

SPECIAL ISSUE: SPRING 2023

# The Great Power Competition in Eurasia



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

**Christopher Zambakari, B.S., MBA, M.I.S., LP.D.**

*Founder & CEO, The Zambakari Advisory, Hartley B. and Ruth B. Barker Endowed Rotary Peace Fellow, Assistant Editor, Bulletin of The Sudans Studies Association*

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.



# Ukraine, China, and the Global Failure of US Policy:

An Interview with Ambassador W. Chas Freeman Jr.

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The Zambakari Advisory is pleased to present this substantial and wide-ranging interview with Ambassador Chas Freeman Jr. The ambassador possesses a rare breadth and depth of experience in diplomacy and security policy:

- **China and Southeast Asia:** In 1972, having previously mastered two dialects of Chinese, Freeman served as primary interpreter during President Richard Nixon's path-breaking trip to China. From 1979–1981, Freeman was director for Chinese affairs at the U.S. Department of State. He then served as deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the American embassies in Beijing (1981–1984) and Bangkok (1984–1986).
- **Africa:** During the final years of the 1980s, Freeman was principal deputy assistant secretary of state for African affairs during the U.S. mediation of Namibian independence from South Africa and the Cuban troop withdrawal from Angola.
- **European security:** During 1993–1994, Freeman was U.S. Assistant Secretary

of Defense for International Security Affairs. In this capacity, he received the Defense Department's highest public service awards for his roles in designing a NATO-centered post-Cold War European security system, and in reestablishing defense and military relations with China.

- **Middle East:** Freeman served as U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 1989 to 1992, including during the first Gulf war from 1990–1991.
- **Business, venture capital and entrepreneurship:** For the past four decades, Ambassador Freeman has chaired Projects International, Inc., which helps negotiate, acquire, capitalize and implement business ventures across five continents.

### ***Interview panel***

Christopher Zambakari (**CZ**), LP.D., founder and CEO of The Zambakari Advisory; Estève Giraud (**EG**), Ph.D., assistant research professor at Arizona State University's Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems; Dr. Benjamin Abelow (**BA**), author of *How the West Brought War to Ukraine*; and Stephen Des Georges (**SDG**), content development and communications consultant and TZA editor-at-large.

**CZ:** The conflict in Ukraine has impacted the lives of millions in that region, resulting in both humanitarian and environmental devastation. How did we get to this place, what Russia calls a 'special military operation'?

**Ambassador Freeman:** There are really four wars going on, at least. The first is among Ukrainians — specifically, between Ukrainians who insist that other Ukrainians speak only Ukrainian, and Ukrainians who like to speak Russian at home and want to educate their children in it, and to use it for official purposes.

After the 2014 coup in Kyiv, which reoriented Ukraine away from Russia, there was a rebellion in the eastern part of Ukraine because the Ukrainian government had declared that the only language for official and educational purposes was to be Ukrainian. This was not acceptable to residents of the Donbas region any more



than it had been acceptable to people in Crimea. So this began as a civil war among Ukrainians, and Russia obviously had an affinity with the Russian-speaking Ukrainians. The primary reason for the intervention began then.

The Civil War rapidly became a second war, a proxy war between the Ukrainian government and the Russians who were assisting their fellow Russian speakers in the eastern part of Ukraine. That went on for some eight years. In the meantime, a larger strategic picture was emerging, and, in 2007, at the Munich Security Conference, Russia registered strong objections to the idea that NATO enlargement would include Ukraine, and to the stationing of American weapons, hostile to Russia, on Ukrainian soil within a very short firing distance from Moscow.

Finally, in 2021, Russia demanded negotiations on the European security architecture and Ukraine's place in it — but was decisively rebuffed. The United States declared that we would not address Russia's agenda. Although we were prepared to talk about the details of weapons placement, we were not prepared to talk about the incorporation of Ukraine into what is, in effect, the American sphere of influence in Europe, called NATO.

So, that was the third war, if you will, between Russia and the United States, with Russia trying to deny the United States a sphere of influence in Ukraine, and the United States asserting the right to establish one.

And the final, the fourth war, I would say, is between NATO, meaning European NATO, and Russia. Again, this is a proxy war, in this case supported mainly by the United States, but with support now from countries like Germany, and with strong support from Poland and the Baltic states.

So, what we have here is a rather strange mixture of different sources of conflict. And it's rather ironic and strange that the United States has arrayed itself against self-determination for Russian speakers in the Donbas in Ukraine and in Crimea, whereas, usually, we align and sympathize with this kind of self-determination.

**CZ:** Different from our position with China, right?

**Ambassador Freeman:** If you look at the China issue, we are sympathetic to Taiwan independence, meaning self-determination for Taiwan, but we're unsympathetic to the self-determination of Russian speakers within Ukraine. So this is a rather

stark contrast. Nobody ever asks, ‘What do the people of Donbas want? What do the people of Crimea want?’ This is considered irrelevant. What’s going on here are games that are motivated by a very different factor.

**BA:** Regarding these ‘games,’ are you referring specifically to geostrategic games wherein the U.S. is trying to weaponize the Donbas against Russia? Or are you speaking of something different or in addition to that?

**Ambassador Freeman:** I think the main element was cogently expressed by Lloyd Austin, the secretary of defense, when he said [in April 2022] that the objective is to weaken and isolate Russia. So, whatever the causes of the conflict in Ukraine, I think there was a concerted effort led by people like [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs] Victoria Newland to detach Ukraine from any positive relationship with Russia. The goal was to enlist it in the ranks of NATO and, therefore, on the side of the U.S. in a U.S.-Russian contention.

In that context, the United States has taken geopolitical advantage of this conflict in an attempt to isolate and weaken Russia, as Mr. Austin said. He was, by the way, chided for having been so open about this. One of the great difficulties in this war is that there is no clear objective. We are told we are going to aid Ukraine for as long as it takes, but ‘it’ is never defined. What is ‘it’? What conditions would satisfy our war aims? We don’t know. So we’re in a war of attrition, it seems, another ‘forever war.’ There are no serious proposals for peace on the table. The Chinese have put forward principles, but that’s not a plan. And it remains to be seen whether it will ever be translated into a plan.

**SDG:** Speaking of serious proposals, how willing is Russian President Vladimir Putin or his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy to sit down and seek a way out of this? Or are the U.S. and its allies and NATO such a combined force — such a player, if you will — that they’re restricting or limiting the ability of Putin and Zelensky to get together and say ‘Enough!’?

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, it’s a characteristic of democracies like our own — even though, in some respects, it’s a failing democracy now — to demonize the enemy. That’s been the case in every major war that the United States has ever engaged in. And we have demonized Russia to such an extent that your question, which is a very good one, probably would strike many people as odd.

We know what Putin wants; he's evil. He wants to conquer the world, starting with Ukraine. He wants to reconstitute the Soviet Union, etc. etc. etc. All of which is convenient politically, but factually questionable. So, we're dealing with a problem here, which is that the fog of war has become something more than fog.

So, we're dealing with a problem here, which is that the fog of war has become something more than fog.

There is no information available in the mainstream media in the United States about the Ukraine war that is not derived from Ukrainian sources, or sources sympathetic to Ukraine and supportive of it. The same is true in Russia, by the way. There is no information available in the Russian media, as far as I can determine, that is not derived from sources sympathetic to the Russian cause. So, we live in two different media universes, and both of us, the Russians and the United States — Americans — see this through a sort of virtual reality.

The key to answering your question of whether there could be a negotiated solution is whether there will be dialogue. There is at present no dialogue between the United States and Russia. The 10-minute rancorous encounter in New Delhi [at the March 2022 G-20 conference] between Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign

Everything's in the hands of the military and determined by the military confrontation, and nobody is building an off ramp.

minister, and Antony Blinken, our secretary of state [in which Blinken said he told Lavrov to end the 'war of aggression' against Ukraine], becomes great news, although there's no result, no progress made during that talk. And so now we don't talk. Everything's in the hands of the military and determined by the military confrontation, and nobody is building an off ramp.

**SDG:** So, what could bring this war to an end?

**Ambassador Freeman:** Mr. Putin, from the beginning, has said that he wanted to negotiate. That was how this started. He wanted to negotiate, he massed troops on the border of Ukraine and made it clear there would be some sort of special military



operation, as he put it, if there was not a negotiation. There was no negotiation, and there was, therefore, a military operation. But he has continued to stress that he's prepared to negotiate on the basis of realities on the ground.

Now, that's not unusual. Lines of control where armies stop are the basis for any discussion of how wars end. So, he's realistic. He's open to negotiation, apparently. I'm sure he is a very tough negotiator, and it would not be easy to settle this. On the other side, Mr. Zelenskyy says that he will not negotiate until Russia leaves everywhere, including Crimea, and that he plans to swim on the beaches of Crimea next summer.

This is a model of warfare that the United States developed. We have engaged in four formative experiences of war: our own Civil War, World War I, World War II, and the Cold War. In each case the objective was the annihilation of the enemy — the humiliation of the enemy — followed by the moral reconstruction of the enemy under our supervision. That was Reconstruction in the South, that was the

destruction of Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany, and that was the occupation of Germany and Japan after World War II. And that was our approach to the Soviet Union after the end of the Cold War, after the Soviet Union defaulted on its competition with us. This is a very strange, historically anomalous view of warfare, but one very congenial to the United States and consistent with our traditions.

We take the view that once war starts, diplomacy is irrelevant. The rest of the world imagines that diplomacy is most useful when you're actually in combat. It's precisely when you're at war that dialogue is most important.

**We take the view that once war starts, diplomacy is irrelevant. The rest of the world imagines that diplomacy is most useful when you're actually in combat. It's precisely when you're at war that dialogue is most important.**

**BA:** We often hear from Washington and the media that if Mr. Zelensky doesn't want certain things, we, the U.S., must defer based on Ukrainian agency. Or we hear that this is Ukraine's battle, not ours. Is that a realistic and accurate presentation, or is the situation really one in which,

if the U.S. decides — the U.S. foreign policy elite decides — to bring this war to a conclusion, it can simply impose its decision, using financial or other pressures on Mr. Zelenskyy to basically say, ‘Look, this is what’s going to happen for the sake of everybody, including you.’

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, there’s a lot of evidence that Mr. Zelenskyy responds to foreign advice and counsel and direction. The clearest evidence of that was Boris Johnson’s visit to Kyiv [in April 2022], and his [Johnson’s] apparent sabotage of what appeared to be something very close to an agreement between Russia and Ukraine to end this fight.

So, we’ve seen that foreigners can direct Mr. Zelensky away from peace. Whether they could direct him toward peace is another question. Let’s remember, however, that this man, although he is a brilliant actor, is an actor. And there is a considerable reason to doubt that the lines he is delivering are original to him. They certainly serve geopolitical purposes of the sort we were discussing. So, I think the answer is yes, if we wanted to have peace, we could, but frankly, there’s no evidence we want peace.

We seem to be very comfortable with a war of attrition in which our military-industrial complex profits and the president gets to be a war president. Our greatest presidents are always war presidents, and this seems to be Mr. Biden’s aspiration. So, there are lots of reasons on the American side. It will cost us what I would consider serious money, but apparently people in Congress don’t see it that way. There’s no real pain on our side, so why not fight to the last Ukrainian, which seems to be the plan.

**BA:** Do you see a possible role for an independent proposal coming from the Global South, perhaps something tied to China’s points, or something totally separate, not tied to China, but coming from other countries in the Global South getting together and proposing something? Is that a real possibility?

**Ambassador Freeman:** I think it could be. It would probably come through the UN. It would find a very sympathetic champion in Secretary General [António]

If we wanted to have peace, we could, but frankly, there’s no evidence we want peace.

Guterres at the UN who's been adamant on the subject of trying to end this war, for many reasons.

Of course, the war is having spillover effects of a very nasty nature on things like food supplies for countries that are dependent on imports, African countries in particular, Arab countries. It has created a massive and, so far, incomplete realignment of many markets, including energy markets, with increased costs there. Fertilizer, which is essential for modern agriculture, is no longer available in many cases because of the mining of Ukrainian harbors, ironically, by Ukraine, and the presence of a Russian fleet in the Black Sea.

So, there are many reasons for other countries beyond Europe to want to end this. And I could see an initiative coming forward, but it would have to have roots in Europe. It could not succeed otherwise. We would have to do what some people believe the Chinese statement of principles was designed to do, namely split Europe from the United States on this war. Many Europeans seem to be increasingly fatigued and discomfited by the war. And although our media, again, are falling down on the job, there are increasing protests and demonstrations in Europe against the war, against NATO. And it's clear that the French, who've always been marching to their own tune within NATO, are again offbeat, if you will.

**CZ:** I just hope that when it comes to this conflict in Ukraine, that the architects of the solution take that into account, that it has to be European-driven. It cannot come just from China. It cannot just come from the United States. It has to have roots and buy-in among the Europeans themselves.

**Ambassador Freeman:** There is a basic principle of conflict resolution, which is that those with the capacity to overthrow the solution have to be part of the solution. You have to have buy-in from those who have a stake in what happens, and you have to convince them.

My definition of peace is a very bland one. It is a situation that is sufficiently acceptable to those with the capacity to disturb it

**There is a basic principle of conflict resolution, which is that those with the capacity to overthrow the solution have to be part of the solution.**

so that they don't disturb it. That may make peace sound less noble than it is often portrayed, but I think it's realistic. So the question of what kind of peace is established eventually, if one is established in Ukraine and therefore between Russia and the rest of Europe, is the core question.

Europeans have a very bad record of being the bloodiest continent. Actually, they're not a continent. They're a subcontinent rather like India, but theirs is the most bloody-minded and war-like group of societies that the world has ever known. I think they need help, and that help, unfortunately, is not going to come from the United States, which is very much part of the problem. So, it has to come from elsewhere. And I think Ben [Abelow] is correct, in his previous question, to speculate that this might come from what he calls the Global South, meaning I would say the reconstituted non-aligned movement.

**CZ:** How has the U.S. relationship with China changed over the years. Where have we been relationally speaking, and where are we headed?

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, I like an analytical framework that distinguishes forms of competition, and I identify three. One form is rivalry. That can be very healthy because it consists of each side — sometimes more than two sides — but each side striving to improve its own performance, and thereby out-compete, outdo the others. That is a competition which is not a zero-sum game. It is positive in its outcomes. And that is what we had for a considerable period of time in the U.S.-China relationship.

However, there are two other kinds of competition. One I call 'adversarial animosity.' Adversarial animosity is what happens when a runner in a race decides that he or she can win only by tripping up or hamstringing the competitor. Rather than trying to improve his or her own performance, someone who practices this form of competition strives to cripple the opposition. That is where we are with China at the moment.

The third kind of competition is enmity, which implies a desire to annihilate the other side. Perhaps this is the word to describe the total wars that the United States has fought that I described earlier — the Civil War, World War I, World War II, the Cold War — in which the objective was to destroy the enemy and reconstitute the enemy in a form more congenial to the values of the United States.

So, with China, we have moved from rivalry — healthy competition — to a very unhealthy competition in which our basic effort to compete is not to improve ourselves very much but to cripple the Chinese.

I just read an article that identified 144 areas of cutting-edge technology in the world. Such categorizations are always somewhat subjective, and one shouldn't take them as gospel, but they still can tell you something. China's ahead in 137 of the 144. Why is this? Because the Chinese now have over one-fourth of the world's STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] workforce. One fourth. By 2025, China alone will have more scientists, technologists, engineers, and mathematicians than the entire OECD [U.S. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], meaning the industrialized West plus Japan, Korea, and so forth.

And they are innovating, and they are spending huge amounts of money, which buys more, by the way, in China; there is something called purchasing power parity, which is relevant to comparisons of this kind, not just to the development of technology, but to basic science.

So, you find, for example, that the largest radio telescope is now in China. You find that the Chinese land a vehicle on the far side of the moon, and so forth. They are competing by improving themselves — not by trying to cripple us — and yet we postulate that they are trying to cripple us. So, our response is not very effective.

If you ask Morris Chang, who is the head of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Corporation, or TSMC, which has been more or less dragooned into investing \$40 billion in Arizona to build a chip foundry, he will tell you that the chips the foundry will produce — if it ever gets around to producing things — are going to be much more expensive than the ones that are produced in Taiwan.

Why is that? It is because of the factors that account for our failing competitiveness, which are numerous.

One is, obviously, protectionism. We have a series of laws that ensure that American oligopolies are kept in place. Oligopolies now dominate our economy because antitrust policy has been neglected; you can go to any mall in America and see the franchises of exactly the same national oligopolies. These are inefficient, as



oligopolies always are, but they're protected from foreign competition by tariffs and quotas and things like that. And they are increasingly protected from domestic competition by laws and regulations.

Is this something that China did to us? All the rhetoric says yes, and I say no. What does hold us down — what slowed us down — are decisions that have been made here.

There are other factors. If you look at Germany, for example, you'll find that in the boardroom — the management committee — there is a representative of the labor union. So, when a question comes up about how to compete with a more efficient foreign competitor the answer that is given is not to go to Bangladesh to search for lower-cost labor, but to retrain the existing workforce and automate, invest in more efficient production processes, and thereby raise productivity.

Here in the U.S., we have an antagonistic labor-management relationship. It is less antagonistic than it was in the last century when it was often very violent, but it is still non-cooperative. Labor-management relations are a problem.

The tax system is also a problem. The tax system favors companies that go abroad, make their profits abroad and keep their profits abroad. We have financialized capitalism, which is the most potent destroyer of corporate innovation that has yet been discovered.

What are our companies doing? They make huge profits because they are often oligopolies, as I said, and they use those profits *not* to invest in innovation or additional production, but to do share buybacks. There is a reason that [the Chinese tech corporation] Huawei, which didn't do share buybacks — because it was cooperatively owned and driven by an engineer who wanted to innovate — totally destroyed the American competition.

So, there are multiple problems here before you even get to the fact that we have a fiscal system which depends entirely on deficit finance. We borrow all the money that we need to operate the government. We accumulate debt and we spend the money not on investing in human and physical infrastructure, but on wars. Eight trillion dollars in forever-war costs, according to the Brown University 'Costs of War Project.'

These are impediments that are self-imposed. And I might add that the educational system has two disastrous elements to it now. One is the lowering of standards for students up to the high school level. Siemens, the German manufacturing engineering company finds that it has to give American workers at least six months of remedial education to match what German workers have coming out of high school in Germany.

**I think we are just not facing up to what is required to be the competitor we once were.**

A second problem is that we used to have publicly financed higher education. Now it's all financed by private debt. So students come out of the university experience or professional education burdened by huge amounts of debt, which basically cripples them from the beginning of their professional lives.

These are things that call out for reform in the United States, and do you hear anybody talking about them?

That is a very long answer to the question, but let me encapsulate all this by saying our differences with China, the so-called competition with China, is not driven by strategic reasoning, but by psychological factors.

**You will find that while we greatly outnumber the Chinese in the number of insurance salesmen and tax accountants, China's industrial production is twice ours.**

We became number one internationally sometime around 1870, and we're disturbed by not necessarily being number one anymore. It would be very useful *not* to take GDP, gross domestic product, as a comparison of U.S. and Chinese economies, but, instead, look at sectors. If you do that, you will find that while we greatly outnumber the Chinese in the number of insurance salesmen and tax accountants, China's industrial production is twice ours. I think we are just not facing up to what is required to be the competitor we once were.

**EG:** Why is it that Americans seem unable to tolerate a world in which the U.S. would not always be number one, a world in which there would be multiple forces, for example equals? Where does this need to be number one come from?

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, I'm not sure about all of the factors involved in it. People like to be king of the mountain, I guess, and to push other people off the mountain in order to be that king.

Our relationship with the outside world was once deferential – we actually prospered greatly in our national development by looking for best foreign practices and adopting them.

We no longer do that. In 2016, there was a moment in the U.S. presidential debate between [candidates] Hillary Clinton and, I think, Bernie Sanders, in which Sanders suggested we might learn a few things from Denmark, which is a very orderly, progressive society with apparently low stress levels and low crime and so forth. And, as I recall, Ms. Clinton sneered at that. 'Denmark?!' she said. 'That pipsqueak country, we could learn something?' Anyway, this is emblematic of a problem. Perhaps I'm being unfair to her, but I don't think so. I think she represented a broad American view: 'We are the best.' Actually, we're not. If you look at comparisons, I think we're still slightly above Cuba in terms of the quality of our healthcare, but maybe not. We're not the richest country in the world, although we imagine we are. We have more of the richest people, that's true. Plutocracy has become the reality.

**We don't do  
diplomacy  
anymore.**

I think we're not prepared to make comparisons with other countries that show us up. So, we are operating a bit like the famous cartoon character Mr. Magoo. He wandered around blind, destructive but self-congratulatory. So that's one thing.

And second is, of course, the ascendancy of the military-industrial complex in our foreign relations. We have spent billions of dollars — billions and billions of dollars — during the period of the Cold War and, to date, on university faculties devoted to the study of coercive influence, you know, game theory. Nobody spent any money on persuasive influence.

I take it in our society, if you have a neighbor who is doing things you don't want him to do — like letting his dog drop garbage on your lawn — then you have several choices. I suppose you could wait for him to emerge from church on Sunday, stand on the opposite side of the road and give him the finger just to show your displeasure. Or you could draw a gun and hold it to his head and say, 'Control your dog or else.' But the more effective method is to invite the guy to have a cup of coffee and explain to him why there's a problem and why he has to shape up.

We don't do diplomacy anymore. If you doubt that, look at the [March 2021] Anchorage [Alaska] meeting between Anthony Blinken, [Chinese officials] Wang Yi and Yang Jiechi, and [U.S. National Security Advisor] Jake Sullivan back at the start of the Biden administration. What was the nature of that meeting? We went in there and we said, 'We don't like you. We think you're moral reprobates; if we can pull you down, we will. We're certainly going to try to block your progress, but there are a few things we need you to do for us, and could you help us?' That was the approach. That was remarkably inept, and the result was entirely predictable — an exchange of diatribe rather than anything constructive.

So, I think there are a lot of issues here. I'm not suggesting for a moment that foreigners are benign or adopting the idealistic view that human beings are born noble and pure and that we are all naturally good. I don't believe that. I think human beings need to be trained to be human and to be good, and that's what childrearing is about. So, there are a lot of people out there in the world who are pretty nasty, and we have to live in that world.

But I think we've carried it to the point of psychosis. The reaction to the Chinese balloon, I think, can only be described as psychotic. Of course, it may be that the equipment that balloon carried was indeed deeply injurious to our national security, although there's no evidence of that at all. And the FBI has not said a word about all the nasty things that we suspected were on it, which raises a question whether it really might not have been mainly a meteorological device. There's no empirical basis for doubting the Chinese statement. I actually don't believe the Chinese statement, but that's just because I'm somewhat paranoid. But I don't like to see my country become paranoid. I'd like to see us retain our sanity, our balance, our judgment. I'd like to see us remain empirical in our views, rather

than engage in *a priori* reasoning and psychotic hallucinations. ‘Balloonacy,’ as I call it.

**SDG:** As you look at the next generation of leaders, or people who will be in the positions that you’ve been in, are we properly preparing them for what’s ahead?

**Ambassador Freeman:** No, we’re not. The symbol of this is that the House of Representatives is seriously considering a bill to remove China from the G20. Does the United States control the G20? I don’t think so. So, delusions of grandeur, perhaps, but more importantly, a worldview that is totally out of date.

The world is now composed *not* of a dominant, single, unified domain dominated by the United States, as it may have been briefly after the Cold War. The world is composed of multiple competing regional centers — and we’ve done a good deal to bring that about. For example, we knee-capped the World Trade Organization, made it ineffective by blocking the staffing of its appellate function. So much for

international law and regulation! That’s been replaced in our minds by something called the ‘rules-based order,’ in which we make the rules and decide who they apply to and who is exempt from them. That’s not very persuasive.

We need to rediscover the merits of diplomacy, which begins with empathy. Where is the other guy coming from? You can’t persuade anybody effectively, you can intimidate them, but you can’t persuade them, if you don’t address their concerns and their worldview.

The world is now composed *not* of a dominant, single, unified domain dominated by the United States, as it may have been briefly after the Cold War.

**SDG:** What will the result be if we don’t make changes in how we relate to China?

**Ambassador Freeman:** We have framed this competition with China, conveniently for the military-industrial complex, as a military competition. There’s a problem with that, because last time I looked there were no Chinese aircraft patrolling the U.S. coasts. There are no Chinese submarines off San Diego. There are no Chinese bases in Mexico. We are in their face. They’re not in ours. Well, a balloon blew over the United States; I’ll have to factor that in.



We're projecting our power across 8,000 miles of ocean. And we are conducting three to four reconnaissance flights every day along their coast, looking deep into China. That is why so many Chinese found our hysterical reaction to the balloon so laughable. I would add that we are at war in 82 countries around the world as part of our so-called 'global war on terrorism,' much of which involves drone overflights. And if countries don't have air defenses, they either don't know that we're overflying them with drones, or they can't do anything about it.

So, who is the military threat here?

China is a country divided by civil war, and the civil war was suspended by U.S. military intervention at the time of the Korean War. We put the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait to protect Chiang Kai-shek from Mao Zedong and vice versa. And there were good reasons for that. We didn't want the Korean War to spread beyond the borders of Korea. That was sensible.

However, here we are. We made an arrangement with the Chinese 50 years ago by which we gave them every reason to regard the Taiwan issue as not urgent, not military, resolvable by peaceful means, so that they could be patient about it. We didn't solve the Chinese Civil War; that continued. Now we have violated all of the understandings we reached [with China] back then. We have an official relationship with Taiwan in all but name. We've sent cabinet officers there. We have their foreign minister in Washington engaged in public negotiation with the deputy secretary of state. Our Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi, goes to Taiwan, makes a big deal of it. We have a building in Taipei that cost \$230 million to build, that flies the American flag and has [U.S.] Marine guards and looks a lot like an embassy, whatever we've determined to call it. We agreed [with the Chinese] there would be no official relations. We've broken that agreement.

We agreed there would be no military installations or troops in Taiwan, but we're back. In fact, we're about to put another 200 troops in Taiwan — with the stated purpose of training Taiwan against a possible invasion by the Chinese on the other side of the Taiwan strait.

Which brings me to the third agreement we made, which was to have no defense commitment to Taiwan. But now we have a president [Biden] who on four occasions offered just such a commitment. He doesn't have the authority to make

such a commitment under the Constitution. But the Congress doesn't provide any check at all on executive authority to make war, as we've seen with numerous presidentially authorized interventions recently.

So, the military dimension now no longer has a manageable framework, and we are headed for confrontation. And the Chinese do not believe anymore that a peaceful resolution of the Taiwan separation from the rest of China is possible, because they believe the United States will block that resolution. And if you listen to all of the language in Congress you would have to say they have a basis for that disbelief. So, we're headed for a war.

And what is this war about? This war is about whether something that was always part of China — legally, it is part of China in the view of all but a handful of countries internationally — is or is not part of China.

The Chinese position still is that they want to negotiate an accommodation with Taiwan. And in the past, they've been quite flexible about how that would work. For example, under President Jiang Zemin at the end of the last century, they put forward eight points. And one of those points was that no Chinese officials would be sent to Taiwan after reunification. No Chinese troops would be sent to Taiwan. There would be no military presence in Taiwan. Taiwan would retain its own armed forces to defend its part of China. Against who? I'm not sure: the Filipinos, perhaps.

But theoretically Taiwan would have kept its own armed forces. There were suggestions that, in that context, American arm sales to Taiwan would become acceptable, which they're not at present. All that was ignored. I'm not even sure it's on the table anymore. It looks to me like we are headed inexorably toward conflict.

**SDG:** Are there comparisons that you see between China and Taiwan and what is happening between Russia and Ukraine?

**The military dimension now no longer has a manageable framework, and we are headed for confrontation.**

**Ambassador Freeman:** The Taiwan imbroglio has something in common with Ukraine, although I noted the irony that we support self-determination for Taiwan, but not for Russian speakers in Ukraine.

The point in common is this: the Ukraine war is, in one dimension, about spheres of influence. Would Ukraine be in an American sphere of influence or not? The Russians didn't want it to be in an American sphere and were prepared to see it neutralized. Taiwan is in an American sphere of influence. China does not want an American sphere of influence on what it regards as Chinese territory. It finds that both threatening and humiliating.

So, there is something in common. But at the moment there is no diplomacy. Blinken was going to go to China [in February] to do three things. One, to demonstrate to the world that we could talk to the Chinese, despite our differences. This is important because everybody wants us to deal with the Chinese; they want us to manage the Taiwan issue, they don't want a war over it. Not a single country has signed up to join us in any war over Taiwan. Not one. Although some are sympathetic to that.

The second thing Blinken was going to do was put in what he called guardrails, which I presume are a replacement for the broken promises that once enabled the management of the Taiwan issue. There was no indication that he had anything specific in mind and/or any concessions that he would make. So, this replicates the history of the run-up to the war in Ukraine, where the United States said we would not make concessions to the Russians. We won't make concessions to the Chinese.

And the third thing Blinken wanted to do, apparently, was to posture for the benefit of an American audience, to show that the Biden administration is just as tough on China as the Trump administration was.

When the 'balloonacy' happened, he canceled his visit. That was a great mistake, and it had three results. First, we showed the world we couldn't talk to the Chinese in times of crisis, and, in fact, we were quite hysterical and looked really foolish. Second, that we don't know how to manage the relationship with China and have no real ideas for doing so. And third, in domestic politics, that Mr. Biden can't stand up to political pressure or lead — leadership involving setting new directions rather than responding to the pressure that you're under.

The Blinken cancellation of his trip, until ‘circumstances permit,’ was a grave error, especially because the circumstances that canceled his trip were a domestic political hysteria that shows no sign of abating.

**BA:** How would you address the concern that if a more peaceful or peace-oriented policy was implemented, that the U.S. would thereby not be supporting a type of freedom that I think many of us believe in.

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, the Taiwan situation exemplifies the conflict between foreign policy realism and values-driven foreign policy.

Taiwan for many years — certainly when I studied Chinese there, and I learned both Taiwanese dialect and Mandarin there — was a totalitarian society, or perhaps authoritarian verging on totalitarian. So, it was very easy for the United States to say, well, as between Taipei and Beijing from a strategic point of view, Beijing is vastly more important in the context of the Cold War and globally and for the future, and really there’s not that much difference between the two systems.

They were both Leninist, which the Kuomintang regime of Chiang Kai-shek was. They were both violators of human rights, but that has now changed. Taiwan has developed a robust democracy, a very high level of respect for civil liberties and human rights, and it is in many respects an admirable society. I would say that in the broad course of roughly 5,000 years of Chinese history, this may be the best society that has ever existed on Chinese soil, but it is on Chinese soil. And people in Taiwan speak either Mandarin, which is the official language still, or a dialect of Chinese. They write using Chinese characters, and they eat using chopsticks, and they cook Chinese food.

On the other hand, there’s nothing consistent in the American position regarding realism versus a values-driven foreign policy. We champion human rights when it’s convenient, and we don’t, when it’s not. Ask yourself about self-determination for the Palestinians or what’s going on now with pogroms officially sponsored by this particularly loathsome new Israeli government. There is a lot of silence in the mainstream media. The demonstrations in Israel are not about the Palestinian plight, but about the creeping authoritarianism of Mr. Netanyahu [Israeli prime minister] and the other ‘yahus’ he has surrounded himself with.

So, that is one example. Look at India and Kashmir. There's no consistency about where and when we champion human rights, civil rights, and independent self-determination. For example, in Hungary, when faced with the choice of aiding the Hungarian revolt against Soviet occupation and intervention, we shrank away. And we've done the same thing with the Kurds.

I come down this way. The United States has to make a very difficult choice. Do we want to engage in a struggle with another country over where its territory begins and ends, when the outcome of that struggle could well be a nuclear exchange that destroys us as well as probably the planet? Or do we want to try to find a solution that is perhaps not the best, but not the worst, aiding Taiwan to negotiate some accommodation with the mainland that preserves the freedoms we value so much, which, by the way, was the idea in that eight-point proposal I cited that the Chinese made at the end of the last century.

So, we have a choice to make. It's pretty clear to me that we are going to make the wrong choice. What I consider the wrong choice is one that results in the possible devastation of our homeland.

That's a complicated waffle around a difficult question. And it is difficult. It is not easy to reconcile one's moral judgment with one's realistic judgment about the consequences of one action versus another.

**BA:** What would you envision as the ideal U.S.-Chinese relationship, and how could that be brought about, or what steps could be taken that would increase the chance of bringing it about?

**Ambassador Freeman:** We have everything to gain by piggybacking on, by leveraging, rising Chinese prosperity to benefit ourselves.

Let us not forget that for millennia China was not only the largest, but the wealthiest, best-governed, scientifically most-advanced society on the planet, and it seems to be resuming that position. The fact that it was those things lends plausibility to the possibility it may resume that position, as do the advances in science and technology that I mentioned in general terms at the outset of this

We should be finding ways to work with the Chinese.



discussion. So, we should be finding ways to work with the Chinese. If we can't do it directly, we should work with them in parallel, coordinate our policies on global matters — none of which can be addressed without Chinese cooperation — climate change, nuclear proliferation, international conflict.

Look at the Russia-Ukraine situation. The only country that has put forward a set of principles for ending it is China. And it's very easy to say, well, that's cynical on their part, they don't mean it. But I think it deserves to be tested.

**I would rather deal with selfish people who know what they want and understand their own interests than with people who don't know what their own interests are, and who engage in lofty talk about ideals that they neglect in practice.**

In any event, China is now the largest trading partner of virtually every country in the world. It manufactures one-third of the world's industrial products; we do about one-sixth now. We ignore it at our peril. We should be trying to find ways to see how we can benefit from what the Chinese are doing to benefit themselves, because they're very selfish. I would rather deal with selfish people who know what they want and understand their own interests than with people who don't know what their own interests are, and who engage in lofty talk about ideals that they neglect in practice.

The Chinese are very pragmatic. We ought to be equally pragmatic instead of engaging in loony tunes, or ideological gyrations, which is what we're doing at the moment.

**CZ:** Is there a place for non-West, Global South countries in the future? What will their role be?

**Ambassador Freeman:** Well, I don't think blocs are really the wave of the future. I don't think that's what the BRICS [Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa], the SCO — the Shanghai Cooperation Organization — the other groupings that are emerging want.

I think what the so-called Global South — some of which isn't very far south — wants is their own self-determination, building their own societies to match their own aspirations, not being subjected to outside dictation or interference.

Let's take Africa for example. Nigeria is going to be one of the great powers of the world, one way or another, if they can just figure out how to apply their enormous talent to something other than stealing from each other, which is what they mainly do now. These are the cleverest people in the world, and if they would apply themselves to something constructive, it would be awesome, literally.

You also see Africa at the end of a century with perhaps two billion people, the largest labor force, the youngest labor force on the planet, and currently very robust economic development. Unfortunately, not in Sudan; they suffer from the biblical playbook of plagues of frogs, gerbils, droughts, floods, and so forth. But look at Ethiopia, look at Ghana coming up. Look at model democracies like Botswana. Look at Kenya. These are countries that are succeeding, and that are going to be far more important internationally.

This raises a question related to your question, and that is: How do we embody the new constellation of international power in structures? Clearly, the United Nations Security Council is a very important institution for harmonizing global views, but it's one that's vitiated by the fact that the permanent members are still the victors of World War II, some of them much diminished in power. Post-Brexit Britain is not anything like pre-Brexit Britain in terms of level of international influence. France is still a global power in many ways, but not on a par with China or Russia or India or Japan or the United States.

