



How Russia's War Is Undermining World Order

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Executive Summary

Since 2014, Moscow has been transforming global affairs in the interests of international revisionism. Sooner or later, Russia is certain to lose its war against Ukraine, but it has already caused considerable damage to international law and the global rules-based order. The Russian attack on Ukraine has five important characteristics that, taken together, set it apart from other post-1945 wars. First, the 2014 attack was an assault on an entirely peaceful and non-aggressive state. Second, it is a war not only of aggression, but also of undisguised Russian territorial expansion and annexation. Third, it is a genocidal war that aims to destroy the Ukrainian state as an independent entity and the Ukrainian nation as a cultural community separate from the Russian people. Fourth, the largest and most brutal war of aggression in Europe since the Second World War is being conducted by a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Fifth, it is a conquest of territory by a nuclear weapon state under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) from an official non-nuclear weapon state, which severely undermines the near universal non-proliferation regime.

The political implications of Russia's attack reach far beyond Ukraine and Eastern Europe. Moscow's actions do not just undermine the liberal world and European security orders. They shatter the planet's state, security and conflict-resolution mechanisms, as they have emerged since 1945. Many non-western countries are equivocal about Russia's aggression and violation of fundamental principles of international law. Some even support Russia rather than Ukraine. However, the destructive consequences of Moscow's behaviour towards Ukraine and its legal nihilism may be more consequential for countries in the Global South. Against this background, western and non-western governmental and non-governmental actors should join forces to limit and reverse Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its repercussions for global affairs.

Introduction

At the end of the tenth year of war in Ukraine, the results of Russia's attack on its alleged "brother nation" are ambiguous for the Kremlin. On the one hand, its image as a supposed military superpower has suffered disastrously. The war in 2022 became an international embarrassment for the Russian leadership, army and weapons industry. Moscow's campaign in Ukraine also led to the loss of western partners, markets and investors. These and other setbacks will have far-reaching regional, geopolitical, economic and possibly domestic political consequences for Russia.

Moscow's Achievements

On the other hand, a number of partly ignored, partly underestimated results of Russia's Ukraine policy have weakened the international order and the West. Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022 certainly led to a partial consolidation of the West: NATO and the EU have moved closer together in the light of Russia's escalation; Western countries have supplied military and other support to Ukraine; Finland has joined NATO and Sweden will soon; and the EU has started membership negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and granted candidate status to Georgia, all in response to Russia's aggression.

Despite certain positive side-effects of the confrontation, however, the global political damage caused by the Russian war is and will continue to be enormous. Although this was not the Kremlin's primary goal, it should be assumed that the secondary destructive effects on international stability are also in Moscow's interest, if not actively pursued. Current and potential future revisionist actors across the planet are benefiting from Russia's subversion of the foundations of international law and order. The Russian attack on the world security system in many ways weakens the West and international organizations, thereby strengthening – at least in the Kremlin's zero-sum calculations – Moscow itself, its anti-western allies and other revanchist forces around the world.

Alongside the devastation in Ukraine, Russia's Ukraine adventure is the most worrying blow to global stability and cooperation since the end of the Second World War. The post-war Yalta Order, with its spheres of influence and limitations on sovereignty, was never particularly just or liberal. Since 1945, there have been several equally tragic wars in various regions – some with casualty figures as high. The legality of various armed interventions by western and non-western states under international law was and is also disputed.

Nonetheless, in the sum of its specific characteristics, the Russian war against Ukraine since 2014 and especially since 2022 has a new quality. It is not only Moscow's attempt to undo the European Security Order established by the Paris Charter of 1990 and restore the Yalta Order. Putin's war goes in several respects beyond the conventions of even the pre-1990 Cold War era. A combination of five violations of fundamental rules of interstate order and relations sets it apart from earlier post-World War II military invasions.

