports fell 15 percent in 2022.

He further asserted that while the volume of Russian fertiliser exports to unfriendly countries decreased by a quarter, the share of friendly countries in Russian fertiliser exports in 2023 is expected to be 75 percent compared with 70 percent a year earlier. For Russia the countries of Global South, especially India and Brazil are “New priority export destinations”.¹⁵

Implications for India

Coming soon after the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war has posed both economic as well as diplomatic challenges for India. According to Dharmakriti Joshi, chief economist, Crisil, the conflict had worsened the growth-inflation balance for India. It pushed up crude prices and caused supply side bottlenecks, thereby putting significant upward pressure on inflation. It also raised the fertiliser bill substantially and threatened to derail the budgetary math.¹⁶

However, for India, the impact was not felt as much as other major economies. World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have termed India to be a “bright spot”.¹⁷ This war also created some economic opportunities for India. As many countries in the world, including the developed North, search for alternatives to China, seen as a close partner of Russia, there is greater focus on India as an attractive destination for investment. Foreign direct investments into India are likely to gather momentum in 2024.¹⁸

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine war has been a catastrophe, not just for Ukraine, and Russia, but the entire world, due to its negative consequences for global food, energy and fertiliser supply chains, especially for countries of the Global South. At the core of this war are diverse worldviews and national interests of the two involved countries. The attempt by the Global North to frame the war as a conflict between Western values like democracy and the rule of law, and the non-West which pursues its own self-interests, has not helped the cause of democracy or peace.

In reality, the Western nations are pursuing their own interests in the same manner the non-Western countries do. The position of the Global South was best articulated by India’s Foreign Minister S Jaishankar when he said, “Europe has to get out of the mindset that Europe’s problems are the world’s problems, but the world’s problems are not Europe’s problems.” The prospects of peace will be better served if this ‘new Eurocentrism’ is abandoned and the concerns of the Global South are taken seriously.¹⁹

India’s pragmatic diplomacy has been acknowledged by countries not just in the South, but also by many in the Western world. More than two years since the start of the war, Russia seems to be well entrenched in parts of Ukraine, but its reputation has been greatly compromised. On the other hand, during the last six months, the US and Europe’s double standards on the killing of civilians, bombardment of hospitals and schools in Ukraine compared to Gaza has been exposed.²⁰

While the majority of the African, Asian and Latin American countries are opposed to Russian actions, quite a significant number are not ready to openly condemn Russia. The Western alliance seeks to penalise Russia by imposing economic sanctions and bolster Ukraine’s military capability against Russia while the rest of the world is preoccupied with tackling its negative economic consequences.

The response of the Global South to the Russia-Ukraine war has been primarily based on historical and economic reasons, as opposed to the Global North which has responded mainly through political and security perspectives.

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THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA WAR: MILITARY LESSONS FOR INDIA

Rakesh Sharma



A Ukrainian soldier holding a Punisher drone, April 2024.

Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine War has thrown up an overabundance of geopolitical, geo-economic and geostrategic lessons. In fact, learning from war is a serious business: there also ought to be a learning culture on the conduct of war fighting; on a future capability matrix and optimal military organisations in future conflicts! It, however, must be said that the lives of future military generations and the reputation of the Indian nation depends on learning and adaptation.

Military strategists globally have been analysing the Russia-Ukraine war in all its manifestations, and absorbing lessons for future warfare. The war has been also called the first full-scale drone war. Drones have transformed what were once “dumb”

artillery rounds into precision weapons. On its part, the US Army has learned lessons from the war like the use of drones to help artillery locate targets and countering unmanned aircraft systems. It is relevant to mention that India’s adversarial neighbour in the north, China, has been continually reappraising the war and drawing lessons, something which India needs to follow closely.

Military Lessons for India

Contextually, in this stream of lessons being generated of the Russian-Ukraine war, seven are the most relevant and bear examination for India.

The first lesson is that war is not inevitable. As

the previous and ongoing wars have shown, the economic costs globally have been very severe and long lasting; and the humanitarian costs are overwhelming and devastating. Political sagacity and diplomatic acumen are essential to avert the bloodshed and human misery. Politico-diplomacy has to look ahead, build relationships, explore drivers and trends, heed warnings on the horizon, and prevent an explosion to a war. Once a war commences, it runs its own course, with no assurances of the end-state or victory or defeat.