So, how do we bring a more representative set of institutions into being? I think the process is going to proceed in stages, and what we're in now is one in which China has been a leader: the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; the New Development Bank headquartered in China, which is the BRICS-preferred alternative to the World Bank; new currency arrangements to reduce the monopoly that the dollar has held on trade settlement internationally; a whole series of things that are coming out that eventually will lead — I think these are 'splitists,' if you will; they are hiving off parts of the global economy from the Bretton Woods post-World War II institutions led by the United States.

But, as these countries grow there's still going to be a need for international global cooperation. And I suspect we will find a way to, for example, give countries like India or perhaps one or more African countries, certainly Japan, perhaps the EU instead of Britain and France, a role in global governance that they don't have now. That's a requirement. But that's for somebody to work out long after I'm dead. So I'll not croak on about it.



# The Geopolitics of American Global Decline

Washington versus China in the Twenty-first Century

Image credit: Marzolino / Shutterstock.com

**Alfred W. McCoy, Ph.D.**

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For even the greatest of empires, geography is often destiny. You wouldn't know it in Washington, though. America's political, national security and foreign policy elites continue to ignore the basics of geopolitics that have shaped the fate of world empires for the past 500 years. Consequently, they have missed the significance of the rapid global changes in Eurasia that are in the process of undermining the grand strategy for world dominion that Washington has pursued these past seven decades.

A glance at what passes for insider "wisdom" in Washington these days reveals a worldview of stunning insularity. Take Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye Jr., known for his concept of "soft power," as an example. Offering a simple list of ways in which he believes U.S. military, economic and cultural power remains singular and superior, he recently argued that there was no force, internal or

global, capable of eclipsing America's future as the world's premier power.<sup>1</sup>

For those pointing to Beijing's surging economy and proclaiming this "the Chinese century," Nye offered up a roster of negatives: China's per capita income "will take decades to catch up (if ever)" with America's; it has myopically "focused its policies primarily on its region"; and it has "not developed any significant capabilities for global force projection." Above all, Nye claimed, China suffers "geopolitical disadvantages in the internal Asian balance of power, compared to America."

Or put it this way (and in this Nye, is typical of a whole world of Washington thinking): With more allies, ships, fighters, missiles, money, patents and blockbuster movies than any other power, Washington wins hands down.

If Professor Nye paints power by the numbers, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's latest tome, modestly titled *World Order*<sup>2</sup> and hailed in reviews as nothing less than a revelation, adopts a Nietzschean perspective.<sup>3</sup> The ageless Kissinger portrays global politics as plastic and highly susceptible to shaping by great leaders with a will to power. By this measure, in the tradition of master European diplomats Charles de Talleyrand and Prince Metternich, President Theodore Roosevelt was a bold visionary who launched "an American role in managing the Asia-Pacific equilibrium." On the other hand, Woodrow Wilson's idealistic dream of national self-determination rendered him geopolitically inept, and Franklin Roosevelt was blind to Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's steely "global strategy." Harry Truman, in contrast, overcame national ambivalence to commit "America to the shaping of a new international order," a policy wisely followed by the next 12 presidents.

Among the most "courageous" of them, Kissinger insists, was that leader of "courage, dignity, and conviction," George W. Bush, whose resolute bid for the "transformation of Iraq from among the Middle East's most repressive states to a

<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Is the American century over?* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (London: Penguin Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> James Traub, "Book Review: 'World Order' by Henry Kissinger," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 5, 2014, <http://online.wsj.com/articles/book-review-world-order-by-henry-kissinger-1409952751>.

“multiparty democracy” would have succeeded, had it not been for the “ruthless” subversion of his work by Syria and Iran. In such a view, geopolitics has no place; only the bold vision of “statesmen” and kings really matters.

And perhaps that’s a comforting perspective in Washington at a moment when America’s hegemony is visibly crumbling amid a tectonic shift in global power.

With Washington’s anointed seers strikingly obtuse on the subject of geopolitical power, perhaps it’s time to get back to basics. That means returning to the foundational text of modern geopolitics, which remains an indispensable guide even though it was published in an obscure British geography journal well over a century ago.

**With Washington’s anointed seers strikingly obtuse on the subject of geopolitical power, perhaps it’s time to get back to basics.**

### ***Sir Halford invents geopolitics***

On a cold London evening in January 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder, the director of the London School of Economics, “entranced” an audience at the Royal Geographical Society on Savile Row with a paper boldly titled “The Geographical Pivot of History.”<sup>4</sup> This presentation evinced, said the society’s president, “a brilliancy of description ... we have seldom had equaled in this room.”

Mackinder argued that the future of global power lay not, as most British then imagined, in controlling the global sea lanes, but in controlling a vast land mass he called “Euro-Asia.” By turning the globe away from America to place central Asia at the planet’s epicenter, and then tilting the Earth’s axis northward just a bit beyond Mercator’s equatorial projection, Mackinder redrew and thus reconceptualized the world map.

His new map showed Africa, Asia, and Europe not as three separate continents,

<sup>4</sup> Halford J. Mackinder, “The Geographical Pivot of History (1904).” *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (2004): 298–321.



but as a unitary land mass, a veritable “world island.” Its broad, deep “heartland” — 4,000 miles from the Persian Gulf to the Siberian Sea — was so enormous that it could only be controlled from its “rimlands” in Eastern Europe or what he called



**THE NATURAL SEATS OF POWER.**  
Pivot area — wholly continental. Outer crescent — wholly oceanic. Inner crescent — partly continental, partly oceanic.

*Mackinder's concept of the "world island," from The Geographical Journal (1904)*

The “discovery of the Cape road to the Indies”<sup>5</sup> in the sixteenth century, Mackinder wrote, “endowed Christendom with the widest possible mobility of power ... wrapping her influence round the Euro-Asiatic land-power which had hitherto threatened her very existence.” This greater mobility, he later explained, gave Europe’s seamen “superiority for some four centuries over the landsmen of Africa and Asia.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet the “heartland” of this vast landmass, a “pivot area” stretching from the Persian Gulf to China’s Yangtze River, remained nothing less than the Archimedean

<sup>5</sup> H. J. Mackinder, The Geographical Pivot of History, *The Geographical Journal* 23, no. 4 (1904).

<sup>6</sup> “The Geopolitics of American Global Decline,” *Derasat*, June 24, 2015, <https://www.derasat.org/bh/the-geopolitics-of-american-global-decline/>.

fulcrum for future world power. “Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island,” went Mackinder’s later summary of the situation. “Who rules the World-Island commands the world.” Beyond the vast mass of that world island, which made up nearly 60 percent of the Earth’s land area, lay a less consequential hemisphere covered with broad oceans and a few outlying “smaller islands.” He meant, of course, Australia and the Americas.

For an earlier generation, the opening of the Suez Canal and the advent of steam shipping had “increased the mobility of sea-power [relative] to land power.” But future railways could “work the greater wonder in the steppe,” Mackinder claimed, undercutting the cost of sea transport and shifting the locus of geopolitical power inland. In the fullness of time, the “pivot state” of Russia might, in alliance with another power like Germany, expand “over the marginal lands of Euro-Asia,” allowing “the use of vast continental resources for fleet-building, and the empire of the world would be in sight.”

For the next two hours, as he read through a text thick with the convoluted syntax and classical references expected of a former Oxford don, his audience knew that they were privy to something extraordinary. Several stayed after to offer extended commentaries. For instance, the renowned military analyst Spenser Wilkinson, the first to hold a chair in military history at Oxford, pronounced himself unconvinced about “the modern expansion of Russia,” insisting that British and Japanese naval power would continue the historic function of holding “the balance between the divided forces ... on the continental area.”

Pressed by his learned listeners to consider other facts or factors, including “air as a means of locomotion,” Mackinder responded: “My aim is not to predict a great future for this or that country, but to make a geographical formula into which you could fit any political balance.”<sup>7</sup> Instead of specific events, Mackinder was reaching for a general theory about the causal connection between geography and global power. “The future of the world,”<sup>8</sup> he insisted, “depends on the maintenance of [a]

<sup>7</sup> Colin Flint, *Introduction to Geopolitics* (England: Routledge, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, “The Geopolitics of American Global Decline,” *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 8, 2015, <https://mondediplo.com/openpage/the-geopolitics-of-american-global-decline>.

balance of power”<sup>9</sup> between sea powers such as Britain or Japan operating from the maritime marginal and “the expansive internal forces”<sup>10</sup> within the Euro-Asian heartland they were intent on containing.

Not only did Mackinder give voice to a worldview that would influence Britain’s foreign policy for several decades, but he had, in that moment, created the modern science of “geopolitics”<sup>11</sup> — the study of how geography can, under certain circumstances, shape the destiny of whole peoples, nations and empires.

That night in London was, of course, more than a long time ago. It was another age. England was still mourning the death of Queen Victoria. Teddy Roosevelt was president. Henry Ford had just opened a small auto plant in Detroit to make his Model-A, an automobile with a top speed of 28 miles per hour. Only a month earlier, the Wright brothers’ “Flyer” had taken to the air for the first time — 120 feet of air, to be exact.

Yet, for the next 110 years, Sir Halford Mackinder’s words would offer a prism of exceptional precision when it came to understanding the often obscure geopolitics driving the world’s major conflicts — two world wars, a Cold War, America’s Asian wars (Korea and Vietnam), two Persian Gulf wars, and even the endless pacification of Afghanistan. The question today is: How can Sir Halford help us understand not only centuries past, but the half-century still to come?

### ***Britannia rules the waves***

In the age of sea power that lasted just over 400 years — from 1602 to the Washington Disarmament Conference of 1922 — the great powers competed to control the Eurasian world island via the surrounding sea lanes that stretched for 15,000 miles from London to Tokyo. The instrument of power was, of course, the ship — first men-o’-war, then battleships, submarines and aircraft carriers.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Derasat, “The Geopolitics of American Global Decline.”

<sup>11</sup> Klaus Dodds and James D. Sidaway, “Halford Mackinder and the ‘Geographical Pivot of History’: A Centennial Retrospective,” *The Geographical Journal* 170, no. 4 (2004): 292-297.

While land armies slogged through the mud of Manchuria or France in battles with mind-numbing casualties, imperial navies skimmed over the seas, maneuvering for the control of whole coasts and continents.

At the peak of its imperial power, circa 1900, Great Britain ruled the waves with a fleet of 300 capital ships and 30 naval bastions, bases that ringed the world island from the North Atlantic at Scapa Flow through the Mediterranean at Malta and Suez to Bombay, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Just as the Roman Empire enclosed the Mediterranean, making it *Mare Nostrum* (“Our Sea”), British power would make the Indian Ocean its own “closed sea,” securing its flanks with army forces on India’s North-West Frontier and barring both Persians and Ottomans from building naval bases on the Persian Gulf.

By that maneuver, Britain also secured control over Arabia and Mesopotamia, strategic terrain that Mackinder had termed “the passage-land from Europe to the Indies” and the gateway to the world island’s “heartland.” From this geopolitical perspective, the nineteenth century was, at heart, a strategic rivalry, often called “the Great Game,” between Russia “in command of nearly the whole of the Heartland ... knocking at the landward gates of the Indies,” and Britain “advancing inland from the sea gates of India to meet the menace from the northwest.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, Mackinder concluded, “the final Geographical Realities” of the modern age were sea power versus land power or “the World-Island and the Heartland.”<sup>13</sup>

Intense rivalries, first between England and France, then England and Germany, helped drive a relentless European naval arms race that raised the price of sea power to unsustainable levels. In 1805, Admiral Nelson’s flagship, the HMS *Victory*, with its oaken hull weighing just 3,500 tons, sailed into the Battle of Trafalgar against Napoleon’s navy at nine knots, its 100 smooth-bore cannon firing 42-pound balls at a range of no more than 400 yards.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick J. Teggart, “Geography as an Aid to Statecraft: An Appreciation of Mackinder’s ‘Democratic Ideals and Reality.’” Also: “Review of Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction,” H. J. Mackinder, *Geographical Review* 8, no. 4/5 (1919).

<sup>13</sup> Halford John Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction*, NDU Press defense classic edition. ed. (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1996).

In 1906, just a century later, Britain launched the world's first modern battleship, the HMS *Dreadnought*, its foot-thick steel hull weighing 20,000 tons, its steam turbines allowing speeds of 21 knots, and its mechanized 12-inch guns rapid-firing 850-pound shells up to 12 miles. The cost for this leviathan was £1.8 million, equivalent to nearly \$300 million today. Within a decade, half-a-dozen powers had emptied their treasuries to build whole fleets of these lethal, lavishly expensive battleships.

Thanks to a combination of technological superiority, global reach, and naval alliances with the U.S. and Japan, a *Pax Britannica* would last a full century, 1815 to 1914. In the end, however, this global system was marked by an accelerating naval arms race, volatile great-power diplomacy, and a bitter competition for overseas empire that imploded into the mindless slaughter of World War I, leaving 16 million dead by 1918.

### ***Mackinder's century***

As the eminent imperial historian Paul Kennedy once observed, “the rest of the twentieth century bore witness to Mackinder’s thesis,”<sup>14</sup> with two world wars fought over his “rimlands” running from Eastern Europe through the Middle East to East Asia. Indeed, World War I was, as Mackinder himself later observed, “a straight duel between land-power and sea-power.” At war’s end in 1918, the sea powers — Britain, America, and Japan — sent naval expeditions to Archangel, the Black Sea, and Siberia to contain Russia’s revolution inside its “heartland.”

Reflecting Mackinder’s influence on geopolitical thinking in Germany, Adolf Hitler would risk his Reich in a misbegotten effort to capture the Russian heartland as *Lebensraum*, or living space, for his “master race.” Sir Halford’s work helped shape the ideas of German geographer Karl Haushofer, founder of the journal *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik*, proponent of the concept of *Lebensraum*, and adviser to Adolf Hitler and his deputy führer, Rudolf Hess. In 1942, the Führer dispatched a million men, 10,000 artillery pieces and 500 tanks to breach the Volga River at Stalingrad. In the

<sup>14</sup> Paul Kennedy, “The Pivot of History,” *The Guardian*, June 19, 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/19/usa.comment>.

end, his forces suffered 850,000 wounded, killed and captured in a vain attempt to break through the East European rimland into the world island's pivotal region.

A century after Mackinder's seminal treatise, another British scholar, imperial historian John Darwin, argued in his magisterial survey *After Tamerlane* that the United States had achieved its "colossal Imperium ... on an unprecedented scale"<sup>15</sup> in the wake of World War II by becoming the first power in history to control the strategic axial points "at both ends of Eurasia" (his rendering of Mackinder's "Euro-Asia"). With fears of Chinese and Russian expansion serving as the "catalyst for collaboration," the U.S. won imperial bastions in both Western Europe and Japan. With these axial points as anchors, Washington then built an arc of military bases that followed Britain's maritime template and were visibly meant to encircle the world island.

### ***America's axial geopolitics***

Having seized the axial ends of the world island from Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in 1945, for the next 70 years the United States relied on ever-thickening layers of military power to contain China and Russia inside that Eurasian heartland. Stripped of its ideological foliage, Washington's grand strategy of Cold War-era anticommunist "containment" was little more than a process of imperial succession. A hollowed-out Britain was replaced astride the maritime "marginal," but the strategic realities remained essentially the same.

Indeed, in 1943, two years before World War II ended, an aging Mackinder published his last article, "The Round World and the Winning of the Peace," in the influential U.S. journal *Foreign Affairs*.<sup>16</sup> In it, he reminded Americans aspiring to a "grand strategy" for an unprecedented version of planetary hegemony that even their "dream of a global air power" would not change geopolitical basics. "If the Soviet Union emerges from this war as conqueror of Germany," he warned,

<sup>15</sup> Hans-Heinrich Nolte, review of *After Tamerlane. The Rise and Fall of Global Empires 1400-2000*, John Darwin; *Der Imperiale Traum. Die Globalgeschichte großer Reiche 1400-2000*, John Darwin, Michael Bayer, *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 39, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Francis P. Sempa, "Halford Mackinder's Last View of the Round World," *The Diplomat*, March 23, 2015, <https://thediplomat.com/2015/03/halford-mackinders-last-view-of-the-round-world/>.

“she must rank as the greatest land power on the globe,” controlling the “greatest natural fortress on earth.”

When it came to the establishment of a new post-war *Pax Americana*, first and foundational for the containment of Soviet land power would be the U.S. Navy. Its fleets would come to surround the Eurasian continent, supplementing and then supplanting the British navy: the Sixth Fleet was based at Naples in 1946 for control of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea; the Seventh Fleet at Subic Bay, Philippines, in 1947, for the Western Pacific; and the Fifth Fleet at Bahrain in the Persian Gulf since 1995.

Next, American diplomats added layers of encircling military alliances — the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1949), the Middle East Treaty Organization (1955), the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (1954), and the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty (1951).

**As the fulcrum for Washington’s strategic perimeter around the world island, the Persian Gulf region has for nearly 40 years been the site of constant American intervention, overt and covert.**

By 1955, the U.S. also had a global network of 450 military bases in 36 countries aimed, in large part, at containing the Sino-Soviet bloc behind an Iron Curtain that coincided to a surprising degree with Mackinder’s “rimlands” around the Eurasian landmass. By the Cold War’s end in 1990, the encirclement of communist China and Russia required 700 overseas bases, an air force of 1,763 jet fighters, a vast nuclear arsenal, more than 1,000 ballistic missiles and a navy of 600 ships,

including 15 nuclear carrier battle groups — all linked by the world’s only global system of communications satellites.

As the fulcrum for Washington’s strategic perimeter around the world island, the Persian Gulf region has for nearly 40 years been the site of constant American intervention, overt and covert. The 1979 revolution in Iran meant the loss of a keystone country in the arch of U.S. power around the Gulf and left Washington struggling to rebuild its presence in the region. To that end, it would simultaneously



back Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its war against revolutionary Iran, and arm the most extreme of the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

It was in this context that Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter, unleashed his strategy for the defeat of the Soviet Union with a sheer geopolitical agility still little understood even today. In 1979, Brzezinski, a *déclassé* Polish aristocrat uniquely attuned to his native continent's geopolitical realities, persuaded Carter to launch Operation Cyclone with massive funding that reached \$500 million annually by the late 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Its goal: to mobilize Muslim militants to attack the Soviet Union's soft Central Asian underbelly and drive a wedge of radical Islam deep into the Soviet heartland. It was to simultaneously inflict a demoralizing defeat on the Red Army in Afghanistan and cut Eastern Europe's "rimland" free from Moscow's orbit. "We didn't push the Russians to intervene [in Afghanistan]," Brzezinski said in 1998, explaining his geopolitical masterstroke in this Cold War edition of the Great Game, "but we knowingly increased the probability that they would ... That secret operation was an excellent idea. Its effect was to draw the Russians into the Afghan trap."<sup>18</sup>

Asked about this operation's legacy when it came to creating a militant Islam hostile to the U.S., Brzezinski, who studied and frequently cited Mackinder, was coolly unapologetic. "What is most important to the history of the world?" he asked. "The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the Cold War?"

Yet even America's stunning victory in the Cold War with the implosion of the Soviet Union would not transform the geopolitical fundamentals of the world island. As a result, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Washington's first foreign foray in the new era would involve an attempt to reestablish its dominant position in the Persian Gulf, using Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait as a pretext.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Marshall, "Terror 'blowback' burns CIA," *The Independent*, November 1, 1998, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/terror-blowback-burns-cia-1182087.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "The CIA's Intervention in Afghanistan," Archives, October 15, 2001, <https://archives.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html>.

In 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, imperial historian Paul Kennedy returned to Mackinder's century-old treatise to explain this seemingly inexplicable misadventure. "Right now, with hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops in the Eurasian rimlands," Kennedy wrote in *The Guardian*, "it looks as if Washington is taking seriously Mackinder's injunction to ensure control of 'the geographical pivot of history.'" <sup>19</sup> If we interpret these remarks expansively, the sudden proliferation of U.S. bases across Afghanistan and Iraq should be seen as yet another imperial bid for a pivotal position at the edge of the Eurasian heartland, akin to those old British colonial forts along India's Northwest Frontier.

In the ensuing years, Washington attempted to replace some of its ineffective boots on the ground with drones in the air. By 2011, the Air Force and the CIA had ringed the Eurasian landmass with 60 bases for its armada of drones. <sup>20</sup> By then, its workhorse Reaper, armed with Hellfire missiles and GBU-30 bombs, had a range of 1,150 miles, which meant that from those bases it could strike targets almost anywhere in Africa and Asia. <sup>21</sup>

Significantly, drone bases now dot the maritime margins around the world island — from Sigonella, Sicily, to Icerlik, Turkey; <sup>22</sup> Djibouti on the Red Sea; Qatar and Abu Dhabi on the Persian Gulf; the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean; Jalalabad, Khost, Kandahar, and Shindand in Afghanistan; <sup>23</sup> and in the Pacific, Zamboanga in the Philippines and Andersen Air Base on the island of Guam, <sup>24</sup> among other places. To patrol this sweeping periphery, the Pentagon is spending

<sup>19</sup> Paul Kennedy, "The Pivot of History," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/jun/19/usa.comment>.

<sup>20</sup> Nick Turse, "Nick Turse, Mapping America's Shadowy Drone Wars," *TomDispatch*, October 16, 2011, <https://tomdispatch.com/nick-turse-mapping-america-s-shadowy-drone-wars/>.

<sup>21</sup> Nick Turse, "The Crash and Burn Future of Robot Warfare," *TomDispatch*, January 15, 2012, <https://tomdispatch.com/nick-turse-drone-disasters/>.

<sup>22</sup> Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Military Drone Surveillance is Expanding to Hot Spots Beyond Declared Combat Zones," *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2013, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-drone-surveillance-is-expanding-to-hot-spots-beyond-declared-combat-zones/2013/07/20/0a57fbda-ef1c-11e2-8163-2c7021381a75\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-military-drone-surveillance-is-expanding-to-hot-spots-beyond-declared-combat-zones/2013/07/20/0a57fbda-ef1c-11e2-8163-2c7021381a75_story.html).

<sup>23</sup> Micah Zenko and Emma Welch, "Where the Drones Are," *Foreign Policy*, May 29, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/29/where-the-drones-are/>.

<sup>24</sup> "The Business of Drones," *sUAS News*, January 6, 2023, <https://www.suasnews.com/>.

\$10 billion to build an armada of 99 Global Hawk drones equipped with high-resolution cameras capable of surveilling all terrain within a hundred-mile radius,<sup>25</sup> electronic sensors that can sweep up communications, and efficient engines capable of 35 hours of continuous flight and a range of 8,700 miles.<sup>26</sup>

### ***China's strategy***

Washington's moves, in other words, represent something old, even if on a previously unimaginable scale. But the rise of China as the world's largest economy, inconceivable a century ago, represents something new and so threatens to overturn the maritime geopolitics that have shaped world power for the past 400 years. Instead of focusing purely on building a blue-water navy like the British or a global aerospace armada akin to America's, China is reaching deep within the world island in an attempt to thoroughly reshape the geopolitical fundamentals of global power. It is using a subtle strategy that has so far eluded Washington's power elites.

**China is using a subtle strategy that has so far eluded Washington's power elites.**

After decades of quiet preparation, Beijing has recently begun revealing its grand strategy for global power, move by careful move. Its two-step plan is designed to build a transcontinental infrastructure for the economic integration of the world island from within, while mobilizing military forces to surgically slice through Washington's encircling containment.

The initial step has involved a breathtaking project to put in place an infrastructure for the continent's economic integration. By laying down an elaborate and enormously expensive network of high-speed, high-volume railroads as well as oil and natural gas pipelines across the vast breadth of Eurasia, China may

<sup>25</sup> Tyler Rogoway, "Why the USAF's Massive \$10 Billion Global Hawk UAV is Worth the Money," *Jalopnik*, September 9, 2014, <https://jalopnik.com/why-the-usafs-massive-10-billion-global-hawk-uav-was-w-1629932000>.

<sup>26</sup> "Northrop Grumman's Global Hawk Unmanned Aircraft Sets 33-Hour Flight Endurance Record," *Space War*, March 31, 2008, [https://www.spacewar.com/reports/Northrop\\_Grumman\\_Global\\_Hawk\\_Unmanned\\_Aircraft\\_Sets\\_33\\_Hour\\_Flight\\_Endurance\\_Record\\_999.html](https://www.spacewar.com/reports/Northrop_Grumman_Global_Hawk_Unmanned_Aircraft_Sets_33_Hour_Flight_Endurance_Record_999.html).

realize Mackinder's vision in a new way. For the first time in history, the rapid transcontinental movement of critical cargo — oil, minerals and manufactured goods — will be possible on a massive scale, thereby potentially unifying that vast landmass into a single economic zone stretching 6,500 miles from Shanghai to Madrid. In this way, the leadership in Beijing hopes to shift the locus of geopolitical power away from the maritime periphery and deep into the continent's heartland.

“Trans-continental railways are now transmuted the conditions of land power,” wrote Mackinder back in 1904 as the “precarious” single track of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the world's longest, reached across the continent for 5,700 miles from Moscow toward Vladivostok. “But the century will not be old before all Asia is covered with railways,” he added. “The spaces within the Russian Empire and Mongolia are so vast, and their potentialities in ... fuel and metals so incalculably great that a vast economic world, more or less apart, will there develop inaccessible to oceanic commerce.”

Mackinder was a bit premature in his prediction. The Russian revolution of 1917, the Chinese revolution of 1949, and the subsequent 40 years of the Cold War slowed any real development for decades. In this way, the Euro-Asian “heartland” was denied economic growth and integration, thanks in part to artificial ideological barriers — the Iron Curtain and then the Sino-Soviet split — that stalled any infrastructure construction across the vast Eurasian land mass. No longer.

Only a few years after the Cold War ended, former National Security Adviser Brzezinski, by then a contrarian sharply critical of the global views of both Republican and Democratic policy elites, began raising warning flags about Washington's inept style of geopolitics. “Ever since the continents started interacting politically, some five hundred years ago,” he wrote in 1998, essentially paraphrasing Mackinder, “Eurasia has been the center of world power. A power that dominates ‘Eurasia’ would control two of the world's three most advanced and economically productive regions ... rendering the Western Hemisphere and Oceania geopolitically peripheral to the world's central continent.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, 1st ed. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997).

While such a geopolitical logic has eluded Washington, it's been well understood in Beijing. Indeed, in the last decade China has launched the world's largest burst of infrastructure investment since Washington started the U.S. Interstate Highway System back in the 1950s — already a trillion dollars and counting. The numbers for the rails and pipelines it's been building are mind numbing. Between 2007 and 2014, China criss-crossed its countryside with 9,000 miles of new high-speed rail, more than the rest of the world combined. The system now carries 2.5 million passengers daily at top speeds of 240 miles per hour. By the time the system is complete in 2030, it will have added up to 16,000 miles of high-speed track at a cost of \$300 billion, linking all of China's major cities.<sup>28</sup>



*China-Central Asia infrastructure integrates the “world island” (Source: Stratfor)*

Simultaneously, China's leadership began collaborating with surrounding states on a massive project to integrate the country's national rail network into a transcontinental grid. Starting in 2008, the Germans and Russians joined with the Chinese in launching the “Eurasian Land Bridge.” Two east-west routes, the old Trans-Siberian in the north and a new southern route along the ancient Silk Road through Kazakhstan are meant to bind all of Eurasia together. On the quicker southern route, containers of high-value manufactured goods, computers

<sup>28</sup> Sarwant Singh, “China High-Speed Rail Juggernaut, While Most of US Stands By and Waves — But Not Elon Musk (Part 1),” *Forbes*, July 17, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sarwantsingh/2014/07/17/china-high-speed-rail-juggernaut-while-most-of-us-stands-by-and-waves-but-not-elon-musk-part-1/>.

and auto parts travel 6,700 miles from Leipzig, Germany, to Chongqing, China, in just 20 days,<sup>29</sup> almost half the 35 days such goods now take via oceanic travel.

In 2013, Deutsche Bahn AG (German Rail) began preparing a third route between Hamburg and Zhengzhou that has now cut travel time to just 15 days, while Kazakh Rail opened a Chongqing–Duisburg link with similar times. In October 2014, China announced plans for the construction of the world’s longest high-speed rail line at a cost of \$230 billion.<sup>30</sup> According to plans, trains will traverse the 4,300 miles between Beijing and Moscow in just two days.

In addition, China is building two spur lines running southwest and due south toward the world island’s maritime marginal. In April, President Xi Jinping signed an agreement with Pakistan to spend \$46 billion on a China–Pakistan Economic Corridor.<sup>31</sup> Highway, rail links and pipelines will stretch nearly 2,000 miles from Kashgar in Xinjiang, China’s westernmost province, to a joint port facility at Gwadar, Pakistan, opened back in 2007. China has invested more than \$200 billion in the building of this strategic port at Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, just 370 miles from the Persian Gulf.<sup>32</sup> Starting in 2011, China also began extending its rail lines through Laos into Southeast Asia at an initial cost of \$6.2 billion.<sup>33</sup> In the end, a high-speed line is expected to take passengers and goods on a trip of just 10 hours from Kunming to Singapore.

In this same dynamic decade, China has constructed a comprehensive network of trans-continental gas and oil pipelines to import fuels from the whole of Eurasia for its population centers — in the north, center and southeast. In 2009, after a

<sup>29</sup> Keith Bradsher, “Hauling New Treasure Along the Silk Road,” *The New York Times*, July 20, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/business/global/hauling-new-treasure-along-the-silk-road.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Russia and China Want to Build the Longest High-Speed Railway in the World to Connect Them,” *Business Insider*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/afp-china-russia-mull-high-speed-moscow-beijing-rail-line-report-2014-10>.

<sup>31</sup> “China’s Xi Jinping Agrees \$46bn Superhighway to Pakistan,” *BBC News*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32377088>.

<sup>32</sup> Saleem Shahid, “Gwadar Port Inaugurated: Plan for Second Port in Balochistan at Sonmiani,” *DAWN*, March 21, 2007, <http://beta.dawn.com/news/238494/gwadar-port-inaugurated-plan-for-second-port-in-balochistan-at-sonmiani>.

<sup>33</sup> “China Coming down the Tracks,” *The Economist*, January 20, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2011/01/20/china-coming-down-the-tracks>.



decade of construction, the state-owned China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) opened the final stage of the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline. It stretches 1,400 miles from the Caspian Sea to Xinjiang.

Simultaneously, CNPC collaborated with Turkmenistan to inaugurate the Central Asia-China gas pipeline.<sup>34</sup> Running for 1,200 miles largely parallel to the Kazakhstan-China Oil Pipeline, it is the first to bring the region's natural gas to China. To bypass the Straits of Malacca controlled by the U.S. Navy, CNPC opened a Sino-Myanmar pipeline in 2013 to carry both Middle Eastern oil and Burmese natural gas 1,500 miles from the Bay of Bengal to China's remote southwestern region.<sup>35</sup> In May 2014, the company signed a \$400 billion, 30-year deal with the privatized Russian energy giant Gazprom to deliver 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually by 2018 via a still-to-be-completed northern network of pipelines across Siberia and into Manchuria.<sup>36</sup>



*Sino-Myanmar Oil Pipeline evades the U.S. Navy in the Straits of Malacca (Source: Stratfor)*

<sup>34</sup> "Breaking International News & Views," *Reuters*, accessed December 21, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/>.

<sup>35</sup> Eric Meyer, "With Oil And Gas Pipelines, China Takes A Shortcut Through Myanmar," *Forbes*, February 9, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ericmeyer/2015/02/09/oil-and-gas-china-takes-a-shortcut/>.

<sup>36</sup> "Russia Signs 30-Year Gas Deal with China," *BBC News*, May 21, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-27503017>.



Though massive, these projects are just part of an ongoing construction boom that, over the past five years, has woven a cat's cradle of oil and gas lines across Central Asia and south into Iran and Pakistan. The result will soon be an integrated inland energy infrastructure, including Russia's own vast network of pipelines, extending across the whole of Eurasia, from the Atlantic to the South China Sea.

To capitalize such staggering regional growth plans, in October 2014 Beijing announced the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. China's leadership sees this institution as a future regional and, in the end, Eurasian alternative to the U.S.-dominated World Bank. So far, despite pressure from Washington not to join, 14 key countries, including close U.S. allies like Germany, Great Britain, Australia, and South Korea, have signed on.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, China has begun building long-term trade relations with resource-rich areas of Africa, as well as with Australia and Southeast Asia, as part of its plan to economically integrate the world island.

Finally, Beijing has only recently revealed a deftly designed strategy for neutralizing the military forces Washington has arrayed around the continent's perimeter. In April, President Xi Jinping announced construction of that massive road-rail-pipeline corridor direct from western China to its new port at Gwadar, Pakistan, creating the logistics for future naval deployments in the energy-rich Arabian Sea.<sup>38</sup>

In May, Beijing escalated its claim to exclusive control over the South China Sea, expanding Longpo Naval Base on Hainan Island for the region's first nuclear submarine facility,<sup>39</sup> accelerating its

**By building the infrastructure for military bases in the South China and Arabian seas, Beijing is forging the future capacity to surgically and strategically impair US military containment.**

<sup>37</sup> Jane Perlez, "Stampede to Join China's Development Bank Stuns Even its Founder," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/03/world/asia/china-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank.html?r=0>.

<sup>38</sup> Janes, "Latest Defence and Security News," January 3, 2023, <http://www.janes.com/defence-news>.

<sup>39</sup> Hans Kristensen, "China SSBN Fleet Getting Ready – But For What?" Federation Of American Scientists, April 25, 2014, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2014/04/chinassbnfleet/>.

dredging to create three new atolls that could become military airfields in the disputed Spratley Islands,<sup>40</sup> and formally warning off U.S. Navy overflights.<sup>41</sup> By building the infrastructure for military bases in the South China and Arabian seas, Beijing is forging the future capacity to surgically and strategically impair U.S. military containment.

At the same time, Beijing is developing plans to challenge Washington's dominion over space and cyberspace. It expects, for instance, to complete its own global satellite system by 2020,<sup>42</sup> offering the first challenge to Washington's dominion over space since the U.S. launched its system of 26 defense communication satellites back in 1967. Simultaneously, Beijing is building a formidable capacity for cyber warfare.<sup>43</sup>

**America's current leadership has failed to grasp the significance of a radical global change underway inside the Eurasian land mass.**

In a decade or two, should the need arise, China will be ready to surgically slice through Washington's continental encirclement at a few strategic points without having to confront the full global might of the U.S. military, potentially rendering the vast American armada of carriers, cruisers, drones, fighters and submarines redundant.

Lacking the geopolitical vision of Mackinder and his generation of British imperialists, America's current leadership

<sup>40</sup> David E. Sanger and Rick Gladstone, "Piling Sand in a Disputed Sea, China Literally Gains Ground," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2015, [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/09/world/asia/new-images-show-china-literally-gaining-ground-in-south-china-sea.html?_r=0).

<sup>41</sup> Jim Sciutto, "Exclusive: China Warns U.S. Surveillance Plane," *CNN Politics*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.cnn.com/2015/05/20/politics/south-china-sea-navy-flight/index.html>.

<sup>42</sup> "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Turkmenistan President Sherdar Berdymukhamedov," *News.cn*, accessed December 20, 2022, <http://www.news.cn/>.