Five Russian Cracks in the World Order

First, in 2014, Russia attacked a hitherto completely peaceful and militarily powerless country without provocation. The Russian leadership has many times since pronounced that it was provoked by Ukraine, the West or both, but the change in Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies in 2014 was far less dramatic than Moscow and its apologists abroad have portrayed.

Ukraine's policy towards the ethnic Russian minority remained tolerant after the Euromaidan Revolution. It has only become more restrictive since 2014 as a result of the war, and since its escalation in 2022. Ukrainian right-wing extremism has always been and is still today weak by European standards. The European Union's 2014 Association Agreement with Ukraine was not a challenge to Russia's then operational free trade agreement with Ukraine.

Ukraine's much-lamented accession to NATO was in 2014 and remains today a distant prospect. According to the logic of this particularly popular justification for Putin's behaviour, Russia should have, for instance, withdrawn its troops from the Republic of Moldova long ago. Moldova is, according to its still valid constitution, officially non-aligned, which has precluded NATO accession since 1994. Nonetheless, Moscow has maintained, with active military and economic support, an unrecognized Transnistrian satellite state on Moldovan territory for 30 years.

Conversely, according to the logic of Kremlin spokespersons and apologists, Moscow should have reacted far more resolutely and negatively than it did to NATO's significant Eastern enlargements of 1999 and 2004. More recently, Russia should have attacked Finland in response to its application for NATO membership. After Helsinki's intention to join was made public in early 2022, it was obvious that NATO would satisfy Finland's request far sooner than Ukraine's simultaneous membership application. While the Russian-Finnish border is not quite as long as the Russian-Ukrainian border, it is very long. When Finland joined NATO in 2023, this roughly doubled the total length of the NATO-Russia border.

In addition, Finland's accession puts Putin's and numerous other leading Russian politicians' native St Petersburg in a precarious position. The second Russian capital is now in close proximity to NATO from both the west (Estonia) and the north (Finland). This new geopolitical situation for St Petersburg has made Finnish accession to NATO a more worrying strategic issue for Russia than a potential Ukrainian accession in the probably distant future.

Nonetheless, apart from some noise, there has been no material Russian reaction to Finland's NATO application and accession. In fact, over the past two years, Russia has withdrawn troops from its Western and Northern Military Districts on or close to the Russian-Finnish border. Despite Finland's – in contrast to Ukraine – actual rapprochement with and eventual accession to NATO, the Kremlin's reaction until now has been rhetorical rather than material.

Second, the Russian invasions of 2014 and 2022 were not only aimed at temporary occupation of conquered territories or Ukraine's inclusion in a zone of influence. The aim was the – from a Russian perspective – final and complete annexation, first of Ukrainian Crimea and later of four additional regions on the south-eastern Ukrainian mainland. Such a blatant war to extend state territory at the expense of an internationally recognized neighbouring country is not unique, but has been an exceptional foreign policy, to say the least, since 1945.

Third, the Russian invasion since 2022 is a war not only for expansion into, but also annihilation of the Ukrainian nation. It aims to abolish Ukraine as a sovereign state and eradicate the Ukrainian people as an independent cultural community separate from Russia. Moscow's genocidal intent is expressed not only in its many verbal statements, but also in mass-terrorist forms of behaviour from deliberate bombing of civilian infrastructure to targeted destruction of Ukrainian cultural institutions such as churches and libraries, arbitrary mistreatment and killing of hundreds of civilians and prisoners of war, mass deportation of tens of thousands of accompanied and unaccompanied children, Russification campaigns in the occupied territories, re-education camps for Ukrainians of minor and adult age, and so on. This genocidal approach is also not a unique phenomenon, even since 1945. However, it has never been practiced in this form beyond its territory by a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Related to this is a fourth specific feature of the war – Russia's deliberate use of the UN Security Council seat it inherited from the Soviet Union in 1991 to diplomatically accompany a war of annihilation and politically secure territorial enlargement. Russia's approach has, since 2014, turned the UN's original function on its head. Created to protect international law and, in particular, its member states' borders, integrity and sovereignty, the UN Security Council has, in Russia's hands, become an instrument of violation of these most basic principles.

