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Aparna, Faculty, Department of International Relations, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi.

Keshav Chandra, Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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Russia's War on Ukraine: Implications for the Global Order

Aparna*
Keshav Chandra **

Abstract

In The Art of War, Sun Tzu argues that taking an enemy's country intact is preferable to destroying it. Russia's war in Ukraine presents a markedly different trajectory. The two former Soviet republics have once again become parties to a major armed conflict. According to the 2001 census, approximately eight million ethnic Russians and Russian-language speakers lived in Ukraine, constituting a substantial proportion of the population in industrial, governmental, and educational centres in the eastern and southern regions. Russia's intervention in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 was partly justified through claims concerning cultural and ethnic ties. The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further intensified the conflict and undermined the framework established by the Minsk Agreements. Against this backdrop, this paper examines the nature of the war, the strategies and assumptions underlying it and its implications for the contemporary global order.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, War, Global Order, Russia-Ukraine War



1.Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine War has evolved into a protracted conflict over the past four years with no definitive settlement in sight. Both sides continue to employ missiles and

drones against military, infrastructural and strategic targets in each other's territories. The wider crisis in West Asia has also affected the conflict by diverting some US and Western attention and military resources away from Ukraine, thereby creating some additional

**Dr. Aparna, Faculty at Department of International Relations, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi.*

***Keshav Chandra, Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.21883305*

space for Russia. The Russian forces currently control approximately 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory.¹

The Russian invasion has revitalised the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and prompted extensive Western sanctions against Russia. China's support for Moscow and Iran's cooperation with Russia have further contributed to the changing geopolitical environment. At the same time, major and middle powers in the Global South have adopted cautious positions and avoided full alignment with either side while reiterating their commitment to sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Western governments have characterised Russia's military action as unjustified aggression. Former US President Joe Biden described the invasion as an "unprovoked and unjustified assault",² while Russian President Vladimir Putin has consistently presented NATO's eastward expansion as a major security threat. The US position has since undergone significant change. Under President Donald Trump, Washington has pursued negotiations aimed at ending the war, including proposals that have generated criticism in Ukraine and Europe because of concerns regarding territorial concessions and the future of

Ukraine's security arrangements. Following negotiations led by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, an initial 28-point proposal was reportedly reduced to approximately 20 points, with sensitive questions concerning military limitations and NATO troop deployments deferred.³ The negotiations remain dependent on Russian and Ukrainian responses as well as broader diplomatic developments.

Within this background, this article addresses the following question: How has the Russia-Ukraine War challenged the contemporary global order, and what does the conflict reveal about the transformation of institutional, geopolitical, economic, and normative dimensions of international politics? The central argument is that the Russia-Ukraine War is more than a regional military conflict and represents a major test of the post-Cold War international order. The war has exposed limitations within existing institutions of global governance, intensified geopolitical polarisation, demonstrated the strategic vulnerabilities associated with economic interdependence and strengthened tendencies towards multipolarity. The conflict has not dismantled the existing international order but it has challenged its institutional effectiveness, normative authority, and strategic coherence.

The analysis draws primarily upon Realist and Liberal Institutional perspectives in International Relations. From a Realist perspective, states remain concerned with security, power, and survival within an anarchic international system.⁴ As such, Russia's opposition to NATO enlargement and its military intervention in Ukraine can therefore be examined through the concepts of balance of power and the security dilemma. As Realists argue, great powers are particularly sensitive to military alliances approaching their strategic sphere of influence, and measures intended by one state to enhance its security may consequently be interpreted as threats by another. Liberal Institutionalism, by contrast, emphasises international institutions, economic interdependence and international norms as mechanisms for promoting cooperation and reducing conflict.⁵ The inability of institutions such as the United Nations Security Council to prevent or manage the conflict effectively raises questions about the capacity of existing institutions to function amid renewed great-power rivalry.

The Russia-Ukraine War, therefore, provides an important case for examining competing interpretations of the contemporary international order. The conflict demonstrates the continuing

relevance of geopolitical competition while also exposing institutional limitations within the existing system of global governance.