<sup>43</sup> David E. Sanger, David Barboza and Nicole Perloth, "Chinese Army Unit Is Seen as Tied to Hacking Against U.S.," *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/19/technology/chinas-army-is-seen-as-tied-to-hacking-against-us.html>.

has failed to grasp the significance of a radical global change underway inside the Eurasian land mass. If China succeeds in linking its rising industries to the vast natural resources of the Eurasian heartland, then quite possibly, as Sir Halford Mackinder predicted on that cold London night in 1904, “the empire of the world would be in sight.”

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

Alfred W. McCoy is the Harrington Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He specializes in the history of the Philippines, U.S. foreign policy, European colonization of Southeast Asia, illegal drug trade, and Central Intelligence Agency covert operations. Most recently, he is the author of *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of U.S. Global Power* (Chicago, 2017). He is also the author of *Policing America’s Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* (Madison, 2009), which won the Kahin Prize from the Association for Asian Studies.

His best-known book, *The Politics of Heroin*, stirred controversy when the CIA tried to block its publication in 1972, but it has remained in print for nearly 50 years, translated into nine languages and is generally regarded as the “classic” work on global drug trafficking.

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# The Ghost of the Heartland

Sir Halford Mackinder and the Balance of Power in Eurasia

*Image credit: MNBB Studio / Shutterstock.com*

**Simone Pelizza, Ph.D.**

*Editor, Il Caffè Geopolitico*

Russia's war in Ukraine has revived discussions on the geopolitical future of Eurasia. The unpredictable evolution of the conflict and the crisis of Moscow's regional sphere of influence pose serious questions about the balance of power in the vast continental landmass between the Atlantic and the Pacific. The name of Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861-1947) pops up frequently in the debate: His idea of the Eurasian "heartland" as the "pivot region" of world politics (Mackinder 1904, 434), whose control can lead to global domination, remains very popular among international strategy experts and geopolitical pundits. Some even see the current Ukraine crisis as part of the "script" written by Mackinder more than a century ago, showing the irreversible decline of the maritime West in front of the continental alliance between Russia and China (Krikke 2022). Yet such appreciation is not uncontested. Academic geographers point out the limited

usefulness of Mackinder's concept for contemporary issues, warning that it represents "a West-centric understanding of history" (Dittmer 2013) largely oblivious to social, cultural and political changes. It is, for example, a "poor tool" to understand the role of China in Asia (Lasserre 2020) and the complex web of political and economic relations created by the country's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Far from being a perceptive reading of immutable geographical elements, it is a "dangerous, deterministic prediction" (De Blij 1973, 289) that is used to justify military interventions and aggressive policies for the control of the Eurasian landmass.

So how should we consider Mackinder's work? Is it still a valuable interpretative scheme for our turbulent times? Or is it instead irretrievably dated and dangerously misread by contemporary analysts? The answers to these questions require a careful look at Mackinder's life and the historical context in which the "heartland" theory came to light in the early 20th century.

The theory was more the product of precise political and cultural conditions than a timeless stroke of geographical genius, posing its author in direct (and sometimes polemical) debate with other strategic and geographical thinkers of the Edwardian era. Such a debate can still be perceived today in Mackinder's key texts and helps to explain the peculiarities and contradictions of his great idea. At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge the constant revision and reinterpretation of the "heartland" theory by various authors during and after the Cold War. Through the course of the last century, Mackinder's concept has in fact become the basis of several ideological visions and political programmes, losing many of its original components and developing new features that were later arbitrarily attributed to its creator. Only at the end of these two processes – exploration of the original historical context and analysis of the intellectual evolution of the "heartland" theory – is it possible to draw some relevant conclusions on Mackinder's legacy and its utility for the discussion of contemporary Eurasian geopolitics.

### ***Mackinder's anxious vision***

Halford Mackinder was not a man out of his time. The son of a rural doctor, he tried to find his place in the complex social environment of late Victorian Britain. After graduating from Oxford in 1880, he decided to become a university lecturer,

seeing it as the first step of a promising academic career. Mackinder focused his energies mostly on geography, which was at the time the subject of an intense public campaign promoted by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) (Wise 1986, 367-82). The campaign aimed to improve the teaching of geography in schools and universities, replacing obsolete practices with the new scientific methods developed in France and Germany. Thanks to his contacts with the RGS, Mackinder came to see geography as a crucial discipline for his country, providing it with “an accurate appreciation of space-relations in history” (Mackinder 1895, 379) and contributing to the preservation of its global empire against old and new rivals.

This last aspect was crucial for him. Concerned by the relative economic and military decline of Britain in the late 19th century, Mackinder believed that his country was soon to be confronted by new continental states like Germany or the United States that could use the “rapidly developing resources” of their “vast territories” to build large fleets and defeat the Royal Navy (Mackinder 1903). This threat could only be averted by the union of Britain with its white settler colonies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa), but such an ambitious project required a proper appreciation of world geographical realities. Every British subject should then train to become an “ideal geographer” capable of analysing different environments and picturing “the movements of communities driven by their past history.” Thanks to these formidable skills, “a merchant, soldier, or politician” would be ready to face “practical space-problems” and take the right measures to maintain Britain’s global hegemony (Mackinder 1895, 376). In Mackinder’s view, geographical education was a patriotic duty, and it should be pursued with the utmost urgency for the greater benefit of the nation. Despite his best efforts, however, the discipline struggled to gain a stable position in British universities, while its use for practical matters of state continued to be rather occasional. What was needed was something that could stimulate the imagination of the British ruling class and convince it of the exceptional value of geography as an instrument of statecraft. After some reflection, Mackinder thought to have finally found such a stimulating element with his paper “The Geographical Pivot of History,” which he proudly presented at the RGS in January 1904.

On the surface, the paper was not particularly original. It reflected the European “geopolitical panic” of the early 20th century and was based on popular

**Mackinder was able to convey a strong personal interpretation of modern world history and the complex relationship between space and humanity.**

notions of national decline and violent competition between great states for global domination (Heffernan 2000, 27–51). It was also heavily influenced by J.R. Seeley’s *The Expansion of England* (1883), which was a key text for the movement campaigning for the unification of Britain with its white colonies. Yet, through rhetoric and imagination, Mackinder was able to convey a strong personal interpretation of modern world history and the complex relationship between space and humanity.

According to his view, Western European countries had discovered and colonised large parts of the world for centuries thanks to their successful use of sea communications. But the long maritime era opened by Christopher Columbus’s voyages was now ending and the world was becoming a “dangerous closed political system” where weak nations were at risk of being crushed by stronger ones (Mackinder 1904, 422). This trend was also accompanied by the return of the Eurasian landmass at the centre of the global system, due to the development of transcontinental railways in the steppes of Russia and Central Asia. These railways created the conditions for the rise of a vast and self-sufficient economic zone, free from the interference of Western sea powers. It was the “pivot’s region of world history” from which all the great nomadic peoples of the past (Huns, Mongols, Turks) had moved to conquer large swathes of Europe and East Asia (Mackinder 1904, 436). Now this “pivot region” was under the control of Tsarist Russia, which aimed to use it as a base from which to extend its power over Scandinavia, Central Europe, Persia, India, and China. Modern railway mobility favoured Russian imperial ambitions, while the inability to project sea power in the Eurasian pivot area marked the relative decline of the West in the post-Columbian age. Yet Western nations could still thwart Russia’s expansion through military alliances and the use of peninsulas like India or Korea as “bridge heads” for attacks against the pivot area. Despite its new strength, Russia remained vulnerable to the actions of the “surrounding and insular powers,” proving the persistence of essential geographical conditions. Therefore, Mackinder closed his long paper



with a reminder of the vital importance of geography for international affairs. Geography was the key to understand “the actual balance of political power” in the world and its future evolution (Mackinder 1904, 436-7).

### ***Criticism and revision***

Despite its imaginative boldness, Mackinder’s great geopolitical picture failed to impress the British establishment. In part, his core argument was weakened by Russia’s catastrophic defeat in the war against Japan (1904-5), which seemed to show the military limits of transcontinental railways and the persistent superiority of sea power nations over continental empires. But some commentators also questioned the soundness of his reasoning: An anonymous reviewer on *The Spectator*, for example, noted that Northern Asia remained underdeveloped, and Russia had not enough strength to exploit efficiently its resources. Moreover, railways were still more expensive than sea communications, and no “multiplication” of them could reduce the long distances separating Europe from Asia. For these reasons, Mackinder’s paper was more a “political prophecy” than a serious strategic analysis, and it did not deserve any special consideration (Anonymous 1904). At the same time, the presence of more popular publications on the “Russian threat” – like those of George Curzon (1859-1925) – obscured Mackinder’s work and prevented it from reaching a wider audience. His voice was just one among many who discussed regularly the imperial rivalries for the control of Eastern Asia or the long “Great Game” with Russia over India. It did not get the spotlight it originally sought.

Yet Mackinder did not drop his great vision and continued to work on it in the following years, trying to address both the criticism received and the constant evolution of international conditions. The outbreak of World War I impressed a great acceleration to this revisionist work and led to significant changes in the geographical definition of the “pivot region.” Indeed, in the 1904 paper, this area had been mainly Asiatic, centering on Siberia and its immediate surroundings, while now its borders began to move steadily toward the West and include a huge chunk of Eastern Europe. Such a change was the product of Mackinder’s involvement in the struggle for the liberation of Austria-Hungary’s small nationalities, which was energetically promoted in Britain by the New Europe group led by Robert

Seton-Watson (Seton-Watson 1981). As a member of the group, Mackinder became convinced of the large artificiality of “present political frontiers” in Eastern Europe and advocated a vast federal reorganisation of the region as an obstacle to the hegemonic ambitions of Germany. The war was also a contest between “imperial centralisation and clustered nationalities,” where the latter ones were destined to play a central role in the future global order (Mackinder 1915). British and Allied soldiers were dying not only to “preserve their own country” but also to “organize for the first time a whole democratic world,” free from the political and social constraints of the past (Mackinder 1917, 151). Therefore, it was essential, for both idealistic and pragmatic reasons, that Eastern Europeans should be supported in their quest for freedom and independence. This support became more imperative in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, when the defeat of Germany, the collapse of Austria-Hungary, and the revolutionary turmoil in Russia posed enormous diplomatic challenges for the Allied powers and threatened to generate a new wave of instability across the European continent. Hoping to influence the workings of the Paris Peace Conference, Mackinder wrote *Democratic Ideals and Reality* (1919), in which he tried to reconcile the democratic spirit of the time with the lasting realities of geography, sketching a feasible and realistic settlement for the post-war world.

The book warned against the risks of “generous visions” in a world dominated by material needs and brutal “organisers,” who had no trouble squashing freedom to

pursue their political objectives (Mackinder 1919, 6–7). To survive in such a hostile environment, democracies should learn to use geography as a guide to face the new problems created by the war. Geographical features had not changed through time and remained an essential point of reference for the work of strategists and policymakers. The most significant of these features was the territorial unity of Europe, Asia, and Africa, which formed a massive “World-Island” at the core of the global system (Mackinder 1919, 96). The “heartland” of

**The formula for international security was simple: ‘Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.’**

this huge continental landmass was the original “pivot region” of 1904, extending now from Siberia to Eastern Europe and including all the new countries born by the dissolution of Austria–Hungary and Tsarist Russia during the war. If Western democracies wished to build a peaceful future, they had to preserve the balance of power in the “world-island” and avoid the control of the “heartland” by a single power or a combination of countries. The formula for international security was simple: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.” (Mackinder 1919, 194). Western countries should then support Eastern European peoples and build with them a strategic barrier between Germany and Soviet Russia, preserving the post-war international order from any revisionist threat. With time and assistance, new states like Poland or Czechoslovakia could become solid pillars of the post-war global system and help to defend peace and democracy in Europe and other parts of the “world-island.”

Mackinder’s view was partly idealistic but tempered by his belief in the unchangeability of geographical factors and by his concern about the future of the British Empire after the war. In this sense, he thought that the collapse of Russia represented a serious threat for British interests in the East and that imperial authorities needed to fight harder against the rising menace of Bolshevism. In late 1919, his ideas caught the attention of fellow countryman George Curzon, then Britain’s secretary of state for foreign affairs, who appointed Mackinder as British High Commissioner to South Russia in order to revitalise the dwindling forces of General Denikin’s Volunteer Army and create a potential anti-Bolshevik alliance in Eastern Europe. Despite some promising overtures by Poland, however, Mackinder’s mission was a complete failure and destroyed any possibility that his geopolitical vision could become a leading force of British foreign policy (Pelizza 2016, 174–95). Yet the “heartland” concept survived and gave birth to new variations of its creator’s original ideas, setting the ground for the current frenzy about Mackinderian geopolitics.

## ***Reinventing the 'heartland'***

While largely ignored in Britain, Mackinder's ideas found an unexpected fortune in Germany where they contributed to the development of Karl Haushofer's *Geopolitik* during the 1920s (Herwig 1999, 218-41).

A former military officer with strong ties to right-wing groups, including the Nazis, Haushofer was deeply impressed by the "heartland" concept and started to fantasize about the creation of a vast "Pan-Eurasian bloc" led by Germany and Russia (Herwig 2016, 124). This bloc would exploit the natural resources of the "heartland" and challenge Western sea power, shaping a new world order free from the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon countries. It was a complete reversal of Mackinder's original vision: The threat against which the British geographer had warned became a desired outcome for his German counterpart.

In the 1930s Haushofer's ideas seemed to be officially endorsed by the Nazi regime, thanks also to the close connection of his son Albrecht with the Foreign Ministry. Thus, when Germany and the Soviet Union signed their infamous non-aggression pact in 1939, dividing Eastern Europe between themselves, many believed that Mackinder had somehow inspired that event, providing an intellectual blueprint to Hitler's expansionism. The American press was especially struck by this "scandalous" association and published sensationalist articles on how Mackinder's work had directly influenced Hitler and the whole Nazi war strategy (Blouet 1987, 191-2). Of course, Mackinder tried to set the record straight, emphasizing the differences between his ideas and those of Haushofer, but these efforts were not entirely successful and helped to spread further the rough version of his geopolitical concepts presented by the papers. The "heartland" started to live a life of its own, though its name continued to be associated to Mackinder.

In the United States it almost became an intellectual fad, stimulating the reflection of influential scholars like Owen Lattimore and Nicholas J. Spykman. The concept was rarely understood in its original terms and served mainly to validate previously held beliefs, shaping different theories about the new global order created by the war. Lattimore, for example, observed that the frontiers of internal Asia were now "clearly dominated by the Soviet Union," which used this position of strength to spread communist ideas across the continent. The West should

counter such dangerous influence through political propaganda and effective economic assistance to local peoples (Lattimore 1953, 28–30). On the other hand, Spykman claimed that the peripheral areas around the core of Eurasia – the so-called “rimland” – were far more important than the “heartland” for the international balance of power. Indeed, these areas could be militarily fortified and transformed into “a vast buffer zone” against continental empires like the Soviet Union, emphasizing the amphibious power of the United States and its allies. Mackinder’s famous dictum was significantly altered: “Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.” (Spykman 1944, 38–43). Thanks to Spykman’s reinterpretation, Mackinder’s geopolitical ideas entered the strategic debates of the Cold War and influenced to a certain extent the “containment” policies of the United States. Therefore, after his death in 1947, Mackinder became “a strategist without a place or context,” whose key tenets – extrapolated from their original form – were frequently used by security experts to justify their own theories and catch the eyes of policymakers (Ó Tuathail 1992, 116). The historical complexity of his thought was lost and replaced by simplistic visions rooted in geographical determinism and political expediency. Yet his name remained as an approving “brand” to market geopolitical speculations, while the “heartland” dictum became a stylish slogan easy to remember and widely quotable by the media.

**Mackinder’s famous dictum was significantly altered: ‘Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia; who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.’**

### ***Victorian prophecies and 21st-century realities***

The end of the Cold War put another spin on Mackinder’s legacy. In fact, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of new independent states across Eurasia gave new popularity to his ideas, inspiring further variations and reinterpretations of the original “heartland” formula. In Russia, for example, the “heartland” was discovered by several intellectuals and became a recurring feature in the fierce debates about the future of the country after the Soviet collapse. Both

traditionalists and neo-Eurasianists praised Mackinder's strategic intuitions and made them the basis of various geopolitical schemes aimed at restoring Moscow as a great global power (Hauner 2013, 123–38). But it was not only Russia that fell in love with Mackinder. Other post-Soviet states – Uzbekistan, for one – were also attracted by his writings to sketch their foreign policies after independence (Sharapova 2013, 171–95), while the “heartland” concept continued to be seen in the West as a simple and effective lens to read the confusing geopolitical reality of Eurasia. This popularity has persisted to these days and, as noticed in the opening part of this article, has gained even further relevance after the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

**Scholars and analysts should be wary of relying on antiquated models to explain the complicated reality of the 21st century.**

Yet it should be remembered that Mackinder's great geopolitical picture of Eurasia was the product of a precise historical context. This limits its usefulness to understand and interpret current events. Mackinder's view, for example, is still dominated by railways, heavy industries, large armies, and other early 20th-century ideas of national power, while today such notion is much more nuanced and shaped by complex factors

like technological progress, international connectivity, and economic innovation. At present, these factors tend to favour more Western countries than the Russian “heartland” state (Lewis 2022). China's role in Eurasia is also complicated and seems to escape the rigid geo-historical scheme depicted in Mackinder's writings. According to Lasserre (2020), for example, the BRI is mainly “an opportunistic development strategy” dictated by various imperatives, and it is quite hard to see it as a new incarnation of the “heartland” prophecy. Finally, small states are often neglected in Mackinder's reflection, while the war in Ukraine has shown how they can successfully resist the pressures of great powers and defend actively their independence on the world stage. Therefore, scholars and analysts should be wary of relying on antiquated models to explain the complicated reality of the 21st century.

Nevertheless, the incredible vitality of Mackinder's vision, constantly reinvented in different national contexts, is a testament to its author's brilliant imagination and to the persistent anxiety toward the fate of the Eurasian region, which remains subject to intense strategic competition and great geopolitical changes. We do not need to follow Mackinder's old-fashioned logic till the end to recognize the relevance of his words to contemporary strategists and policymakers. Indeed, their concerns are often similar to those tackled by the British geographer one century ago. Far from being exorcised, the "ghost of the heartland" still haunts us in unexpected ways.

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

Simone Pelizza studied history at the Catholic University of Milan, and at the University of Leeds, where he earned his Ph.D. in 2013 with a dissertation on the life and thought of Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947), the father of modern geopolitics. Pelizza has published book reviews and articles in several academic journals. Since 2014, he has served as author and editor at *Il Caffè Geopolitico*, an Italian website devoted to geopolitics and international affairs. In such a capacity he has also contributed to lectures and educational courses on these topics. His main research interests are international history, international relations, Russian and Asian geopolitics. He lives and works in the United Kingdom.

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A portrait of Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and a red tie. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

# From Hegemony to Multipolarity

How Post-Cold War US Foreign Policy Toward Russia  
is Creating a Modern Eurasia

*Image credit: Luca Perra / Shutterstock.com*

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## ***The background: 'the end of history'***

Any proper documentation and analysis of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the ongoing fissure between Russia and China on the one hand, and the Western world on the other, must begin with the period covering the ending of the ideological Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which came with the declaration of independence by some of its constituent soviet republics such as Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic States, as well as the de-Sovietisation of Eastern Europe, was bound to create a new global order. Much would depend on the United States, the sole remaining world power, as to how this new state of affairs would take shape. It had as an option recourse to its foundational precepts as a republic, which cautioned against entangling alliances to pursue a course of isolationism. The withering away of

the Soviet Union and prior to that, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, opened up the possibility that the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) would be disbanded and a new security architecture developed on the continent of Europe that included Russia. This fresh, innovated pan-European set up could have developed out of the framework of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and might have included an economic dimension centred on measures aimed at integrating the German economy with that of Russia; a development of *Ostpolitik*.

This did not happen.

Describing the development as “the unipolar moment,” Charles Krauthammer, the late Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist, argued the case for a “serenely dominant” United States that would not withdraw into its hemisphere and, instead, act as one bastion of power in a multipolar world.<sup>1</sup> For some like Francis Fukuyama, a political scientist, the fall of the Soviet Union represented the “end of history.” According to Fukuyama, history was characterised as a struggle between ideologies, and liberal democracy had triumphed over all others.<sup>2</sup> His views were readily adopted by those who identified with the neoconservative school of thought. These intellectual descendants of Wilsonian idealism and fervent believers in American exceptionalism were already deposed to be promoters of democracy. Thus, in the aftermath of the victory of liberalism and free market capitalism over Marxism, the United States, they argued, should proceed to mould the world in its image.

This line of thinking came to be reflected in the theorising and application of U.S. foreign policy. The idea that America should operate

**In the aftermath of the victory of liberalism and free market capitalism over Marxism, the United States, they argued, should proceed to mould the world in its image.**

<sup>1</sup> Krauthammer, Charles. “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 1, 1990. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.

<sup>2</sup> Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Free Press, 1992.

as the sole global hegemon is reflected in the so-called “Wolfowitz Doctrine,” named for Paul Wolfowitz, the U.S. deputy under secretary of defense for policy during the administration led by President George H. Bush.

The overarching objective of the “Defense Planning Guidance” for the 1994–99 fiscal years, published for internal consumption in February 1992 by Wolfowitz and fellow-under secretary Scooter Libby, was that the United States would use the vacuum caused by the breakup of the Soviet Union as an opportunity to prevent the rise of any nation attempting to take up the mantle of a global competitor.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to achieve this, it explicitly disavowed being bound by multilateral agreements and envisaged destroying by military action or the application of economic pressure any nation which operated in a way which was inimical to America’s declared political and economic interests.

The influence of adherents to the neoconservative ideology, as well as those promoting the interests of military contractors, has loomed large in American military action, both overtly and covertly in its invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, NATO’s destruction of Libya in 2011, and the covert attempt to overthrow the Ba’athist government of Syria, which also commenced in 2011. Neoconservatives have also been in the vanguard of calling for the United States to attack Iran.

**A classified Pentagon document set out a plan to attack and destroy “seven countries in five years,” starting with Iraq and ending with Iran.**

It was to neoconservative ideologues that Wesley Clark, a retired 4-star U.S. Army general and supreme commander of NATO, was referring when in 2008 he spoke of a “policy coup” in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, in which a group of “hard-nosed people took control of policy in the United States.”<sup>4</sup> Clark spoke of a visit that he made to the Pentagon while preparations

<sup>3</sup> “Defense Planning Guidance for the 1994–99 Fiscal Years,” February 18, 1992, <https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/jscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> “Wes Clark – America’s Foreign Policy ‘Coup,’” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY2DKzastu8>.

were afoot for the “police action” that would be taken in Afghanistan. A former colleague had shown him a classified document which set out a plan to attack and destroy “seven countries in five years.” They included Iraq, Libya, and Syria and, as Clark would state, the programme was scheduled to “start with Iraq and end with Iran!”

It is also important to note that while General Clark asserted in 2001 that American foreign policy had been “hijacked,” and that there had been no public debate about the “policy coup,” Jeffrey Sachs, a prominent American economist and academic, considers the current conflict in Ukraine to be the latest in a line of neoconservative-inspired foreign policy disasters.<sup>5</sup>

But it is also clear that forces other than neoconservative ideologues — who have been well-represented in successive administrations — are not alone in perpetuating America’s cycle of endless wars. The military industry and an accompanying “Deep State” establishment is a responsible but unaccountable facet of this continuum of militarism, despite the changes of administration. In 2014 Michael J. Glennon, a professor of international law at Tufts University, offered some explanation in a lengthy journal article-turned-book entitled “National Security and Double Government.”<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from the writings of 19th-century English constitutionalist Walter Bagehot about a hidden government, educator Glennon posited that the unbending trajectory of U.S. foreign policy came from a powerful but unacknowledged institution that he designated as “Trumanite.” The Trumanite Institutions are composed of ex-military, security officials and other vested interests associated with the military

**Forces other than neoconservative ideologues are not alone in perpetuating America’s cycle of endless wars.**

<sup>5</sup> Sachs, Jeffrey D. “Ukraine Is the Latest Neocon Disaster.” <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2022/06/28/ukraine-latest-neocon-disaster>. See also: Makinde, Adeyinka. “The Syrian Tragedy: Western Foreign Policy and its ‘Useful Idiots,’” *Global Research Canada*, October 23, 2016. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/the-syrian-tragedy-western-foreign-policy-and-its-useful-idiots/5552621>.

<sup>6</sup> Glennon, Michael J. “National Security and Double Government.” *5 Harvard National Security Journal* 1 (2014). [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2376272](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2376272).

industry and the intelligence services who he argued run national security policies at the expense of the “Madisonian” institutions; that is, the separated organs of state which function to constitutionally check the power of each other and who are accountable to the electorate. The Trumanite network weakens Constitutional safeguards and boundaries in place to check the government, resulting in less democracy.

It would be remiss not to add the influence of Zbigniew Brzeziński, a one-time U.S. national security adviser, on the conduct of American foreign relations. Although not a part of the neoconservative movement, he endorsed the view that no power should be allowed to rise and challenge American supremacy over the globe. A major part of his focus was on Russia. In his book *The Grand Chessboard*, Brzeziński set out his views on how Russia should be militarily intimidated and economically weakened to achieve the goal of breaking it up as a nation or otherwise reducing it to a state of vassalage, with its role being restricted to that of supplying the energy needs of the West.<sup>7</sup>

The pressures applied by successive U.S. administrations on Russia have been three-pronged: military, economic and informational. As the late Professor Stephen Cohen argued, Western pressure has been demonstrably proactive, while Russia’s actions have been largely reactive. These pressures are informed by the policy which germinated in the post-Cold War environment and were applied by many political actors imbued with the neoconservative mindset who are supported by “Trumanite” institutions. These include the burgeoning “military-industrial complex” of which President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned the American people in his farewell address of January 1961.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The military dimension: ‘not one inch eastward’***

The first line of military-related pressure applied against Russia is one that lies at the heart of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This has been the decision to expand

<sup>7</sup> Brzeziński, Zbigniew *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. National Archives. “President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address (1961),” <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/president-dwight-d-eisenhowers-farewell-address>.

NATO to Russia's borders. When expansion was first touted by the administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton in the 1990s, it raised protests from the Western-friendly government of Russia's first president, Boris Yeltsin. Yeltsin's successor, President Vladimir Putin whose government assumed a more nationalist posture than that of Yeltsin, made it clear after the incorporation of the Baltic States, Poland and others that further expansion to Ukraine and Georgia would constitute a "red line."

The Russians have contested the enlargement of NATO as presenting not only an existential threat to their country, but also as an abrogation of an agreement reached by the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. The substance of this uncodified accord was that in return for allowing the reunification of Germany, which would automatically become a member of the Atlantic Alliance, the United States gave assurances to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "one inch" eastward. There is an ample trail of evidence in the form of documents and oral histories that confirm a consensus was reached.<sup>9</sup>

### ***The economic dimension: 'Nord Stream must end'***

Economic pressures, including outright economic warfare by the punitive tool of sanctions, represent another dimension through which the United States-led West has sought to weaken post-Soviet Russia. Professor Cohen summarised the overall pattern of relations between both as one of proactive conduct on the part of the United States, with Russia being largely reactive. This has meant that Russian reactions to Western provocations, such as the United States-sponsored Maidan coup in Kiev in February 2014, have given the West the opportunity to respond by imposing sanctions. In the case of the Maidan coup, the Russian response of protecting its Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol consisted of initiating a referendum in Crimea to provide the basis of its annexation in March 2014.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Savranskaya, Svetlana and Blanton, Tom (2017). "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," National Security Archive Briefing Book #613, December 12, 2017. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

<sup>10</sup> "Address by President of the Russian Federation," Kremlin website, March 18, 2014. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>.



Today, German, French, and British leaders conduct a relationship with the United States which is more akin to vassalage than partnership. The lack of strong leadership arguably led to the lack of restraint on the aggressive and disastrous foreign policy adventures undertaken by NATO, as well as the handling of relations with Russia. It meant that the leaders of the German and French governments disingenuously served as guarantors of the Minsk accords — assurances designed

Today, German, French, and British leaders conduct a relationship with the United States which is more akin to vassalage than partnership.

to bring peace to Ukraine where a civil war had been kickstarted by the United States-sponsored coup in Kiev.

The “shock and awe” sanctions imposed by the United States and its European allies, designed to sink the Russian economy and bring about the overthrow of Vladimir Putin, have proved to be a spectacular failure. As the economist J.K. Galbraith outlined in May 2022, Russia has survived because it is a self-sufficient nation which has developed an industrial base.<sup>11</sup>

### ***The informational dimension: ‘Putin as the new Hitler’***

The economic and military pressures placed on Russia have been supplemented by a campaign using the Western-dominated “soft-power” of the media, which has consistently demonised the Russian leader Vladimir Putin and his country. Putin, whose portrayal is based on that of an oriental-style dictator, is often referred to in the press as an “ex-KGB thug”<sup>12</sup> and as a “new Hitler.”<sup>13</sup> Speaking in 2017, Cohen felt that American media accounts of Putin were “tabloid, derogatory, libellous” and

<sup>11</sup> Galbraith, James K. “The Dollar System in a Multi-Polar World,” Institute for New Economic Thinking, May 5, 2022. <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/the-dollar-system-in-a-multi-polar-world>.

<sup>12</sup> “John McCain Was Right: Vladimir Putin is a Thug,” McCain Institute, February 12, 2022. <https://www.mccaininstitute.org/resources/in-the-news/john-mccain-was-right-vladimir-putin-is-a-thug/>.

<sup>13</sup> Rucker, Philip. “Hillary Clinton’s Putin-Hitler comments draw rebukes as she wades into Ukraine conflict,” *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hillary-clintons-putin-hitler-comments-draw-rebukes-as-she-wades-into-ukraine-conflict/2014/03/05/31a748d8-a486-11e3-84d4-e59b1709222c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/hillary-clintons-putin-hitler-comments-draw-rebukes-as-she-wades-into-ukraine-conflict/2014/03/05/31a748d8-a486-11e3-84d4-e59b1709222c_story.html).

“without context, evidence or balance.”<sup>14</sup> Cohen argued that “falsely demonising” the Russian leader made the new Cold War even more dangerous.<sup>15</sup>

Western leaders who meet with Putin have indulged in pseudo-psychological examinations of what they perceived to have “seen” when they looked into his eyes. Although George W. Bush opined a neutral stance by saying that he got a “sense of his soul,”<sup>16</sup> Joe Biden differed and claimed that he told Putin in a 2011 meeting, “I don’t think you have a soul.” Biden found Putin’s eyes to belong to “a killer,”<sup>17</sup> while French President Emmanuel Macron perceived “a sense of resentment,”<sup>18</sup> a condition which some argued made Putin “more aggressive and unpredictable than ever.”<sup>19</sup>

The language and tone of these utterances reflect a decline in the standard of political discourse, as well as a diminution of statecraft and the art of diplomacy in recent times. During the ideological Cold War, the leaders of both superpowers sought to reduce tensions. They often turned to diplomacy and were careful in their use of language in the public sphere. The opposite may be averred to be the case now; intemperate language is used to increase tensions.

A summary of the approach of the United States is encapsulated in a paper presented by the RAND Corporation in 2019 which was titled “Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-Imposing Options.” Under the

<sup>14</sup> “Rethinking Putin: A Talk by Professor Stephen F. Cohen,” *The Nation* YouTube Channel, Delivered on the annual *Nation* cruise, December 2, 2017. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOH\\_VF9hWnA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOH_VF9hWnA).

<sup>15</sup> Cohen, Stephen, “Who Putin Is Not,” *The Nation*, September 20, 2018. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/who-putin-is-not/>. Stephen Cohen also forcefully poured scorn over “Russiagate,” stating that Robert Mueller turned up no credible evidence to back up the allegation. Cohen pronounced the two original documents on which the whole “Russiagate” saga relied on as “impotent.”

<sup>16</sup> “User Clip: Bush saw Putin’s soul,” C-SPAN, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4718091/user-clip-bush-putins-soul>.

<sup>17</sup> Troianovski, Anton. “Russia Erupts in Fury Over Biden’s Calling Putin a Killer,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/18/world/europe/russia-biden-putin-killer.html>. (Biden comments in an interview with George Stephanopoulos on ABC on March 16, 2021)

<sup>18</sup> Tapper, Jack. “One-to-one with French President Emmanuel Macron,” *CNN*, September 23, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BT5nXDhtOo>.

<sup>19</sup> Seddon, Max. “Vladimir Putin, Russia’s resentful leader, takes the world to war,” *The Financial Times*, February 25, 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/c039db89-7201-4875-b31f-b41a511496f1>.

heading “Ideological and Informational Cost-Imposing Measures,” it outlined a plan of attack which had the objective of diminishing the faith of the Russian people in their electoral system, creating the perception that Putin was pursuing policies not in the public interest, encouraging domestic protests and undermining Russia’s image abroad.<sup>20</sup>

### ***The road to the Russia-Ukraine war***

It is only with insight into the geostrategic thinking of American neoconservatives and the doctrinal philosophy of Zbigniew Brzezinski — who believed that Russia could not be a power without Ukraine — that an assertion that the United States has chosen Ukraine as a battleground with the Russian Federation can be readily appreciated.

Contrary to the narrative provided by Western political leaders that has been faithfully disseminated by Western mainstream media, the war in Ukraine did not begin on February 24, 2022, when President Putin launched what he termed a Special Military Operation (SMO).<sup>21</sup> It was merely a development in a chronology of events started by NATO threats of expansion to Russia’s border. There followed a struggle for the soul of Ukraine which developed as follows: Set against a backdrop of the Ukrainian government’s mulling over whether to accept economic aid from Russia or the EU, the Maidan protests, a series of manipulated public demonstrations, culminated in an American-orchestrated coup in Kiev in February 2014. The use of certifiable neo-Nazi and ultranationalist groups in the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich, who was viewed by the West as pro-Russian, kick-started an internal conflict between the central government and ethnic Russian Ukrainian separatists of the Donbas in the eastern part of the country. The Minsk peace accords followed: the Minsk Protocol of September 2014 and its follow up, Minsk II in February 2015. However, the failure of these accords and the continued build-

<sup>20</sup> Dobbins, James, Cohen, Raphael S. et al. “Overextending and Unbalancing Russia: Assessing the Impact of Cost-Imposing Options,” RAND Corporation, 2019. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10014.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10014.html).

<sup>21</sup> Address by the President of the Russian Federation, Kremlin website, February 24, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/67843>.

up of Ukrainian military forces in the Donbas — armed and trained by countries of NATO in a conflict which claimed an estimated 14,000 lives — ultimately led to the Russian intervention.<sup>22</sup>

That the exertion of pressure by the West within Ukraine would create the conditions for a civil war was predictable. In his internal memorandum of February 2008, Ambassador William J. Burns had noted the following in Paragraph 5(c):

*Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership, with much of the ethnic-Russian community against membership, could lead to a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war. In that eventuality, Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face.*<sup>23</sup>

A key plank of Russian objectives in launching Putin's SMO was to effect the "demilitarisation" of the Donbas region and the city of Mariupol where concentrations of well-armed Ukrainian forces in fortified positions were located. The small and ill-equipped Ukrainian Army existing in 2014 was increased in size and began to be trained and armed by NATO.<sup>24</sup> The Russians had detected a rising tone of bellicosity on the part of the Ukrainian government, which by 2021 had made the objective of re-taking Crimea official military doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Its trained-to-NATO-standards military was also the beneficiary of a marked increase in arms sales from the United States.<sup>26</sup> In his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2022, President Zelensky revived the threat of joining NATO. He also suggested that Ukraine would abrogate

<sup>22</sup> Sachs, Jeffrey. "The Ninth Anniversary of the Ukraine War," jeffsachs.org, February 28, 2023. <https://www.jeff-sachs.org/newspaper-articles/yjae8gc8hp2p293tmt4dlr4z2dpe2s>.

