

# Introduction to the Spring 2023 Special Issue: Who Has the Power?

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The war in Ukraine is the largest military engagement in Europe since World War II.<sup>1</sup> It has been ongoing since 2014, when Ukraine’s pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was ousted from power. The conflict has since escalated into a full-blown war, with all the accompanying humanitarian and environmental tragedies.

The conflict has its roots in a historical rivalry between Ukraine and Russia, with Ukraine being part of the Soviet Union until the latter’s collapse in 1991. Since then, Ukraine has attempted to align itself with the West, while Russia has sought to maintain its influence in the region.

The Minsk Agreement, signed in 2015, was meant to bring an end to the political jousting, but it has since failed.

For some analysts, the war in Ukraine is part of a never-ending power struggle; the U.S. should have contained Russia when it was most vulnerable – after the

<sup>1</sup> Dan Bilefsky, Richard Pérez-Peña, and Eric Nagourney, “The Roots of the Ukraine War: How the Crisis Developed,” *The New York Times (Online)*. Accessible from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-eu-rope.html> (2022).

collapse of the Soviet Union (Some would argue, as General George Patton did, the U.S. had the chance near the end of World War II to drive Russia back to its original borders, rather than ceding Berlin.)<sup>2</sup> Yet, some see the conflict as threatening the very structure of post-Cold War stability; the future of global order hinges on the outcome of that struggle.<sup>3</sup> For others, the new cold war has the potential to be far worse than the first.<sup>4</sup>

Separately, the U.S. and China – both sideline participants but on opposite ends of the conflict’s support spectrum – are in a deepening competition across economic, military and technological spheres, one that could, as a result of war in Ukraine,

reorder the world in ways we cannot yet predict. The reckless and preventable conflict in Ukraine has already produced worldwide consequences.<sup>5</sup>

**Russia’s instigation of the crisis in Ukraine has further reaffirmed the transition to a multipolar world.**

Political scientist John J. Mearsheimer contends the liberal international order has accelerated China’s rise and ultimately transformed the global system from unipolar to multipolar.<sup>6</sup> Russia’s instigation of the

crisis in Ukraine has further reaffirmed the transition to a multipolar world.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Kagan, “The Price of Hegemony: Can America Learn to Use Its Power?” *Foreign Affairs*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/russia-ukraine-war-price-hegemony>.

<sup>3</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal, “The Return of Conquest? Why the Future of Global Order Hinges on Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-04-06/ukraine-russia-war-return-conquest>.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, “I’m a Cold War Historian. We’re in a Frightening New Era,” *The New York Times*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/01/opinion/russia-ukraine-cold-war.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Amir Handjani, “Ukraine War Is Causing a Commodities ‘Super Cycle’ and Likely Global Food Crisis,” *Responsible Statecraft*, March 16, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/03/16/ukraine-war-could-cause-a-global-food-crisis/>.

<sup>6</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/43/4/7/12221/Bound-to-Fail-The-Rise-and-Fall-of-the-Liberal>.

The war in Ukraine and a possible contest with China will have significant implications for international relations and security, including the risk of a disastrously expanded war. A rising Russia and China could challenge the dominance of the United States and its allies, potentially leading to a new Cold War. The economic, political, social and military implications of this are many, with potential consequences for the planet.

Among the many questions we must ask is this one: What comes next?

In our Spring 2023 Special Issue, we asked scholars, researchers and policymakers to think about the war in Ukraine in its historical context. We asked for their learned take on the U.S.-led NATO alliance and its role in the conflict. We wondered about the profile and place of emerging powers like China. And more.

We received compelling answers to our questions.

The first paper in our Special Issue explorations is a Q&A with Ambassador Chas W. Freeman Jr. titled, “Ukraine, China, and the Global Failure of U.S. Policy.” Ambassador Freeman, a former U.S. assistant secretary of defense and longtime diplomat, discusses the war in Ukraine, the shifting of global power and the United States’ flawed idea of diplomacy. Is a nuclear confrontation a possibility? Freeman fears the worst, if the U.S. doesn’t turn its focus away from military prowess and territorialism and, instead, concentrate on being a better world partner.

**Is a nuclear  
confrontation a  
possibility?**

The next three articles deal with the Mackinderian theory of geopolitics and how his 20th-century observations are unfolding today in Eurasia. In the “The Geopolitics of American Global Decline,” educator and author Alfred W. McCoy writes that for even the greatest of empires, geography is often destiny. McCoy’s path leads us through Sir Halford Mackinder’s groundbreaking theories of geopolitics and how they are playing out a century later. Was geostrategist Mackinder a 20th-century Nostradamus? China-led developments in Eurasia provide a clue.

In “The Balance of Power in Eurasia,” Simone Pelizza, a specialist in geopolitics and international affairs, unpeels questions surrounding the balance of international power in the vast landmass between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Victorian/Edwardian-era prophecies meet 21st-century realities, as Pelizza explores the strategic competition and geopolitical changes taking shape in Eurasia.