A curious side issue is that Ukraine, as a former-Soviet republic, was one of the founders of the UN in 1945, while the predecessor Soviet republic of today's Russia, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), was not. Nonetheless, the successor state of the RSFSR, the Russian Federation, that joined the United Nations only in late 1991, today officially includes five forcibly annexed regions of a UN founding republic. Against this backdrop, it might come as no surprise that Russia bombed Kyiv in late April 2022 while UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was in the city. As a result, Guterres had to hide in a Kyiv bomb shelter from missiles sent by a permanent member of the UN Security Council and targeted at his immediate vicinity.

The most far-reaching consequences of Moscow's behaviour for the world security system are related to a fifth feature – the nuclear aspect of Russia's war of expansion and annihilation against Ukraine. The behaviour of all actors in this confrontation is shaped by Russia's possession and Ukraine's non-possession of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction. Ukraine, the West and the rest of the world are calculating their actions and signals in the light of Moscow's blatant threats to use nuclear weapons and Kyiv's inability to do the same.

The most scandalous aspect of this constellation is that the NPT, signed in 1968, explicitly allows Russia to possess nuclear weapons but strongly forbids Ukraine to acquire or build them. Like the paradoxical effects of Russia's permanent seat on the UN Security Council, Moscow has turned the meaning of the NPT on its head. Conceived as an instrument for peacekeeping, today's consistent implementation of the NPT, in the context of Russia's behaviour towards a non-nuclear weapon state Ukraine, has had the effect of enabling a war of expansion.

As in the case of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic's UN membership since 1945, there is a further historical curiosity regarding the non-proliferation regime. After gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine briefly had the third largest arsenal of nuclear weapons after Russia and the USA. At the time, Ukraine possessed more atomic warheads than the remaining three official nuclear weapon states – the United Kingdom, France and China – put together.

In the mid-1990s, however, Kyiv not only agreed to destroy its, by this time anyway unusable, intercontinental missiles in exchange for the now infamous Budapest Memorandum of 1994, but was also persuaded to liquidate or hand over to Russia all militarily usable atomic stockpiles, radioactive materials and nuclear technologies, as well as all relevant delivery systems. Since 2022, a particularly tragicomic aspect of this story has been Russia's use of some of the delivery systems it received from Ukraine in the 1990s as part of the 1994 Budapest deal to destroy Ukrainian cities.

Gravedigger of the Post-cold War Order

Russia's war against Ukraine since 2014, and its escalation in 2022, have shaken not only the liberal world order, but also the European Security Order and the rules-based international order. Russia's attack is directed not just against Ukraine's democracy, but against the statehood, borders, sovereignty, identity and integrity of a UN member state. The subversive effects of this behaviour by a permanent member of the UN Security Council and official nuclear weapon state under the NPT are amplified by the meek or ineffectual behaviour of the remaining members of the Security Council, the other nuclear weapon states and further powerful western countries – first and foremost Germany.

It is true that the massive sanctions imposed on Moscow by the West since 2022 have hampered Russian warfare and weakened the economy. However, they have not been able to fundamentally constrain Russia, let alone end the war. Western arms deliveries to Ukraine are not insignificant, but continue to be reluctant, circumscribed and slow. They remain limited in scope and exclude various crucial types of weaponry.

Russia's war also often indirectly and sometimes directly affects the security interests of European and other states, for example, when Russian missiles operate in the vicinity of Ukrainian nuclear power plants, target the embassy district of Kyiv or destroy Ukrainian grain silos. Even so, militarily powerful European states whose interests are visibly threatened or diminished by Russian warfare leave the protection of critical objects on Ukrainian territory exclusively to Ukraine's armed forces.