<sup>23</sup> "Nyet Means Nyet: NATO's Enlargement Redlines," Diplomatic cable by William J. Burns, February 1, 2008. [https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o8MOSCOW265\\_a.html](https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/o8MOSCOW265_a.html).

<sup>24</sup> Michaels, Daniel. "The Secret of Ukraine's Military Success: Years of NATO Training," *Wall Street Journal*, April 13, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-military-success-years-of-nato-training-11649861339>.

<sup>25</sup> Melanovski, Jason. "Ukraine approves strategy to 'recover' Crimea, threatening all-out war with Russia," World Socialist website, March 19, 2021.

<sup>26</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, March 2022. [https://www.forumarmstrade.org/uploads/1/9/0/8/19082495/screen-shot-2022-03-18-at-2-51-22-pm\\_orig.png](https://www.forumarmstrade.org/uploads/1/9/0/8/19082495/screen-shot-2022-03-18-at-2-51-22-pm_orig.png).

its obligations under the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 and pursue a course of re-nuclearisation.<sup>27</sup> The issuance of those threats alongside briefings from Russian intelligence of Ukrainian forces being poised to strike the areas of Donbas controlled by the militias of the ethnic Russian secessionists almost certainly signalled the tipping point for the Kremlin.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Toward multipolarity: Russia's divorce from the West and the dawning of Eurasia***

One development emanating from the pressures applied to Russia in the aftermath of the Cold War has been the ignition of a closer state of relations between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China. Tentative at first but intensifying in recent years, these two nations are now in a *de facto* alliance against the United States-led West.

In its rawest form, the geostrategic theory postulated by the British geographer and scholar Sir Halford J. Mackinder, provided a theoretical basis upon which the United States acted toward preventing a unification of the contiguous landmass

which encompasses Europe and Asia. In his paper titled "The Geographical Pivot of History," published in 1904, Mackinder postulated what he termed the "Heartland Theory." It divided the globe into three geographical regions. The Americas and Australia were referred to as "outlying islands," and the British Isles and the islands of Japan he labelled "outer islands." The combination of Africa, Europe, and Asia he termed the "world island." And at the centre of the world

**Tentative at first but intensifying in recent years, Russia and China are now in a *de facto* alliance against the United States-led West.**

<sup>27</sup> "Zeleńsky's full speech at Munich Security Conference," *Kyiv Independent*, February 19, 2022. <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>. See also: Herszenhorn, David M.; Lynch, Suzanne and Anderlini, Jamil. "A defiant Zeleńskiy promises Ukraine will defend itself 'with or without' allies," February 19, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/zelenskiy-ukraine-defiant-munich-security-conference-speech-russia-threat/>.

<sup>28</sup> "The military operation in Ukraine, including Kiev, is aimed at disarming Ukraine. Russia will not let Ukraine obtain nuclear weapons," Sergey Lavrov. See "Russia will not let Ukraine obtain nuclear weapons — Lavrov," TASS, March 2, 2022. <https://tass.com/politics/1414915>.

island is the “heartland,” which stretches from the Volga River to the Yangtze River and from the Himalayas to the Arctic Ocean.<sup>29</sup>

He refined his thesis in his book *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, published in 1919. In it, he summarized the essence of his theory as follows: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.”<sup>30</sup>

Mackinder’s explanation of the global power that had rested in the hands, first of the British Empire — an “offshore island” — and later with the United States — an “outlying island” — was that sea power which had enabled the rise of Britain and the United States would give way to land power situated in the heartland of the world island, unless measures were undertaken to ensure that the power

wielded by the heartland could be balanced. The heartland encompassed most of the lands controlled, respectively, by the Russian empire and the Soviet Union. Mackinder suggested that one of the ways through which the power of the heartland could be balanced was by controlling eastern Europe.<sup>31</sup>

Although there have been modifications of Mackinder’s thesis by other theorists, while others have argued that it is outdated and has never been proven in all its component parts, this does not diminish the importance of Russia and China in any calculations related to the

**A key tenet of Mackinder’s argument lies in the distribution of global resources and access to where such resources lie.**

<sup>29</sup> Mackinder, Halford. “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *The Geographical Journal* Vol. 23, No. 4 (April 1904), pp. 421-437. Published by the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1775498>.

<sup>30</sup> Mackinder, Halford J. *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Henry Holt, New York 1942.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

geopolitical balance of power.<sup>32</sup> A key tenet of Mackinder's argument lies in the distribution of global resources and access to where such resources lie. Russia's abundance of natural resources, and the U.S.-led West's objective of controlling these resources, lie at the heart of its policy towards Russia regardless of whether it is ruled by an "autocrat" or by a "democrat."

It is not difficult to appreciate how the Mackinder thesis helped shape and inform U.S. policies geared toward containing the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It is not hard to appreciate its influence in the formulation of the Brzeziński Doctrine as a template for seeking to diminish Russian political and economic sovereignty by prying it apart from Ukraine and by maintaining its hegemony within Eurasia.

A concomitant aspect of U.S. policy toward Russia has been an enduring hostility on the part of the U.S. toward any substantive economic relationship between Germany and Russia. As geopolitical forecaster George Friedman has noted on several occasions, including in his 2010 book *The Next Decade*, collaboration between Europe and Russia has been frowned on by the United States, but Russian-German cooperation in particular needed to be "nipped in the bud." Thus, he concluded, "maintaining a powerful wedge between Germany and Russia is of overwhelming interest to the United States."<sup>33</sup> In a lecture given in 2015, Friedman characterised Germany as "Europe's basic flaw." It was, he asserted,

**A concomitant aspect of US policy toward Russia has been an enduring hostility on the part of the US toward any substantive economic relationship between Germany and Russia.**

<sup>32</sup> For modern interpretations of Mackinder's theory see for instance:

Scott, Margaret and Alcenat, Westenley. "Revisiting the Pivot: The Influence of Heartland Theory in Great Power Politics," 2008, [https://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The\\_Pivot\\_-\\_Alcenat\\_and\\_Scott.pdf](https://www.creighton.edu/fileadmin/user/CCAS/departments/PoliticalScience/MVJ/docs/The_Pivot_-_Alcenat_and_Scott.pdf).

Iseri, Emre. "The US Grand Strategy and the Eurasian Heartland in the Twenty-First Century," *Geopolitics*, Volume 14, 2009. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14650040802578658>.

<sup>33</sup> Friedman, George. *The Next Decade*, Doubleday, New York, 2010.



a country that is “economically powerful and geopolitically fragile.” If it left the EU, Germany would gravitate eastward and seek cooperation with Russia. This would revive the enduring fear of “German capital and technology” allied to that of “Russian resources and manpower.”<sup>34</sup> This backdrop is extremely important in understanding U.S. hostility toward the Nord Stream and earlier gas pipelines and the suspicion that the U.S. was responsible for carrying out the undersea act of pipeline sabotage in September 2022.

The accumulation of pressures on Russia through the implementation of the “shock and awe” sanctions has only served to push Russia towards China, creating a Eurasian economic entity which will likely develop an alternate form of the international payments system and work toward developing trade in Asia and the rest of the world under the aegis of BRICS. Thus, in addition to Brazil, India, and South Africa, Russia, and China will seek to provide an economic umbrella for other countries, several of which have applied to join the organisation.

If BRICS is expanded to include countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, Nigeria, and Argentina, it would encompass over half the global population, 60 percent of global gas and 45 percent of global oil reserves.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the sale of Russian gas in rubles — and more recently Russia’s increasing use of the Yuan for payment of oil exporters, as well as in facilitating commercial loan transactions and as a preferred currency for household savings — can only hasten the trend of de-dollarisation.<sup>36</sup>

The status of the American dollar as the global currency is thus under threat. In the early 1970s, the administration led by President Richard Nixon entered into a bargain with the House of Saud which involved the United States guaranteeing the security of the Saudi state in return for the Saudis selling oil in dollars. This

<sup>34</sup> Friedman, George. “Europe: Destined for Conflict?” Lecture before the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 23, 2015. <https://globalaffairs.org/events/europe-destined-for-conflict>.

<sup>35</sup> Devonshire-Ellis, Chris. “The New Candidate Countries For BRICS Expansion,” Silk Road Briefing, November 9, 2022. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2022/11/09/the-new-candidate-countries-for-brics-expansion/>.

<sup>36</sup> Dulaney, Chelsey; Gershkovich, Evan and Simanovskaya, Victoria. “Russian Turning to the Chinese Yuan in a Bid to Marginalise the U.S. Dollar,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2023. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-turns-to-chinas-yuan-in-effort-to-ditch-the-dollar-a8111457>.

arrangement, which was made possible due to Saudi dominance within the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), ensured the survivability of the U.S. dollar as the *de facto* reserve currency of the world.

There are arguably two pillars on which the dollar's status as the world reserve currency rests. First is the perception that the U.S. has the world's largest economy. While this is presently true in terms of calculations based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it is not the case when based on measuring China's purchasing power parity (PPP).<sup>37</sup> The second pillar involves the tradition of conducting oil transactions in U.S. dollars. If the three largest oil producers in the world — Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Russia — trade under an alternative currency, then it will signify the demise of the U.S. dollar as the global reserve currency.

Apart from the expansion of BRICS, there is the threat to the United States of the development of both already-existing institutions and brand-new institutions which would offer an alternative to those created at Bretton Woods in the aftermath of World War II. The New Development Bank (NDB)<sup>38</sup> created after the Fortaleza meeting of BRICS in 2014 is one such institution. Apart from BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), a Eurasian body that encompasses political, economic, International security and defence functions, as well as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), also present an institutional basis for an alternative global economic framework to that which has been dominated by the United States-led West.<sup>39</sup>

**If the three largest oil producers in the world trade under an alternative currency, it will signify the demise of the US dollar as the global reserve currency.**

<sup>37</sup> Tang, Frank. "China overtakes US as No 1 in buying power, but still clings to developing status," *South China Morning Post*, May 21, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Chin, Gregory T. "The Evolution of the New Development Bank (NDB) at Six and Beyond – A New Commentary Series," *Global Policy Journal*, April 14, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> "Russia Rethinks The Eurasian Economic Union," *Russia Briefing News*, March 15th, 2023. <https://www.russia-briefing.com/news/russia-rethinks-the-eurasian-economic-union.html/>. See also: Lehne, Stefane. "After Russia's War Against Ukraine: What Kind of World Order?" *Carnegie Europe* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), February 28, 2023.

Assessing the future of the world in terms of a distinct and powerful Eurasian region within a new multipolar order is no longer within the realm of speculation but is in fact now a reality. U.S. foreign policy pressures have led to the conflict in Ukraine and served to create a deep and, at least for the foreseeable future, an unmendable fissure between Russia and the West. Similar pressures have also been applied against China, which is now preparing for a separation from the West.

For Russia, whose leaders, including Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, had over the years continually referred to “our Western partners,” the breach is now permanent and irreversible. In his speech to the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2022, President Putin excoriated the United States for operating as an imperialist empire that did not accept the right of other nations to act as politically and economically sovereign states. He included the states of the EU as being subject to this vassalage when accusing the organisation of not being ready to play the role of an “independent, sovereign actor” during the Ukraine crisis. Putin used the occasion of his speech to specifically declare that “the era of the unipolar world is over.”<sup>40</sup>

**Putin used the occasion of his speech to specifically declare that ‘the era of the unipolar world is over.’**

Then, one month later, in July Putin made a statement at the Agency for Strategic Initiatives (ASI) forum, a gathering that met under the banner “Strong Ideas for the New Time.” Here, Putin appeared to suggest that a new global economic model was needed to replace what he termed the West’s “Golden Billion” model. That was not all. His added insistence that this model, inherently “racist” and “neo-colonial” in nature, and which “took its positions due to the robbery of other

<sup>40</sup> Kottasová, Ivana; Pokharel, Sugam and Gigova, Radina. “Putin lambasts the West and declares the end of ‘the era of the unipolar world,’” CNN, June 18, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/17/europe/russia-president-vladimir-putin-speech-spief-intl/index.html>. The unipolar model was significantly fractured by Putin’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 28th, 2015, shortly after which Russian forces intervened in the Syrian war. See Makinde, Adeyinka. “Vladimir Putin and the Patterns of ‘Global Power,’” November 2, 2015. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/vladimir-putin-and-the-patterns-of-global-power/5486083>.

peoples both in Asia and in Africa,” appeared to be an appeal to the nations of the Global South.<sup>41</sup>

China, whose contemporary rivalry with the United States was officially inaugurated by President Obama’s doctrinal “Pivot to Asia,” has been on the receiving end of U.S. economic measures that began to ramp up during the Trump administration.<sup>42</sup> While accusations of its own bullying of neighbours over the South China Sea are not without foundation, Beijing has been aggrieved by what it claims is the United States’ abrogation of its acceptance of a “One China” policy during the 1970s through a series of agreements which followed President Nixon’s historic visit to China in 1972 and the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979.<sup>43</sup> The release by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs of two policy documents in February 2023, “The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper”<sup>44</sup> and “US Hegemony and Its Perils,”<sup>45</sup> confirms that China considers itself to be in an

<sup>41</sup> Kaul, Apoorva. “Russian President Putin Criticizes ‘golden Billion’ Model; Calls It ‘unfair & Racist,’” *Republic World*, July 20, 2022. <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/russia-ukraine-crisis/russian-president-putin-criticizes-golden-billion-model-calls-it-unfair-and-racist-articleshow.html>. See also: Putin’s speech in October 2022 at the Valdai Discussion Club. He referred to Russia’s desire to rekindle friendships with its Soviet-era allies and “non-Western friends” for creating a new world order. The title of the forum held in Moscow from October 24–27 was “A Post-Hegemonic World: Justice and Security for Everyone.” See: “Valdai International Discussion Club meeting,” Kremlin website, October 27, 2022. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69695>. Kibii, Eliud. “A new multipolar world is being born — Russian envoy” (Interview with Dmitry Maksimychev), *The Star*, March 7, 2023. <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/big-read/2023-03-07-a-new-multi-polar-world-is-being-born--russian-envoy/>.

<sup>42</sup> Tellez, Anthony. “Here Are All The U.S. Sanctions Against China,” *Forbes*, February 8, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/anthonytellez/2023/02/08/here-are-all-the-us-sanctions-against-china/?sh=68a6774715b4>.

<sup>43</sup> Liff, Adam P. and Lin, Dalton. “The ‘One China’ Framework at 50 (1972–2022): The Myth of ‘Consensus’ and Its Evolving Policy Significance,” *The China Quarterly*, Cambridge University Press, Volume 252, September 2022. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/one-china-framework-at-50-19722022-the-myth-of-consensus-and-its-evolving-policy-significance/090825F25AB75868FBB3E6A9C63A9B30>. See also: Echols, Conor. “As Pelosi Taiwan visit looms, Menendez bill would ‘gut’ One China policy,” *Responsible Statecraft*, August 1, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/08/01/as-pelosi-taiwan-visit-looms-menendez-bill-would-gut-one-china-policy/>

<sup>44</sup> Liff, Adam P. and Lin, Dalton. “The ‘One China’ Framework at 50 (1972–2022): The Myth of ‘Consensus’ and Its Evolving Policy Significance,” *The China Quarterly*, Cambridge University Press, Volume 252, September 2022. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/china-quarterly/article/one-china-framework-at-50-19722022-the-myth-of-consensus-and-its-evolving-policy-significance/090825F25AB75868FBB3E6A9C63A9B30>. See also: Echols, Conor. “As Pelosi Taiwan visit looms, Menendez bill would ‘gut’ One China policy.” <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/08/01/as-pelosi-taiwan-visit-looms-menendez-bill-would-gut-one-china-policy/> *Responsible Statecraft*, August 1, 2022.

<sup>45</sup> “US Hegemony and its Perils,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, February 20, 2023. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220\\_11027664.html](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202302/t20230220_11027664.html).

adversarial relationship with the United States.

This means that the U.S.-led West will likely face a military alliance of nations led by Russia and China, in addition to an alternate economic global framework composed of nations transacting in currencies pegged to gold.

## **Conclusion**

The route from the unipolar world bestridden by the United States after the breakup of the Soviet Union to the contemporary situation of a fast-developing state of multipolarity is one which can be strongly argued to have been facilitated by the mismanagement of United States foreign policy. The influence of neoconservative ideologues who espouse a particularly aggressive form of American exceptionalism, as well as those of the National Security State and interests of the military industry, have led the United States from one foreign policy disaster to another.

The era following the ending of the Cold War has been characterised by the conspicuous absence of the employment of sound statecraft of the sort seen in previous generations of leaders. This has created the circumstances in which tensions between Russia and China, both economically and militarily important nations, have been allowed to rise to increasingly intolerable levels. The lack of

a genuine application of diplomacy has led to the wholesale dismantling of the nuclear treaty system painstakingly built during the Cold War. It has fed the avoidable creation of a destructive conflict in Ukraine, a conflict noted political scientist and international relations expert John Mearsheimer says has been

**The era following the ending of the Cold War has been characterised by the conspicuous absence of the employment of sound statecraft of the sort seen in previous generations of leaders.**

led down the primrose path with the result of its being wrecked.<sup>46</sup> Lee Smith of *The Tablet* forecasted in an article published the day after the launch of the SMO that by “tying itself to a reckless and dangerous America, the Ukrainians made a blunder that client states will study for years to come.”<sup>47</sup>

The conflict in Ukraine presents the foreseeable possibility of an open confrontation between the West and Russia, just as the mishandling of China’s rise — a case study of the “Thucydides Trap”<sup>48</sup> — threatens a Pacific War in the near future.

It is symptomatic of the present era that American foreign policy has united the Eurasian landmass against it, whereas during the Cold War era it assiduously strove to maintain the divisions between the Russian-dominated Soviet Union and Red China through the endeavour of reopening trade and diplomacy with the latter. The American empire, it appears, has failed to grasp from its predecessor Anglo-Saxon global power, the British empire, the stratagem of an “economy of enemies” policy.

Equally symptomatic of the times is how U.S. militarism and the weaponization of trade through the use of sanctions has succeeded in alienating large swathes of the world. It has been estimated that as much as a quarter of the global population is placed under some form of sanction. Many nations in the Global South have reacted negatively to American and Western European criticisms of their resistance to joining in the sanctions placed on Russia since the escalation of the war in Ukraine. Members of governments have accused the United States and the EU of hypocrisy in regard to the criteria used for justifying the imposition

<sup>46</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, in speech “Uncommon Core: The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” September 2015. Video: “Why is Ukraine the West’s Fault? Featuring John Mearsheimer,” *University of Chicago* YouTube Channel, uploaded September 25, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4>.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, Lee. “Ukraine’s Deadly Gamble,” *The Tablet*, February 25, 2022. <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/ukraines-deadly-gamble>.

<sup>48</sup> Allison, Graham, “The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?” *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/n>.

of sanctions<sup>49</sup> They are also likely weary of the invention of the “democracies”-versus-“autocracies” rationale for the antagonistic international climate which has been fomented.

The redundancy of the policies pursued are evident in so far as the conflict in Ukraine is concerned: The EU states are facing economic hardship, Germany included, which is grappling with deindustrialisation. The Ukraine war has also shown that Russia is capable of industrial warfare in a manner which the United States, with its diminished industrial base, would find hard to match.<sup>50</sup> And, as with the case of the lengthy engagement in Afghanistan, the billions spent on shoring up a corrupt state is only serving to facilitate a wealth transfer from U.S. taxpayers to military contractors.<sup>51</sup>

The lack of public debate to which General Wesley Clark referred when explaining how neoconservative ideologues had “hijacked” American foreign policy persists, as does the lack of accountability on the part of the National Security State which, in concert with the neoconservative movement, has ensured the diminution of American moral prestige around the globe and the growth of its sovereign debt.

These forces have unwittingly assisted in the creation of a Eurasian-centred New World Order.

<sup>49</sup> “Jaishankar jibes Europe’s hypocrisy on Russian energy purchase – ‘Only Indian money funding war?’” *Hindustan Times YouTube Channel*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogTzJXBZs5E>. In February 2023, Jaishankar also stressed that the world was “rebalancing” and “less Euro-Atlantic.” In his thinly veiled words directed to the West, he noted “there are still people in the world who believe that their definition, their preferences (and) their views must override everything else.” See: “Old, Rich, Opinionated And Dangerous: S. Jaishankar Hits Back At Billionaire George Soros,” *CNBC-TV18*, February 18, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ds1W0XQJCRC>.

<sup>50</sup> Vershini, Alex. “The Return of Industrial Warfare,” *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)*, June 17, 2022. <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/return-industrial-warfare>. Note: The Russian military complex has demonstrated its ability to ramp up and produce vast quantities of weapons, equipment and ammunition during the Ukraine War (infantry fighting vehicles, missiles, rockets artillery systems). The U.S. does not have the industrial base dedicated to production of military equipment at this scale.

<sup>51</sup> Makinde, Adeyinka. “War Is a Racket: The US War in Afghanistan Validates General Smedley Butler,” *Global Research Canada*, August 24, 2021. <https://www.globalresearch.ca/war-racket-us-war-afghanistan-validates-general-smedley-butler/5753880>.



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# NATO and the Road Not Taken<sup>1</sup>

Image credit: VanderWolf Images / [iStock.com](https://www.iStock.com)

## **Rajan Menon, Ph.D.**

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After a prolonged buildup of forces, the total reaching 120,000 soldiers and National Guard troops, Russian President Vladimir Putin decided on February 24, 2022, to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The decision has revived a sharp-elbowed debate in the United States. One side consists mainly, though not exclusively, of those belonging to the realist school of thought. This side insists that Putin's move can only be understood by taking into account the friction that NATO's eastward expansion created between Russia and the United States. The other side, primarily comprised of neoconservatives and liberal internationalists, retorts that Putin's protests against NATO's enlargement are bogus. They contend

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published by *The Boston Review* on March 16, 2022, and is republished with permission from *The Boston Review* and Rajan Menon.

that Putin’s animosity toward democracy — particularly the fear that its success in Ukraine would rub off on Russia and bring down the state that he has built since 2000 — was the sole reason for the war.

Both sides have succumbed to the single-factor fallacy. Given the complexities of history and politics, why should we assume that Putin has only one aim, only one apprehension? In consequence, their exchanges have been inconclusive, producing more heat than light. On occasion, there have been simpleminded portrayals of realism in newspaper columns<sup>2</sup> and magazines,<sup>3</sup> and worse, ugly *ad hominem* attacks.<sup>4</sup> There has been little meaningful debate. Social media has enabled much sound and fury, proving about as productive as a dog’s attempt to chase its tail, albeit much less amusing.

Opposition to Putin’s war against Ukraine must not prevent efforts to understand the circumstances that led to it. This distinction bears emphasizing because emotions about the war have run high, and analyses of Russia’s actions have sometimes been conflated with endorsement — and in ways that have exposed realists, in particular, to attack. We must examine the larger context and a deeper view of the role of NATO, and think about the European security order we might hope for in the future.

## ***The context***

The outrage in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reflects the widespread belief that it cannot reasonably be seen as a necessary war of self-defense against an aggressor. Indeed, like the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Russia’s assault on Ukraine is a preventive war: Its justification was that a designated enemy might, at some point in the future, pose a serious threat. Preventive wars do more than just violate international humanitarian law; when powerful countries claim the

<sup>2</sup> Ross Douthat, “They Predicted the Ukraine War. But Did They Still Get It Wrong?” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/opinion/ukraine-russia-invasion-west.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Tooze, “John Mearsheimer and the Dark Origins of Realism,” *New Statesman*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/john-mearsheimer-dark-origins-realism-russia>.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Schwarz, “No, Russia Didn’t Get Its Propaganda From John Mearsheimer.” *The Intercept*, March 7, 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2022/03/06/russia-john-mearsheimer-propaganda/>.

right to invade other countries and topple their governments based on imagined scenarios that they declare unacceptable, they make the world an even more dangerous place. Whatever Putin's apprehensions about NATO, they do not justify his unprovoked assault on Ukraine, to say nothing of the Russian army's wanton attacks on civilians.

Yet, even though Putin bears primary responsibility for the unjust war in Ukraine, NATO cannot accurately present itself as blameless. As the temperature rose in the run up to the war, NATO's Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and U.S. President Joe Biden repeated that the alliance's statement from its 2008 Bucharest summit — that its doors were open to Ukraine (and Georgia) — stood, and that Putin's demand that the country pledge to be a neutral state was not up for negotiation.<sup>5</sup> In truth, there was no chance that Ukraine would be admitted to NATO anytime soon: NATO's April 1949 founding treaty requires a unanimous vote before new members can join, and everyone knew that Ukraine wouldn't clear that bar. <sup>6</sup>Ukraine was thus left to knock on the alliance's door for nearly fourteen years. Still, the possibility that it might be allowed in was enough to stoke Russian fears, and that increasingly exposed Ukraine to danger. Meanwhile, NATO had no serious intention of guaranteeing Ukraine security through membership. In short, Kyiv was left in limbo. That (non)decision was a mixture of cowardice and strategic irresponsibility, one for which Ukraine has paid a terrible price, while NATO has paid none at all. Seen this way, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's anger at the alliance, reflected in his speech at the February 2022 Munich Security Conference, becomes understandable.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bucharest Summit, "Bucharest Summit Declaration," NATO, July 5, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_8443.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_8443.htm).

<sup>6</sup> "The North Atlantic Treaty," NATO, last modified April 10, 2019, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_17120.htm).

<sup>7</sup> "Zelensky's full speech at Munich Security Conference," *The Kyiv Independent*, February 19, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/national/zelenskys-full-speech-at-munich-security-conference>.

Realists are right to say that Putin's complaints about NATO expansion have been blithely dismissed by the defenders of that policy as a red herring. Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and Polish-American journalist Anne Applebaum, for instance, waves away Putin's complaints as nothing more than camouflage for his real fear, namely that a successful democracy in Ukraine could inspire Russians and threaten the Russian state.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Kotkin, a preeminent historian of Russia, reaches a similar conclusion through a different route.<sup>9</sup> Expansionism and authoritarianism have always marked Russian history and are ineradicable, he says. So, NATO expansion cannot account for anything Russia says or does; indeed, it's an essential counterweight to an innately aggressive country. Russia, in short, is portrayed as irredeemable. Its past explains its present and future actions. Ergo, Western policy toward it deserves no scrutiny.

Putin certainly does preside over an authoritarian political system and abhors U.S. campaigns to spread democracy and promote "color revolutions" in countries near Russia. But Ukraine has been a democracy — i.e., a country with regular elections, numerous civic organizations and a free press — since the end of 1991, when it became independent. (Some have likened it to a "failed state,"<sup>10</sup> but that label brings to mind Somalia- or Libya-like anarchy, fragmentation and pervasive violence, conditions that don't accurately describe Ukraine, no matter the flaws of its democracy.) Putin made no effort to annex parts of Ukraine before 2014, not even during the overtly pro-Western 2004–2005 Orange Revolution. Therefore, his aversion to democracy does not, by itself, explain his objections to NATO's enlargement. What's more, Russian opposition to NATO enlargement long preceded Putin's presidency. In fact, it dates back to the 1990s, when, under

<sup>8</sup> Anne Applebaum, "The U.S. Is Naive About Russia. Ukraine Can't Afford to Be," *The Atlantic*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/ukraine-russia-kyiv-putin-bluff/621145/>.

<sup>9</sup> David Remnick, "The Weakness of the Despot," *The New Yorker*, March 11, 2022, [https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin?utm\\_source=nl&utm\\_brand=tny&utm\\_mail=ing=TNY\\_Daily\\_031222&utm\\_campaign=aud-dev&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=tny\\_daily\\_recirc&bx-id=5bd674fd24c17c10480128f6&cndid=32608657&hasha=d9d734773e6797f04e411482fobaf9b3&hashb=7a4e-58a8b74cd64ce795db27dc86649559bc8615&hashc=95b115ad14ea7080ada28b9560c3f69aofd2996ee18d-6266e78dofc2b22532ac&esrc=AUTO\\_NYA](https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/stephen-kotkin-putin-russia-ukraine-stalin?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=tny&utm_mail=ing=TNY_Daily_031222&utm_campaign=aud-dev&utm_medium=email&utm_term=tny_daily_recirc&bx-id=5bd674fd24c17c10480128f6&cndid=32608657&hasha=d9d734773e6797f04e411482fobaf9b3&hashb=7a4e-58a8b74cd64ce795db27dc86649559bc8615&hashc=95b115ad14ea7080ada28b9560c3f69aofd2996ee18d-6266e78dofc2b22532ac&esrc=AUTO_NYA).

<sup>10</sup> Katrina vanden Heuvel, "Opinion | A Path out of the Ukraine Crisis," *The Washington Post*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/15/path-out-of-ukraine-crisis/>.

President Boris Yeltsin, Russia was cheered in the West as both a democracy and a partner.

Besides, it is not just democracies that are entitled to worry about their security. Democratic states are obliged, if only in sheer self-interest, to take the security interests of non-democratic states into account. Were this not true, the protracted negotiations that have been held with North Korea, for example, would be inexplicable.

The argument of Applebaum, and others of like mind — including Ivo Daalder,<sup>11</sup> the former U.S. ambassador to NATO, and Michael McFaul,<sup>12</sup> President Obama's ambassador to Russia — is self-serving. It absolves dogged proponents of NATO expansion like them from having to engage in any introspection: Putin bears all the blame for the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations, and NATO expansion has had nothing to do with it. Case closed. If only things were that simple and easily reducible to moral certitudes.

Declassified documents<sup>13</sup> demonstrate that President Boris Yeltsin expressed his opposition to NATO to the Clinton administration on several occasions,<sup>14</sup> and that senior U.S. diplomats relayed to Washington the pervasive antipathy toward the policy within Russia's foreign policy and national security apparatus. For example, in 1993, as Secretary of State Warren Christopher was about to depart for a meeting with Yeltsin, the chargé d'affaires at the U.S. embassy, James Collins, sent a cable warning that NATO expansion was "neuralgic to the Russians,"<sup>15</sup> who

<sup>11</sup> Ivo Daalder, "Vladimir Putin's Deepest Fear Is the Freedom of Russia's Neighbours." *Financial Times*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/6c0c9e21-0cf7-4732-a445-bc117fb5d6f8>.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/what-putin-fears-most/>.

<sup>13</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion – The Budapest Blow Up 1994," National Security Archive, November 24, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2021-11-24/nato-expansion-budapest-blow-1994>.

<sup>14</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," National Security Archive, March 16, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

<sup>15</sup> "Your October 21-23 Visit to Moscow – Key Foreign Policy Issues," National Security Archive, October 20, 1993, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16378-document-06-your-october-21-23-visit-moscow>.

feared that they would “end up on the wrong side of a new division of Europe ... if NATO adopts a policy which envisions expansion into Central and Eastern Europe without holding the door open to Russia.”<sup>16</sup> That outcome, warned Collins, “would be universally interpreted in Moscow as directed at Russia and Russia alone — or ‘neo-containment,’ as Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev recently suggested.”<sup>17</sup> NATO never had any serious intention of guaranteeing Ukraine security through membership. It left Kyiv in limbo.

Collins was right. Consider what Yeltsin told President Bill Clinton during their May 10, 1995, meeting in Moscow. Russia’s first president questioned the sanity of NATO’s expansion:

*I want to get a clear understanding of your idea of NATO expansion, because now I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed. How do you think it looks to us if one bloc continues to exist while the Warsaw Pact has been abolished? It’s a new form of encirclement if the one surviving Cold War bloc expands right up to the borders of Russia. Many Russians have a sense of fear. ‘What do you want to achieve with this, if Russia is your partner?’ [T]hey ask. I ask it too: ‘Why do you want to do this?’ We need a new structure for Pan-European security, not old ones! Perhaps the solution is to postpone NATO expansion until the year 2000 so that later we can come up with some new ideas. Let’s have no blocs, only one European space that provides for its own security.*<sup>18</sup>

Putin’s animosity toward NATO’s enlargement represented continuity, not a personal quirk, and was well understood in Washington. For example, in a February 2008 cable written shortly before the fateful Bucharest summit and addressed to the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff

<sup>16</sup> William Noah Glucroft, “NATO: Why Russia Has a Problem with Its Eastward Expansion,” *Deutsch Welle (DW)*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/nato-why-russia-has-a-problem-with-its-eastward-expansion/a-60891681>.

<sup>17</sup> Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, “NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard,” National Security Archive, March 16, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

<sup>18</sup> “Summary Report on One-on-One Meeting between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin, May 10, 1995, Kremlin,” National Security Archive, May 10, 1995. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16391-document-19-summary-report-one-one-meeting>.



(among others), the U.S. ambassador to Russia, William Burns, now the head of the CIA, noted:

*Foreign Minister [Sergei] Lavrov and other senior Russian officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains an 'emotional and neuralgic' issue for Russia, but strategic policy concerns also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia. In Ukraine, these include fears that the issue could potentially split the country in two, leading to violence or even, some claim, civil war, which would force Russia to decide whether to intervene.<sup>19</sup>*

In his 2019 memoir, *The Back Channel*,<sup>20</sup> Burns notes that he made the same point, although more vividly, in a memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, also written in February 2008. “Ukraine’s entry into NATO,” he wrote, “is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin’s liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.”

It’s wrong, therefore, to reduce Russian aversion to NATO expansion to Putin’s paranoia and fear of democracy, or Russia’s historical baggage. No leader in Moscow liked the policy, and they minced no words about it. However, out of weakness and economic dependence on the West, and the United States in particular, they had to come to

**‘Ukraine’s entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite.’**  
– Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns

<sup>19</sup> Rajan Menon, “NATO and the Road Not Taken,” *Boston Review*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/nato-and-the-road-not-taken/>.

<sup>20</sup> Rajan Menon, “NATO and the Road Not Taken,” *Boston Review*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/nato-and-the-road-not-taken/>.

terms with it — including by signing the May 1997 NATO–Russia Founding Act,<sup>21</sup> and settling for sops such as the NATO–Russia Council,<sup>22</sup> formed in May 2002.

In the 1990s, Russia, led by an ailing and often inebriated Yeltsin, was near economic collapse and its armed forces were debilitated. After Putin became president in 2000, Russia gained the economic and military power to go beyond verbal objections to NATO. The catalyst was NATO’s decision related to Ukraine’s and Georgia’s membership at its Bucharest conclave. Thereafter, Russia turned from protests to pushback. The first sign of this change was the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which occurred soon after the Bucharest meeting. Then, in 2014, fearing that Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution would lead to alignment with NATO and the European Union, Russia annexed Crimea and created two breakaway statelets in Ukraine’s Donbas region.<sup>23</sup>

The crisis that Putin’s war has created between Russia and the West can only be understood by bringing NATO expansion into the picture. However, this is not to say that the remote prospect of Ukraine entering the alliance at all justifies Putin’s decision to invade it. It does not. Still, it is worth thinking about the road not taken as it offers lessons for the future.