Next, a Eurasian-centered new world order is being created, and the U.S. has chosen Ukraine as a battleground with the Russian Federation. So offers barrister Adeyinka Makinde in “Hegemony to Multipolarity: Creating a Modern Eurasia,” as he unpacks the de facto alliance between Russia and China and its implications for the Eurasian landscape. Again a nod to Mackinder’s foresight, but also a real-time, 21st-century geopolitical analysis of import.

An award-winning academic and researcher, Rajan Menon reminds us in “NATO and the Road not Taken” of a lesson seemingly ignored over millennia: “Starting war is the easy part; what’s difficult, perhaps even impossible, is using it to achieve anything that resembles strategic success.” Is it NATO, or is it Russia’s aversion to democracy that is to blame in the conflict in Ukraine?

In “The Nightmare of NATO Equipment being Sent to Ukraine,” former Marine Corps intelligence officer Scott Ritter details the West’s military assistance in Ukraine. He argues that such support, if continued, risks a nuclear nightmare, fails Ukrainian expectations and rebukes the World War II history enshrined in a prominent Soviet war memorial in Berlin.

Chris Hedges, author of *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* provides more food for thought in his contribution, “Ukraine: The War that Went Wrong.” Hedges suggests that NATO support for the war in Ukraine, designed to degrade the Russian military and drive Vladimir Putin from power, is not going according to plan. And, new and sophisticated military hardware isn’t the answer.

The next series of papers looks beyond Ukraine and explores the rise of non-West states, led by Russia and China, as well as multipolarity and the great shifting of powers, including what it means for Africa. In “War in Ukraine: US, Russia, China and the Return of the Multipolar World,” I share my belief that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has long been foretold, based on promises broken and commitments ignored by the West. Now, the war threatens the global order, as China and Russia

draw closer, and the United States' longstanding unipolar dominance in global affairs is challenged.

A researcher of political economies and development, Nchedo Oguine writes about the rise of Eurasian power in her entry, "The Physiognomic Implications of Power Shift from the U.S. to China." She examines economic and political factors that could impede and support Eurasia's goal of flouting Euro-American dominance.

"Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: What does it Mean for Africa?" comes next. Author Yusuf Bangura suggests that the continent's opinion- and policy-makers explore just such a question. After all, the Russian invasion of Ukraine threatens the security of small nations and reinforces an illiberal turn in world politics; democratic norms are being challenged globally.

Be it Russia, be it the U.S., it's military madness. That's the take of Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft President Andrew Basevich in his offering, "Russia's Underperforming Military (and ours)." Basevich contends Putin's plunge into Ukraine is proof he learned nothing from the folly of post-9/11 U.S. military policy. Will the United States learn anything from Putin's actions against Ukraine—creep?

Rajan Menon offers up additional insights in his second submission, this time proposing three different endings to the war in Ukraine. Appropriately titled "Ending the War in Ukraine: Three Possible Futures," his work explores those possible paths while acknowledging the war has consequences beyond the European theater. Whatever the possible outcomes, Menon warns, "No one who matters seems to be thinking about them."

The common thread in our experts' shared opinions is that we are likely witnessing the slow descent of Western powers and the ascension of non-Western powers.

In asking for their input, and without invoking the memory of the bold and brilliant geopolitical and geostrategic icon Sir Halford Mackinder, we sought to know learned views on the shakeup – or the shakedown – taking place in Eurasia. In return, what we received, either directly or indirectly, echoes Sir Halford's observation of some 80 years ago.

At the time, Russia and Germany were duking it out in World War II. Looking back on his groundbreaking works of 1904 and 1919, he wondered if his geopolitical

“Heartland” concept was now – in 1943 – even more appropriate than it was when originally posited. Today, a pair of decades into the 21st century, it is apparent, as Mackinder noted eight decades ago, that the “Heartland” concept, “is more valid and useful today as it was either twenty or forty years ago.”

What was true in 1943 is true today.

We hope you find this Special Issue to be informative and thought-provoking. We appreciate the knowledge, insights and expertise shared in the following contributions, and we look forward to the growth we will realize over future issues, as well as the expanded conversations that will take place as a result of our work.

### ***About the author***

Dr. Christopher Zambakari is founder and CEO of The Zambakari Advisory. He is a Doctor of Law and Policy, assistant editor of *Bulletin of the Sudans Studies Association*, and a Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow. His area of research and expertise is policy development that ensures political stability and socioeconomic development, and his interests include modern political and legal thought, governance and democracy, the rule of law, postcolonial violence and nation-building projects in Africa.

A native of Sudan, Zambakari is a valued contributor to UN agency publications and in the journals and digital offerings of U.S. embassies across Africa. He is a leading voice in African Union discourse and is also a voice for the UN’s Economic Commission for Africa. His research has been ranked in the “Top-10% Authors, 2017-2020” by Social Science Research Network (SSRN) and featured in “Most-Read African Studies papers Since 2013” by Routledge, a world leader in academic publishing centered on the humanities, social sciences and STEM. His work has been published in law, economic and public policy journals.