Last but not least, international involvement in non-military aid for Ukraine remains muted. Today, there are intense debates in the West on transferring Moscow's frozen funds to Kyiv, on how to punish Russia for its mass human rights violations in the occupied Ukrainian territories and on the repatriation of thousands of unaccompanied deported Ukrainian children from Russia to their homeland. However, there have thus far been few relevant practical steps taken to implement these and similar noble intentions.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The continuing gap between the West's public rhetoric and political practice gives the impression that the liberal international order is a mirage. To be sure, Russia is heading towards a dead end for its would-be empire and will emerge from the war as a loser. At the same time, however, the Kremlin has managed to partly destroy the UN-based world system that emerged after 1945 and the European Security Order that emerged from the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 and the Paris Charter of 1990.

To alleviate this situation, the words, and deeds of western and non-western governments and of international organizations must better match each other. Making national and multinational action in support of Ukraine more resolute will demand better explanatory work from western and non-western press offices, think tanks, media outlets, PR companies, educational institutions and other public bodies. They must clarify for their audiences the full range of risks and implications for international stability that emanate from Russia's subversive foreign behaviour.

This concerns European actors above all, but is also an issue beyond Europe. West European and North American support for Ukraine is heavily driven by normative and emotional concerns, and often based on feelings of community, solidarity and empathy. While laudable,

such motivations need to be supplemented with more explicit and rational consideration of the national and transnational costs of a continuing Russian devaluation of world order, international law and global security.

Outside the western realm, by contrast, values, emotions and norms play a lower (or even negative) role in evaluating Ukraine's plight since 24 February 2022. Many politicians and commentators in the Global South see the Russo-Ukrainian war as either a quarrel between different white people or a conflict between Russia and the West. Most commentators perceive it as an event largely unrelated to the interests of non-European nations. A number of politicians, diplomats and experts regard it as a confrontation that can and should be exploited by Asian, African and Latin American countries for their own benefit. Some even mistake Russia's imperial war, illegal annexations and genocidal behaviour as acts of anti-imperialist resistance against an allegedly expansive West – a curious misinterpretation also popular in western far left and right wing circles.

The rapid spread of such misunderstandings across the non-western world is paradoxical. Russia's rhetorical devaluation and practical subversion of international law, order and organization, through its nihilistic approach to Ukraine, does not only concern the European continent. It may be potentially more dangerous for militarily weak non-western countries than for well-protected NATO member states, or for close non-NATO allies of the US, such as Japan or South Korea.

It is sometimes forgotten that Ukraine is itself – in broadly comparative terms – a country deeply entrenched in international structures. To illustrate the international embeddedness of Ukraine as of February 2024, it has been the beneficiary of an extraordinary Budapest Memorandum attached to the NPT since 1994, a participant of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe since its creation in 1995, party to an especially detailed Association Agreement with the EU since 2014 as well as to far-reaching security agreements with the United Kingdom and Germany since early 2024, and co-convenor of a special NATO-Ukraine Council founded since 2022. Many states around the world are less deeply entrenched in international structures or have less powerful partners and allies. The sovereignty and integrity of these non-European countries therefore rely – even more than Ukraine's – on the functioning of the international rules, organizations and laws that Russia is currently devaluing.

Five policy recommendations emerge from these conclusions:

- Western and non-western countries should, in their own interests, support Ukraine as far and in as many ways as possible in its attempts to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty;
- Western and non-western countries should, in their own interests, support Ukraine in its attempts to limit and reverse the genocidal aspects of Russia's attack on Ukraine since 2014 and to hold Russia accountable;
- Western and non-western governments, think tanks, media outlets and NGOs should cooperate on the exchange and spread of empirical information and political clarification, to the wider public, about Russia's war and its various international consequences;

- Western and non-western countries should consider ways to reform the UN and broader world system in order to prevent future misuse of international agreements and organizations to implement expansionist or genocidal policies;
- Western and non-western countries should consider strengthening older or the establishing new discussion forums (diplomatic, political or academic), transnational networks (governmental, non-governmental or mixed) and international organizations (regional, transregional or global) designed to confront and contain revanchist, colonial, imperialistic and genocidal policies.



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