

What Fueled the Russia-Ukraine War?

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Abstract

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war is a grave reminder that conflict and wars are yet to be over. Humanity has yet to find more pragmatic, effective and consensus based solutions to the deeply entrenched, persistent disagreements between the states. It has also underlined the limitations of international organizations, global civil society, mass media, international laws, treaties, conventions, regimes etc. in preventing the outbreak of conflict and wars. It has also put a question mark on the assertions and key assumptions of globalization theorists, particularly of hyper globalists regarding global exchange, cooperation and possible unification of states. It has uncovered the worst side of human beings despite all the claims of civility, rationality and a genuine common concern for lasting global peace. Now a question emerged as to what leads to this conflict, who can be held responsible for it and in what direction it's heading? Can we take it as the beginning of the World War III as said by some global leaders or it may die down with some mutually agreed solutions? The present study would attempt to explore the key causes of the Ukraine crises from its history, contemporary policies and international politics.

Key Words: Russia, Ukraine, Conflict, Causes, NATO, US

Introduction: the outbreak of the War

Both Russia and Ukraine have their own reasons for the outbreak of the present conflict, its motive, nature and culpability. Most American allies and European states blamed Russia as the aggressor and try to portray Russian leader Putin as a 'dictator' with global geopolitical ambitions and a potential danger to global peace. The Russian side accused the US and NATO's eastward expansion of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

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Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, intending to "demilitarise and de-Nazify Ukraine". The Russian leader Vladimir Putin has declared that he aimed to protect the Ukrainian People subjected to eight years of bullying and genocide by the Ukrainian government. Russia also wants Ukraine to remain neutral in the ongoing tussle between US lead NATO and Russia. The Chief of Russia's foreign intelligence Sergei Naryshkin has argued that "Russia's future and its future place in the world are at stake". The Russian side even refuses to acknowledge it as a war or invasion and termed it as a "special military operation" initiated to liberate Ukraine. (Kirby, 2022)

On the other hand, Ukraine has categorically rejected all such claims and blamed Russia for invading a sovereign country with a democratically elected leader. Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky has retorted to all the "false claims" made by Russia and said that "the enemy has designated me as target number one; my family is target number two". His advisor alleged that two attempts have already been made by the Russian side to destabilize the Ukrainian government. Scholars are also of the opinion that Russia has also expanded the goals and scope of this conflict. Initially, its objective was the liberation of Donbas and now it seems that it either wants to take its full control or to divide it.

Causes of the Conflict

In general, every conflict starts due to some instantaneous factors amounting to its sudden outbreak. But, every conflict also has a background and history behind it that keeps the disagreements and hostility alive and lets the parties and scholars keep anticipating its abrupt outburst at a particular time in future. The following are some of the probable reasons for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine:

Historical reasons: contested "commonality"

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine is not new. It has a long history stretching from the times of imperial Russia. The present territory of Ukraine became part of the Russian empire in the late 1700s after successive rules by the Mongols, the Poles and Lithuanians. After the

success of the Bolshevik revolution in 1918, Ukraine declared independence; but by 1921 the Red army conquered most of it and Ukraine became a republic within the Soviet Union. (Donahue, 2022) After the disintegration of the former Soviet Union in 1991, this conflict took a new shape as now the re-unification becomes one of the goals of the political heir of the Soviet legacy, Russia.

Supreme Russian leader Vladimir Putin had expressed his worldview and vision way back when he argued about the inherent unity among the Eastern Slavs—Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, who all trace their origins to the medieval Kyivan Rus commonwealth. It was an indication and desire that the modern states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus should share a common political destiny in present and future. (Mankoff, 2022) Vladimir Putin has always sought to reverse the "disintegration of historical Russia" and declared his intentions to restore Russian greatness. (CEPA, 2022) He has claimed that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, denying Ukraine its long history and termed the independent status of the state merely as an "anti-Russia project". He also asserted that "Ukraine never had stable traditions of genuine statehood" which can be seen as a crude expression of his future intentions.