2. Russian Annexation of Crimea: A Turning Point

In 2014, Russia intervened in Crimea and subsequently incorporated the territory into the Russian Federation.⁶ The development altered Ukraine's geopolitical trajectory and contributed to a broader deterioration in relations between Russia and the West. In response to Russia's actions, NATO deployed four battalions to Eastern Europe in April 2016. The deployment was intended to strengthen deterrence in the Baltic region, including Poland, Estonia, and Lithuania. The United States also deployed Army tank brigades to Poland to reinforce NATO's eastern flank.⁷

Among the former Soviet republics, Ukraine was the second-largest in terms of population and economic capacity. Its geographical position, industrial base, agricultural production, defence industries, and access to the Black Sea have given it considerable strategic importance for Russia. The two countries also share extensive historical, cultural, economic, and political ties. Kyiv occupies an important place in

Russian historical narratives and is often described as the “mother of Russian cities.” In 1954, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.⁸ The decision was made within the institutional framework of the Soviet Union and took on greater significance following the dissolution of the USSR.

Russia's intervention in Ukraine has been interpreted as an attempt to retain strategic influence over its neighbour and prevent Ukraine from moving decisively towards Western institutions. The conflict has instead strengthened Ukrainian support for closer relations with the European Union and NATO. Russia has also sought to preserve its strategic position in the Black Sea, where Crimea provides important military and logistical advantages.

3. Why Does Russia Seek Control over Ukraine?

The conflict has been concentrated largely in eastern and southern Ukraine although Russian attacks have affected areas across the country. Russian missile and drone strikes have caused extensive damage to cities, ports, energy infrastructure, and military facilities. Control of Crimea has strengthened Russia's

position in the Black Sea and enhanced its capacity to project military power towards the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North Africa.⁹

Moscow has also sought political influence over Kyiv's internal constitutional structure. One proposed model involves federalisation, under which Ukrainian regions would receive greater political and economic autonomy, particularly areas with significant Russian-speaking populations.¹⁰ Such an arrangement could affect Ukraine's ability to pursue a consistent foreign and security policy and could complicate its integration with European institutions.

Recent opinion polling has indicated limited Ukrainian support for federalisation, while support for closer relations with the EU and NATO has increased. Russia's military intervention has therefore contributed to a stronger Ukrainian national identity and greater public support for a Western-oriented foreign policy.

Energy and infrastructure also form part of the strategic context. Ukraine possesses natural gas reserves and an extensive network of pipelines connecting Russia with European markets. Before the war, a substantial

proportion of Russian gas exports to Europe passed through Ukrainian pipelines, generating transit revenues for Kyiv.¹¹ Control over southern Ukrainian territory, including the Odesa region, is also strategically important due to its ports, energy infrastructure, air-defence requirements, and access to the Black Sea.

The strategic significance of Ukraine was recognised in post-Cold War US policy. In 1994, former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued that a strong and stable Ukraine could serve as a counterweight to Russia and become an important element of US strategy following the Cold War. He argued that Ukraine's subordination would substantially strengthen Russia's ability to reassert imperial influence.¹²

4. Implications for the Global Order

The war has revived long-standing debates concerning NATO enlargement and European security. Western governments emphasise the sovereign right of states to determine their security partnerships, whereas Russian policymakers have consistently regarded NATO expansion as a strategic threat. This reflects a classic security dilemma in which measures adopted by one

actor to enhance its security are perceived by another as potentially offensive.¹³ Recognising these competing security perceptions does not legitimise Russia's military intervention, but it provides context for understanding the strategic environment in which the conflict developed.

The broader significance of the war lies in its challenge to assumptions that economic globalisation and institutional integration would reduce the likelihood of major interstate conflict. Military alliances, territorial security, strategic competition, and coercive power remain central features of international politics.