The rupture that Putin’s invasion of Ukraine has created between Russia and the West will likely persist as long as he remains president, perhaps longer. But it ought to be an occasion to reflect on whether the United States missed an opportunity, as early as 1989, to forge a European order that included Russia rather than one that kept it on the outside, increasing its sense of alienation and exclusion, and ensuring that it would have no stake in safeguarding it and would, instead, seek to destroy it.

The history of NATO expansion raises the question of whether there was an

<sup>21</sup> “Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation Signed in Paris, France,” NATO, last modified October 12, 2009, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm).

<sup>22</sup> “NATO–Russia Council (NRC),” NATO, last modified September 1, 2022, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_50091.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50091.htm).

<sup>23</sup> Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The unwinding of the post-cold war order* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).

alternative way of organizing Europe after the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. As it happens, expanding the alliance toward the Russian border was not the only feasible choice. Once the Soviet-aligned communist governments in Eastern Europe (or East-Central Europe, as the region is now called) began to crumble, and Germany's reunification became imminent, President Mikhail Gorbachev

**Leaders are often inclined, by default, to favor the status quo, especially when it favors them.**

proposed disbanding both NATO and the Warsaw Pact in favor of a new, inclusive, trans-European security order stretching from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains. President George H. W. Bush dismissed this idea and Gorbachev's follow-up proposal for a unified but neutral Germany.<sup>24</sup> Knowing that Gorbachev held a weak hand — he was battling political opponents at home and dependent on Germany to provide money for the

500,000 troops stationed there (who would eventually have to be sent home and housed and fed) — Bush insisted that NATO was in Europe to stay and that its writ would encompass all of a unified Germany. He understood that the United States needed NATO to remain a European power but was also, understandably, skittish about dismantling a structure that had worked for half a century. Leaders are often inclined, by default, to favor the status quo, especially when it favors them. Bush's stance also suggests that, even at the tail end of the Cold War, the United States envisioned an enlarged NATO and understood that it would be impractical if the alliance's troops and weapons were formally barred from eastern Germany, the corridor to East-Central Europe.

Conceiving and creating a wholly new security system amid fast moving, unexpected events — the collapse of the communist states in the old Eastern Europe, the unraveling of the Soviet Union, the Soviet nuclear weapons remaining in what would become the independent states of Belarus and Ukraine — would have required an uncommon boldness of vision. The pity is that the United States didn't give it any serious thought.

<sup>24</sup> M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch* (London: Yale University Press, 2022).

Now, those with the most influence on U.S. foreign policy — those belonging to the executive branch and Congress, or who work for the major newspapers and prominent think tanks — are in no mood to reflect on lost opportunities. To the contrary, along with the shock created by Putin’s attack on Ukraine, there is a mood of triumphalism. Russia’s aggression has been interpreted as a vindication of the decision to expand NATO. The prevailing view is that, if anything, the United States should double down and increase its military presence in Europe, including in NATO’s eastern flank.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, this camp wants to make it permanent, even though Section IV of the NATO–Russia Founding Act stipulates that there will be no “additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” there.

This call to station even more American troops and armaments in Europe is curious considering that European countries’ combined GDP (\$15.3 trillion)<sup>26</sup> is more than ten times Russia’s (\$1.5 trillion).<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Europe boasts world-class tech companies<sup>28</sup> and many top-grade defense industries — in short, ample wherewithal for self-defense.<sup>29</sup> What Europe lacks is political will, and that owes to the iron-clad U.S. defense guarantee that endures even thirty years after the Cold War. The watchword in Washington remains that the United States must maintain its status, as former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it, as “the indispensable nation.” Part of that role involves serving as the protector par excellence for European countries that recovered from the ravages of World War II decades ago to become competitors of the United States in the global marketplace.

<sup>25</sup> John R. Deni, “America Needs a Permanent Military Presence in the Baltics, and Here’s Why,” *Defense News*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/09/24/america-needs-a-permanent-military-presence-in-the-baltics-and-heres-why/>.

<sup>26</sup> “GDP/ Europe,” *Trading Economics*, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/gdp?continent=europe>.

<sup>27</sup> “GDP/Europe,” *Trading Economics*.

<sup>28</sup> Niels Martin Brochner, “Council Post: Why We Are About To Enter The Golden Age Of European Tech,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2021/02/25/why-we-are-about-to-enter-the-golden-age-of-european-tech/>.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Roth, “The Size and Location of Europe’s Defence Industry,” *Bruegel*, June 22, 2017, <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/size-and-location-europes-defence-industry>.

The proper lesson to draw from Russia's invasion of Ukraine is that Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward much greater self-reliance in defense, even if it eschews the more ambitious goal of "strategic autonomy."<sup>30</sup> Those, including me, who favor greater European autonomy in defense are not tipping their hats to Donald Trump.<sup>31</sup> Unlike him, they are not calling for junking NATO overnight, seeking to extort money from European governments in exchange for continued U.S. protection, or damning them as deadbeats. Their basic point is that Europe can manage its own defense and should seek to do so gradually while preserving trans-Atlantic cooperation on a variety of fronts. In principle, this can be done within a reconfigured NATO or, eventually, without it.

The crisis that Putin's war has created between Russia and the West can only be understood by bringing NATO expansion into the picture. But this may prove a distant dream, even a chimera. NATO's own latest figures show that Canada and Europe have a long way to go, even if a less demanding standard is used — for example, the "guideline,"<sup>32</sup> adopted at the alliance's 2014 Wales summit, that each NATO member state should allocate 2 percent of its GDP to defense spending. By 2021, only ten out of thirty NATO members had done so. Their record in meeting the second guideline — devoting 20 percent of national defense spending to acquiring arms and equipment and investing in military-related research and development — is better: only five countries have failed to hit that benchmark.

Remarkably, Germany, which has the largest GDP in Europe, has yet to meet either goal. As documented in the 2019 report on the Bundeswehr by Germany's former Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces Hans-Peter Bartels, chronic shortfalls include staffing, enlistment and application rates, basic equipment (such as armored vests, radio jamming transmitters and night vision goggles),

<sup>30</sup> Lucia Retter, Stephanie Pezard, Stephen J. Flanagan, Gene Germanovich, Sarah Grand-Clement and Pauline Paillé, "European Strategic Autonomy in Defence," RAND Corporation, November 9, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1319-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1319-1.html).

<sup>31</sup> Rajan Menon, "A New and Better Security Order for Europe," Defense Priorities, February 15, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/a-new-and-better-security-order-for-europe>.

<sup>32</sup> "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2021)," NATO, June 11, 2021, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2021/6/pdf/210611-pr-2021-094-en.pdf).

spare parts, maintenance and training.<sup>33</sup> Following the invasion of Ukraine, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pledged a one-time, additional \$113 billion for the military budget, which he said would increase its share of GDP to 2 percent.<sup>34</sup>

Whether the Russia shock will spur Germany and other members of NATO to meet the Wales benchmarks remains to be seen. What we have seen is President Biden scrambling to muster some 8,000 troops to dispatch to NATO's eastern flank as Russia massed troops along Ukraine's border. A glance at the map suggests that meeting that challenge should have principally been the responsibility of Europeans, not of a protector located over 4,000 miles away.

**Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward greater self-reliance in defense.**

A new security European order should also involve greater engagement between Russia and the United States to advance nuclear arms control and to create "confidence-building measures" that reduce the likelihood of war in Europe. Now is not, to put it mildly, the most opportune time to make headway on these fronts. Putin will eventually be gone, but Russia will remain. It will also be a major power in Europe, and the United States will need to revive

mutually beneficial cooperation with it on matters of security.

Europe must, at a measured but deliberate and demonstrable pace, move toward greater self-reliance in defense. On arms control, Russia and the United States should negotiate an improved version of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.<sup>35</sup> Signed by presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev, that agreement eliminated all nuclear-armed missiles with a range between 500

<sup>33</sup> Dr Hans-Peter Bartels, "Culture of responsibility in times of excessive organisation," January 29, 2019, [https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/594460/8085ed11cf7ce79ddd40bod435fabfb7/statement\\_annual\\_report\\_2018-data.pdf](https://www.bundestag.de/resource/blob/594460/8085ed11cf7ce79ddd40bod435fabfb7/statement_annual_report_2018-data.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> Maria Sheahan and Sarah Marsh, "Germany to Increase Defence Spending in Response to 'Putin's War' – Scholz," *Reuters*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/germany-hike-defense-spending-scholz-says-further-policy-shift-2022-02-27/>.

<sup>35</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, last modified August 2, 2019, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/INFtreaty>.

and 5,500 kilometers. The United States charged, in 2014, that Russia was violating the accord, and the Russians leveled their own accusations. Rather than seeking to resolve these differences through negotiations, however, President Donald Trump summarily exited the treaty in 2019, surprising Washington's NATO allies. President Putin soon followed suit. A revamped INF Treaty would make Europe a much safer place.

The New START treaty, which covered strategic nuclear weapons, was signed by the United States and Russia in 2010.<sup>36</sup> In February 2021 both countries extended it until 2026. That provides time for the current crisis to abate and for both countries to negotiate a follow-on deal that further reduces the number of deployed warheads and bombs from the limit of 1,550 set by the treaty. While the United States has been keen on China's participation in talks to reduce strategic nuclear weapons, Beijing has insisted that it will not take part so long as the United States and Russian nuclear arsenals far exceed its own, which is estimated to contain 350 bombs and warheads.<sup>37</sup> So, either China can build up to reach Russia's numbers (which it is already doing) or the two nuclear superpowers can build down, starting from the limits set by New START, to Chinese levels. Then they can jointly engage China in efforts to make further cuts to create a minimum nuclear deterrent for each country. There has been much debate about the desirability of, and problems involved in, moving toward that goal, but none are, in principle, insuperable.<sup>38</sup>

On the confidence-building front, one important step would be rejoining the 1992 Open-Skies Treaty,<sup>39</sup> which Trump withdrew from in 2020, as did Russia the following year.<sup>40</sup> That agreement allotted the thirty-four signatories, twenty-six

<sup>36</sup> Shannon Bugos, "New START at a Glance," Arms Control Association, April 1, 2022, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/NewSTART>.

<sup>37</sup> Shannon Bugos, "Pentagon Sees Faster Chinese Nuclear Expansion," Arms Control Association, December 1, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2021-12/news/pentagon-sees-faster-chinese-nuclear-expansion>.

<sup>38</sup> Li Bin, "Major Problems with Minimum Deterrence," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 21, 2014, [https://thebulletin.org/roundtable\\_entry/major-problems-with-minimum-deterrence/](https://thebulletin.org/roundtable_entry/major-problems-with-minimum-deterrence/).

<sup>39</sup> Daryl Kimball, "The Open Skies Treaty at a Glance," Arms Control Association, December 1, 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/openskies>.

<sup>40</sup> Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Follows US in Withdrawal from Open Skies Treaty," *AP News*, January 15, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-leaves-open-skies-treaty-e58019b80ae95e12007265aedfac229b>.



of whom have ratified it, varying quotas of flights they could conduct and were obligated to permit. (More than 1,500 have been conducted since the treaty took effect in 2002.) The flights, which can cover the entire territory of participating countries, enable them to observe the deployment and movement of each other's troops and armaments. The purpose is to increase transparency and build trust.

Russia and the United States should also negotiate protocols to prevent close encounters between one another's military aircrafts and warships — which have occurred repeatedly in recent years in the Mediterranean Sea, Black Sea, and Baltic Sea regions — to reduce the likelihood that an accident could spiral into an armed confrontation.<sup>41</sup> In addition, routinized meetings between American and Russian military officers (so-called mil-to-mil exchanges) could reduce mistrust and provide an opportunity to learn about the other side's security concerns. Moreover, they could also lay the groundwork for negotiations at higher levels to place limits on troops and weapons, and perhaps even to demarcate weapons-free zones along the NATO-Russia front.

Mikhail Gorbachev's vision of a pacific European security order stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals may prove beyond reach, but that should not prevent efforts to move toward a more stable and secure future. The diplomats who try to steer things in that direction should keep in mind the advice President John F. Kennedy offered in his 1961 Inaugural Address: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."<sup>42</sup>

**'Let us never negotiate  
out of fear. But let us  
never fear to negotiate.'**

– John F. Kennedy, 1961  
Inaugural Address

Meanwhile, the war Putin unleashed has injured thousands and killed hundreds of civilians in Ukraine, reduced parts of many Ukrainian cities to rubble, and forced more than 2.5 million people to flee their homeland for refuge in neighboring

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth McLaughlin and Luis Martinez, "A Look at the US Military's Close Calls with Russia in the Air and at Sea," ABC News, January 5, 2001, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/us-militarys-close-calls-russia-air-sea/story?id=63558131>.

<sup>42</sup> "Milestone Documents," National Archives, April 9, 2021, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>.

countries<sup>43</sup> — mainly Poland, whose two largest cities have become overwhelmed by the influx and have had to plead for international assistance.<sup>44</sup>

Even if Russian firepower overcomes Ukraine's army, Putin's military victory will prove to be a strategic defeat. Any pro-Russian government he installs won't last long without Russian troops. Will Putin occupy a country that, in land area, is the largest in Europe (aside from Russia) and has 44 million people, most of whom will reject Russian overlordship, with many resorting to rebellion? If so, for how long and at what cost? A weakened Russia, cut adrift from the West, will become even more dependent on China, and, according to some senior Chinese foreign policy experts, even a liability.<sup>45</sup> The U.S. military presence in Europe will increase and may even become permanent in NATO's east. In Finland and Sweden, Russia's attack on Ukraine has prompted a debate about joining NATO. (*Editor's note:* On April 4, Finland officially became the 31st member of NATO, marking a major shift in the security landscape in northeastern Europe that adds some 1,300 kilometers (830 miles) to the alliance's frontier with Russia.) Germany and France, the foremost proponents within the alliance of engagement with Russia, now see it in a different light.

**Starting war is the easy part; what's difficult, perhaps even impossible, is using it to achieve anything that resembles strategic success.**

Putin's gambit in Ukraine provides another reminder, as if we needed it, of the destructiveness and cruelties of war. It also pours cold water on theories that offer economic interdependence as a solution to war. But it also reveals what has been clear for over a generation: Starting war is the easy part; what's difficult, perhaps even impossible, is using it to achieve anything that resembles strategic success.

<sup>43</sup> "Ukraine Refugee Situation ." Ukraine Refugee Situation. UNHCR. Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

<sup>44</sup> Agnieszka Wądołowska, "'We Can't Take Any More Refugees': Polish Cities Call on Government to Seek EU and UN Help," Notes From Poland, March 11, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/03/11/we-cant-take-any-more-refugees-polish-cities-call-on-government-to-seek-eu-and-un-help/>.

<sup>45</sup> Hu Wei, "Possible Outcomes of the Russo-Ukrainian War and China's Choice," *U.S.-China Perception Monitor*, March 12, 2022, <https://uscnpm.org/2022/03/12/hu-wei-russia-ukraine-war-china-choice/>.

***About the author***

Rajan Menon is a recipient of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching at Vanderbilt University; the Joseph F. Libsch Award for Distinguished Research at Lehigh University; and the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching presented by the Lindback Foundation. He was selected as a Carnegie Scholar (2002–2003) and has received fellowships and grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the United States Institute of Peace.

Menon has written more than 50 opinion pieces and essays for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *washingtonpost.com*. He has appeared as a commentator on National Public Radio, ABC, CNN, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and World Focus (PBS).

A photograph showing a train of military tanks on tracks. The lead tank is an M1 Abrams, and it is followed by several Leopard 2 tanks. The tanks are on flatbed railcars, and the tracks recede into the distance under an overcast sky.

# The Nightmare of NATO Equipment Being Sent to Ukraine<sup>1</sup>

Image credit: Corona Borealis Studio / Shutterstock.com

## **Scott Ritter**

*Author, Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika*

On January 24 this year, the White House decided that it would send about 30 M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine,<sup>2</sup> which was seen as political cover for Germany, which decided to ship 14 Leopard 2 tanks to Kiev.<sup>3</sup>

Almost 80 years ago, early on the morning of May 2, 1945, General Vasily Chuikov, the commander of the Soviet 8th Guards Army, accepted the surrender of the German garrison of Berlin.

<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in *Consortium News*, January 24, 2023. It is republished with permission from *Consortium News* and Scott Ritter.

<sup>2</sup> “Russia-Ukraine War: The U.S. Plans to Send M1 Abrams Tanks to Ukraine, Officials Say,” *The New York Times*, January 24, 2023, [https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/24/world/russia-ukraine-news?campaign\\_id=60&emc=edit\\_na\\_20230124.&instance\\_id=0&nl=breaking-news&ref=cta&regi\\_id=60589271&segment\\_id=123408&user\\_id=c550a777ff274656e5b019d07eee610a](https://www.nytimes.com/live/2023/01/24/world/russia-ukraine-news?campaign_id=60&emc=edit_na_20230124.&instance_id=0&nl=breaking-news&ref=cta&regi_id=60589271&segment_id=123408&user_id=c550a777ff274656e5b019d07eee610a).

<sup>3</sup> “Germany confirms it will provide Ukraine with Leopard 2 tanks,” *BBC News*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64391272>.

Two days prior, soldiers from the 150th Rifle Division, part of the Soviet 5th Shock Army, had raised the victory banner of the Red Army over the Reichstag. An hour after the banner went up, Adolf Hitler and his mistress, Eva Braun, committed suicide in his study inside the Fuhrrerbunker.

Chuikov, the hero of Stalingrad whose battered 62nd Army was renamed the 8th Guards Army in honor of their victory in holding that city in the face of a massive German onslaught, had led his troops into the heart of the Nazi capital, battling stubborn Nazi resistance in the Tiergarten district of Berlin, where the den of the Nazi beast was located. The Soviet general was rewarded for the courage and sacrifice of his soldiers by being in position to accept the German surrender.

In honor of this accomplishment, and the sacrifice it entailed, the Soviet Army inaugurated, in November 1945, a commemorative monument along the Tiergarten.<sup>4</sup> It was constructed from red marble and granite stripped from the ruins of Adolf Hitler's Neue Reichskanzlei (New Imperial Chancellery), and it consisted of a concave colonnade of six joined axes flanked by Red Army artillery and a pair of T-34 tanks. A giant bronze statue of a victorious Red Army soldier stood watch from the center pylon.

From 1945 until 1993, when the Russian Army withdrew from Berlin, Soviet guards stood guard over the monument. Since that time, the monument has been maintained according to the terms of the German Reunification Treaty of 1990, which brought West and East Germany together in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Carved into the granite of the monument, in Cyrillic letters, is an inscription that reads "Eternal glory to the heroes who fell in battle with the German fascist occupiers for the freedom and independence of the Soviet Union."

In a turn of events which must have Vasily Chuikov and the Soviet heroes to whom the Tiergarten war memorial was dedicated

**The forces of  
fascism have  
once again  
reared their  
odious heads.**

<sup>4</sup> "Soviet War Memorial in Tiergarten," berlin.de, November 19, 2015, <https://www.berlin.de/en/attractions-and-sights/3561689-3104052-soviet-war-memorial-in-tiergarten.en.html>.

turning in their graves, the forces of fascism have once again reared their odious heads, this time manifested in a Ukrainian government motivated by the neo-Nazi ultra-nationalistic ideology of Stepan Bandera and his ilk.

Bandera — a far-right radical who believed only war could establish a Ukrainian state — and his murderous movement had been physically defeated by Soviet forces in the decade following the end of the Second World War. However, its ideology survived in a western Ukrainian diaspora formed from the survivors of that movement who found safe haven in West Germany (where Bandera himself settled until poisoned by the Soviet KGB in 1959), in Canada (where Chrystia Freeland, the granddaughter of a former publisher of pro-Bandera propaganda, currently serves as deputy prime minister), and in the United States (where the followers of Stepan Bandera have constructed a “heroes park” outside Ellenville, New York, including a bust of Bandera and other neo-Nazi Ukrainian ultra-nationalists.)

The ideology also survived in the shadows of the western Ukrainian districts that had been absorbed by the Soviet Union following the dismemberment of Poland in 1939, and later, after the reoccupation of these territories by Soviet forces in 1945.

### ***CIA-funded political underground***

Here, beginning in 1956, (following the de-Stalinization policies instituted by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the aftermath of his “secret speech” to members of the Communist Party),<sup>5</sup> thousands of members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)/Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists–Bandera (OUN-B), who had been arrested and convicted by Soviet authorities, were released from the Gulag. They returned to their homes, ostensibly to be reintegrated into Soviet society. This reintegration never materialized, however.

Instead, Ukrainian fascists, funded by the CIA, operated as a political underground, running sabotage operations and fomenting anti-Soviet/anti-Russian ideology

<sup>5</sup> “Khrushchev’s secret speech,” Britannica, February 18, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Khrushchevs-secret-speech>.



amongst a population where the precepts of Ukrainian nationalist ideology ran strong.<sup>6</sup>

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, these Ukrainian nationalists emerged from the shadows and began organizing into political parties backed by gangs of violence-prone extremists who promulgated, through physical intimidation, a cult of personality built around the person of Stepan Bandera.

Political parties such as Svoboda (“Freedom”) and the Right Sector came into being. Although lacking support among the majority of the Ukrainian population, these groups were able to leverage their penchant for organization and violence into a dominant role in the riots that broke out in Maidan Square in Kiev, in early 2014. The uprising led to the ouster of democratically-elected Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovych and his replacement by a government of people hand-picked by the United States. This included the future prime minister, Arseniy Yatsenyuk.

An intercepted phone call between U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and the U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, Geoffrey Pyatt,<sup>7</sup> took place in the days prior to the ouster of Yanukovych in February 2014. In the call, Nuland was heard to be positioning Yatsenyuk as the future leader of Ukraine. In this context, she was actively encouraging Yatsenyuk to coordinate with Oleh Tyahnybok, the head of Svoboda, who was being openly backed by armed radicals from the Right Sector.

The close coordination between the new post-Maidan government of Ukraine and the pro-Bandera Svoboda and Right Sector political parties was manifested in these organizations having an oversized role in Ukrainian security affairs.

By way of example, Dmytro Yarosh, the former head of Right Sector, became an adviser to the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General

<sup>6</sup> Richard Breitman and Norman J.W. Goda, *“Hitler’s shadow: Nazi war criminals, US intelligence, and the Cold War,”* (Berlin: National Archives and Records Administration, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> “Ukraine Crisis: Transcript of Leaked Nuland-Pyatt Call,” *BBC News*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>.



Valerii Zaluzhnyi. In that role, Yarosh oversaw the incorporation of numerous volunteer units of the Right Sector into the regular armed forces of Ukraine.

One of the units created because of this reorganization is the 67th Separate Mechanized Brigade,<sup>8</sup> which has been undergoing training in the United Kingdom since November 2022.

The fact that NATO members — such as the UK — are actively involved in the training of Ukrainian forces is well-established. In July 2022 the British Defense Ministry announced that it would begin training approximately 10,000 Ukrainian troops every four months.<sup>9</sup>

That they are playing an active role in providing combat training to ardent neo-Nazi military formations is something Western media outlets appear to eschew.

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### ***Ukraine Defense Contact Group***

The issue, however, is far more complex — and controversial — than simply providing basic military training to a few thousand adherents of Stepan Bandera's hate-filled ideology.

The 67th Separate Mechanized Brigade is likely to be one of three Ukrainian brigade-sized formations that will be trained and equipped using billions of dollars of military assistance recently approved<sup>10</sup> during the eighth session of the

<sup>8</sup> "67th Mechanized Brigade," militaryland.net, December 7, 2022, <https://militaryland.net/ukraine/armed-forces/67th-mechanized-brigade/>.

<sup>9</sup> "UK to Offer Major Training Programme for Ukrainian Forces as Prime Minister Hails Their Victorious Determination," gov.uk, June 17, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-to-offer-major-training-programme-for-ukrainian-forces-as-prime-minister-hails-their-victorious-determination>.

<sup>10</sup> David Axe, "The Ukrainian Army Could Form Three New Heavy Brigades With All These Tanks And Fighting Vehicles It's Getting," *Forbes*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/the-ukrainian-army-could-form-three-new-heavy-brigades-with-all-tphilliphese-tanks-and-fighting-vehicles-it-s-getting/ar-AA16s7vz>.

Ukraine Defense Contact Group.<sup>11</sup>

The contact group was first convened at the sprawling U.S. Air Force base in Ramstein, Germany, in April 2022. In the year-plus since, it has served as the primary mechanism of coordination between the armed forces of Ukraine and NATO regarding the provision of training and material support to the Ukrainian military.

The most recent convocation of the Ramstein Contact Group took place in the shadow of an interview given by the commander of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, to *The Economist*, in December 2022.<sup>12</sup> According to Zaluzhnyi, the primary problem facing Ukraine was the need “to hold this line [i.e., the Soledar-Bakhmut defensive belt] and not lose any more ground.”<sup>13</sup>

Since that interview, Soledar has fallen to the Russians, and Bakhmut is threatened with being surrounded. Moreover, Russian forces are on the offensive north and south of the Bakhmut front, in some instances advancing up to seven kilometers per day.

Zaluzhnyi also stated that the second priority for Ukraine was “to get ready for this war which can happen in February [2023]. To be able to wage a war with fresh forces and reserves. Our troops are all tied up in battles now, they are bleeding. They are bleeding and are being held together solely by courage, heroism, and the ability of their commanders to keep the situation under control.”<sup>14</sup>

The Ukrainian commander noted that the February “war” would have Ukraine resuming the attack, adding:

<sup>11</sup> “21 notes from the 8th Ramstein meeting of Ukraine Defense Contact Group,” *Ukraine Frontlines*, January 21, 2023, <https://ukrainefrontlines.com/news/world-press-about-ukraine/a/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Zaluzhny: Russians and any other enemies must be killed,” *New Geopolitics*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.newgeopolitics.org/2022/12/15/zaluzhny-russians-and-any-other-enemies-must-be-killed/>.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Ritter, “Nightmare of NATO Equipment Sent to Ukraine,” *New Age*, January 27, 2023, <https://www.new-agebd.net/article/192760/nightmare-of-nato-equipment-sent-to-ukraine>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

*We have made all the calculations — how many tanks, artillery we need and so on and so on. This is what everyone needs to concentrate on right now. May the soldiers in the trenches forgive me, it's more important to focus on the accumulation of resources right now for the more protracted and heavier battles that may begin next year.*<sup>15</sup>

The goal of this offensive, Zaluzhnyi said, was to push Russia back to the borders that existed on Feb. 23, 2022, the start of the Russian invasion. He also indicated that the liberation of Crimea was an objective.

“In order to reach the borders of Crimea, as of today we need to cover a distance of 84 km to Melitopol [a strategic city in the south of the Donetsk Republic],” said the general, adding, “By the way, this is enough for us, because Melitopol would give us a full fire control of the land corridor, because from Melitopol we can already fire at the Crimean Isthmus.”

Zaluzhnyi exuded confidence. “I know that I can beat this enemy,” he said. “But I need resources. I need 300 tanks, 600–700 IFV’s [infantry fighting vehicles], 500 Howitzers. Then, I think it is completely realistic to get to the lines of February 23rd.”<sup>16</sup>

Zaluzhnyi spoke of an upcoming meeting with U.S. General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “I will tell him [Milley] how much it is worth, how much it costs. If we don’t get it, of course we will fight to the end. But as a movie character said, ‘I don’t vouch for the consequences.’ The consequences are not hard to foresee. This is what we have to do.”<sup>17</sup>

In short, Zaluzhnyi was saying he could win the war with Russia if he received the requested amount of military equipment. Otherwise, Ukraine would likely lose the conflict.

<sup>15</sup> “An Interview with General Valery Zaluzhny, Head of Ukraine’s Armed Forces,” *The Economist*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/zaluzhny-transcript>.

<sup>16</sup> Ritter, “Nightmare of NATO.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## ***The eighth session***

The eighth session of the Ramstein Contact Group convened on Jan. 20 of this year, and the Ukrainians pressed hard for their Western allies to provide the material support Zaluzhnyi had requested.

Defense ministers from more than 50 countries participated, including Ukraine's Oleksii Reznikov who, speaking at the Davos World Economic Forum a few days before the Ramstein meeting, declared, "We [Ukraine] are carrying out NATO's mission today. They aren't shedding their blood. We're shedding ours. That's why they're required to supply us with weapons."<sup>18</sup>

The Contact Group took the Ukrainian demand for material support under consideration, and by the end of the meeting had committed to providing Ukraine with a multi-billion-dollar support package. In the pledge were included air defense weapons, artillery ammunition, support vehicles and (perhaps most importantly) approximately 240 of the 500 infantry fighting vehicles it had requested. This breaks down into one battalion (59 vehicles) of U.S.-made M-2 Bradleys, two battalions (90 vehicles) of M-1126s, one battalion (40 vehicles) of German Marders and one battalion (approximately 50 vehicles) of Swedish-made CV90s.

The Ramstein Contact Group also promised delivery of four self-propelled artillery battalions, consisting of 19 Swedish-made Archer's, 18 British-made AS-90s, 18 U.S.-made M-109 Paladins, and a dozen French-made CEASARs. When added to the 24 towed FH-70 pieces, the total of artillery pieces being sent to Ukraine amounts to just under 100 artillery pieces, a far cry from the 500 requested by Zaluzhnyi.

Missing from the Ramstein Contact Group list was anything remotely resembling

**'They (NATO) aren't shedding their blood. We're shedding ours. That's why they're required to supply us with weapons.'**

– Ukraine Minister of Defense  
Oleksii Reznikov

<sup>18</sup> Aaron Mate, "Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov," Twitter, January 11, 2023, <https://twitter.com/ijweb/status/1613086637571080192>.

the 300 tanks Zaluzhnyi had requested; the best Ukraine's European allies could muster (at that time) was a promise from the United Kingdom to supply a company's worth (14) of Challenger 2 main battle tanks.

Zaluzhnyi, in his interview with *The Economist*, had indicated that he could not accomplish his planned offensive with anything less than the three armored and three mechanized brigade equivalents he had requested.

The collective West had responded with barely two brigade's worth of equipment.

These two, when added to a third mechanized brigade that had previously been formed and was undergoing training in Poland, gave the Ukrainian general half of what he claimed he needed to launch a successful offensive against Russia.

For U.S. General Milley, the equipment shortfall wasn't the issue — training was. Prior to arriving at Ramstein, Milley toured the sprawling Grafenwoehr training grounds in Germany.<sup>19</sup> There, the U.S. Army is in the process of training some 600 Ukrainian soldiers to effectively move and coordinate their company- and battalion-size units in battle, using combined artillery, armor and ground forces.

Speaking to reporters, General Milley said such training is critical in helping Ukraine recapture territory lost to Russia last year. The goal of this training, Milley said, was for incoming weapons and equipment to be delivered to Ukraine so the newly trained forces would be able to use it "sometime before the spring rains show up. That would be ideal."<sup>20</sup>

### ***What the West is giving***

Operational training, no matter how competently delivered and absorbed, does not paint an accurate picture of the true combat capability being turned over to Ukraine by the West. The reality is most of this equipment won't last a month under combat conditions; even if the Russians don't destroy them, maintenance issues will.

<sup>19</sup> Lolita C. Baldor, "Top US General Visits Training Site for Ukrainian Soldiers," *military.com*, January 18, 2023, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2023/01/17/top-us-general-visits-training-site-ukrainian-soldiers.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Ritter.

The reality is most of this (West-provided) equipment won't last a month under combat conditions; even if the Russians don't destroy them, maintenance issues will.

Take, for instance, the 59 M-2 Bradley vehicles being supplied by the United States. According to anecdotal information obtained from Reddit, the Bradley is “a maintenance NIGHTMARE,”<sup>21</sup> the tribulation shared in all caps.

“I can't even begin to commiserate how f\*\*\*ing awful maintenance on a Bradley is,”<sup>22</sup> the posting author, a self-described U.S. Army veteran who served in a Bradley unit in Iraq, declared. He continued: “Two experienced

crews MIGHT be able to change one Brad's track in 3 or 4 hours, if nothing goes wrong (something always goes wrong). Then you got the track adjuster arms, the shock arms, the roadwheels, the sprocket itself, that all [must be] maintained and replaced as needed.” And more: “I haven't even started talking about the engine/transmission pack yet. When you do services on that, it's not like you just raise the engine deck lid.” Nope. “You got to take the armor OFF the Bradley so an M88 Wrecker vehicle can use its crane to LIFT the engine/tranny out of the hull.”<sup>23</sup>

The Stryker isn't any better. According to a recent article in *Responsible Statecraft*, U.S. soldiers who used the vehicle in both Iraq and Afghanistan called the Stryker “a very good combat vehicle, so long as it traveled on roads, it wasn't raining — and didn't have to fight.”<sup>24</sup>

The Stryker is also a difficult system to maintain properly. One of the critical features of the Stryker is the “height management system,”<sup>25</sup> or HMS. In short, this is what keeps the hull from riding on the tires. A failure to constantly maintain

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Keith Anderson, “Stryker: Height Management System PM,” *PS Magazine*, November 23, 2021, <https://www.psmagazine.army.mil/News/Article/2852005/stryker-height-management-system-pm/>.

and monitor the HMS system will result in the hull rubbing up against the tires, causing tire failure and a non-operable vehicle.

The HMS is complex,<sup>26</sup> and a failure to maintain or operate one component will result in the failure of the entire system. The likelihood of the future Ukrainian operators of the Stryker properly maintaining the HMS under combat conditions is near-zero — they will lack the training as well as the “logistical support” necessary (such as spare parts).

But, wait, there’s more.

The German Marder IFV appears to represent a similar maintenance headache for the Ukrainians: according to a 2021 article in *The National Interest*, “The vehicle was considered unreliable from the outset: Tracks rapidly wore out, transmissions often failed, and soldiers could not easily remove the vehicle’s engine for field maintenance.”<sup>27</sup>

While Germany is preparing to invest a significant amount of money to upgrade the Marder, this hasn’t yet been done. Ukraine is inheriting an old weapons system that brings with it a considerable maintenance problem Ukraine is not prepared to properly handle.

The Swedish CV 90 saw some limited combat in Afghanistan when deployed with the Norwegian Army. While there is not enough publicly available data about the maintainability of this system, one only needs to note that even if the SV 90 proves easy to maintain, it represents a completely different maintenance problem from that of the Bradley, Stryker or Marder.

In short, to properly operate the five battalion equivalents of infantry fighting vehicles being supplied their NATO partners, Ukraine will need to train its maintenance troops on four completely different systems, each with its own unique set of problems and separate logistical/spare part support requirements.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Rosemond, “Stryker: Calibrate and Maintain Height Management System,” *The Preventive Maintenance Magazine*, January 24, 2022, <https://www.psmagazine.army.mil/news/articles/2022/01/24/stryker-calibrate-and-maintain-height-management-system>.

<sup>27</sup> Ritter.



It is, literally, a logistical nightmare that will ultimately prove to be the Achilles heel of the Ramstein tranche of heavy equipment.

But even here, neither NATO nor Ukraine seems able to see the forest for the trees. Rather than acknowledging that the material being provided is inadequate to the task of empowering Ukraine to carry out large-scale offensive operations against Russia, the two sides began haranguing each other over the issue of tanks, namely the failure of Germany to step up to the plate in Ramstein and clear the way for the provision to Ukraine of hundreds of modern Leopard 2 main battle tanks.