Disagreements always persist between the two regarding the nature and extent of the relationship of Ukraine with the European Union, NATO and the United States of America. Armed conflict erupted in Eastern Ukraine in early 2014 after the Russian troops took control of Ukraine's Crimea region in March 2014. At that time, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that there was an emergent need to protect the rights of Russian citizens and Russian speakers in Crimea and southeast Ukraine. Later on, Russia formally annexed the Crimean peninsula through a disputed local referendum in which the Crimean population voted to join the Russian Federation. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022) It leads to further ethnic divisions within Ukraine and after a few months, pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of eastern Ukraine held a similar referendum to declare independence from Ukraine. Soon, an armed conflict in the region broke out between the Russian-backed forces and the Ukrainian military. The present

conflict can be seen in the continuation of the old hostility and rivalry between Ukraine and Russia. Other than the political reasons, it also has an ethnic dimension that provokes Russia time and again.

Table 1: Key Dates in Russian Ukrainian Relations

Date	Event
1918	Ukraine declares independence
1922	Ukraine becomes a republic within the Soviet Union
1991	It regains independence with the Soviet Union's collapse
2004	Orange Revolution annuls the rigged election of Russia-backed Viktor Yanukovich as president
2008	Ukraine applies to join NATO
2010	Yanukovich is elected president
2012	Ukraine and the EU draft an agreement to foster closer ties
2013	Yanukovich rejects the EU deal, sparking mass protests
Feb. 2014	Yanukovich is overthrown
Mar. 2014	Russia seizes Crimea
Apr. 2014	Pro-Russia separatists begin seizing territory in eastern Ukraine
Feb. 2022	Russia launches full-scale war on Ukraine

Source: Bloomberg, Asia Edition

Nord Stream II Project

Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin Russia emerged as an energy giant, becoming the world's third-largest producer of oil and the second-largest producer of natural gas. Russia has used energy revenues to accumulate around \$630 billion in foreign exchange reserves to boost its economy. (Krishna, 2022) The relationship between Russia and Europe is based on some mutual requirements and dependencies. Russia is the largest single energy source for European Nations. While Russia needs revenues through the export of energy resources to European states the latter heavily depends on the supply

of energy to keep their economies moving. Currently, Russia was supplying about One-third of Europe's natural gas consumption and more than one-quarter of crude oil imports.

Due to this interdependency, it would be unlikely for Europe to impose any tougher sanctions on Russia. Here, particularly the case of Germany, which is the largest economy in Europe, is important because it was getting more than half of its natural gas and over one-third of its crude oil supplies from Russia. From the cold war days, there have been disagreements between the USA and Russia (former the Soviet Union) regarding Europe's energy dependency on Russia. It has the potential to prevent any punitive action against Russia, if required or make those actions largely ineffective. Successive US governments from John F. Kennedy to Ronald Regan have faced this dilemma as to how to tackle this problem. On the other hand, Russia has always been looking for some alternative routes and supply lines to directly supply energy to its largest customers in Europe like Germany rather than through some proxy US ally like Ukraine. Russia stopped its subsidized supply through Ukraine after the Pro-US governments came into power there. When Ukraine refused to comply, Russia earnestly started looking for some alternative energy supply routes as it has to fulfil its contracts and commitments with other European states. It was at that juncture a new pipeline named Nord Stream- that can directly supply gas from Russia to Germany was planned. Nord Stream pipeline became operational on November 8, 2011, and was hailed by political and business leaders as making a significant contribution to Europe's long-term energy security. (Nord Stream, 2011) It has two long-term consequences- It inflicted a huge annual loss of transit fees to Ukraine and further increased Germany's energy dependency on Russia.

Many scholars view the ongoing crises in Ukraine from the prism of the US attempt to derail the Nord Steam 2 pipeline project, which is an expansion of the original Nord Stream pipeline. It was approved by the German government in 2018 and its construction was completed in September 2021. Once operational it would smoothly transit a higher level of energy supply from Russia bypassing Ukraine, Poland and other

countries. Norm Stream 2 not only inflict huge revenue losses; but was also seen as an attempt of Russia to divide Europe along their energy requirements and supply lines. America and its allies also believe that once it becomes operational it can be used to arm-twist Europe to meet Russian geo-political goals in the region. However, on February 22, 2022, Germany halted the Nord Stream 2 Baltic Sea gas pipeline project after Russia formally recognised two breakaway regions in eastern Ukraine. (Marsh & Chambers, 2022)

Ukraine's relationship with the West and NATO membership

Russia fundamentally believes that the existence of NATO and its expansion in the post-cold war era in Eastern Europe is an imminent danger to the Russian political and security interest in Europe. Russian leadership considers that the sole aim of NATO is to weaken it, divide its society, isolate it and ultimately destroy it. Russia has accused NATO that the primary motive of its eastward expansion was to launch an "active military build-up on territories adjacent to Russia". Deployment of weapons and Missile Defense Systems in territories close to Russian borders, which means Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, were viewed as a direct threat and challenge by the Russian leadership and they have raised this issue multiple times with European states. Russia has warned Ukraine to shun its ambitions of joining NATO otherwise it would be forced to take military action.