4.1The Expanding Role of Major Powers

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has demonstrated the influence of major external actors on the trajectory of the war. In December 2021, Russia called on the United States and NATO to halt further military expansion in Eastern Europe and to provide guarantees against Ukraine's future NATO membership. The United States and its allies rejected these demands and warned Russia of severe economic consequences in the event of military action. Washington subsequently imposed sanctions targeting Russia and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.¹⁴

In the months preceding the invasion, US and Ukrainian assessments differed regarding the scale and immediacy of the Russian threat. Satellite imagery indicated a major concentration of Russian forces near Ukraine and Belarus. Diplomatic efforts involving the United States, Russia, France, and Germany failed to produce an agreement.

Western military and financial assistance subsequently became a central component of the conflict. By February 2023, the United States had provided more than \$50 billion in assistance to Ukraine, including rocket and missile systems, helicopters, drones, and tanks. Other NATO members also provided substantial support. Ukraine's military expenditure increased sharply, reaching approximately \$44 billion in 2022, representing a 640 per cent annual increase according to SIPRI data.¹⁵

The United States remained the principal provider of military assistance. According to the US Department of Defence, security assistance to Ukraine serves American national security objectives, supports deterrence, and strengthens the US defence industrial base. The scale of assistance has also increased demand within the

defence sector. The United States accounted for approximately 40 per cent of global arms exports between 2018 and 2022.¹⁶ Between 2013–17 and 2018–22, US arms exports increased by 14 per cent.¹⁷

The war has therefore affected the global defence market by increasing demand for military equipment and encouraging higher defence expenditure among European states. It has also reinforced the political and economic significance of major arms-producing countries.

4.2 European Union: Strategic and Economic Costs

The European Union and its member states have strongly condemned Russia's military actions and the annexation of Ukrainian territories. Since the beginning of the war, EU institutions have adopted successive sanctions packages targeting Russian energy revenues, military capabilities, financial networks, and associated shipping activities. The EU's 17th sanctions package targeted Surgutneftegas, Russian oil revenues, and vessels associated with the so-called "shadow fleet".¹⁸ Additional Russian and third-country entities accused of supporting Russia's military operations have also been sanctioned.¹⁹

At the same time, differences among EU member states have complicated collective decision-making. Hungary's objections have delayed some measures related to military assistance and sanctions, reflecting broader disagreements over the Union's foreign and security policy.²⁰ The EU's consensus-based decision-making structures can make rapid responses difficult during major security crises. The war has therefore raised questions about the EU's capacity to develop a more integrated defence and foreign-policy framework.

The conflict has also imposed economic costs on Europe. Energy disruptions, supply-chain problems, and higher commodity prices affected European economies and contributed to inflationary pressures. The European Investment Bank projected weaker EU economic growth in 2022 than previously expected, with inflation and declining household consumption adding to the challenges confronting the European economy.²¹

The European response demonstrates both the capacity and limitations of regional governance. The EU has coordinated sanctions and provided substantial support to Ukraine, while differences among member states continue to constrain the development of a unified

strategic approach. The war has consequently intensified debate over whether the EU can develop the capabilities required to act as a geopolitical power.

4.3 The United Nations and the Crisis of Global Governance

The Russia-Ukraine War raises fundamental questions concerning the effectiveness of contemporary global governance. The UN Security Council's inability to adopt binding measures against Russia reflects a structural problem within the post-1945 system: the veto power of the permanent members can limit institutional action when one of them is directly involved in a conflict.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has repeatedly highlighted the gap between the scale of global challenges and the capacity of multilateral institutions to address them. He has argued that international institutions require stronger political will, resources, and collective purpose.²²

The humanitarian situation in Ukraine illustrates these challenges. The UN initially requested \$2.63 billion to assist approximately 6 million people but subsequently revised its appeal to \$1.75 billion due to funding constraints, even as an estimated 12.7 million people

required humanitarian assistance.²³ Humanitarian organisations assisted approximately 8.4 million people in Ukraine in 2024, with local organisations playing a major role in delivering assistance.²⁴

The funding situation has become more difficult amid reductions in international humanitarian assistance. The Trump administration's reduction in US foreign aid funding, including substantial cuts to USAID, has created additional pressure on humanitarian organisations.²⁵

At the diplomatic level, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on 2 March 2022 condemning Russia's invasion and calling for the withdrawal of Russian forces, with 141 of 193 members voting in favour.²⁶ Russia has nevertheless maintained its position through its permanent seat and veto power in the Security Council. The resulting institutional constraints demonstrate the difficulty of achieving collective security when major powers are directly involved in conflict.

