

Russia-Ukraine War

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*Current Affairs*

## Russia-Ukraine War: Harbinger of a Global Shift A Perspective from Ukraine\*

*Iliya Kusa\**

The situation in Ukraine is still dynamic and tense. Russian military invasion is paradoxically both an unexpected adventure and a projected decision. On one hand is the security crisis between Russia and the West, which emerged in autumn 2021.<sup>1</sup> Bilateral security and peace are clearly threatened with a major escalation in Ukraine. Unfortunately, Ukraine has become the core contention area between Russia and the West. On the other hand, is the anticipation being shared by some analysts that Russia would launch a full-scale invasion that would certainly entail substantial military losses and economic implications for the global economy.

Since February 24, when Russia invaded Ukraine, its objectives have changed frequently and so have its operational tactics. I would divide the Russian military campaign in Ukraine into three main phases:

### First Week

Russian invading forces were trying to surround and block main cities in Ukraine's south, north, northeast, and east. They avoided storming them but Moscow used paratroopers to land them near Kyiv. The Russian troopers were to establish control over a key suburban airport in anticipation of reinforcements, which would ultimately break into the capital and depose the official government. However, these landing parties were unable to break into Kyiv and capture major transport routes to bring reinforcements. A significant number of troops found themselves stuck near the big cities of Kharkiv and Chernihiv without being able to proceed to the capital.

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\* This comment is based on the presentation of the author in a hybrid conference titled "Russia-Ukraine War: Causes, Dynamics, and Implications" organized by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Islamabad on March 30, 2022.

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## **Weeks 2-4**

Russian army tried to surround and block big cities from all sides to force them to surrender. Indiscriminate shelling of both military and civilian infrastructure began. At the same time, Russians launched negotiations with local authorities demanding them to hand over the control of the cities and lay down arms. On several other fronts, war was dragging on without a change of control over major roads and towns – Russians were not able to gain ground quickly. After almost all local mayors refused to surrender, the war became a positioned one. Russian military forces did not succeed in encircling crucial cities like Chernihiv and Kharkiv, which allowed Ukrainian troops to maneuver in the countryside and avail reinforcements.

## **Weeks 5-7**

Russian army refocused their attention on military activities in the east and south, where they were able to occupy some territory. War in Ukraine was effectively confined to the battle in eastern regions. Simultaneously, Russia's political demands scaled back from those made in Vladimir Putin's speech at the onset of their invasion.<sup>2</sup> In April, Russian forces completely abandoned their positions near Kyiv and the three regions in the north and northeast, withdrawing troops and transferring them to the eastern front. Finally, Russians continued to hit military and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine, particularly shifting to destroying strategic and critical objects—thermal plants, power plants, railroad junctions, warehouses, petrol stations, oil depots, gas and water pipelines, airports, bridges that connect Western and Eastern Ukraine. This also had a devastating effect on the humanitarian situation in the country.

The quest for military gains continues but apart from the military dimension, I think there are two important dimensions to perceive this war more broadly and assess its global and regional impact. The first is its economic dimension. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine allowed for a strategic redistribution of energy markets, especially in Europe. The EU has already decided to curtail Russia's share in gas and oil imports. Although it would be quite difficult for Europe to fully stop Russian gas and oil imports, it seems that the majority of European countries are confident to reduce a substantial amount of Russian energy imports in the following 2-5 years. This will let other countries take a more prominent role in energy exports to Europe, and they may include, for instance, the United States (US), Qatar, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Algeria. For Ukraine, the Russian invasion

accelerated the process of switching off Russia's energy grid system and integrating into the European energy network, which happened in March.

The global oil market was particularly hit by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A surge in global oil prices, which had begun even before the war, benefited key oil-producing states, including Russia itself while oil-dependent states suffered. The war also prompted other countries to find ways to push Russia out of oil export chains to Europe. This was reflected in the decisions by the US, Great Britain, and Canada to impose a full embargo on Russian oil imports. However, a similar decision did not materialize in Europe, where heated debates occurred on whether to restrict oil imports from Russia and how to do that without dealing a blow to their national economies. To some extent, one could argue that the desire by the West to find an alternative to Russian oil as a result of the war in Ukraine revived US-Iran nuclear talks in Vienna after they had deadlocked in January 2022. However, this has not produced any results yet as negotiations quickly collapsed in April following Tehran's demand that Washington should drop terrorism-related sanctions against the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Biden administration and European allies tried to negotiate with Gulf monarchies pressuring them to increase output to stabilize world energy prices, but they refused.

This triggered an angry reaction from Washington, with a group of senators reviving a decade-old bill allowing for the US to sue Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) countries and their national companies for manipulating world markets. Not only these negotiations failed to stabilize the situation, but further drove prices up. For Ukraine, the oil issue also became crucial as Kyiv is dependent on Russian and Belarusian oil imports. Now with Russian military ships blocking Ukrainian Black Sea ports, the European land routes are the only ones for importing fuel and gasoline. The situation has worsened with Russians hitting fuel depots and bases in different regions during March. With the energy markets in disarray, prices of gasoline in Ukraine skyrocketed and a fuel deficit is visible in almost all regions.

An unprecedented informal boycott by foreign companies preceded by Western-led economic sanctions and financial restrictions once again raised the question of the legitimacy and effectiveness of sanctions as coercive measures in modern international relations. It has become an issue of concern for many countries as sanctions have disrupted supply chains, derailed trade, complicated bank transactions, and made the international economic

cooperation difficult and uncomfortable while triggering another global dispute between the West and the East on the integrity of the global financial system and Western dominance over it.