**Neither NATO nor Ukraine seems able to see the forest for the trees.**

### ***German history and optics***

The Ramstein meeting was hampered by concern within the German Parliament over the optics associated with Germany providing tanks which would be used to fight Russians in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup>

This angst was perhaps best captured by Petr Bystron of the right-wing Alternative for Germany party. “German tanks [fighting] against Russia in Ukraine,”<sup>29</sup> Bystron challenged his colleagues, “remember, your grandfathers tried to do the same trick, together with [Ukrainian nationalists] Melnik, Bandera and their supporters.

“The result was immense suffering, millions of casualties on both sides and, eventually, Russian tanks came here, to Berlin,” continued Bystron. “Two of those tanks remain on permanent display nearby, and you must keep this in mind when you pass them by every morning,”<sup>30</sup> he closed, referring to the two Soviet T-34 tanks at the Tiergarten memorial to fallen Soviet soldiers.

<sup>28</sup> “After Germany Sent Its Tanks to Russia Last Time, Russian Tanks Entered Berlin — Lawmaker,” TASS, January 20, 2023, <https://tass.com/world/1564755>.

<sup>29</sup> Ritter.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The issue of Leopard tanks, however, was more political than technical, with Poland threatening to ignore Germany's refusal to allow the tanks to be sent to Ukraine, announcing that it was prepared to dispatch 14 of its own Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine in the near future.<sup>31</sup> When combined with the 14 Challenger 2 tanks being promised by the British, Ukraine was getting 28 of the 300 tanks it said it needed for any future offensive. (Now roughly 58 with the U.S. Abrams.)

Numerical disparities and maintenance difficulties aside, NATO politicians seem quite pleased with what was accomplished at Ramstein. According to British Defense Secretary Ben Wallace, in an address to Parliament:

*The international community recognizes that equipping Ukraine to push Russia out of its territory is as important as equipping them to defend what they already have. Today's package is an important increase in Ukraine's capabilities. It means they can go from resisting to expelling Russian forces from Ukrainian soil.*<sup>32</sup>

Wallace seems to ignore that by empowering Ukraine to expel Russian troops from what are — following the annexation of the four former Ukrainian territories (Lugansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson) last September — permanently part of the Russian Federation, NATO would be potentially creating the conditions under which Russia would be able to doctrinally employ nuclear weapons. Those conditions would be to defend against the accumulation of conventional military power capable of threatening the existential survival of Russia.

Russia, however, has not ignored this. Speaking after the Ramstein Contact Group finished its meeting, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, "Potentially, this is extremely dangerous, it will mean bringing the conflict to a whole new level, which, of course, will not bode well from the point of view of global and pan-European security."<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> "Ukraine War: Germany Won't Block Export of Its Leopard 2 Tanks, Foreign Minister Says," *BBC News*, January 24, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64370165>.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> "Kremlin Warns of Escalation If West Gives Ukraine Longer Range Weapons," *The Moscow Times*, January 19, 2023, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/19/kremlin-warns-of-escalation-if-west-gives-ukraine-longer-range-weapons-a79989>.

Senior Russian officials chimed in on social media. Anatoly Antonov, the Russian ambassador to the United States, declared on his Telegram channel:

*It should be clear for everyone — we will destroy any weapons supplied to the Zelensky regime by either the United States or NATO. That is true now as it was true during the Great Patriotic War. The emergence of tanks, bearing Nazi insignia, on the former Soviet soil unequivocally makes us aim at toppling the neo-Nazi regime in Ukraine and creating normal conditions so that the neighboring peoples in the region could live peacefully like in the old days.<sup>34</sup>*

Dmitri Medvedev, a former Russian president and close adviser to Russian President Vladimir Putin, added on Twitter that those who promote a Russian defeat risk unleashing global ruin. “None of them gets it that a nuclear power’s loss of a conventional war can lead to a nuclear one. Nuclear powers haven’t been defeated in major conflicts crucial for their destiny.”<sup>35</sup>

### ***The consequences for Ukraine***

The reality is, however, that the consequences of the Ramstein Contact Group’s work will be far more detrimental to Ukraine than Russia.

Under pressure from the West to carry out a major offensive designed to expel Russian forces from the territories captured last year, General Zaluzhnyi will have his work cut out for him. He will be compelled to sacrifice whatever reserves he would be able to assemble in the aftermath of Ramstein for the purpose of engaging in fruitless attacks against a Russian opponent that is far different from the one Ukraine faced in September and October of last year.

At that time last year, a reconstituted Ukrainian army, bolstered by tens of billions of dollars of NATO equipment, training and operational support, was able to take advantage of over-extended Russian forces to recapture large swaths of territory in Kharkov and Kherson.

<sup>34</sup> “Embassy of Russia in the USA / Посольство России в США,” *Telegram*, January 19, 2023, <https://t.me/EmbU-SA/1961>.

<sup>35</sup> Dmitri Medvedev, “Backward Political Good-Timers in Davos Reiterated,” *Twitter*, January 19, 2023, <https://twitter.com/i/web/status/1615974846206197760>.

Today, Russia's military presence in Ukraine is a far cry from what it was in the autumn of 2022. In the aftermath of Putin's September 2022 decision to mobilize 300,000 reservists, Russia has not only consolidated the frontline in eastern Ukraine, assuming a more defensible posture, but also reinforced its forces with some 80,000 mobilized troops. The moves allow the the Russians to sustain offensive operations in the Donetsk regions while solidifying its defenses in Kherson and Lugansk.

**Today, Russia's military presence in Ukraine is a far cry from what it was in the autumn of 2022.**

From the invasion's February 2022 beginning through the autumn of that year, Russia has deviated significantly from how it doctrinally prosecutes armed conflict.

Moving forward, Russia will be waging war by the book. Defensive positions will be laid in a manner designed to defeat concerted NATO attack, both in terms of troop density along the frontline, as well as depth — something lacking in the Kharkov offensive in September 2022 — and with sufficient dedicated fire support. Again, such support was lacking in September of last year.

By General Zaluzhnyi's own admission, Ukraine has insufficient forces for the task. Even if Ukraine were able to concentrate all three brigades' worth of men and material that are in the pipeline following the Ramstein Contact Group meeting at one place at the same time, the 20,000 or so troops this represents would be unable to breach a Russian defensive position laid out in doctrinal fashion.

### ***Learn the lesson***

Ukraine and NATO should heed the history lesson that Petr Bystron presented to his fellow German parliamentarians — German tanks do not historically fare well against Russian tanks on Ukrainian soil. And Ben Wallace and Mark Milley should pay attention to the order of battle of the Russian forces opposing the Ukrainian Army, especially around the critical battlefields in and around the strategic city of Bakhmut. There, Russian soldiers belonging to the 8th Guards Army are poised to continue in the tradition of Vasily Chuikov's heroes of Stalingrad and Berlin, destroying the forces of fascism on the field of battle.

While the modern-day soldiers of the 8th Guards Army may not be mounting a new generation of tanks on display in the Berlin Tiergarten, rest assured they know fully well their historical legacy and what is expected of them.

This, more than anything else, is the true expression of the Ramstein effect, a cause-effect relationship that the West does not seem either able or willing to discern before it is too late for the tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers whose lives are about to be sacrificed on an altar of national hubris and ignorance.

**The modern-day soldiers of the 8th Guards Army know fully well their historical legacy and what is expected of them.**

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

Scott Ritter is a former U.S. Marine Corps intelligence officer who served in the former Soviet Union implementing arms control treaties, in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm and in Iraq overseeing the disarmament of WMD. His most recent book is *Disarmament in the Time of Perestroika*, published by Clarity Press.



# Ukraine: The War That Went Wrong<sup>1</sup>

*Image credit: Khorkins / Shutterstock.com*

## **Chris Hedges**

*International correspondent; Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist*

Empires in terminal decline leap from one military fiasco to the next. The war in Ukraine, another bungled attempt to reassert U.S. global hegemony, fits this pattern. The danger is that the more dire things look, the more the U.S. will escalate the conflict, potentially provoking open confrontation with Russia. If Russia carries out retaliatory attacks on supply and training bases in neighboring NATO countries, or uses tactical nuclear weapons, NATO will almost certainly respond by attacking Russian forces. We will have ignited World War III, which could result in a nuclear holocaust.

U.S. military support for Ukraine began with the basics — ammunition and assault weapons. The Biden administration, however, soon crossed several self-

<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in *ScheerPost* on January 29, 2023. It is republished with permission from *ScheerPost* and Chris Hedges.



imposed red lines to provide a tidal wave of lethal war machinery:<sup>2</sup> Stinger anti-aircraft systems; Javelin anti-armor systems; M777 towed Howitzers; 122mm GRAD rockets; M142 multiple rocket launchers, or HIMARS; Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Patriot air defense batteries; National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS); M113 Armored Personnel Carriers; and now 31 M1 Abrams, as part of a new \$400 million package. These tanks will be supplemented by 14 German Leopard 2A6 tanks, 14 British Challenger 2 tanks, as well as tanks from other NATO members, including Poland. Next on the list are armor-piercing depleted uranium (DU)<sup>3</sup> ammunition and F-15 and F-16 fighter jets.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Russian invasion of February 24, 2022, Congress has approved<sup>5</sup> more than \$113 billion in aid to Ukraine and allied nations supporting the war in Ukraine. Three-fifths of this aid, \$67 billion, has been allocated for military expenditures. There are 28 countries transferring weapons to Ukraine. All of them, with the exception of Australia, Canada and the U.S., are in Europe.

The rapid upgrade of sophisticated military hardware and aid provided to Ukraine is not a good sign for the NATO alliance. It takes many months, if not years, of training to operate and coordinate these weapons systems. Tank battles — I was in the last major tank battle outside Kuwait City during the first Gulf war as a reporter — are highly choreographed and complex operations.

**It will be many, many months, if not years, before Ukrainian forces receive adequate training to operate this equipment and coordinate the diverse components of a modern battlefield.**

<sup>2</sup> “U.S. Security Cooperation with Ukraine Fact Sheet” (U.S. Department of State, March 21, 2023), <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-ukraine/>.

<sup>3</sup> EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). 2023. <https://www.epa.gov/radtown/depleted-uranium>.

<sup>4</sup> “NATO-Made Fighter Jets Could Be Sent to Ukraine, White House Confirms,” *Morning Star*, July 24, 2022, <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/w/nato-made-fighter-jets-could-be-sent-ukraine-white-house-confirms>.

<sup>5</sup> “Congress Approved \$113 Billion of Aid to Ukraine in 2022,” Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget. <https://www.crfb.org/blogs/congress-approved-113-billion-aid-ukraine-2022>.



Armor must work in close concert with air power, warships, infantry and artillery batteries. It will be many, many months, if not years, before Ukrainian forces receive adequate training to operate this equipment and coordinate the diverse components of a modern battlefield. Indeed, the U.S. never succeeded in training the Iraqi and Afghan armies in combined arms maneuver warfare, despite two decades of occupation.

I was with Marine Corps units in February 1991 that pushed Iraqi forces out of the Saudi Arabian town of Khafji.<sup>6</sup> Supplied with superior military equipment, the Saudi soldiers that held Khafji offered ineffectual resistance. As we entered the city, we saw Saudi troops in commandeered fire trucks, hightailing it south to escape the fighting. All the fancy military hardware, which the Saudis had purchased from the U.S., proved worthless because they did not know how to use it.

NATO military commanders understand that the infusion of these weapons systems into the war will not alter what is, at best, a stalemate, defined largely by artillery duels over hundreds of miles of front lines. The purchase of these weapons systems — one M1 Abrams tank costs \$10 million<sup>7</sup> when training and sustainment are included — increases the profits of the arms manufacturers. The use of these weapons in Ukraine allows them to be tested in battlefield conditions, making the war a laboratory for weapons manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin. All this is useful to NATO and to the arms industry. But it is not very useful to Ukraine.

The other problem with advanced weapons systems such as the M1 Abrams, which have 1,500-horsepower turbine engines that run on jet fuel, is that they are temperamental and require highly skilled and near constant maintenance.<sup>8</sup> They are not forgiving to those operating them who make mistakes; indeed, mistakes

<sup>6</sup> Contributors to Wikimedia projects, “Battle of Khafji,” (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., January 28, 2023), [https://web.archive.org/web/20230128192529/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle\\_of\\_Khafji](https://web.archive.org/web/20230128192529/https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Khafji).

<sup>7</sup> Ellie Cook, “The Cost of Western Tanks Being Sent to Ukraine, from Abrams to Leopards,” (*Newsweek*, January 26, 2023), <https://www.newsweek.com/cost-western-battle-tanks-m1-abrams-leopard-2-challenger-2-1776725>.

<sup>8</sup> Tara Copp and Lolita Baldor, “What You Need to Know about the Abrams Tanks Bound for Ukraine,” *PBS* (Public Broadcasting Service, January 25, 2023), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-abrams-tanks-bound-for-ukraine>.

can be lethal. The most optimistic scenario for deploying M1-Abrams tanks in Ukraine is six to eight months, more likely longer. If Russia launches a major offensive before fall, as expected, the M1 Abrams will not be part of the Ukrainian arsenal. Even when they do arrive, they will not significantly alter the balance of power, especially if the Russians are able to turn the tanks, manned by inexperienced crews, into charred hulks.

**If Russia launches a major offensive before fall, as expected, the M1 Abrams will not be part of the Ukrainian arsenal.**

So why all this infusion of high-tech weaponry? We can sum it up in one word: panic.

Having declared a *de facto* war on Russia and openly calling for the removal of Vladimir Putin, the neoconservative pimps of war<sup>9</sup> watch with dread as Ukraine is being pummeled by a relentless Russian war of attrition. Ukraine has suffered nearly 18,000 civilian casualties (6,919 killed and 11,075 injured).<sup>10</sup> It has also seen around 8 percent of its total housing destroyed or damaged,<sup>11</sup> and 50 percent of its energy infrastructure directly impacted with frequent power cuts.<sup>12</sup> Ukraine requires at least \$3 billion monthly in outside support to keep its economy afloat, the International Monetary Fund's managing director recently said.<sup>13</sup> Nearly 14 million Ukrainians have been displaced<sup>14</sup> — 8 million in Europe and 6 million internally — and up to 18 million people, or 40 percent of Ukraine's population,

<sup>9</sup> Chris Hedges, "Pimps of War: Neocons Who Fueled 20 Years of Carnage in the Middle East Are Back for More," (*Salon.com*, April 11, 2022). <https://www.salon.com/2022/04/12/pimps-of-war-neocons-fueled-20-years-of-carnage-in-the-middle-east-are-back-for-more/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update 3 January 2023," OHCHR, January 3, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/01/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-3-january-2023>.

<sup>11</sup> Hnat Kulish, "The Total Amount of Damage Caused to Ukraine's Infrastructure Due to the War Has Increased to Almost \$138 Billion," Kyiv School of Economics.

<sup>12</sup> "Press Briefing by the United Nations Information Service," UN Geneva.

<sup>13</sup> Person, "Ukraine External Financing Needs Could Reach \$5 Bln a Month, IMF's Georgieva Says," *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, October 25, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> "Ukraine," ReliefWeb, (2023) <https://reliefweb.int/country/ukr?figures=all#key-figures>.

will soon require humanitarian assistance.<sup>15</sup> Ukraine's economy contracted by 35 percent in 2022, and 60 percent of Ukrainians are now poised to live on less than \$5.5 a day, according to World Bank estimates.<sup>16</sup> Nine million Ukrainians are without electricity and water in sub-zero temperatures,<sup>17</sup> the Ukrainian president says.<sup>18</sup> According to estimates from the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, 100,000 Ukrainian and 100,000 Russian soldiers have been killed in the war as of last November.<sup>19</sup>

"My feeling is we are at a crucial moment in the conflict when the momentum could shift in favor of Russia if we don't act decisively and quickly," former U.S.

**The near hysterical calls to support Ukraine as a bulwark of liberty and democracy by the mandarins in Washington are a response to the palpable rot and decline of the US empire.**

Senator Rob Portman was quoted as saying at the World Economic Forum in a post by The Atlantic Council. "A surge is needed."

Turning logic on its head, the shills for war argue that "the greatest nuclear threat we face is a Russian victory."<sup>20</sup> The cavalier attitude to a potential nuclear confrontation with Russia by the cheerleaders for the war in Ukraine is very, very frightening, especially given the fiascos they oversaw for twenty years in the Middle East.

The near hysterical calls to support Ukraine as

<sup>15</sup> "Press Briefing by the United Nations Information Service," UN Geneva, (2023).

<sup>16</sup> [worldbank.org](https://www.worldbank.org/), (2023)

<sup>17</sup> Person and Olena Harmash, "Grid Operator Urges Ukrainians to Save Electricity as Temperatures Drop," *Reuters* (Thomson Reuters, January 6, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/grid-operator-urges-ukrainians-save-electricity-temperatures-drop-2023-01-06/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Ukraine War: As It's Happening," *The Moscow Times* (The Moscow Times, December 26, 2022), <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/12/27/ukraine-war-zelensky-says-9-million-ukrainians-still-without-electricity-a79806>.

<sup>19</sup> "Ukraine War: US Estimates 200,000 Military Casualties on All Sides," *BBC News* (BBC, November 10, 2022), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63580372>.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Schlosser, "The Greatest Nuclear Threat We Face Is a Russian Victory," *The Atlantic* (Atlantic Media Company, January 18, 2023), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/01/russias-invasion-ukraine-war-nuclear-weapon-nato/672727/>.

a bulwark of liberty and democracy by the mandarins in Washington are a response to the palpable rot and decline of the U.S. empire. America's global authority has been decimated by well-publicized war crimes, torture, economic decline, social disintegration — including the assault on the capital on January 6, the botched response to the pandemic,<sup>21</sup> declining life expectancies<sup>22</sup> and the plague<sup>23</sup> of mass shootings<sup>24</sup> — and a series of military debacles from Vietnam<sup>25</sup> to Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> The coups, political assassinations, election fraud, black propaganda, blackmail, kidnapping, brutal counter-insurgency campaigns, U.S. sanctioned massacres, torture in global black sites, proxy wars and military interventions carried out by the United States around the globe since the end of World War II have *never* resulted in the establishment of a democratic government. Instead, these interventions have led to over 20 million killed and spawned a global revulsion for U.S. imperialism.<sup>27</sup>

In desperation, the empire pumps ever greater sums into its war machine. The most recent \$1.7 trillion spending bill included \$847 billion for the military; the total is boosted<sup>28</sup> to \$858 billion when factoring in accounts that don't fall under

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Mueller and Eleanor Lutz, "U.S. Has Far Higher Covid Death Rate Than Other Wealthy Countries," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, February 1, 2022), <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/02/01/science/covid-deaths-united-states.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Tanya Lewis, "How the U.S. Lost Years of Life," *Scientific American* (Scientific American, February 1, 2023), <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-u-s-lost-years-of-life/>.

<sup>23</sup> Paul LeBlanc, "Three Weeks and 39 Mass Shootings. This Is America in 2023," CNN Politics, *CNN* (Cable News Network, January 24, 2023), <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/politics/mass-shootings-in-2023-what-matters/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "Gun Violence Archive, Standard Reports," Gun Violence Archive. 2023. <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports>.

<sup>25</sup> "Nick Turse Hidden Tragedy of Vietnam War," YouTube (YouTube, July 7, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpSIGhScnLQ>.

<sup>26</sup> "Spenser Rapone Afghanistan Papers," YouTube (YouTube, July 6, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7Ie73PLYfw&t=315s>.

<sup>27</sup> "U.S. Wars and Hostile Actions: A List," Let's Try Democracy, February 28, 2023, <https://davidswanson.org/warlist/>.

<sup>28</sup> "Senate Passes \$847B Defense Bill, Forcing Biden's Hand on Vaccine Mandate," *Politico*, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/12/15/senate-passes-847b-defense-bill-forcing-bidens-hand-on-vaccine-mandate-00074246>.

the Armed Services committees' jurisdiction, such as the Department of Energy, which oversees nuclear weapons maintenance and the infrastructure that develops them.<sup>29</sup> In 2021, when the U.S. had a military budget of \$801 billion, it constituted nearly 40 percent of all global military expenditures, more than the next nine countries, including Russia and China, spent on their militaries *combined*.<sup>30</sup>

As Edward Gibbon observed about the Roman Empire's own fatal lust for endless war: "[T]he decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness. Prosperity ripened the principle of decay; the cause of the destruction multiplied with the extent of conquest; and, as soon as time or accident had removed the artificial supports, the stupendous fabric yielded to the pressure of its own weight. The story of the ruin is simple and obvious; and instead of inquiring *why* the Roman Empire was destroyed, we should rather be surprised that it had subsisted for so long."<sup>31</sup>

A state of permanent war creates complex bureaucracies,<sup>32</sup> sustained by compliant politicians, journalists, scientists, technocrats and academics, who obsequiously serve the war machine.<sup>33</sup> This militarism needs mortal enemies — the latest are Russia and China<sup>34</sup> — even when those demonized have no intention or capability, as was the case with Iraq, of harming the U.S. We are hostage to these incestuous institutional structures.

Earlier this month, the House and Senate Armed Services Committees, for

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Nuclear Weapons and Forces Sustainment and Modernization," U.S. GAO. 2023, <https://www.gao.gov/nuclear-weapons-and-forces-sustainment-and-modernization>.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Alvarez, "U.S. Still Spends More on Military than next Nine Countries Combined," Institute for Policy Studies, June 30, 2022, <https://ips-dc.org/u-s-still-spends-more-on-military-than-next-nine-countries-combined/>.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Gibbon, "General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West." Taken from *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Gibbon (1979). <https://ccel.org/g/gibbon/decline/volume1/chap39.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> YouTube (YouTube). 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/?app=desktop>.

<sup>33</sup> Editor, "Chris Hedges: The Democrats Are Now the War Party," *scheerpost.com*, January 3, 2023, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/12/25/chris-hedges-the-democrats-are-now-the-war-party/>.

<sup>34</sup> Dan Lamothe, "U.S. General Warns Troops That War with China Is Possible in Two Years," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, January 28, 2023), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/01/27/us-general-minihan-china-war-2025/>.

example, appointed eight commissioners to review President Biden’s National Defense Strategy (NDS) to “examine the assumptions, objectives, defense investments, force posture and structure, operational concepts, and military risks of the NDS.”<sup>35</sup> The commission, as Eli Clifton writes at the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, is “largely comprised of individuals with financial ties to the weapons industry and U.S. government contractors, raising questions about whether the commission will take a critical eye to contractors who receive \$400 billion of the \$858 billion FY2023 defense budget.”<sup>36</sup> The chair of the commission, Clifton notes, is former Rep. Jane Harman (D-CA), who “sits on the board of Iridium Communications,<sup>37</sup> a satellite communications firm that was awarded a seven-year \$738.5 million contract with the Department of Defense in 2019.”<sup>38</sup>

Reports about Russian interference in the elections and Russian-manufactured bots manipulating public opinion — which Matt Taibbi’s recent reporting on the “Twitter Files” exposes as an elaborate piece of black propaganda — was uncritically amplified by the press.<sup>39</sup> It seduced Democrats and their liberal supporters into seeing Russia as a mortal enemy. The

**It seduced Democrats and their liberal supporters into seeing Russia as a mortal enemy. The near universal support for a prolonged war with Ukraine would not be possible without this con.**

<sup>35</sup> “Armed Services Committees Leadership Announces Selections for Commission on the National Defense Strategy,” January 11, 2023, <https://armedservices.house.gov/news/press-releases/armed-services-committees-leadership-announces-selections-commission-national>.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Semler et al., “The New US Military Budget Enriches Private Contractors at the Cost of Human Well-Being,” Jacobin, March 12, 2022, <https://jacobin.com/2022/12/fiscal-year-2023-biden-defense-budget-stimulus-checks>.

<sup>37</sup> “Jane L. Harman,” Iridium Satellite Communications. <https://investor.iridium.com/jane-l-harman-bio>.

<sup>38</sup> “Iridium Awarded 7-Year, \$738.5 Million Contract by the U.S. Department of Defense,” Iridium Satellite Communications. (2019). <https://investor.iridium.com/2019-09-16-Iridium-Awarded-7-Year-738-5-Million-Contract-by-the-U-S-Department-of-Defense>.

<sup>39</sup> “Matt Taibbi: Move over, Jason Blair: Meet Hamilton 68, the New King of Media Fraud,” *scheerpost.com*, January 31, 2023, <https://scheerpost.com/2023/01/28/matt-taibbi-move-over-jason-blair-meet-hamilton-68-the-new-king-of-media-fraud/>.

near universal support for a prolonged war with Ukraine would not be possible without this con.

America's two ruling parties depend on campaign funds from the war industry and are pressured by weapons manufacturers in their state or districts, who employ constituents, to pass gargantuan military budgets.<sup>40</sup> Politicians are acutely aware that to challenge the permanent war economy is to be attacked as unpatriotic and is usually an act of political suicide.<sup>41</sup>

"The soul that is enslaved to war cries out for deliverance," writes Simone Weil in her essay, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force,"<sup>42</sup> adding, "but deliverance itself appears to it an extreme and tragic aspect, the aspect of destruction."<sup>43</sup>

Historians refer to the quixotic attempt by empires in decline to regain a lost hegemony through military adventurism as "micro-militarism." During the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) the Athenians invaded Sicily, losing 200 ships and thousands of soldiers. The defeat ignited a series of successful revolts throughout the Athenian empire. The Roman Empire, which at its height lasted for two centuries, became captive to its one military man army that, similar to the U.S. war industry, was a state within a state. Rome's once mighty legions in the late stage of empire suffered defeat after defeat while extracting ever more resources from a crumbling and impoverished state. In the end, the elite Praetorian Guard auctioned off the emperorship to the

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<sup>40</sup> "Defense," OpenSecrets (2023). <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/indus.php?Ind=D>.

<sup>41</sup> "How the War Machine Took over the Democrats w/ Dennis Kucinich," *The Chris Hedges Report*. (YouTube, December 16, 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=b079rbpYIzU&t=373s>.

<sup>42</sup> "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/simone-weil-the-iliad>.

<sup>43</sup> History Extra, "The Praetorian Guard: The Emperors' Fatal Servants," (August 30, 2022), <https://www.historyextra.com/period/roman/the-emperors-fatal-servants/>.



highest bidder.<sup>44</sup> The British Empire, already decimated by the suicidal military folly of World War I, breathed its last gasp in 1956 when it attacked Egypt in a dispute over the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Britain withdrew in humiliation and became an appendage of the United States. A decade-long war in Afghanistan sealed the fate of a decrepit Soviet Union.

“While rising empires are often judicious, even rational in their application of armed force for conquest and control of overseas dominions, fading empires are inclined to ill-considered displays of power, dreaming of bold military masterstrokes that would somehow recoup lost prestige and power,” historian Alfred McCoy writes in his book, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*. “Often irrational even from an imperial point of view, these micro-military operations can yield hemorrhaging expenditures or humiliating defeats that only accelerate the process already under way.”<sup>45</sup>

The plan to reshape Europe and the global balance of power by degrading Russia is turning out to resemble the failed plan to reshape the Middle East. It is fueling a global food crisis and devastating Europe with near double-digit inflation. It is exposing the impotency, once again, of the United States, and the bankruptcy of its ruling oligarchs. As a counterweight to the United States, nations such as China, Russia, India, Brazil, and Iran are severing themselves from the tyranny of the dollar as the world’s reserve currency, a move that will trigger economic and social catastrophe in the United States. Washington is giving Ukraine ever more sophisticated weapons systems and billions upon billions in aid in a futile bid to save Ukraine but, more importantly, to save itself.

**The plan to reshape Europe and the global balance of power by degrading Russia is turning out to resemble the failed plan to reshape the Middle East.**

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*, Dispatch Books (Newburyport: Haymarket Books, 2017).

***About the author***

Chris Hedges is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist who was a foreign correspondent and bureau chief in the Middle East and the Balkans for fifteen years for *The New York Times*. He previously worked overseas for *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and NPR. He was host of the Emmy Award–nominated RT America show “On Contact.” Hedges, who holds a Master of Divinity from Harvard University, is the author of numerous books, and was a National Book Critics Circle finalist for *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*. He has taught at Columbia University, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of Toronto. He has taught college credit courses through Rutgers University in the New Jersey prison system since 2013.



# War in Ukraine

US, Russia, China and the Return of the  
Multipolar World

*Image credit: Photo Veterok / Shutterstock.com*

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## ***Introduction***

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is nearing its one-year milestone, Ukrainian cities lay in ruin, and more than 14 million of the country's people have been displaced.<sup>1</sup>

The destruction of Ukraine grows daily. Washington and its coalition of the willing struggle to help Ukraine defend itself. Punitive measures meted out to Russia

<sup>1</sup> "UN: Russian Invasion Has Uprooted 14 Million Ukrainians," *Associated Press*, <https://www.usnews.com/news/us/articles/2022-11-02/un-russian-invasion-has-uprooted-14-million-ukrainians>.

include economic sanctions,<sup>2</sup> trade embargoes<sup>3</sup> and the confiscation of the assets of Russian leaders.<sup>4</sup> Billions of dollars from Western-bloc countries now support the Ukrainian resistance.

For some, this conflict is the result of a never-ending power struggle; the U.S. should have contained Russia when it was most vulnerable – after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Others see the struggle in Ukraine as threatening the very structure of post-Cold War stability – the future of global order hinging on the outcome.<sup>5</sup>

Certain is this: A new cold war has the potential to be far worse than the first.<sup>6</sup>

Field experts and military leaders have warned for decades that if the West continues to threaten Russia's vital interests in the region, political and even military confrontation would result.<sup>7,8</sup>

**Certain is this: A new cold war has the potential to be far worse than the first.**

<sup>2</sup> “United States: U.S. Treasury Announces Unprecedented & Expansive Sanctions against Russia, Imposing Swift and Severe Economic Costs,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0608>.

<sup>3</sup> “Commercial Service Status, Russia Sanctions and Export Controls,” International Trade Administration, <https://www.trade.gov/russia>.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Ponciano, “Seized Russian Oligarchs’ Assets Could Be Used for Ukraine Aid under Senate Bill,” *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jonathanponciano/2022/03/15/seized-russian-oligarchs-assets-could-be-used-for-ukraine-aid-under-senate-bill/?sh=2cb5e95b2b9c>.

<sup>5</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal, “The Return of Conquest? Why the Future of Global Order Hinges on Ukraine,” *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.) 101, no. 3 (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, “I’m a Cold War Historian. We’re in a Frightening New Era,” *The New York Times* (Online) (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Anatol Lieven, “Russia Has Been Warning About Ukraine for Decades. The West Should Have Listened,” *Time*, Jan. 25, 2022. Accessible from <https://time.com/6141806/russia-ukraine-threats/> 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Stan Resor, “Opposition to Nato Expansion,” The Arms Control Association, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-06/arms-control-today/opposition-nato-expansion>.



The West has chosen to ignore the warnings, breaking security assurances while engaging in activities that have threatened Russia.<sup>9</sup>

The war in Ukraine has been long foretold, and today has produced worldwide consequences.<sup>10</sup> The costs of energy, wheat, corn and sunflower oil – important Ukrainian exports – have hit record prices globally. Absent a decisive military victory, a diplomatic political settlement is the only viable option to end the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>11, 12, 13</sup>

The focus on the carnage in Ukraine overlooks the strengthening alliance between Russia and China.

The focus on the carnage in Ukraine overlooks the strengthening alliance between Russia and China. Says American historian and educator Alfred McCoy, “At the core of recent conflicts at both ends of Eurasia is an entente between China and Russia that the world hasn’t seen since the Sino-Soviet alliance at the start of the Cold War.”<sup>14</sup>

The war in Ukraine reveals a tectonic shift taking place in Eurasia – the Ground

<sup>9</sup> “Nato Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard,” National Security Archive, The George Washington University, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

<sup>10</sup> Amir Handjani, “Ukraine War Is Causing a Commodities ‘Super Cycle’ and Likely Global Food Crisis,” *Responsible Statecraft*, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/03/16/ukraine-war-could-cause-a-global-food-crisis/>.

<sup>11</sup> Barry R. Posen, “Ukraine’s Implausible Theories of Victory: The Fantasy of Russian Defeat and the Case for Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-07-08/ukraines-implausible-theories-victory> (2022).

<sup>12</sup> Lieven, “How the War in Ukraine Can Be Ended,” *Current Affairs*, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2022/05/how-the-war-in-ukraine-can-be-ended>.

<sup>13</sup> Lieven, Sarang Shidore, and Marcus Stanley, “Avoiding the Dangers of a Protracted Conflict in Ukraine,” *Quincy Brief No. 23* (New York: Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft. Accessible from <https://quincyinst.org/report/avoiding-the-dangers-of-a-protracted-conflict-in-ukraine/>, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Alfred McCoy, “The Geopolitics of the Ukraine War: Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping in the Struggle over Eurasia,” *TomDispatch*, <https://tomdispatch.com/the-geopolitics-of-the-ukraine-war/>.

Zero of socio-political world affairs is shifting from the West to the East.<sup>15, 16</sup> The gravitational center of the world economy is shifting from the Atlantic to east of the Urals. The bloody conflict threatens the resulting global order as Russia and China grow closer in their alignment.

The rise of China poses a lethal threat to U.S. primacy in the post-World War II global architecture of governance.

The world's largest economy by purchasing power measures, China has emerged as the greatest trading nation, one set to challenge the U.S. position in the world politically, economically and militarily.<sup>17</sup> Economist James K. Galbraith argues the global dollar-based order has remained unchallenged “mainly by instability elsewhere and the lack of a credible alternative or compelling reason to create one.”<sup>18</sup> Further, the U.S. has maintained its global hegemony because there has been “no clearly different, functionally superior economic development model.”<sup>19</sup>

## ***War foretold***

What is happening today in Ukraine is what I call a “war foretold.”<sup>20</sup> My case is this: Attempting to impose a military solution to a political problem will – already has – endanger more innocent people.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> McCoy, *In the Shadows of the American Century: The Rise and Decline of US Global Power*, Dispatch Books (Newburyport: Haymarket Books, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Smith, *Time No Longer: Americans After the American Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> “Gross Domestic Product Based on Purchasing-Power-Parity in Current Prices,” Knoema, <https://knoema.com/atlas/ranks/GDP-based-on-PPP>.

<sup>18</sup> James K. Galbraith, “The Dollar System in a Multi-Polar World,” Institute for New Economic Thinking, <https://www.ineteconomics.org/perspectives/blog/the-dollar-system-in-a-multi-polar-world?fbclid=IwAR-13W6K49y2fWDTEENMiUdw02GY242e03NYIZFEmtDWLFFI|TA2Klo92K6dAo>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Christopher Zambakari, “War Foretold: Ukraine’s Crisis, 30 Years in the Making,” The Fletcher World Forum, September 13, <http://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2022/9/13/war-foretold-ukraines-crisis-30-years-in-the-making> (2022).

<sup>21</sup> Open Letter, “We Call on Biden to Reject Reckless Demands for a No-Fly Zone,” *Guardian News*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/11/we-call-on-biden-to-reject-reckless-demands-for-a-no-fly-zone>.