Second, excessive reliance on global support may be another fallacy. Deliberate strategic ambiguity and uncertainty, driven by internal political complications like the US Congress, is feasible. As many of the UN resolutions have shown, a number of countries hedge their positions and avoid taking sides during wars, despite sympathising with one or the other side.

Although India has many strategic partners, in the eventuality of a war many other forces will come into play – market forces, for instance, or trade issues. Inevitably, the transition happening in global geopolitics will influence events. While some support – especially in military wherewithal and intelligence—is feasible, its timeliness will have to be monitored. Obviously, while the Western military-industrial complex will salivate at the possibility of pecuniary gains with a protracted conflict, this is an era of self-help. The war will have to be prosecuted from within the finite capacities of the Indian nation. That must become the bottom-line for national capacity building.

Third, the reliance on economic interdependence with adversaries to decrease the chance of war is another fallacy. The belief is that trade relationships will lead to positive expectations and provide the incentive to stay peaceful. That economic interdependence will constitute a safeguard against war, is not tenable; political considerations always come first. Russia's weaponization of interdependence on Russian energy supplies to

Europe (and Ukraine) has not guaranteed peace. As a corollary, Chinese commercial interests and growing trade with India does not prevent the Communist Party of China's (CPC) political leadership's belligerence against India.

Fourth, peace based on agreements is fragile and illusory. Ukraine-Russia 2022 has proven what India witnessed against China in 2020. With five strong India-China agreements from 1993 to 2013, and the Minsk 1 and 2 between Ukraine and Russia, it is simple to see how easy it is for nations to break treaties and faith and how quickly a situation can descend into genuine catastrophe. India had over three decades to convince ourselves to believe that “this cannot happen here”, and overnight that illusion was shattered.

Fifth, the unthinkable: 20th century conventional warfare is equally possible in the 21st century, even with modern technological wars. The most important and brutal lesson of Ukraine is that major conventional wars with linear defences like in the First World War between large nations is possible — even under the shadow of modern technology and nuclear weapons. For decades, we have viewed major conventional wars as a relic of the past for fair and logical reasons. “Hard power” is back with a vengeance now, as the Ukraine and Gaza Wars have shown. The need for real kinetic capability and the national will to use it are imperative. For us too, territorial bickering by the adversary as the stated objective cannot be taken as the only bedrock of mutual differences. War can have geopolitical aims; territory can be an illusion to disallow India to reach her ‘potential’.

It is essential to consider the battlefield adaptations undertaken by both sides: Ukraine and Russia. Russians appeared initially to have given little heed to drones and loitering munitions that were to make traditional arms vulnerable. Ukraine's innovative approach to technology also allowed it to execute newer battlefield technologies and tactics that caused great upset to the Russian military.

There have been many other important innovations like explosive sea drones, which have been able to strike and damage Russian warships and oil tankers in the Black Sea. Ukraine's military leadership had prioritised projects that included robotic systems, electronic warfare, artificial intelligence tools, cyber security, communications, and information security management systems.

Sixth, wars can have unpredictable outcomes, as the ongoing war in Ukraine indicates. The outcome of all out warfare is uncertain and cannot be predicted from net-assessments, algorithms, war games, war-simulations and limited exercises. The intangibles and uncertainties in the fog of war do not lend themselves to quantification as is evident in the battlefields of Ukraine. Morale, national and military leadership, intuition, initiative, imagination, discipline, deception and indeed motivation, play very significant roles. In fact, even clear technological superiority has not been forceful enough to compel favourable outcomes or rapid decisions.

Learning from the ongoing war, a strong adversary will seek a short war, to avoid a scenario of protraction and even the likelihood of loss of face. War will remain a test of logistics and industrial capacity such as transport, huge amounts of ammunition, maintenance and battlefield and tertiary medical care.

In the same context is the issue of treachery and betrayal of trust and confidence by adversaries. India has had her share of treachery. Prime Minister Vajpayee was a sincere peacemaker when he undertook the bus to Lahore in February 1999, was received by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and the units of Pakistan Army gave the Indian Prime minister a guard of honour. All this while General Musharraf was treacherously executing the plans to occupy the heights of Kargil that led to a bitter war from May to July in the same year! In matters of appreciating adversarial conduct, India has to be

mindful of treachery, and avoid complacency.