Russia has expressed its concerns regarding the cosyng up of relations between Ukraine and the West. We can partially blame this on the cold war mentality and lack of trust between the US and Russia. On numerous occasions in the past two years, Putin has publically expressed his thinking and concerns regarding Ukraine; but the other side seems determined to ignore it or took it too lightly. Some scholars believe it was more of testing Russia's patience, its political will and its capability to act.

US culpability

Eminent scholar John J. Mearsheimer while giving a speech on June 16 at the European Union Institute (EUI) blamed America for the current crises in Europe. He argued that "The United States is principally

responsible for causing the Ukraine crisis. This is not to deny that Putin started the war and that he is responsible for Russia's conduct of the war. Nor is it to deny that America's allies bear some responsibility, but they largely follow Washington's lead on Ukraine". He largely attributed this to "America's obsession with bringing Ukraine into NATO and making it a Western bulwark on Russia's border". He further said that rather than trying to settle the issue through constructive dialogue Biden administration has reacted to the outbreak of war by doubling down against Russia. (Mearsheimer, 2022) America's punitive approach, arming and rearming of Ukraine, running global propaganda to unilaterally blame the imperial intentions of Russia for the war and creating hurdles in positive dialogue, amplified the scope of the war. It seems that the United States of America is not willing to find a diplomatic solution to the problem.

Apart from that Russia has repeatedly blamed and warned America against arming Ukraine. In April 2022, Russia sent a formal diplomatic note to the Biden administration warning the U.S. against further arming Ukraine as it could have "unpredictable consequences". Although the US officially denied receiving any such communication but reiterated, "What we can confirm is that, along with allies and partners, we are providing Ukraine with billions of dollars' worth of security assistance, which our Ukrainian partners are using to extraordinary effect to defend their country against Russia's unprovoked aggression and horrific acts of violence." (Brennan, 2022)

On the other hand the Secretary of State of the US, Antony Blinken has described this strategy as part of its plan to increase Kyiv's leverage at the negotiating table which may eventually help in settling the differences and end the conflict. It has been reported by The New York Times that in less than a week after the outbreak of the conflict the United States and NATO have pushed more than 17,000 antitank weapons, including Javelin missiles, over the borders of Poland and Romania to be transported to Ukraine. In April 2022 President Biden further approved fresh military assistance to Ukraine, including \$800 million worth of arms including artillery such as medium-range

howitzers for the next phase of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The US President also announced \$500 million in direct economic assistance to the Ukrainian government as it battles to save the lives of people under siege by Russian forces. (Holland, 2022b) It has been reported that Washington has already provided \$6.9 billion in military assistance to Kyiv since the beginning of the Russian invasion. (Euronews, 2022) The supply of weapons and other logistical and economic support has been continuously provided by US and NATO in this conflict.

An opportunity to unite Europe against Russia

It has also been argued that for long US was looking for an opportunity to unite the European countries against its perceived enemy Russia, but it was not getting a solid reason and purpose to do so. The European countries have diverse economic and political interests that obstruct common reasoning and action. Somewhere, the European countries also want economic sovereignty and freedom from great power global competition and domination. It is pertinent to note that China and the United States couldn't separate their economic interests from geopolitical interests, but the member European Union states have learned this art. (Pisani-Ferry et al., 2019)

However, the Ukrainian crisis has provided that very ground to solidify NATO, persuade other countries like Finland and Sweden to join NATO and isolate and punish Russia. The US was looking for some kind of a broader alliance of democracies against the 'authoritarian states. As a Presidential candidate, Joe Biden had expressed his intent to "organize and host a global Summit for Democracy to renew the spirit and shared purpose of the nations of the free world". (Miller, 2020) Such an alliance would be useful and relevant in furthering American interests in different parts of the world once the Ukraine conflict gets over.

