

Great-Power Competition and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Russian forces invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, staging what Moscow called a *special military operation*. Russia's military had been building up along the border for months, and Western intelligence agencies warned of an imminent attack for several weeks. Russia was expected to go into eastern Ukraine, but few believed that an initial invasion would include an attempt to take Kyiv. Instead, Russian forces attempted to take the Ukrainian capital while simultaneously entering the Donbas and Luhansk regions. The goal was to remove Volodymyr Zelenskyy from power and replace him with someone who would support Moscow's security needs and agree to territorial concessions that could end the conflict.

Moscow's initial invasion plan failed, and instead of a quick victory, Russia found itself mired in a long-enduring conflict. This destroyed Russia's relationship with the West, ended all efforts at rapprochement, and created the conditions for a new Iron Curtain between NATO member states and Russia. US–Russian relations ground to a halt even in areas in which the two states cooperated previously, such as joint efforts to support the International Space Station (ISS). Moscow and Washington had expended much effort to create joint projects but the Ukrainian invasion ended this collaboration. Europe is again divided between great powers who are on opposing sides of a continental ground war.

The situation between Moscow and Washington is extremely reminiscent of the Cold War era. Following World War II, the two allies who defeated the Germans became strategic rivals and were dominated by two different ideologies. The first was liberal democracy, adhered to by the United States and its allies. The second was communism, adhered to by the Soviet Union and its allies. The former war allies' relationship had transformed into a geopolitical rivalry, where each sought to convince as many states as possible to accept their ideology. As states chose between East or West, they became military partners in the great struggle between democracy and communism. Washington saw Moscow as the great enemy and sought to contain communist ideology from spreading and defeating the ideology of liberal democracy.

With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, a euphoria spread to both sides, and there was hope of a renewed relationship. Both Moscow

and Washington vowed to cooperate with each other and enter into a new era of peace and prosperity. In fact, Pres. George H. W. Bush stated that we would see a new Europe whole and free in this new era. However, good relations did not last. Events such as the expansion of NATO, the war in the former Yugoslavia, and the expansion of the European Union served to isolate Moscow from Washington. While there were many efforts initially at bringing Russia into the Western fold, Moscow resented the fact that Russia no longer had a seat at the table and was treated more as a junior partner than a great power.

It should be noted that while many policy makers in the West had stated that the era of geopolitics and great-power competition was over after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the war in Ukraine showed that great-power competition had not disappeared, it had merely receded from US policy makers' minds following the end of the Cold War. We now examine the great-power competition between Russia and the United States over Eastern Europe following the end of the Cold War.

Great-Power Competition in Eastern Europe

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union Boris Yeltsin, Russia's first president, attempted to integrate Russia into the West. However, Yeltsin believed that rather than capitulate and fully integrate into the world order established by the United States, Russia was a great power that deserved a seat at the table and the ability to negotiate with the United States to create a new global order. The United States was not willing to negotiate a new world order. Instead, policy makers were convinced that the Soviet Union had lost the Cold War and that Russia must accept the global order as it is and integrate into the world order as a vanquished foe.

According to Jack Matlock, the last US ambassador to the Soviet Union, the United States and the Soviet Union had negotiated an end to the Cold War, and that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a different event. He contends that policy makers should have made that distinction clear because if they were to conflate those two events, then it looks as though the Soviet Union was defeated by the United States in the Cold War, which he contends is not accurate.¹ If Moscow freely relinquished its hold on Eastern Europe through negotiations and a partnership with Washington, then it did not lose the Cold War and should have more international status. Russia wanted the same international status as the Soviet Union, but when the latter split into multiple states, the overall power capability changed, which lowered Russia's international status. There was disunity between Russian ambitions and its recognized status that would create complications in future relations.

Moscow became increasingly resentful of American policy in Eastern Europe and Russia began to become more belligerent with its neighbors and across the region. In Eastern Europe, Moscow's actions antagonized those states, creating a view that Russia was a resurgent power that sought to maintain influence and some control in Eastern and Central Europe and the Baltics.² This led many states and leaders to see Russia as a major threat and the best option available to small, weak states was NATO membership.³ Such policies led to a feedback loop in which relations increasingly worsened and became tense. The invasion of Ukraine was a culmination of frustration between Moscow and Washington over their visions of the world and world order. However, contrary to the period of the Cold War, this devolution of relations occurred not because of ideology, but rather because of geopolitics and power politics.