The conflict in Ukraine is long foretold,<sup>22</sup> because for decades the warning signs have been ignored by the architects of the U.S.-led NATO alliance.<sup>23</sup> Some 30 years ago, foreign policy wonk Anatol Lieven predicted<sup>24</sup> the coming crisis between Russia, Ukraine and the West, writing, “The really major question for Russia is Ukraine ... moves toward NATO membership for Ukraine would trigger a really ferocious Russian response, involving a complete collapse of cooperation with the West.”<sup>25</sup>

More recently, in 1997, 50 prominent foreign policy experts scribed an open letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton, outlining their opposition to eastward expansion by NATO, which was in the process of admitting new members from former Warsaw Pact<sup>26</sup> countries in eastern Europe,<sup>27</sup> violating the pledge then-U.S. President George H.W. Bush made to Russian leaders at the end of the Cold War. The pledge: not to expand NATO eastward.<sup>28</sup> The message to Clinton emphasized: “In Russia, NATO expansion, which continues to be opposed across the entire political spectrum, will strengthen the nondemocratic opposition, undercut those who favor reform and cooperation with the West, [and] bring the Russians to question the entire post-Cold War settlement.”<sup>29</sup>

The empty promises, broken pledges and assurances given to Russia have been

<sup>22</sup> Resor.

<sup>23</sup> Senator Bernie Sanders, “Prepared Remarks: Sanders Senate Floor Speech on Ukraine,” U.S. Senate, <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/press-releases/prepared-remarks-sanders-senate-floor-speech-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>24</sup> Lieven, “Russian Opposition to Nato Expansion,” *The World Today* 51, no. 10 (1995).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> The Warsaw Pact was a collective defense treaty established in 1955 by the Soviet Union and seven other Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe: Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania.

<sup>27</sup> Resor.

<sup>28</sup> C. J. Polychroniou, “Chomsky: US Approach to Ukraine and Russia has ‘Left the Domain of Rational Discourse,’” *Truthout*, <https://truthout.org/articles/us-approach-to-ukraine-and-russia-has-left-the-domain-of-rational-discourse/>.

<sup>29</sup> Resor.



largely ignored,<sup>30, 31, 32</sup> including then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's adamant "not one inch eastward" pledge about NATO expansion in 1990.<sup>33</sup> Recently declassified documents reveal Baker assured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, "Neither the President [Clinton] nor I intend to extract any unilateral advantages from the processes that are taking place."<sup>34</sup>

## **Double standard**

For Russian President Vladimir Putin, Ukraine represents a national security matter; the West continues to ignore Russia and its superpower status. If this is indeed the case, it is because what is often referred to as the "American-led open-democratic political order"<sup>35</sup> or "U.S.-led liberal, rules-based international order"<sup>36, 37</sup> favors the strong. The U.S. has manhandled the unwritten rule whenever it has suited its national interest. Pulitzer Prize-winning author Adam Johnson contends, "If any other country engages in aggressive war without U.S. sanction, they are said to undermine the 'liberal, rules-based order.'<sup>38</sup> But such an order never existed, it's not an actual document or a series of laws. 'Rules-based'

<sup>30</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault," *Foreign Affairs*, 93, no. 5 (2014).

<sup>31</sup> Lieven, "Russian Opposition to Nato Expansion."

<sup>32</sup> Noam Chomsky and David Barsamian, "Welcome to a Science-Fiction Planet: How George Orwell's Doublethink Became the Way of the World," *TomDispatch*, <https://tomdispatch.com/welcome-to-a-science-fiction-planet/>.

<sup>33</sup> National Security Archive.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> G. J. Ikenberry, "Power and Liberal Order: America's Postwar World Order in Transition," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 5, no. 2 (2005).

<sup>36</sup> Ben Scott, "The United States and the Rules-Based Order," Lowy Institute, <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/usa-rules-based-order/>.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Kagan, "The Twilight of the Liberal World Order," The Brookings Institution. Accessible from <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-twilight-of-the-liberal-world-order/>. 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Johnson also lists a number of international treaties the U.S. refused to ratify, including the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention of 1958, the Convention against Discrimination in Education of 1962, Convention on the Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages of 1962, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972, Minimum Age Convention of 1973, the Moon Treaty of 1979, the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1990, Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty of 1996, Kyoto Protocol of 1997, Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court of 1998, Convention on Cluster Munitions of 2008, and the Arms Trade Treaty of 2013, "The NYT's Casually Racist, Arrogant Chauvinism in Two Paragraphs," Substack Inc., <https://thecolumn.substack.com/p/the-nyts-casually-racist-arrogant>.

simply means ‘American rules’ that the U.S. and its NATO allies assert when it suits them.”<sup>39</sup>

The proxy war the U.S. chooses to fight against Russia has drawn the Bear and the Dragon closer together in their opposition to Western ideals.

### ***Renewed Sino-Russian entente and the rise of the petro-ruble and petro-yuan***

All this leads to the wildcard transpiring in Ukraine.

Enter China, a force once referred to as “The Sleeping Giant,” a force that, like Russia, seeks to weaken the U.S. stranglehold on the world economy. No government – until now – has been powerful enough to upset the U.S. dollar’s status as the global reserve currency.<sup>40</sup>

Today, a very real test to the dollar comes from Russia and China, both seeking to snap the Anglo-American-controlled finance system. In response to invasion-spurred sanctions instituted by Western countries, the Putin administration has moved to require purchases of Russian energy be transacted in Russian rubles, or gold instead of the dollar or Euro.<sup>41</sup>

All this leads to the wildcard transpiring in Ukraine.

Despite Russia’s GDP being less than a tenth of that of the U.S. or China, Russia is a major global supplier of key commodities; as a result of Putin’s rubles-or-gold dictate, the ruble has risen in value on global exchanges. The effect has been reminiscent of the 1970s, when the petrodollar – crude oil exports revenues – propped up the value of U.S. dollar in the global marketplace.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Ellen Brown, “The Coming Global Financial Revolution: Russia is Following the American Playbook,” *scheerpost.com*, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/04/04/ellen-brown-the-coming-global-financial-revolution-russia-is-following-the-american-playbook/>.

<sup>41</sup> Stephen Alpher, “Russian Lawmaker Suggests Nation Could Accept Bitcoin for Oil Payments,” *Yahoo! News*, <https://finance.yahoo.com/news/russian-lawmaker-suggests-accepting-bitcoin-161918687.html?guccounter=1>.

The debate over Russia's demand that foreign buyers pay for gas in rubles has tested the resolve of European governments to take a hard line against Moscow over the war in Ukraine. Meanwhile – listen for the sirens and the bells going off in the background – Russia continues to knot closer economic ties with China and other non-Western countries. As an example, Moscow's September agreement to begin switching payments for gas supplies to China to yuan and rubles instead of dollars is a "move over" announcement to reduce its reliance on the U.S. dollar, the Euro and other hard currencies in its banking system and for trade.

In 2014, Russia announced a pivot to China with a deal to build two natural-gas pipelines to carry a fifth of China's gas imports.<sup>42</sup> Alongside the energy pipeline, China agreed to build a \$24.2 billion,<sup>43</sup> 4,300-mile high-speed railway<sup>44</sup> from Beijing to Moscow. Now, Western sanctions have drawn the two regimes even closer together. According to geostrategist Brahma Chellaney, "By effectively putting Russia, the world's richest country in natural resources, in Beijing's pocket, the [Western] sanctions will yield major dividends for a resource-hungry China, including allowing it to dictate the terms of the bilateral relationship and secure greater access to Russian military technology."<sup>45</sup>

If Russia poses complexities for the West, China offers, quite possibly, an even greater adversary. Says FBI Director Christopher Wray, "There is just no country that presents a broader threat to our ideas, our innovation and our economic security than China."<sup>46</sup> Echoing the director's contention, U.S. President Joe Biden

<sup>42</sup> James Paton and Aibing Guo, "Russia, China Add to \$400 Billion Gas Deal with Accord," *Bloomberg News*, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-11-10/russia-china-add-to-400-billion-gas-deal-with-accord#x-j4y7vzkg>.

<sup>43</sup> Steve LeVine, "China is Building the Most Extensive Global Commercial-Military Empire in History," *Quartz*, <https://qz.com/415649/china-is-building-the-most-extensive-global-commercial-military-empire-in-history/>.

<sup>44</sup> "Moscow to Beijing in 2 Days: China to Build \$24.2bn High-Speed Railway," *RT News*, <https://www.rt.com/business/225131-russia-china-speed-railway/>.

<sup>45</sup> James Griffiths, "War in Ukraine Could Put Russia Deeper in China's Pocket Than Ever. Here's How Beijing Could Use that Economic Leverage," *The Globe and Mail Inc.*, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-war-in-ukraine-could-put-russia-deeper-in-chinas-pocket-than-ever-what/>.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Wray, "Countering Threats Posed by the Chinese Government Inside the U.S.," Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), <https://www.fbi.gov/news/speeches/countering-threats-posed-by-the-chinese-govern->

has remarked, “China ... is the only competitor potentially capable of combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system.”<sup>47</sup>

Sleeping giant? Certainly a metaphorical giant, but no longer sleeping.

According to a World Bank report, China’s GDP stood at more than \$19.6 billion in purchasing power parity in 2017.<sup>48</sup> The U.S. boasted a \$19.5 billion GDP. Together, the two powers accounted for one third of global GDP. China’s growth is fueled by its central management of the economy, its large-scale capital investment and rapid expansion of manufacturing and production. Recent forecasts by UK-based Centre for Economics and Business Research show that China will overtake the U.S. as the world’s largest economy by 2030, five years earlier than the pre-pandemic prediction.<sup>49</sup> The prognostication is consistent with International Monetary Fund predictions that China’s total GDP could equal that of the U.S. in 2027 to 2028.<sup>50</sup>

In the technology race, the U.S. appears to be losing to the Red Dragon. In his book, *The New Silk Roads*, Peter Frankopan notes that important decisions shaping this and the next century will not be made in the West “but in Beijing, Moscow, in Tehran and Riyadh, in Delhi and Islamabad, in Kabul and in Taliban-controlled areas of Afghanistan, in Ankara,

**‘Technological innovation has become the mainbattleground of the global playing field.’**

– Chinese President Xi Jinping

[ment-inside-the-us-wray-013122](#).

<sup>47</sup> President Joseph R. Biden, “Interim National Security Strategic Guidance: Renewing America’s Advantages” (Washington, D.C.: The White House, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>, 2021).

<sup>48</sup> “Purchasing Power Parities and the Size of World Economies : Results from the 2017 International Comparison Program.” (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33623>, 2020).

<sup>49</sup> “World Economic League Table 2022,” 13th edition (London, United Kingdom: The Centre for Economics and Business Research, <https://cebr.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/WELT-2022.pdf>, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Cited in Huang Renwei, “What Does the Future between the Us and China Look Like?,” *scheerpost.com*, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/07/24/what-does-the-future-between-the-us-and-china-look-like/>.

Damascus and Jerusalem.”<sup>51</sup> Chinese President Xi Jinping knows of the shift. “Technological innovation has become the main battleground of the global playing field, and competition for tech dominance will grow unprecedentedly fierce,” he writes,<sup>52</sup> announcing his intentions to “develop indigenous capabilities, decrease dependence on foreign technology, and advance emerging technologies.”<sup>53</sup>

### ***Unipolar, bipolar and multipolar***

World order can be distinguished by its polarity in terms of power distribution within the state-led system.<sup>54</sup> There is unipolarity (one dominant power), bipolarity (two dominant powers) or multipolarity (more than two dominant powers). For example, the Cold War contest between the Soviet Union and U.S. created a bipolar world with two core centers of power. When the Cold War ended, the U.S. enjoyed a brief moment of unipolarity when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Some 30 years ago, Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Charles Krauthammer argued that to see the U.S. as anything but the world’s “unchallenged superpower”<sup>55</sup> was fantasy. The U.S. could not retreat from the world because, according to Krauthammer, “The alternative to unipolarity is chaos,” he wrote. “If America wants stability, it will have to create it.”<sup>56</sup>

Now, according to political scientist and international relations expert John J. Mearsheimer, it is a liberal international order that has accelerated China’s rise, and ultimately transformed the system from unipolar to multipolar.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads A New History of the World*, New History of the World (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

<sup>52</sup> Graham Allison et al., “The Great Tech Rivalry: China vs the U.S.,” in *Avoiding Great Power War Project* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, <https://www.belfer-center.org/publication/great-tech-rivalry-china-vs-us>, 2021).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Karl W. Deutsch and J. David Singer, “Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability,” *World Politics* 16, no. 3 (1964).

<sup>55</sup> Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* (New York, N.Y.) 70, no. 1 (1990): 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>57</sup> Mearsheimer, “Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order,” *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019).

The growing relationship between Moscow and Beijing is not lost on President Biden, who has reportedly warned Chinese President Xi Jinping that China would face consequences if it were to provide material support to Russia amid the war in Ukraine. The call is part of longstanding U.S. efforts to check the emerging Sino–Russian betrothal, says historian McCoy, adding that, as U.S. global power declines, China and Russia “are going to emerge as the new centers of global power on the planet.”<sup>58</sup>

**The growing relationship between Moscow and Beijing is not lost on President Biden.**

McCoy further contends that China’s ascension is different from that of previous great powers.<sup>59</sup> The behemoth of a country is not relying on building a blue-water navy like the British or a global aerospace armada akin to America’s. Instead, it is “using its cash reserves to reach deep within the world island to the heart of Eurasia in an attempt to thoroughly reshape the geopolitical fundamentals of global power, using a subtle strategy that has so far eluded Washington’s power elites.”<sup>60</sup>

As Russia and China work to break U.S. dominance over a Eurasian landmass that is home to 70 percent of the world’s population, there is more evidence the decades-long alliance is nearing formal consummation. An example is China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. A massive infrastructure program of railways, energy pipelines, highways and streamlined border crossings, the BRI could expand the international use of Chinese currency and create as many as 50 special economic zones, turning the “middle of nowhere”<sup>61</sup> into the center of the world economy. “[T]he United States shares the concern of some in Asia that the BRI could be a

<sup>58</sup> McCoy.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Ben Mauk and Andrea Frazzetta, “Can China Turn the Middle of Nowhere into the Center of the World Economy?” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2019/ January 29, 2019.

Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion,” says the U.S.-based nonprofit think tank Council of Foreign Relations.<sup>62</sup>

For years, China has been engaged in what Nadège Rolland calls its “southern strategy,”<sup>63</sup> the creation of a grand coalition in its lower stretches to constrain U.S. strategic ambitions there. Rolland, a senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, argues that Chinese policymakers are building a global sphere of influence comprising the “non-Western, and largely nondemocratic world”<sup>64</sup> – what she calls the “global south.”<sup>65</sup> If China succeeds in shoring up support by unifying the global south, Rolland warns that U.S. global hegemony could come to an end.<sup>66</sup>

Russia and China are not exactly monogamous partners. Moscow and Tehran have jumped into bed on a recent \$40 billion project, a deal tying together the resources of the National Iranian Oil Company NIOC and Russia’s state-owned multinational energy giant Gazprom.<sup>67</sup> China, meanwhile cemented a 2021 agreement with Iran worth \$400 billion that will enable tech transfer, infrastructure development and oil sales between the two countries. The economic and security deal will help ease Iran’s international isolation and also reflects China’s growing interest in expanding its profile in the region – a region that has been a strategic preoccupation of the U.S. for decades, notes *The New York Times*.<sup>68</sup>

Really, such partnerships as those developed with Iran by Russia and China are but the tip of a Titanic-sized iceberg. The two powers are taking orders from and

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, “China’s Massive Belt and Road Initiative,” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>63</sup> Nadège Rolland, “China’s Southern Strategy: Beijing Is Using the Global South to Constrain America,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 9, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-06-09/chinas-southern-strategy> (2022).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Patrick Lawrence, “21st Century Order,” *scheerpost.com*, <https://scheerpost.com/2022/07/26/patrick-lawrence-21st-century-order/>.

<sup>68</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Myers Steven Lee, “China, with \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast,” *The New York Times*, Mar 27, 2021 2021.



fulfilling commitments to any number of countries that are helping swing the world order away from its current Western base.

## **Conclusion**

Modern war rarely ends in decisive military victories. Left behind are devastation, death and destruction. The war in Ukraine has shown the limits of American power in corralling a global coalition to positively impact its proxy wars. China's ties with Russia grow stronger in the war's wake.

**'We are at the edge of war with Russia and China on issues which we partly created, without any concept of how this is going to end or what it's supposed to lead to.'**

– Former U.S. Secretary of State  
Henry Kissinger

The world, says elder statesman Henry Kissinger, is on the edge of a dangerous disequilibrium: "We are at the edge of war with Russia and China on issues which we partly created, without any concept of how this is going to end or what it's supposed to lead to."<sup>69</sup>

The challenge for America in an emerging world order will be less about stopping the rise of other powers and more about finding its place among world powers. It is time for the U.S. to make a decision. Diversity in powers makes for greater options and

democratizes the global arena. Alternatives to the hegemony of the dollar-based order may help revive U.S. manufacturing while offsetting reliance on traditional energy sources. By diffusing the burden of leadership, delegating some tasks to regional powers, the U.S. can redirect valuable resources inward.

What this could mean for a country divided, a nation torn apart politically and socially, is a greater – and a more necessary – inward focus. While a side eye must be cast toward the melding of non-Western alliances and their impact on the

<sup>69</sup> Laura Secor, "Henry Kissinger is Worried About 'Disequilibrium'; the 99-Year-Old Former Secretary of State has Just Published a Book on Leadership and Sees a Dangerous Lack of Strategic Purpose in U.S. Foreign Policy," *The Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Aug 12, 2022.

U.S., internal challenges in the U.S. have been put on the backburner for too long. The advancement of what should be our real “national interests” – education, healthcare, environment, infrastructure, race relations and social services – are at stake.

### ***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.



# Power, Polarity and the Present

Image credit: Giovanni Cancemi / [Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

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### **Introduction**

An earthquake struck Europe in February 2022. This was not a natural disaster, but a political earthquake. Russia invaded Ukraine. The military temblor shook European policymakers' foundational beliefs to the core. It had an even greater impact on the decision-makers in Washington. A new phase in the post-Cold War international system emerged. Throughout the Cold War, bipolarity maintained a stable international system. The end of this decades-long political stalemate and its subsequent transformation into a unipolar world led to optimism about the future. American hegemony would continue the stability of the past and be a progressive force for the rest of the globe.

Washington initially considered the unipolar transformation generational,

whereas others thought it was a passing phase (Krauthammer 1990). The latter proved correct. Other powers — China, as an example — aspired to a seat at the world's power table. One aspect that the Russian aggression in Ukraine has highlighted is the slow but seemingly inevitable transition from unipolarity to multipolarity. It can be argued that there is a return to the Cold War period, whereby China replaces the Soviet Union as an antagonist to the United States position. There is validity to this assertion, though as recently as the end of 2022, it is hard to argue that China has the wherewithal the Soviet Union possessed throughout the Cold War years of the 1960s and 1970s.

To understand and predict polarity in the international system, it is best to start any investigation with reference firstly to power and secondly to Kenneth Waltz, who authored *Theory of International Politics* in 1979 in hopes of explaining the recurrence of a central and general dynamic observable in international politics: the balance of power (Waltz 2010).

## **Power**

Characterizing a central concept of international relations, such as power, demands deciphering the complicated task of shaping a polysemic notion, whose identification is a commitment to one or another particular current of thought. By shedding light on certain edges and hiding others, the form that power obtains in this approach is functional for the realist approach, to the detriment of the use that could be given to it in another interpretive framework. In this same sense, it is necessary to have as a compass the characterization of power, not its definition. The objective is to outline a descriptive and not normative notion of the term, which applies to an analytical model of relations formed among the agents of the international system.

**Characterizing a central concept of international relations, such as power, demands deciphering the complicated task of shaping a polysemic notion.**

Having delimited what is sought in terms of power, it is also necessary to establish the utility of the effort. From its particularities, neorealism — the basis of polarity

— is concerned with the meaning of the accumulation and maximization of power and how this demarcates the differences in hierarchization between the system's units — in this case countries vying for the controlling spot. Neorealist conceptual proposals explore appropriate ways of seeking power as a means for security, or as an end in classical realism — competition for power as an end (Waltz 2015). However, this central effort is weakened by a delimitation of the concept, which at the base of the theory is somewhat basic and has been evolving in a fragmented way throughout its development.

Power, from this perspective, becomes a means directed toward a gain within the spectrum of action, which translates into a better ability to promote one's ends, even against the opposition of other parties. In proposing power as a means to gain a foothold in any arena of action or dispute, the logical step is to try to understand the characteristics of power — descriptive conceptualization — and how they intervene in the competition. Four elements through which power will be understood as a relationship factor between units are highlighted below.

1. Power is a relational concept, which is based on the formation of a link between the parties, where one or more prevail over the other;
2. Power is multiscalar and multidimensional;
3. Power is based on the existence of a certain agenda or objective that is pursued in the social system;
4. Power must possess certain characteristics, real or perceived, that those influenced or controlled consider of immense value, either because they are considered threatening or valued as proof of the power exercised.

German sociologist Max Weber understood power as the probability of imposing one's own will, within a social relationship, even against all resistance, and whatever the foundation of that probability (Wallimann, Tatsis & Zito 1977). Power is also understood as a probability of obedience within a relationship between one or several parties, in which some desires and preferences are imposed on others. The point here is this: Power is the possibility for the agent to impose his/her will on others. It would not then be power — a proper or innate condition of an existing agent — but the expression, apparently measurable, of behaviour

patterns in a relationship. In this case, the link, although it is unidirectional in terms of the imposition of the will, becomes a two-way proposition. It also follows the Weberian approach to the idea of domination — a specific type of power — as the probability of finding obedience to a command. Both power and domination are based on a series of commands (as manifestations of the will of the dominator) being obeyed. This submission takes place in a bilateral bond where the parties expect that if the behaviour determined does not appear, then there is a decomposition or loss of the command-obedience relationship. In its relational condition, the competition for spaces of action is determined by the borders in which an agent can exercise domination over the others. Concerning this, the others see their action conditioned by the will of the first.

Imposition of the will may be motivated through the threat and recourse to direct violence and the construction of meanings that guide the agents' behaviour and

**Force is configured  
as a tool that  
guarantees  
obedience.**

allow for persuasion. In this sense, recalling what Weber proposed, force is configured as a tool that guarantees obedience. However, it cannot manifest relational power since serious violence is the resource through which the breach of the bilateral relationship of obedience is corrected; what guarantees force is the control of non-response or obedience to a command (Albrow 1990). In this direction, force is part of power, as a latent element. For our purposes, competing states would attempt to consolidate their respective domains

through immaterial elements that link the parties in a relationship of legitimacy which is understood as obedience to something beyond force.

When the relationship is accepted by those who are subject to it, those who value the benefits or the convenience of following the dictates of the other, power reaches its maximum expression. This means that in discussions of power relations, one is alluding to a combination of power over other actors, who appear as subordinates, and the power to achieve certain ends, both aspects being dialectically interrelated.

Therefore, power, in general, is the capacity of an individual or group of individuals to secure, directly or indirectly, what they want. Power presupposes ends — desires or preferences, and means. Power does not remain mere intentions. Various

forms of power can be categorized across a broad spectrum, from destruction to construction (Gray, Bougon & Donnellon 1985).

There are two complementary elements of power: the means and the ends. On the one hand, whoever exercises command in the relationship needs a series of means, real or perceived by the other parties, on which the connection is based. These elements are the inputs that allow both the possibility of appealing to force and building joint meanings through mass communication tools.

Power relations are not sustained in perpetuity. At one point, an agent promotes his interests over others and achieves the objectives they sets for themselves. However, when the agenda — objectives and preferences — is exhausted, another must appear, either because the dominator can generate a new one or because it is replaced by another that now has the possibility of imposing its will on others (Kalb 2013). Power must have meaning for a horizon or purpose; otherwise, the bilateral relationship would fragment because the dominant side stops fulfilling its part, giving space for the ties to be reactivated (Rasheed 1995).

### ***Waltz at work***

In Waltz's formulation, in an anarchic environment such as the international one, the behaviours of states and their conditioning was important. They set the international political structure. These conditionings took place at the level of selectable strategies to satisfy the primary interest of survival which, under normal conditions, could only be achieved by equalling the capabilities of the most powerful state in the system at a given moment. The nucleus of the reasoning of Waltz — a preeminent political scientist in the field of international relations — can be synthesized from the concept that international politics does not tolerate power vacuums (Schweller 2016).

**The nucleus of the reasoning of Waltz — a preeminent political scientist in the field of international relations — can be synthesized from the concept that international politics does not tolerate power vacuums.**



Waltz never hid his preference for the bipolar system. In his journal article “The Stability of a Bipolar World,” his first treatment of the topic, he highlighted the particular configuration of the bipolar system, presenting the two superpowers with a series of problems linked to the coordination between the actors and to the uncertainty related to crisis management, enacting the balance of power (Waltz 1964).

He also enumerated four characteristics of the Cold War bipolar system which, analogously, he extended to bipolar systems in general: the absence of peripheries, the extent and recurrence of crises, the persistent presence of a certain political pressure, and the military preponderance of the two poles (Waltz 1964). These characteristics help to make the power balance produced within the bipolar system one that is solid, inflexible. This makes the eventuality of a systemic war between the two contenders highly unlikely. The bipolar order is stable as long as systemic pressures create the conditions that allow for the adoption of internal balancing strategies.

In his analysis of the stability of a bipolar system when compared to a multipolar one, Waltz frequently referred to the topic of scarce systemic incentives to internal balancing that leads to the flexibility of alliances and systemic instability (Jervis 1987). In multipolar systems, Waltz noted, the instability is encouraged by two elements. The first is that the actors are incentivized to favour external balancing over internal balancing, therefore there exists a preference for a system of alliances. In the systems of alliances, in a multipolar system, it can be extremely volatile and flexible, due to the problems related to coordination between the actors themselves; there is a need to balance constantly against the actors capable of threatening the existing balance. However, it is not the alliance system itself that makes it an unstable multipolar system, rather it is the trends of the states regarding bloc dynamics when compared to their individual policies.

In general terms, Waltz sought to explain the continuities of international politics, prioritizing a systemic perspective in which maximum importance is given to the interactions between a set of units — whose internal political composition is irrelevant (Waltz 2014). Given the relationships between the few holders of the greatest power resources, the hierarchical structure is configured where the units are located, one above the other, according to the possession of

a greater or lesser number of these strategic resources. From where Waltz sat, the subordination factor is the ability to guarantee one's security through the resources one possesses. Once the central actors configure the structure, which is an ambivalent condition of the theory, the latter begins to condition the behaviour of its creators (Carlsnaes 2008). Through socialization, through which the parties create patterns of behaviour that are accepted or rejected, and competition, through which behaviours that are understood to be successful and necessary to replicate are generalized in the system, the range of actions that the units can develop is limited by the same structure (Schimmelfennig 2000).

Within Waltz's proposal, the central units are understood as poles or great powers. Under the idea that power and the resources that determine it are possible to accumulate or lose, these primordial agents must act in such a way as to maximize their resources and improve their security (Waltz 2000). The self-help principle states that the system rewards correct policies and punishes inappropriate behaviours in anarchic reality (Waltz 2014).

Thus, the change in the hierarchical position of the parties is constituted as a natural condition since, as a primary element, the parties will try to improve their relative position in front of the others. It is key to remember that for Waltz, the balance of power — as the set of manoeuvres designed to limit the capacity of a preponderant agent — is a condition to which the system tends more or less spontaneously after a period of hierarchical change. The number of powers that are configured at any given time demarcate the structure — unipolar, bipolar or multipolar — and the relationships established between them condition how the other actors interact with each other and with the powers, be they unilateral, multilateral or pluralateral (Bhala & Cooper 2014).

There is an absence of a relational dynamic in Waltz's 20th-century conception of power. He identified it only as a capacity that derives from the possession of strategic factors, which grant power regardless of their counterparts. With this as a reference, there is a relational link that is equal to, or even more important than, the eventual capacity of an actor to exploit some resources that it possesses.

In this same sense, recalling the contributions of Joseph Nye, one of the most influential of today's scholars on American foreign policies, the demarcation of

the dual nature of power comes into play (Bakalov 2020). The importance of the classic physical resources of power such as population, territory and military resources continues to be significant as a hierarchical factor within the structure. State units have gradually displaced their interests from material to immaterial resources, focusing on the ability of an agent to make others want what their competitors want and not to impose it by force (Nye 1990). There are different typologies given to sets of powers under denominations such as superpower, hegemonic power, great power, regional power, middle power and emerging power, where it becomes a matter of adequately dimensioning the type of power resources and the scope of the state (Nolte 2010).

### ***Rethinking polarity***

In trying to identify polarity, the idea of anarchy must be preserved as a starting point, as a fundamental principle of the system, and as the configuration of a hierarchical structure based on the interactions between the units. Within the structure, states position themselves based on their power resources, which become a means to preserve their existence and security. This security is defined in defensive and offensive orbits. Once its survival is assured, the agent will try to influence the system to maintain the status quo that benefits it within an offensive framework. Power resources are not conceived exclusively in physical properties; immaterial factors, such as culture, soft power and political ideology, can also become tools exploited for the state's security.

**In trying to identify polarity, the idea of anarchy must be preserved as a starting point.**

The basic idea, applicable to each scale and following the delimitation made of the idea of power, focuses on proposing that the recognition of power falls on the existence of a relational link. The link is sustained by the possession of a significant amount of resources of power, which allow the state to develop an international agenda. The state is considered a leading player in the system's structure. The state configures the behaviour and expectations of those residing within the system,

based on predictions of the behaviour of the power. In differentiating the powers by the type of power resources they possess and their scope, analyses at different scales are necessary. Some preponderant states will appear at the systemic level and others will stand out at the regional level, being regular that the former has a space of regional preponderance, to sustain their interests of global scope. If the systemic level is focused upon, the U.S., China, India, Russia, European Union, Brazil, and South Africa would attract attention. When comparing the global and regional scale, actors can be repeated or introduced, which in their respective contexts — due to a limited number of resources that forces a regional projection agenda — have dynamism and recognition from the other States.

To support its power status, the state will support its own actions, especially its survival, within a defensive orbit. The actions of the powers are framed within the development of an agenda aimed at improving their security and configuring or sustaining a world or regional order convenient to their interests. The resources of power are divided between the material — military, economic, population, territorial resources — and the immaterial, those of political leadership, cultural influence, persuasion capacity and production of knowledge and information.

It is also necessary to locate the non-state agents of the system within power relations without losing sight of the preponderance of states within the world order. Remembering that the structure is formed from the interaction between powers, the intervention of these new agents in the system occurs concerning the links between the states.

Non-state agents are independent units with their unique interests and objectives, which act in specific dimensions and on various scales of analysis. They can take multiple forms, with different degrees of organization and levels of international activity. To understand their role in the system, it is essential to recognize the functional difference between state and non-state agents. The former, whose action reference is the safeguarding of its security through the accumulation of power resources, has the same functional order, given its obligation to guarantee its own survival. Meanwhile, non-states are not obliged to the same condition of self-protection — the preservation of a social group does not depend on their existence. Therefore, they can develop a flexible role within the power relations in the system, adapted to the issues on which they decide to intervene such as the

environment or focus on human rights. Within the spectrum of action, in their intervention in power relations, they are characterized by configuring themselves as enhancers, facilitators or obstacles.

In the first case, the non-state agent and the state develop a connection in which, consciously, both parties understand that the better positioning of one results in benefits for the other. Given this relationship condition, the non-state agent will undertake beneficial actions for his official ally, understanding them as indirectly beneficial for himself.

In the second type of relationship, the non-state agent, in the development of its agenda, indirectly and casually can benefit a certain state. Actions will only sometimes be useful to the power, but the state agencies can exploit the activity to their benefit.

In the third type, the non-state agent becomes an obstacle, even an opponent, to the activities of a certain power. This relationship is usually based on an opposing ideological perspective, where the state itself bases its rejections on the fundamental principles or elements it defends in the system. Diplomatic networks, international law, international organizations and even the media can influence power relations, affecting their dynamics and acting as structural modifiers (Allott 1983).

Finally, it is necessary to recognize two fundamental factors of the current world order, which are constituted as the context in which powers interact. In the first place, the agenda on which the agents operate has become complex, both in the issues addressed and in the way they intersect. Secondly, the interconnection that the system has reached means that all processes are subject to a constant state of change, in which disturbances in one area of the globe can have consequences in the rest of the world.

## ***Conclusion***

Regarding Russian aggression in Ukraine, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger advocates rewarding Russia with territory. The implosion of Russia carries much greater incipient threats to the international system than the diminution of Ukraine. In terms of polarity, Kissinger accepts that Moscow

cannot be considered an effective pole, but rather as a nuclear threat. What is clear, however, is that one cannot classify the international system as being unipolar with the single power able to guarantee allies territorial integrity, as the superpowers were able to do so during the Cold War. During the Cold War the superpowers were able to guarantee their allies territorial integrity. At present, it is clear to see that one cannot classify the international system as being unipolar as the “unipolar power” is unable to enact this guarantee, as witnessed in Ukraine.

Taking a snapshot of the world in 2023, the war in Ukraine has demonstrated that the Russia of today is not the Soviet Union of the Cold War (Yiğit 2022), especially in terms of its military profile. Having said this, one must bear in mind the Soviet military intervention into Afghanistan. At the time, many thought the Red Army would easily overcome the internal opposition and strengthen the Afghan communist regime. That was not to be; the Soviets withdrew after a decade and a substantial number of casualties and deaths. Thus, in some respects Russia is not too dissimilar to the Soviet Union in terms of its military effectiveness when invading a neighbouring country. The war in Ukraine, therefore, severely harms its prospects of becoming a polar power.

A brutal war is raging in Ukraine. This armed conflict has captured the attention of those trying to explain the contemporary international system of power. Some cling to the notion of the United States as the unipolar power (Fettweis 2022). Some, such as international affairs specialist and academic Charles Kupchan believe that bipolarity — in the form of an emerging China — has already arrived (Kupchan 2021). Still others like political scientists Benjamin Martill and Lisa ten Brinke accept a multipolar world with the European Union as a third pole. (Martill & ten Brinke 2020). One can certainly add as potential future polar powers India and Brazil. (Krasilshchikov 2022)

China is the likeliest polar prospect. Beijing is not home to a monolithic stagnant

**One cannot classify the international system as being unipolar with the single power able to guarantee allies territorial integrity, as the superpowers were able to do so during the Cold War.**

economy like Russia's, but one which is expected to be the largest in the world by 2035 (Tang 2022). In fact, evaluated through purchasing power parity measures, China's GDP passed U.S. GDP nearly a decade ago. It has steadily increased its military spending and through its massive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative, is engaging with the developing world economically, simultaneously projecting its soft power. Welcome to a brave new world.

### **About the author**

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Yiğit is the author of several books and book chapters on energy security, United States–China trade relations, citizenship, European foreign policy, the war in Ukraine, Eurasian Economic Union developments and Mongolian democratisation. His current research interests are chiefly focused on polarity in international relations, African Union–EU relations, EU migration, Mongolian foreign policy, digital transformation and Georgian 20th-century developments.

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# Western-Eurasian Relationship:

The Physiognomic Implications of the Power Shift from the US to China

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## ***Introduction***

The global economy has been divided into two categories: “developed” and “developing.” The developing nations are called “Third World” countries. China was formally categorized as a Third World country but has risen as one of the world’s fastest-growing economies (and, in some cases, a leading economy); it’s now a developed nation. Countries can be said to be unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Unipolarity explains a state that favors supremacy with a preponderance of power and has no rival states, like the case of the U.S. (Jervis 2009).