4.4. Humanitarian Consequences and the International Order

The humanitarian effects of the war have extended beyond Ukraine. Large-scale displacement, food

insecurity, refugee movements, and disruptions to humanitarian financing have affected international institutions and neighbouring states.

Before the war, Ukraine was one of the world's major agricultural exporters and an important supplier to the World Food Programme. Marianne Ward, WFP Deputy Emergency Coordinator in Ukraine, described Ukraine as the organisation's leading source of commodities, with 880,000 metric tons purchased in the country during the preceding year.²⁷ The disruption of Ukrainian agricultural production and exports has therefore contributed to global food-security pressures.²⁸

The war has also produced one of Europe's largest refugee movements in recent decades. More than three million Ukrainians initially fled to neighbouring European states, particularly Poland, Slovakia, Romania, and Hungary. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi described the displacement as one of the fastest refugee movements of recent decades.²⁹ Women and children constitute a large proportion of those who fled because many Ukrainian men remained in the country under mobilisation requirements.

Internal displacement represents another major dimension of the crisis.

According to the International Organization for Migration, approximately 3.7 million Ukrainians were internally displaced in October 2025, representing roughly one-eighth of the country's population.³⁰

The scale of international assistance demonstrates the wider geopolitical significance of the conflict. Since January 2022, Ukraine has received approximately \$407 billion in assistance, including more than \$118 billion from the United States.³¹ US-led diplomatic efforts under the Trump administration have subsequently placed greater emphasis on negotiations and a possible settlement. Washington has also encouraged Kyiv to consider difficult territorial and security concessions. Following discussions with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump called for direct ceasefire negotiations between Russia and Ukraine.³²

5. Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine War has reshaped the international environment across diplomatic, military, economic, and humanitarian dimensions. It has intensified great-power competition, disrupted energy and food markets, expanded defence expenditure, and exposed limitations within existing institutions of global

governance. The conflict has also affected relations among major Western powers. Under the Trump administration, US policy has moved towards negotiations with Russia and placed greater pressure on Ukraine to consider compromises. Washington's voting position at the UN has also diverged from several European allies. In one instance, the United States voted against a European resolution condemning Russia's invasion and supported a US-sponsored resolution calling for an end to the conflict without explicitly assigning responsibility to Russia. These developments have generated debate concerning the future of transatlantic relations and the direction of US foreign policy.

The United Nations faces a related institutional challenge. The Security Council remains constrained by Russia's veto power, while humanitarian agencies face increasing financial pressures. The conflict demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining an effective collective-security system when the interests of major powers diverge sharply. The war has also accelerated geopolitical diversification. China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia have strengthened their strategic cooperation, while countries across the Global South have pursued more flexible diplomatic positions.

Across the institutional dimension, the war has exposed limitations in the capacity of multilateral organisations to prevent or manage major-power conflict. Geopolitically, it has intensified competition and encouraged movement towards a more multipolar system. Economically, the conflict has exposed the vulnerabilities of interconnected energy, food, financial, and supply networks. Normatively, it has generated renewed debates over sovereignty, territorial integrity, intervention, alliance politics, and the use of force. The evidence therefore

points towards transformation rather than the collapse of the existing international order. The Russia-Ukraine War has demonstrated that military power, strategic geography, economic resilience, institutional capacity, and diplomatic legitimacy remain closely interconnected. Its long-term implications will depend on the eventual settlement of the conflict, the evolution of relations among Russia, Ukraine, Europe, China, and the United States, and the capacity of international institutions to adapt to a more contested and plural international system. ■

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