During the period leading up to the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow used asymmetric tactics against Washington and the West. Most of these asymmetric tactics involved psychological warfare. The Russian psychological approach to conflict, where nonmilitary actors are strategically incorporated into its war effort, has received much attention. The so-called Gerasimov doctrine combines information warfare, cyberattacks, and psychological warfare with military actions to prevail in war. Called *hybrid warfare* in the West and *nonlinear war* within Russia, Moscow has come to realize that a broad range of actors are an essential and critical part of modern warfare. Journalists, diplomats, academics, economists, computer hackers, transnational criminal organizations, social media outlets, and other groups outside the military participate and play important roles in advancing the national strategic agenda. Working in concert, each of these actors can interact with different Western populations to delegitimize governments and weaken their military. Russia seeks to accomplish its strategic objectives without needing to use hard military force.

A free and open society that relies on freedom of speech and the press is vulnerable to outside actors who can deploy resources that give them the ability to directly market their positions on official and social media. The liberties taken for granted within the West can be targeted to sow confusion, proliferate misinformation, exacerbate existing societal divisions, and blur the lines between truth and fiction. Moscow has often used trolls to flood social media with misinformation and sow confusion and dissent in Western democracies. These operatives intervene in social discourse to create or aggravate preexisting divisions and wreak havoc with the political systems they have targeted.

Moscow prepared for the Ukraine War by supporting extremist candidates, using polarizing social issues, and sowing doubt in Western democratic institutions. These efforts sought to break the Western consensus and create conditions

where there would be discord among allied states in NATO, which would create divisions among Western allies to Russia's benefit when conflict did break out. Moscow thought this tactic would foster divisions and lead to arguments among the allies that would delay or weaken sanctions, and would lead to a lessening of the response of the Western democracies to Russia's actions in Ukraine.

Moscow has worked for years to create confusion and discord across Europe and the West to give Russia a public diplomacy advantage in the event of conflict. In the current war in Ukraine, Moscow spent years preparing the battlefield and creating conditions that would let it be successful in conducting its long-term strategy. However, Moscow's strategy did not take into account that the Western democracies were prepared to combat the Gerasimov doctrine with their own version of hybrid warfare. Instead, Moscow faced a united front of democracies willing to levy heavy sanctions against Russian president Vladimir Putin and the oligarchs supporting him. Even small states, which in normal times would lack the domestic support to make tough stands against Russia, are pressing forward with the sanctions and helping to isolate Putin. Moscow's nonmilitary actors have failed to produce the discord and have been outmaneuvered by the West, and certainly by Ukraine itself—forcing Moscow to figure out how to combat its own strategy. In other words, the West has out-Gerasimoved the Gerasimov Doctrine.

Ironically, the return of great-power competition in Europe masks true great-power competition. In terms of demography, Russia and much of Western Europe are declining powers.⁴ While the United States and Russia are preoccupied fighting a proxy war in Ukraine, China and India are carefully watching the situation with their own views of challenging the global order. We now turn to an examination of some of those challenges.

Changing Periphery

The areas where great powers compete for control and influence in the developing world are changing because of the Ukraine conflict. As Russian forces invaded, they were able to occupy and control less ground than what they had planned. Forces were withdrawn from Kyiv and redeployed to the east. In addition, Russia strengthened its invasion forces by adding personnel, both professional, private, and mercenary forces, from regions in the Middle East and North Africa, where they had been deployed. As a result, states that have maintained a close relationship with Moscow for domestic security—such as Syria, Libya, and Armenia—have fewer Russian forces protecting them. In some cases, the Russians were able to adjust their protection to rely more on airpower, but the depletion of forces has jeopardized some dependent populations. This personnel change has created a geopolitical struggle to gain influence within the territory Russia has left.

The Ukraine War creates openings for other actors to move into these regions where Russians are reducing their presence. In the Levant, both Israel and Turkey have become more aggressive in Syria and have undertaken operations that would have been riskier had Russia maintained its full ground military presence. Similarly, the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh is increasingly vulnerable to Turkish influences. The largest question concerns the international impact on Libya. The United States and Europe have stepped back from Libya, while Russia, Turkey, and Arab states are engaged in a power competition over influence in this country. Moscow's intervention in Libya has been ad hoc as Russia moved into areas abandoned by the West; Russian presence, therefore, serves as a means to give it additional influence within the broader Middle East. The geostrategic vulnerabilities created by Russia redeploying its troops from these regions to Ukraine has so far generated additional military activity from Turkey and Israel, yet the United States, China, and other great powers have not sought to directly exploit this opening.