Wheat and sunflower exports were also badly damaged by Russia's invasion. Ukraine and Russia are among the leading exporters of wheat, which is a vital resource as a staple food for dozens of countries and a life-saving product with regard to food security. Countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Algeria import from 50 percent to more than 80 percent of their wheat from Russia or Ukraine. With world food prices going up and the war in Ukraine blocking a large chunk of exports, this situation can have potentially catastrophic global consequences.

Ukraine's major wheat-producing fields are located in six regions in the south, east, northeast, and center. Of these six, four are already affected by the war and two are partially occupied by Russian forces. According to government estimates, this year Ukraine's sowing area will decrease by 20 percent. One of the biggest agricultural companies in Ukraine has stated that they would not be able to access almost 50 percent of all their sowing grounds this year. Global prices for meat and eggs could also go up. Food products saw rising prices even before the war started. This prompted the UN to voice concern over the looming famine threat in several regions.

The second dimension, which is very important in this context is the political one. By launching the invasion of Ukraine, Russia has indeed changed the current global and regional order in several ways.

First, by invading Ukraine, Russia effectively limited its foreign policy agenda. For the last 15 years, Russian foreign policy has been aimed at positioning Moscow as an alternative center of power in the great power competition of the Twenty-first Century by combining hybrid warfare, soft power instruments, political cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. The kind of war Russia is waging in Ukraine narrows that objective, potentially weakens the Kremlin's global image and stance, limits their ability to dedicate resources to other projects and geopolitical playgrounds, isolates the country because of its hawkish reputation, and invites political and economic risks that other nations would not want to be exposed to by dealing with Moscow.

Second, Russia's war will alter European security architecture. It will further consolidate European countries in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and strengthen the European institutions inside European Union

(EU). The situation in Ukraine has pushed some countries like Poland, Slovakia, and Germany toward rearming themselves. Also, Turkey, the EU, and the US would require further stabilization and possible deterrence of Russia through deeper interregional cooperation, which in turn may expand the European security architecture into a broader Eurasian context.

Third, the Russian war in Ukraine ended the 30-year era, during which Moscow was trying to lead post-Soviet integration efforts after the fall of the Soviet Union. After what happened in Ukraine, it is unlikely that there will be any space left for the values-driven relationship between Russia and other post-Soviet republics. Russia will most probably lose its advantage to use culturally close ties, which for many years kept post-Soviet countries together. The list of claims, which were mentioned by President Putin as a pretext for war with Ukraine alleged nuclear threat, the need to demilitarize Ukraine's army, the need to defend the Russian-speaking population, and the belief by Russian elites that Ukraine is an 'artificial state' etc. These could be projected on any other post-Soviet state, which is why the war is of great concern for them, raising suspicions between states about Russia's possible true intentions in dealing with them.

Finally, the Russian military offensive has become an important milestone in pushing the world closer to what seems to become a multipolar international system, in which several regional countries will gain prominence and play a more active role in world affairs. We already see that countries like Turkey, Israel, and Poland are very active in shaping events in Ukraine and facilitating Ukraine-Russia negotiations. They were even named as potential security guarantors for Ukraine's future neutral status. Voting in the United Nations (UN) on Russia-related resolutions exposed divisions between the West and the rest of the world. It has become clear that Western dominance in the international system is being rattled with other regional players vowing to fill in the vacuum, including Turkey, India, Pakistan, China, Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Japan, Iran, and others.

On the other hand, the Russian invasion only strengthened the kind of camp politics or block politics which polarize international relations, escalate political and ideological tensions, and contribute to further militarization. Had Russia not invaded Ukraine, the regional and international system could be more stabilized paving the way for a more region-focused, rule-based order. But currently, it seems that the initial reaction to the war in Ukraine is a revival of Cold War-style camp politics, in

order to increase competition in the short run, first and foremost between the US and China.

The future in Ukraine is closely tied to what will become with the world order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has become another element in the post-Cold War great power competition set to shape the international system for the years to come. With Ukraine surviving the war and maintaining its position, it would have the opportunity to become the bridge between the West and the East, connecting rather than dividing continents and regions. The ability of the international community to act and guarantee peace is at stake in Ukraine. Without meaningful pledges from foreign partners, Ukraine will not see peace as Russia will almost certainly continue its quest to obtain global respect by projecting military power over Ukrainian territories. The longer the war, the greater will be the damage inflicted to the world order by involving more countries and destabilizing markets. War in Ukraine is truly a harbinger of a global shift from the post-Cold War Western-dominated international system to a more pragmatic, chaotic, and multipolar one. However, the war is also a bad omen in many ways if it gets out of control.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> ICG, "War in Europe: Responding to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" (statement, International Crisis Group, Brussels, February 24, 2022), [https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/ukraine-24ii22%20\(3\).pdf](https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/ukraine-24ii22%20(3).pdf); and Mansur Mirovalev, "Russia and Ukraine Conflict Explained: What You Need to Know," *Al Jazeera*, December 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/16/what-you-should-know-about-the-conflict-between-russia-ukraine>.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Full Text of Speech" (speech, Moscow, February 22, 2022), *Veterans Today*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.veteranstoday.com/2022/02/22/vladimir-putin-full-text-of-february-21-2022-speech/>.