Seventh and lastly, deterrence, as an attempt to discourage potential perpetrators by influencing their assessment of costs relative to potential gains, cannot ensure peace. The large Russian war machine could not deter war in Ukraine. The concept of deterrence - punitive/dissuasive in India-- is one of the most dominant, and is considered important to develop necessary strategic and operational capabilities. India, hence, does not have the luxury of easing-off on the defensibility of disputed borders.

Conclusion

In sum, complacency will be detrimental to national security. Apparently, riding on its own strength and overconfidence of NATO support, Ukrainian security forces and intelligence establishment had become complacent. India has had her share of being surprised in history, for instance in 1948, 1962, 1965, 1999, 2008 and 2020. Complacency hence can lead to war-like situations, and this highlights the all-importance of battlefield transparency.

To be militarily effective in war, it is of utmost necessity for India to recognise that in all domains of warfare – army, navy, air force, space, cyber and electronic warfare; and in all dimensions – physical, informational and cognitive – adaptation will be all important. Militaries will invariably confront problems posed by imaginative adversaries with asymmetrical force and technological advantage, as also of unfathomable strategy. The lines between peace and war have been blurred into irrelevance. Israel believed itself to be in a peaceful time. India, in peace, hence remains in a state of challenges, undeclared and unending.



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THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR: TAKEAWAYS FOR INDIA

Pankaj Saran and Raj Kumar Sharma



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Introduction

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has entered its third year, with no near-term end in sight. Nations around the world are drawing different lessons from this crisis based on their economic needs, foreign policy and national security priorities. The impact of this conflict is being felt around the world. India is no exception. The lessons for India can be categorised under different heads.

manufacturing capacity through joint ventures, transfer of technology and putting in place policies that promote and help national champions, start-ups and MSMEs, especially in the private sector. Many steps have already been taken in this direction, including the announcement of a list of items that are barred from imports.

Bolstering National Security

To wage and then win a war, a nation should be self-dependent to fulfil the military needs of its armed forces. India's overwhelming dependence on any country for military hardware has to be reduced. This requires a major push to fast-track domestic

Domestic production has to keep pace with cutting edge technologies. A great game over technology is underway between major world powers.¹ India has to learn the right lessons. Maintaining 'Balance of Technology' is as important for India as the 'Balance of Power'. India should source the best available technologies to fight the wars of the future. The doors to advanced Western technologies have been opened for India, but New Delhi should be

careful not to create new dependencies by following the earlier import-led model for defence modernisation. The short-term pain involved in building a credible and efficient domestic defence industry will have to be endured for long-term gain.

The modernisation of hardware has to go hand in hand with review of military doctrines and streamlining of procurement procedures. Private players should be seen as ‘partners’ and not simply as ‘vendors’ in defence modernisation and planning. Long pending structural reforms, some of which have been initiated, such as theaterisation of commands, need to be pushed. Hybrid threats to national security such as proxy and cognitive warfare, militarization of space, cyber-attacks on critical infrastructure, information warfare and ‘weaponization of everything’ need to be mainstreamed in national security strategy. In the Ukraine conflict, information warfare has been used by all sides for perception management. It allowed Ukraine advantages in three areas – boosting the morale of its own citizens, facilitating military support from other countries and receiving support from those within Russia who sympathise with Ukrainians.²

Winning the war is important, but so is winning the narrative. Strategies of how to win a war without fighting need to be debated and fine-tuned.

Before this conflict began, it was assumed that future wars would be short and swift. However, this crisis has stretched over many months demonstrating the fact that wars could be longer even in contemporary times. National will has to be developed to prevail in battles of attrition. Infrastructure and logistics are critical for success.

Robust Foreign Policy

In the area of foreign policy, constant vigil and prevention are critical. Management of peripheries and neighbours is a critical task for any nation. Smaller nations seek to insure

themselves against perceived threats from their large neighbours, not least by inviting extra-regional powers to underwrite their security. Large countries with multiple neighbours also have security interests and they equally expect these to be protected by their smaller neighbours.

Small countries open themselves to risk if they choose to serve as proxies and pawns in larger geopolitical battles. India has to be alive to the use of smaller states as springboards and proxies to contain and hurt India by inimical hegemonic third parties. The best example is Pakistan.

India should maintain relations with its traditional partners and keep all options open till such time as it acquires adequate national power. The war has weakened Russia, but not defeated Russia. The problem from India's point of view is that it has taken global attention away from China and the Indo-Pacific, making Europe once again the epicentre of global politics. The focus on China must be retained. India should maintain its relations with Russia for its inherent bilateral logic but also to prevent Russia's slide into China's embrace. India is the only country in the Quad which has not condemned Russia. India is not comfortable with constant pressure to distance itself from Moscow. It should intensify its dialogue with the US and Europe to illustrate to them the implications of pushing Russia into China's arms.