The United States, China, the EU, and India are relying on their existing networks present within the region rather than introducing new forces. Turkey's NATO membership allows it to take additional risks in exploiting the Russian movement of forces to Ukraine. Likewise, Israel's relationship with Washington allows it to be more aggressive in attacking Iranian and Hezbollah fighters and weapons than it would as an isolated state. The present incentives to avoid a direct military conflict have limited the competition, and Turkey's and Israel's new movements have been careful to avoid targeting Russians. Whether through error or miscalculation, the danger is that a militarized conflict between Russia and Turkey would mean a war between NATO and Moscow. Likewise, any combat involving Israel would bring Washington into the struggle. The risk is that an American ally could find itself in a shooting war with Russia that would deteriorate into a great-power war.

It is easy to recognize that a great-power conflict could emerge directly from the events in Ukraine, but there is additional threat. The Russian movement of forces from the Middle East to Ukraine creates the possibility for a war with an American ally that could lead to a great-power war. China maintains a smaller Middle Eastern military presence and is very unlikely to be drawn into a great-power conflict in the region. However, the Ukrainian war increases the possibility of a new great-power conflict as American allies move to take advantage of the removal of Russian troops in the Middle East. At this time, China's regional military presence is limited to naval operations and general training, and Beijing is not likely to be drawn into conflict in the region.

China's Game

The Chinese are well placed to benefit from the Russian invasion of Ukraine by becoming more aggressive in East Asia. While the West is focused on Eastern Europe, China is gathering its strength to make strategic geopolitical gains. Beijing has provided a market for Russian exports currently sanctioned by the West, and as a result, China has a stronger supply of oil and natural gas. Western sanctions have not hurt Russia's economy as originally conceived, and the ruble, which collapsed as the war began, has recovered. As China has consumed Russian energy, this has allowed Moscow to stabilize its economy and permit the war to be fought indefinitely.

While the world focuses on the Ukraine War, China has greater room to maneuver within its own region. The United States and its NATO allies have offered Ukraine help by donating vast weapon supplies to such an extent that the domestic stock is endangered. The longer the war between Kyiv and Moscow endures, the fewer weapons the United States and its close allies will have to provide to its East Asian allies and partners. China desires to control Taiwan, and the conflict in Ukraine makes it less likely that Washington will be able to provide military aid to Taipei. The cost-benefit calculations for Beijing make conflict less costly and increase the probability of war. We do not propose that this makes war inevitable, but Russian aggression against Ukraine makes Chinese aggression against Taiwan more probable.

While invading Taiwan is the primary fear within the West, China has other opportunities to change the status quo. Beijing can extend its territorial claims and continue to build islands to foster China's military power. One outcome that would be problematic for Washington is if China were able to expand the geographic range of its antinaval ballistic missile. This change, which is not a direct act of war, threatens the American military's Pacific presence and would weaken Washington's ability to project power in East Asia.

Washington is focused on limiting Russia's success within Ukraine, and China can take advantage of this conflict by making strategic changes that would undermine the US ability to protect its Asian allies. Beijing has a clear strategic interest in moving American troops from its borders and region. If China succeeds and Washington pulls back, the Chinese military will have the ability to move outside its region and establish a long-term global presence. In the short term, the largest strategic victor of the Ukraine War is not Russia, nor the West, but Beijing. Even if China does not invade Taiwan, Beijing is well positioned to further challenge the United States in Asia and become a stronger, more powerful great power.

Economic Elements Burdening Europe, the Middle East, and Africa

The Russian approach to war has been called fourth-generation warfare, hybrid warfare, and nonlinear war. Moscow sees Western democracy as a direct threat to its ruling elite and, therefore, as against Russia's national interest. Putin's fear is that a revolution forcing him from office will be instigated within Russia as had happened in the color revolutions of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan; thus, Moscow seeks to insulate itself from international influence while using psychological operations to undermine foreign adversaries. Russia recognizes that it does not have the military power to accomplish its security goals by employing them in the classical sense. Thus, Moscow has broadened its concept of war to include psychological, diplomatic, economic, informational, and sociopolitical elements. If Russia is successful in deploying these elements, Moscow can accomplish its goals against the West without resorting to direct conflict. Russia also uses different methods against each adversary, because it targets the local vulnerabilities—and these vary across the West—and does not have a consistent course against all states. The tactics employed in one theater are not used in others, and this makes Russian maneuvers appear unpredictable. Russia's military invasion and occupation of eastern Ukraine are not likely to be repeated in its struggle with NATO and the West.