To seize Ukrainian territory and rebuild the Russian empire

It has long been argued that Russia under Putin is determined to rebuild 'Soviet' Russia. Vladimir Putin has been at the helm of affairs in Russia either as the President or Prime Minister of the Russian Federation

since August 9, 1999. It has been more than 20 years since Putting took over. Many scholars believe that ever since Putin took over the control of the Russian state his attempts were directed to strengthen Russia militarily and economically, unite Russia, deal with all the internal challenges with an iron fist and ally with like-minded states globally. (Shvangiradze, 2022) While addressing Duma in one of his initial speeches Putin said, "Russia has been a great power for centuries, and remains so. It has always had and still has legitimate zones of interest ... We should not drop our guard in this respect, neither should we allow our opinion to be ignored". His annexation of Crimea, political intervention in former Soviet states, opposition to NATO's eastward expansion, crushing of internal dissent, and separatism within Russia can be seen from that perspective. Putin's tough response to the secessionist rebels in Chechnya at the start of his premiership boosted his popularity and credentials among the Russian people. Domestically, his policy was to ensure stability at any cost and his foreign policy was to regain Russia's lost place in world affairs.

Russia under Putin has started withdrawing from some of its earlier commitments and common European security architecture. Ambassador Kurt Volker has argued that President Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference amounts to Russia's rejection of the existing European security architecture. Russia had already withdrawn from its commitments to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and opposed all NATO future plans in Europe.

However, this hypothesis has been questioned by Mearsheimer in the context of the current Ukraine war. He stated that Putin has never hinted or shown any interest to make Ukraine part of Russia until the Ukraine crisis first broke out on February 22, 2014. He was even an invited dignitary to the NATO summit at Bucharest in April 2008 where the alliance announced that Ukraine and Georgia would eventually become its members. We should analyze before assuming that it was a well-calculated move of Russia. Here, it is important to explore the shreds of evidence on three grounds- first, is it a desirable goal; second, was it a feasible goal and third, was he really intended to pursue that

goal? Evidence suggested that Putin was not intended to make Ukraine part of Russian territory however he has made some references such as Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” with a common history. However, the possibility of it now can’t be denied under the changed circumstances and progression of conflict.

Fear of Escalation

Ever since the conflict started leaders and scholars are investigating its probable outcome and future course of action of the parties involved. Although, at the end of March Ukraine proposed not to join NATO and would become a non-aligned and "non-nuclear" state, with no foreign military bases or contingents on its territory but the conflict is intensifying. Noted scholar John J. Mearsheimer has argued there is a danger that the war will escalate, as NATO might get dragged into the fighting and nuclear weapons might be used. He said that we are living in perilous times. The same fear of nuclear escalation was also expressed by the Russian leadership. In an interview with Russian state television in April 2022, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told the world not to underestimate the “considerable risk” of nuclear conflict. He said that NATO's supply of weapons to Ukraine "in essence" meant that the Western alliance was engaged in a proxy war with Russia. (Reuters, 2022) He warned the world that the risk of World War III "is serious" and criticised Kyiv's approach to floundering peace talks at the behest of the US. (Agence France-Presse, 2022) Responding to this both Ukraine and the US have rejected Russian claims. The U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said Lavrov’s comments were part of a “pattern of bellicose statements” from Russia that is not irresponsible but indicates “a clear attempt to distract from its failure in Ukraine.”

In one of the most recent cautionary, on July 6, 2022, former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told the United States that attempts by the West to punish a nuclear power such as Russia for the war in Ukraine risked endangering humanity. He further said that the United States as an empire had spilt blood across the world by killing Native Americans,

nuclear bombing Japan and a host of wars in different parts of the world from Vietnam to Afghanistan.

Amidst the current crises, Russia announced its new naval doctrine on July 31, 2022, and avowed the United States' pursuit of global maritime dominance and the growth in NATO activity as the two main threats to Russia's national maritime security. The concerned document categorically that, "The main challenges and threats to the national maritime security and sustainable development for the Russian Federation related to the world oceans are the strategic course of the US toward domination in the world oceans and their global influence on the development of international processes, including those related to the use of transport communications and energy resources of the world ocean". It further read that the expansion of NATO's military infrastructure progressively closer to Russian borders and the growing number of naval drills in areas adjacent to Russian waters are also posing threats to the national security of Russia. (2022)

Under present circumstances, it is difficult to predict the future of this ongoing conflict, but the fear of its escalation to a dangerous level can't be denied. It is the collective responsibility of the international community to resolve it amicably. Currently, tensions are also piling up between US and China over the Taiwan issue. China's unconditional support to Russia during the current conflict might prove to be ominous for world peace and stability in future.

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