Meanwhile, India has no choice but to keep a close eye on the Russia-China relationship, as well as the evolution of US-China engagement. There are different voices and conflicting strategies within the US on how to deal with China. China is playing all sides to manoeuvre its way into pole position on the global stage.

Major Powers in this case have acted with scant regard for international law. The pursuit of national interest has overridden concern for global stability. India should have clarity about its national interests. It should be prepared to safeguard them, alone if necessary, and with friendly partners, where possible and necessary. The UN and its bodies and international organisations responsible for maintenance of international peace and security have proved to be ineffective. They are gridlocked, characterised by double standards and unrepresentative of the contemporary world. This is a lesson for India. It cannot afford to trust the international system to protect its interests.

Indian diplomacy has to be ready to deal with strategic surprises. This entails making tough choices, leveraging contradictions and converting adversities into opportunities. At the same time, India should be a solution provider and bring its civilisational strengths to bear on global problems, as it did in voicing the views of the Global South. A new balance between realism, pragmatism, interests and values will have to be found.

India has its weaknesses and has to guard against strategic overreach. Yet, it has its own formidable bargaining strengths, manifested today by its being courted by all major powers. This means a pursuit of a foreign policy that maximises individual relationships, and use of smaller issue based coalitions to supplement bilateral efforts.

Self-reliance and Trusted Supply Chains

The primary aim for India should be to keep its foot on the growth accelerator. Growth allows the generation of surplus that is needed to solve the country's social and economic problems. Economic muscle enables freedom of action and generates national confidence. If we are entering the era of 'weaponization of everything', we have

to protect and secure ourselves from disruptions and threats in the areas of finance, trade, investment and data.

Supply chains need to be reviewed for their resilience and trustworthiness. There are unnatural dependencies of some key sectors on Chinese supply lines. A strong manufacturing base is a strategic imperative. Decisions in the area of increasing the national R and D budget, skill development, 5G technology, Production Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, semiconductors and the AI Mission and pause in joining Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) are all steps in that direction.

Hydrocarbons have become a tool of geopolitics and comprehensive national power for the states which possess them in abundance. The others, such as India, have become victims of energy geopolitics. India imports almost 80 per cent of its oil and 45 per cent of its natural gas needed for consumption.³ It is the third largest energy consumer in the world. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has impacted its energy security.

The war is an opportunity for India to play the market for best prices and simultaneously accelerate the shift away from fossil fuels. India has the potential of becoming the cheapest producer of green hydrogen. It has already recorded one of the fastest growths in the generation of solar power.

Just as the Covid pandemic laid bare the criticality of self-reliance, as distinct from autarky and a closed economy, the Ukraine War has brought out the need for a sub-continental sized economy like India to be able to sustain itself and meet the needs of its people in times of global disruptions.

Conclusion

Great powers can hold the world to ransom by their behaviour. They demand allegiance and find comfort in seeing the world through the prism of alliances. They want to shape the world order and

selectively apply principles and international law that suit their interests. There is little accountability for their actions. Unilateralism is trumping cooperation. The shadow boxing in Ukraine and the expansion of NATO has been going on for more than twenty years till tensions reached breaking point in 2022. East-West relations have ruptured. The peace dividends of the collapse of Communism and disintegration of the Soviet Union have been exhausted

Meanwhile, in the midst of these moves, a new global power has arisen in India's backyard. This has changed India's strategic landscape and brought major power rivalry to India's doorstep. Russia is gaining militarily but stretched, Europe is bogged down in Ukraine, the US is bogged down in both Ukraine and West Asia and China is trying to steer clear of entanglements, maximise opportunities and preserve its energies to deal with domestic economic problems and competition with the US.

There is securitisation of foreign, economic and trade policy. India, like much of the world, is being forced to protect itself from future shocks, hedge its bets, and pursue its development agenda against strong headwinds. It will have to deal with China in a more complicated environment, not least due to the forced reliance of Russia on China.

The lessons for India relate to the entire gamut of foreign and domestic policy and to the new instruments of power as well as new threats to national security. This requires an organic approach which involves all arms of government and strategic thinking in the broadest sense. Silos and compartmentalised responses will no longer be enough.

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