The Russian military strategy suggests that its division from the West will be long-term and fought on many levels—such as economic, cultural, informational, and political. One important element of the Gerasimov doctrine is that a state of war exists well before any shots are fired. Moscow already sees conflict with the West as an active cultural war. It sees this contest no longer as temporary, but permanent—meaning that Russia fully understands that its division from Europe and the United States is going to endure for the foreseeable future. The key to Russia's strategy is to use the resources at its disposal in a way that provides benefits to its allies and imposes severe costs on its opponents while understanding its limited capabilities. In other words, Russia must utilize an asymmetric strategy.

Russia has two resources that it can leverage in its conflict with Ukraine and the West: oil and agricultural products. We have already discussed how China benefits through its access to Russian energy, but there is an additional resource advantage Beijing gains that few recognize. One effective way to create long-term economic chaos is to use the Black Sea blockade of Ukraine to prevent its agricultural products and fertilizer from reaching world markets. Kyiv is responsible for 10 percent of global wheat trade, 15 percent of corn, 15 percent of barley, and two-thirds of all sunflower meal. Together, Russia and Ukraine produce 80 percent of the world's sunflower oil.⁵ In addition, the four largest fertilizer exporters

are Russia, Canada, China, and Belarus—only Canada falls within the Western alliance. The agricultural market was already experiencing problems due to COVID-19 restrictions, and 11 states have agricultural export restrictions—the global shortages caused by the Ukraine War are likely to increase these trade limitations. Moscow and Beijing have also implemented export bans on fertilizer or components used to manufacture them. The inability to fertilize will lower crop yields. The trade bans work to increase panic and generate additional price spikes. The countries that have the greatest import-dependent populations will see their populations' food supply contract and suffer hunger and possible famine. This may create a path-dependent crisis leading to additional export constraints and expanding the potential crisis further. In fact, China itself faces food insecurity, which will only serve to exacerbate that situation.⁶

China is positioned to benefit as Russia separates itself economically from the West, as Beijing is the world's largest agriculture importer.⁷ Since Ukraine's agricultural shipments to its partners are prevented by the Black Sea blockade, they now must take a more expensive route to reach the Baltic Sea. This network, however, is currently being used to ship weapons to Ukraine, and that has taken priority over trying to find alternate ways of exporting food. The Russian goods that were previously destined for Europe or the West are now redirected to China who stands to gain more food security through the Ukraine War. While food shortages are likely to emerge globally, one state has improved its access to global agriculture. The costs are going to be disproportionately borne by the West and its allies in the Middle East and Africa. While it is impossible to assess the specific consequences food shortages will have on international relations, there are a couple of simple predictions that are likely to come.

The negative costs are likely to be experienced by Arab and African states, which will become increasingly unable to feed their populations.⁸ Since the European population is aging and its nations have strong social-welfare states, it is probable that more refugees will attempt to move from poor states into the EU. The impact could be greater than the 2015 refugee crisis. This will further aggravate the budget deficits and place increasing pressures on European governments to stop the immigrants. This is amid European states already struggling to provide for the existing Ukrainian refugees. The surreal combination where female Ukrainian refugees compete with male-majority African and Arab immigrants for European social spending will generate a crisis for Europe. While no one is talking about this, one foreseeable outcome of the Ukraine War will be increased immigration from Africa and the Middle East into Europe, which will continue to increase nationalist fervor in Europe.

A second consequence is that wars may occur between small states with vulnerable food supplies. While it is difficult to make specific individual state forecasts in a general overview, it is likely that shortages may increase incentives for governments to use their military to try to gain access to food supply. It is likely that small wars will emerge as a direct consequence of the food shortage generated by the Ukraine War. These conflicts will further incentive migrants to try to settle in Europe to escape conflict and gain reliable access to food.

A long-term consequence will be that Europe will face increasing pressures on its budget as it struggles to maintain its generous social-welfare state. Not only will it have to add Ukrainian refugees, but it will also face additional migration from Africa and the Middle East. Europe will have to focus more on internal problems and will be increasingly difficult to act as a protagonist and to manage the international system. It will also possibly be forced to intervene in local conflicts that result from shortages. Europe is likely to decline in its global importance through the indirect effects of the Ukraine War.

India's Power: Sideline Observer

While the world intensely focuses on China and Russia and their challenge to the global order, especially following the invasion of Ukraine, there is another major power that should be watched. India has been steadily gaining power and is poised to become a major power player in all of Asia. While China is beginning a slight decline in terms of demographic power and ultimately economic power, India is still rising demographically and economically.

Typically, India is viewed as an ally of the United States, mostly due to the fact that it is a democracy, and its support is taken for granted. However, during the Cold War, India was mostly aligned with the Soviet Union and was famous for its Non-aligned Movement. In other words, India stressed the fact that it was not beholden to any other power and shows its own foreign policy.

However, when it came time to vote at the UN to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, India chose to abstain. This worried Washington tremendously. It had taken New Delhi's support for granted and had painted narrative of the Ukraine conflict as a conflict between authoritarianism and democracy. India's vote challenged that notion. India's democratic institutions are less important to its foreign policy than Westerners had realized, and this led to some strategic miscalculations.

India has a massive population—by some accounts it will overtake China as the world's most populous country in the next four years. It has multiple resource needs and would not take a moral stand against a conflict if it endangered access to critical resources. India is trying to avoid divisions that would complicate its international relations.⁹ Instead, it is maintaining its relationship with Russia.

Scholars examining Indian foreign policy have often discussed the closeness between India and Russia, especially in defense.¹⁰ Michael Slobodchikoff and Aakriti Tandon closely examine India's treaties with China, Russia, and the United States, and find that India should be classified as a revisionist power. In fact, India has closer relations with China than the United States. It should be noted, however, that New Delhi and Beijing still have a significant border dispute, and despite having closer relations with Beijing than Washington, New Delhi remains wary of China's growth and actions within East Asia.

Washington needs to properly ascertain India's growth and great-power status and must work with New Delhi to balance Beijing's growing influence. However, by focusing on events in Ukraine, Washington does not seem able to adequately multitask and build an effective relationship with New Delhi to preserve India's own hegemony while balancing against Chinese hegemony. India is unlikely to be shamed into joining the Western alliance but is likely to be motivated primarily by its own strategic interests.

In the longer term, India's power will grow to rival that of China and possibly the United States. However, India has shown little inclination of wanting to take up the mantle of being a great power in the world and seems content with letting other powers challenge the current global order. This may change in several years, but at this point, New Delhi is content with having a weaker United States and more of a multipolar world order instead of the current unipolar order.

Conclusion

We do not predict a war between great powers emerging because of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but the conflict will complicate American and NATO's foreign relations by weakening Western access to critical resources. The war's primary beneficiary is China, which has been able to maintain its trade relationships and access to resources while gaining additional resources from Russia that have been removed from Western markets. We will see agricultural shortages as Ukrainian and Russian grain ceases to be available in the West. The primary states to suffer food shortages are those with poor populations dependent on imports—such as Algeria and Egypt. We foresee a possible refugee crisis affecting Europe. While shortages are affecting Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, China's agricultural sources will actually grow and will become more secure. The outcome will create economic conditions that will further weaken the West and its allies.

These conditions make it more likely that states not directly affected by the conflict will maintain their neutrality as much as possible to avoid becoming subject to an export restraint from Russia or its allies. India is unlikely to become a protagonist to advance Ukraine's interests nor is it likely to challenge Moscow's

military aggression. The security and resource conditions in its own region require India to balance its foreign policy carefully to maintain as much strength as possible—this requires India to maintain its supply of critical resources and not undertake any action that would jeopardize them.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine will further complicate American foreign relations and make it more difficult to gain international support for its positions. Washington will need to revise its strategic approach to deal with additional factors and allow it to advance in more difficult circumstances. We cannot expect our past policies to be effective in the future unless we modify them to reflect risks and cost-benefits to our partner countries. The world is more complicated today, and our task has become more difficult. Nevertheless, we have the resources to successfully navigate these difficulties if we can face the challenges honestly. ☪

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