The United States exercises its unipolarity and superiority to unleash a majority of power over other states. (Waltz 2000 & Norrlöf 2010). The imbalance of power propelled the weaker states with the strength and reason to break the jinx. Academic and one-time editor-in-chief of *Security Studies* William Wohlforth

rejects the balance of power and believes power should be centered on the more superior form. After the Cold War, the U.S. has been the dominant power in the international system. As such, the idea of a balance of power, if adopted globally, will create competition between the U.S. and other countries seeking control and influence; this could weaken the preeminence of the U.S. The unipolarity lying with the U.S. has been a contentious issue, as countries have diversified their economies in ways that have driven the past success of the United States. The U.S.'s dominance has accounted for its continued and heady participation in global issues.

Carla Norrlöf, a Swedish-Ethiopian political scientist who specializes in the international political economy of trade, investment, and security; argues that three factors guarantee the unipolarity of the U.S.: the global exchange rate of the dollar as the world's most accepted dominant currency, commercial power, and military power. Looking at the U.S. holistically, the country benefits greatly from its supremacy (Norrlöf, 2010). Many countries do not challenge U.S. control because the economic policies align with the caprices of policy choices. These U.S. political and economic policies have significantly aided and enhanced the wealth creation of the so-called international world order (Beckley 2018). After World War II, the United States set up an international order designed to sustain its leadership role in world affairs and protect its status as the "world's greatest democracy." The United States is not known for material superiority but for a solid social and economic structure obtained through legitimacy and institutionalization (Wohlforth 2022).

The "power-centered approach" paradigm best explains the necessity and existence of power to handle societal issues involving domination and the exercise of control over others (Oguine et al. 2021), which explains the nature of power in handling societal issues. Political power is unavoidably consequential in responding to issues that require one's ability (Oguine 2018). Michael Beckley, a fellow in the International Security Program at the Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, has argued that American importance and homogeneity have blindfolded the West, positing that the U.S. growth rate is less than other powerful nations like China and India, which are highly populated. To buttress Beckley's view, scholars such as Barry Posen, John

Mearsheimer, and William Wohlforth have offered that unipolarity is on the verge of collapsing and could be headed to a multipolarity world order (Beckley et al. 2018). Multipolar policies could weaken the economic interdependencies of less developed countries (Garzón 2017). Consequently, as multipolar systems propel global orders, agreements formed within regions to overwrite international policies will be necessary to seed growth.

### ***The US and the Eurasian economies***

The world is swiftly moving from a unipolar to multipolar world order. The idea of “Eurasia” as a combined force in global affairs earned recognition after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Hoekman 2014). Its geological and geopolitical silhouette encompasses a single enormous landmass comprised of the continents of Europe and Asia. The Eurasian-centered economy has focused – and often found – solutions to foster development. China, Russia, and the countries of Central Asia have contributed much to make Eurasia’s fiscal and economic policies more feasible. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), launched in 1961, fosters policy dialogue and understanding between countries. OECD Eurasia activities have been centered in thirteen countries, including Afghanistan, Armenia, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine to call out some of those bordering the European Union in the east. Meanwhile, in 2014, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was created with the signatures of the leaders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Russia to post-Soviet states. As a milepost for success, the Union has integrated a single market of nearly 200 million people and a GDP just shy of \$2 trillion, according to the International Monetary Fund’s 2021 Economic Outlook Database, while at the same time pursuing policy reforms that conform to global best practices that support Ukraine’s European aspirations.

The EAEU operates through international and intergovernmental institutions, emulating the European Union. Its single integrated market enhances the free movement of goods and services and shares standard macroeconomic policies, transport, industry, agriculture, energy, foreign trade, investment, and technical regulation. The free trade system of the EAEU promotes high, but not necessarily uniform growth among states; it poses no dangers, so long as all participants are from several countries, thereby alleviating any single dominance. The open

interchange system is now referred to as “globalization” to harness countries and put off power segregation in the politics and economics of world economies. This system allows for the free exchange of information, ideas, goods, and services globally without restrictions or limitations.

Among Eurasian countries, is China the world’s fastest-growing economy? The answer must be “Yes.” China is one of the non-member economies with which the OECD has working ties, and the country’s trade and industrialization pedigree has deepened the interdependency between other countries. The paradigm shift in the global economies of countries like China,

South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, and India has been swift because of enormous investments in infrastructure and education. This shift in thinking and practice provides the best opportunity for nations to increase economic growth and meet their respective wealth and socio-economic goals. Expanding the “trade possibility frontier” requires that all trade allies be mindful of the protectionist tendencies that consistently surface as a result of societal interests, particularly in times of economic distress. OECD estimates that, because of the high tariffs imposed in Section 301 of the U.S. Trade Act of 1974, the exchange of goods between the United States and China could decrease by 1.1 percent of China’s real GDP in 2021-2022 (OECD Baseline Economic Projection). In fact, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission, across all affected sectors, Section 301 tariffs reduced imports from China by 13 percent, increased the value of U.S. production by 0.4 percent and increased the price of U.S. products by 0.2 percent.

In the 2016 Global Manufacturing Competitiveness Index, international consultant Deloitte ranked China as the world’s most competitive manufacturer. At the top of the firm’s list of 40 countries in the category, China had been ranked number four just six years earlier. China’s ascent to the position of a global leader through its significant investments in innovative technologies improved higher education and extensive research and development spending. Additionally, China’s forward progress is attributable to its focus on high productivity, the

**Among Eurasian countries, is China the world’s fastest-growing economy? The answer must be ‘Yes.’**

introduction of viable government policies that enhance innovation, and its increasing graduation rates in STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics).

From a broader perspective, out of 140 economies, the World Economic Forum ranked China as the world's 28th most competitive economy, while the U.S. was ranked first (WEF 2016). China's population is nearing 1.5 billion people, giving the country a robust population of supporting youth in an economic-human capital model boosting high productivity rates. From the early 1980s, China's economic reforms in foreign investment and trade have aided it in achieving great economic prowess, and the country has continued to prosper. China's manufacturing dominance has the potential for the weaponization of trade and dangerous market disputes with its Eurasian counterparts, and its emergence on the world trade stage poses a severe and persistent military menace to the Western bloc.

According to the World Bank Annual Report (2018), China is the second-largest and fastest-growing economy on earth, with an average increase with an annual growth rate of 9.5 percent in 2022. Comparatively, Asia's economic growth rate was 16 percent in 1950 and 34 percent in 1998. Also, it has been projected that the Eurasian growth rate will rise by 44 percent by 2030 (The World Bank 2019). The merger of Europe and Asia into a single entity will entail working together on various economic, political and cultural ties. Doing so through institutions such as the United Nations, the WTO and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will build a larger Eurasian economy.

U.S. influence during the Cold War and post-war years shaped its role as a unipolar world leader, certainly in Europe and Asia. At the same time, China's ascension on the international playing field was much the result of its perceived rivalry with the Soviet Union, which earned it favor and support from the United States (Ikenberry 2001). In fact, in 2001, China was admitted into the World Trade Organization

**Cooperation in Europe will build a larger Eurasian economy. US influence during the Cold War and post-war years shaped its role as a unipolar world leader, certainly in Europe and Asia.**



(WTO) to promote the expansion of an open international economic system, one with few, if any, barriers to free trade activity. China is one country in Eurasia with large-scale capital investment, accelerated growth, economic expansion and more significant trading partners. It has prominent trading partners in Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and has maintained an enormous trade surplus with the United States. Other trade countries partnered with China include members of the European Union (EU), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), and the Association of Southeastern Asia Nations (ASEAN). The ASEAN countries of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam today pose a threat to the Western bloc because of their regional multipolarity. (Observation of Economic Complexity 2020).

### ***Trade activities between China and the US***

In terms of trade, China's trade surplus was ranked as the world's leading exporter of finished products and the second-largest importer of raw materials and semi-finished goods. Consequently, the country's major imports are electrical machinery and equipment, crude petroleum, nuclear reactors, boilers, ores, medical and surgical instruments, optical and photographic material, pharmaceutical products, oil seeds, and vehicles other than railway tramways. And, its export products include computers, cellphones, office machine parts, integrated circuits, textiles, light fixtures and electronics. The rise of China ahead of several countries has both positive and negative consequences. In the international market, its productive capacity, dominance, high proficiency, demand and consumption of

**China's increase in terms of economic growth, research and development has pushed up its competitive strength.**

its finished products have propelled real-time geopolitical and market competition with other nations over time. A General Administration of Customs report from China's ministry-level administrative agency showed that the country is leading in the digital economy and sustainable development. China's rapid technological advancements and innovative policies have posed a significant threat to the

United States and other developed nations. China's increase in terms of economic growth, research and development has pushed up its competitive strength; this could cause the U.S. to lose its ranking as the world superpower.

In 2010, the China Internet Network Information Center claimed that China had overtaken the United States with the most significant number of internet users (253 million), thereby becoming the world's biggest market with a 50 percent growth rate over the preceding year. The growth potential remains vast; even at these numbers, only 19 percent of Chinese people use internet services, compared with 70 percent in the U.S. The colossal percentage gap could result from so many factors; internet censorship is one factor that affects internet usage. Notably, ten countries — China, Iraq, North Korea, Belarus, Turkey, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Iran, Russia, and Turkmenistan — have a total ban on virtual private networks (VPN).

Chinese internet censorship is more comprehensive and strictly reinforced. Such censorship includes the restriction of freedom of the press and viewing online materials such as news and documentaries. China has also blocked various websites and web pages: Google search, Facebook, Twitter, Wikipedia and mobile phone apps are among those closed off. Chinese internet censorship scrutinizes the internet access of Chinese netizens to combat disinformation and cyber-related crimes and promote the patronage of domestic products and services. The internet censorship system is called the "Great Firewall of China." The Great Firewall combines legislative actions and technologies to regulate internet activities domestically.

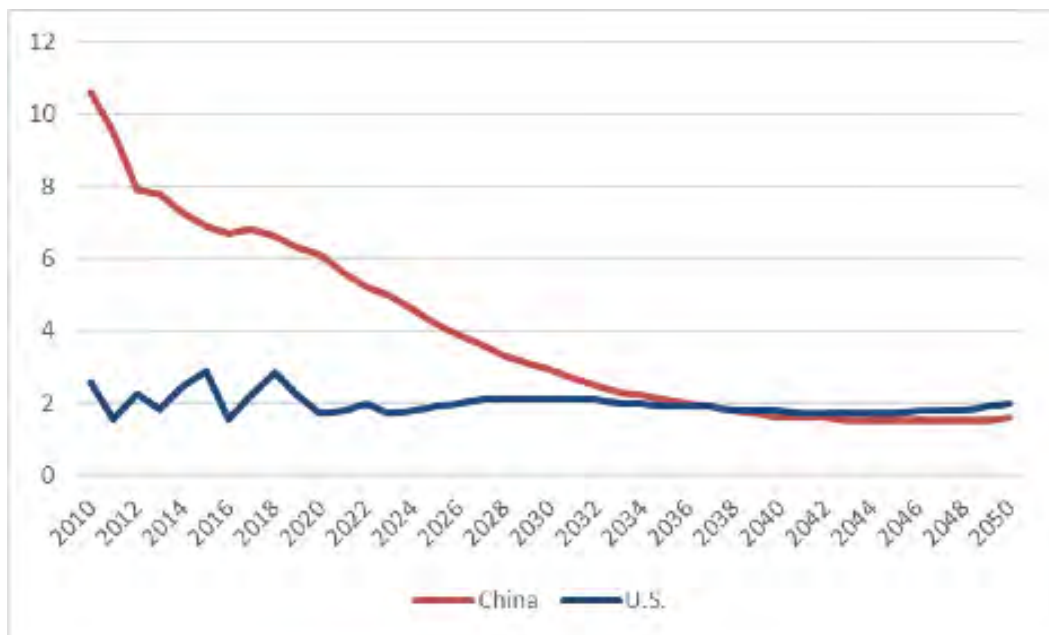
With growth rates of 60 percent to 70 percent per year, the internet market is China's fastest-growing consumer market, dominated by domestic companies like Baidu, Tencent, and Alibaba. The technological advancement is practically and steadily pushing American companies such as Google and Yahoo and others out of their long-held leadership positions in sectors ranging from 5G technology to artificial intelligence (AI) (Monteiro 2013).

In 2007, China attained the highest growth in its history at 14.2 percent, experienced a decline for two years, then increased its GDP by 10.6 percent in 2010. China has taken over Japan and Eurasian countries to become the world's fastest

economy. In 2021, the growth of actual GDP was about \$18 trillion and amounted to an approximate 6 percent increase, which constituted 18.4 percent of the global economy (*CNN Business News* 2022).

The productivity rate has led to a decreased growth rate of 5.8 percent in 2022 and 5.6 percent in 2023, respectively, which is about 1.3 and 0.7 percent points lower than the previous year's projections (*World Bank Facts* 2022). In late 2020, the crackdown on the private sector, a firm commitment to zero-tolerance Covid-19 policy and other economic policies badly affected the economy and job markets, especially in the tech industry. Indeed, these ugly scenarios have caused rising social discontent and slow innovation and productivity dynamics.

ANNUAL REAL GDP GROWTH RATES PROJECTIONS OF THE U.S. AND CHINESE ECONOMY BY PERCENTAGE



Source: *Economist Intelligence Unit Database* (2019)

The leadership of the former president of the People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao, lasted almost a decade, from 2003–2013. He oversaw China's smooth recovery from the global financial crisis and emergence as a significant world power. He focused on building a more egalitarian society to enhance the living standard of vulnerable populations in China. Hu launched a global campaign and policies to combat climate change and greenhouse gases, but when succeeded in the presidency

by Xi Jinping, many middle-class people were disappointed and disillusioned by the subsequent economic performance. The Xi leadership model is the direct opposite of the immediate past president. Hu promoted rapid expansion through investment, manufacturing, and trade. China is at a crossroads now; in 2013, the GDP began to record downward results. The more recent, Xi-inspired model has caused diminishing returns in economic equality and increasing financial debt due to sluggish economic activities.

The leadership of Xi has not only become narrow-minded in issues like the economically disastrous zero-tolerance COVID policy, which has propelled a colossal gap in U.S.-China relations. His refusal to condemn the Moscow invasion of Ukraine, and China's recent aggression toward Taiwan, could further isolate China from the U.S. and its allies. The Economist Intelligence Unit, an international economic forecaster, has predicted a drop of 1.9 percent in China's GDP growth rates by 2037. The EIU database estimates that by 2050, the U.S. GDP will surpass China's by a difference of 0.1 percent.

For the West, structural frameworks such as the IMF and other specialized bodies have strengthened the coexistence of the global economic order by promoting more stable and equitable economic policies that support the sustainable growth and development of other nations.

And, speaking of development, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) — the globe's most ambitious infrastructure project — is a massive undertaking that can only expand the country's influence in Eurasia. China, in fact, has budgeted more than \$1 trillion (US) for developed and less-developed countries (LDC) at 4 percent interest.

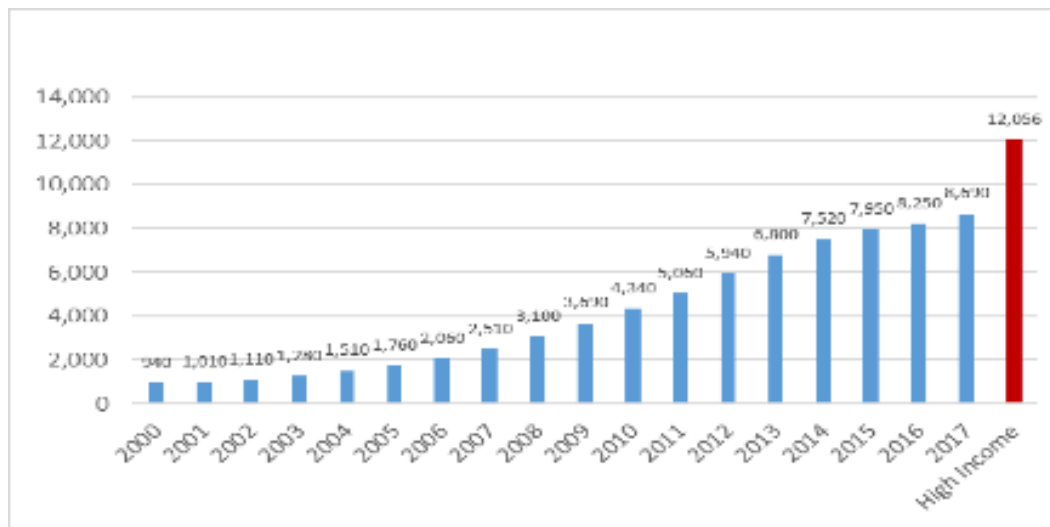
Presently, the allotted lending fund is China's largest official creditor. The loan has a shorter pay-back period of 10 years, compared to the 28 years of other concessional lenders, such as the World Bank, that have lower interest rates and longer repayment periods.

Conversely, the BRI project has left the Asian giant with a vast piled-up loan. The Chinese economy is threatened; about 60 percent of the country's loans are trapped as debtors. The IMF, in some cases, could offer a debt waiver to LDCs, but the Chinese will barely relinquish its financial supply. In this, China's unsustainable

debt trap policy has been criticized. It has been alleged to be a panacea to take control of important institutions and installations in defaulting countries and to establish its military presence (BBC News 2018).

As a global player in the technology arena, the U.S. has implemented measures to safeguard its standing. Patent rights restrictions on installing software equipment, current updates and spare parts are among the steps taken to make these products and services difficult to access in the international marketplace. About 95 percent of the computer chips (AI and semiconductor technologies) needed to optimize production in robotics, automated vehicles, electronics and other equipment are made in China. These restrictions have jeopardized China's prospects in AI development and innovation, among the requisites of a world power. Additionally, Beijing's efforts to invest in producing semiconductors to ensure domestic self-reliance have been retarded because of the presence of corruption in governmental agencies.

WORLD BANK MEASUREMENTS OF CHINA'S PER CAPITA PRODUCT: 2000-2017 (\$ BILLION)



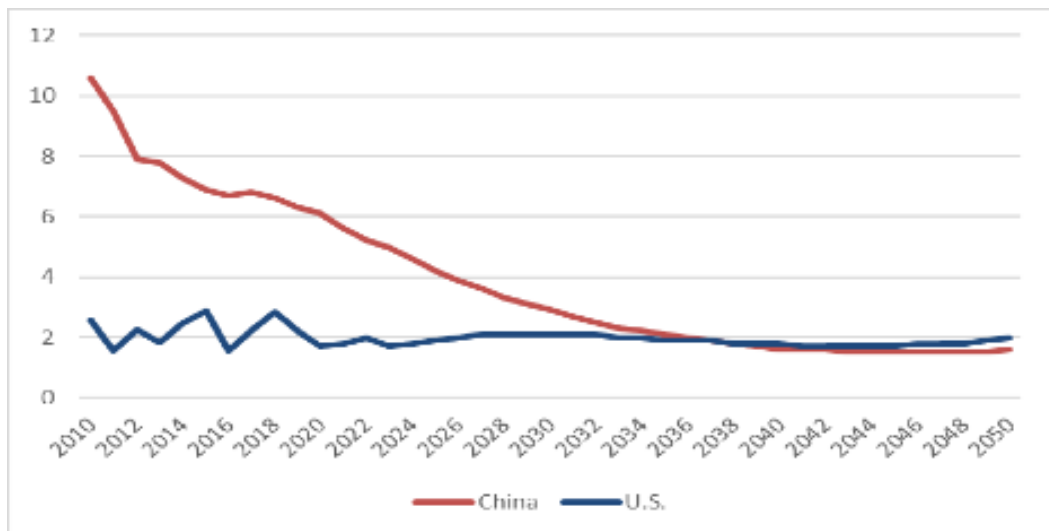
Source: Common Reporting Standard Report (2019)

The decline of the United States from its position as a global superpower has been the source of commentary for several decades. By all indications, the U.S. will still be the dominant global power in the near future, but may no longer boast the largest economy. While it could experience a future drop from its global perch, it

is likely Americans (and Europeans) will still enjoy greater personal wealth than others on this planet for the foreseeable and long-term futures.

According to the World Database Outlook, by 2050 the economies of the E7 (the “Emerging Seven” of China, India, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Indonesia, and Turkey) will grow to be, collectively, 50 percent larger than the current G7 (U.S., Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Canada). China will remain the fastest-growing economy near term, gaining economic strength from foreign trade. At the same time, it may overtake the United States to become the world’s largest and fastest-growing economy. In this short, maybe three-to-four-year window of time, the Chinese economy could be as much as 30 percent larger than that of the U.S.

PROJECTIONS THROUGH 2050 U.S. AND CHINESE ANNUAL GDP GROWTH RATES 2010-2018 BY PERCENTAGE

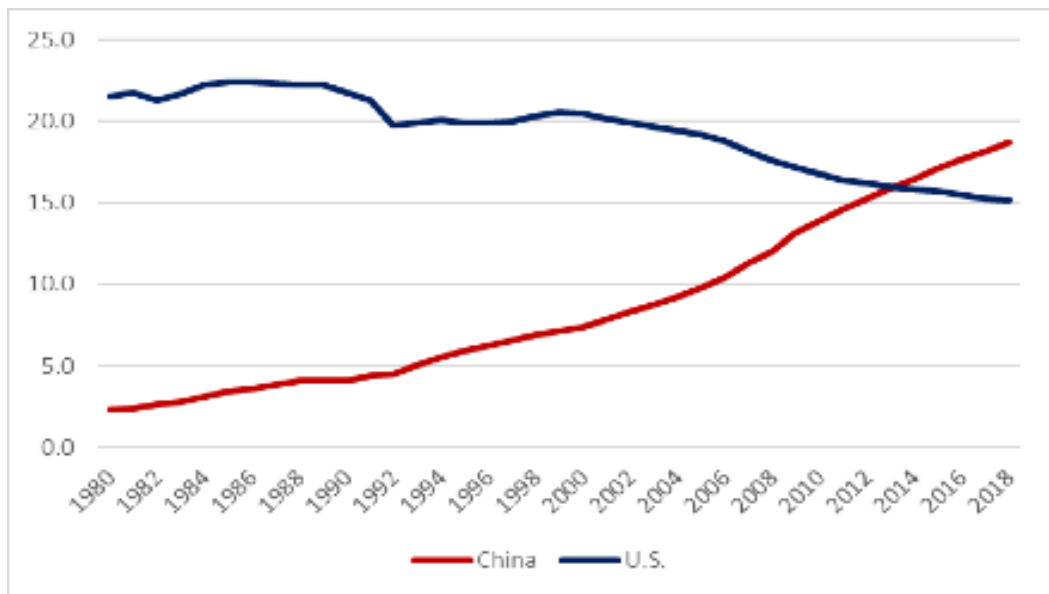


Source: EIU Database (2019)

Recently, China announced a significant oil discovery – 61 deep-sea drilling plants are now hard at work in exploration. The country has achieved technological advancement in deep-water energy exploration and drilling, based on technology that is recognized as among the best in the world. Additionally, China produces high-quality maintenance equipment and parts to keep the offshore exploration

infrastructure at optimum performance and production. The country's advancements in these areas are critical: Because it engages mainly in industries, shipping and the transport of large volumes of goods, China's appetite for energy is voracious. Recent deep-sea oil explorations have ensured that the government can satisfy at least 70 percent of its citizen's growing energy demand.

U.S. AND CHINESE GDP (PURCHASING POWER PARITY BASIS) AS A SHARE OF GLOBAL TOTAL, 1980-2018, BY PERCENTAGE



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook (2019)

Many economists and social science scholars such as Lio Chi-Shing, Li Changan, Zheng Bijan, Martin Jacques, and Kathleen Walsh have forecast that China will soon become the world's largest economy. They argue that the increase in economic growth in AI, manufacturing, industrial goods and others will lead to an ultimate shift in the global balance of power. Comparable data on China's economy has been debated among economists because Chinese national accounting differs from most Western nations. The difficulties of bridging this statistical gap pose a concern to statisticians due to the nature of the Chinese accounting process. Economists attempt to develop estimates of exchange rates based on their actual purchasing power relative to the dollar to make more accurate comparisons of



economic data across countries, usually referred to as purchasing power parity or PPP.

Currency value measurements ignore variances in the prices for goods and services across nations. Furthermore, the purchasing power of one U.S. dollar to the Chinese yen would buy more goods and services in China than in the United States. In 2015, China emerged as the world’s largest economy over the United States because of its international trade impacts. Still, the U.S. dollar’s purchasing power remains second among the world’s leaders.

COMPARISONS OF CHINESE AND U.S. GDP AND PER CAPITA GDP IN NOMINAL U.S. DOLLARS PURCHASING POWER PARITY BASIS IN 2018

Economic Activities	China	United States
Nominal GDP (\$ billions)	13,407	20,494
GDP in PPP (\$ billions)	25,270	20,494
Nominal Per Capita GDP (\$ billions)	9,608	62,606
Per Capita GDP in PPP (\$)	18,110	62,606

Source: IMF World Economic Forum (2021)

## **Conclusion**

China and the U.S. are the two largest economies in the world. IMF findings demonstrate that several emerging and developed countries are engulfed by a high level of dollar-denominated debt. Against all odds, the U.S. dollar is used for 90 percent of global transactions. The U.S. debt to China comes mainly from U.S. Treasury securities and bonds issued by the U.S. government.

Moving forward, China’s colossal trade surplus with the U.S. — maintaining China’s export-driven economy — will result in a debt-buying burden on the communist country. The purchase of U.S. Treasury bonds has subjected China to occupy a larger place in the U.S. national debt; the U.S. uses these bonds as a negotiating tool in trade agreements. However, Chinese loans to the U.S. through

the purchase of treasury bills, and its dependency on the U.S. economy, leverage the U.S. to buy Chinese products. In terms of international trade, both countries gain mutually; China gets a big market for its goods, and the U.S. benefits from the lower prices of Chinese products. Despite their political and economic rivalry, both countries are inter-twined and interdependent; most likely, they need each other to solve vital transnational issues such as climatic change, peacekeeping missions and poverty in developing nations.

**There is a widespread belief that the power shift is gradually moving from America to Eurasia.**

Although both countries have solid policies to influence technology advancements and international trade, there is a widespread belief that the power shift is gradually moving from America to Eurasia. Looking at the facts in this paper, the issue of power shift is still a conspiracy theory because of persistent fluctuations in trade and the quirks and moods

of the global economy and financial institutions. Over several decades, the U.S. has formed significant alliances with other nations to boost global economic development. China still lags behind the United States; it has recorded gaps in technological innovations, production of semiconductors, biotechnology and renewable energy. Despite China's military arsenals and intelligence, the U.S. still has the world's most sophisticated weaponry and nuclear weapons.

Comparably, the U.S. financial market lends to developing countries at a lower interest rate with a longer payback period. Despite a significant number of internet users, among other countries, China's ban on VPNs has placed tight restrictions and control on the use of the internet to access media information and novel ideas, limiting freedom of speech and the rights of citizens. The U.S. leverages the internet and allows its accessibility to its citizens to enhance freedom of speech.

Despite China's huge progress in opening up its economy, it still maintains some levels of protection that restrict direct foreign investments and trade-related activities, whereas U.S. economic policies foster global foreign investment and trade. All these have given the United States the status quo of being a major actor in international affairs. It remains the world's superpower.

### **About the author**

Dr. Nchedo Josephine Oguine holds a Bachelor of Science in economics, as well as a Master of Science and Ph.D. degree in political economy and development studies. She is a member of the American Economic Association, the International Political Science Association, the African Association of Political Science, the International Association of Political Science Students, and the Nigerian Association of Political Science.

Her research centers on political economy and development studies, and she has published standard research works in the fields of agriculture, comparative politics, political philosophy and theories, and public policy analyses in reputable international journals. Outside of the scope of developmental problems, Oguine has made research contributions in the areas of political ethics and international relations.

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# Russia's invasion of Ukraine: What does it mean for Africa?<sup>1</sup>

Image credit: Oleg Elkov / Shutterstock.com

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine marks a decisive end to the post-Cold War security regime that has governed the strained but stable relations between the West and Russia and guaranteed the independence of East European countries and former Soviet republics over the last three decades. The invasion threatens the security of small nations and reinforces the illiberal turn in world politics by challenging the body of rights and democratic norms that gained ascendancy in the 1990s. African opinion- and policy-makers should understand what this portends for the continent.

Russia's transition from communism to capitalism was messy: Its economy contracted by about 40 per cent after a shock therapy of price liberalisation and

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privatisation. Inflation skyrocketed, the ruble plummeted and shortages of basic food items became the norm. While the employment data did not show any mass layoffs, about a quarter of the workforce was on unpaid or low-paid leave. A third of the population fell into poverty, and the social protections developed in the Soviet era proved insufficient for maintaining basic well-being. Boris Yeltsin, the first post-communist president, sought — and Russia was granted — membership in the IMF in 1992 and obtained a series of loans with tough conditionalities that did not improve the country's economy (Gould-Davies and Woods 1999; Crotty 2020). Indeed, former Russian foreign minister and prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, believes that Russia's losses under the IMF were twice as large as those suffered during World War II (Arkangelskaya and Shubin 2013).

Many Russians saw the IMF loan agreements as an attack on Russia's sovereignty (Gould-Davies and Woods 1999) and an attempt to turn Russia into a vassal state of the West. Indeed, the loss of the Soviet republics, the deep economic recession, and dependence on Western institutions for finance profoundly weakened Russia's status as a global power and provoked a conservative and neonationalist turn in domestic politics. Russians yearned for a strong leader who would reverse the decline and restore the country's position in the comity of nations.

After winning several fairly credible elections and stabilising the economy with the help of soaring oil and gas prices, Vladimir Putin, an ex-KGB official, fit the bill of a new messiah. When Putin assumed power in 2000, Russia's political system, though fragile, could still be described as an electoral democracy; relatively free and competitive elections were regularly held. However, within a few years of his rule, Putin reined in independent political organisations, developed the brutal tactic of poisoning his key critics, controlled national television stations and other media, weakened the power of the oligarchs who had been empowered by fire sales of state assets, and concentrated power in the presidency (McFaul 2021). Supreme political authority provided the basis for challenging Western hegemony and reclaiming former Soviet lands.

**Supreme political authority provided the basis for challenging Western hegemony and reclaiming former Soviet lands.**

Ever since he came to power, Putin has been obsessed with recreating the boundaries of the Soviet Union as Russian territory. In 2005, he told the world that the collapse of the Soviet Union “was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century” and a “genuine tragedy” for the Russian people as “tens of millions” of Russians found themselves outside Russian territory (BBC 2005). His strategic view of the world is a throwback to the Concert of Europe of the nineteenth century in which the great powers had vested interests and spheres of influence, intervened in the internal affairs of small states and acted collectively to maintain a balance of power or security in Europe. Such a system is antithetical to the current multilateral norms and arrangements that seek to curb unilateralist behaviour by states.

The US and its Western allies did not only refuse to dismantle NATO, they proceeded to expand it to include former Soviet republics and East European countries. This was a strategic blunder of enormous proportions, especially as Putin wanted Russia to join the alliance but was told that he had to apply like any state seeking membership (Rankin 2021). Hubris or triumphalism clouded Western strategic policy-making. Many bought the dubious and self-serving idea of the end of history — that markets and democracy would now

**The US and its Western allies did not only refuse to dismantle NATO, they proceeded to expand it to include former Soviet republics and East European countries.**

determine how states are governed, and that the US would be the only superpower and would do as it pleased in policing the world. This posture fuelled Putin’s suspicion that the West still regarded Russia as an enemy and was not serious about world peace. In the logic of realpolitik and national security, the borders of states, especially those of great powers, should be free of antagonistic military forces. It is highly unlikely that Estonia and Latvia, which share a common border with Russia, would have been allowed to join NATO if Russia had regained its confidence and was governed by a resolute and calculating leader like Putin. Matters were not helped when NATO signalled that it would consider Ukraine’s membership of the alliance.



**The US and its allies ignored UN rules and procedures in 2003 by invading Iraq under the false pretence of looking for weapons of mass destruction. And there have been countless other US interventions in foreign countries that clearly violated the rules-based international order, including the use of lethal drone strikes in Pakistan and Arab countries.**

There are two key planks in Putin's strategy to revive Russia's power. The first is his challenge of liberal values and the rules-based multilateral system. It must be stressed that the attack on liberalism is not just a Russian problem. The US and its allies ignored UN rules and procedures in 2003 by invading Iraq under the false pretence of looking for weapons of mass destruction. And there have been countless other US interventions in foreign countries that clearly violated the rules-based international order, including the use of lethal drone strikes in Pakistan and Arab countries. In his *United States of War: A Global History of America's Endless Conflicts, from Columbus to the Islamic State* (2020), David Vine observes

that the US "has been" at war or has invaded other countries almost every year since its "independence."

Liberal values have also eroded in the US, where there was an attempt in January 2021 to prevent a transfer of power to the winner of the presidential election, and laws are being passed in Republican-controlled state legislatures to limit Black participation in the electoral process and to overturn election results. Putin's anti-liberalism is, however, visceral or an article of faith and serves as an instrument for resurrecting Russian power. In this regard, Russia has emerged as a leading actor in disinformation, cyberattacks and tampering with the electoral processes of Western and other democracies. Russia's hacking of Hilary Clinton's and the Democratic National Committee's emails, and its collusion with Wikileaks to influence the 2018 elections in favour of Donald Trump, another leader with an authoritarian mindset, is instructive. It is clear from Putin's pronouncements that he is unhappy with the post-Cold War security arrangements and the global rules-based liberal order, which he believes shackle his quest for global power.

The second plank of Putin's strategy is to claw back lost territories along Russia's border. The vehicle for realising this strategy is the 25 million ethnic Russians who reside in the new ex-Soviet countries. The creation of the Soviet Union in 1917 was accompanied by the Russification of non-Russian republics, through a process that involved the deportation of large numbers of disloyal individuals from indigenous populations and the encouragement of Russians to migrate and fill gaps in labour markets and public administrations.

One of the most glaring examples of Russification was the displacement of the German population in Kaliningrad (which does not even share a border with Russia, but is wedged between Lithuania, Poland, and the Baltic Sea) and the massive migration of Russians into the region after Germany's defeat in the Second World War. Joseph Stalin occupied, demanded and was given the right to annex Königsberg (the previous name of Kaliningrad) by the Allied Powers as compensation for the mass suffering Russians had been subjected to by Nazi Germany. Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, supported the expulsion (ethnic cleansing) of Germans from Königsberg. In his words: "Expulsion is the method which, in so far as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble." (Sukhankin 2018: 41) In 1945, there were only 5,000 Russians and more than 100,000 Germans in Königsberg; by 1948 about 400,000 Soviets had moved into the region. There are now only 1,600 Germans or about 0.4 per cent of the population; Russians currently account for 87 per cent of the population (Wikipedia-a).

**Relations between ethnic Russians and host nations are often tense, as the latter seek to undo historical injustices.**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine had the largest number of ethnic Russians (about 8.3 million, or 17.2 percent of the population), followed by Kazakhstan (3.6 million, or 20.2 percent of the population), Belarus (785,000) and Uzbekistan (750,000). However, Latvia (487,250, or 25.2 per cent of the

population) and Estonia (322,700, or 24.2 per cent) have higher percentages of ethnic Russians than all other countries (Wikipedia-b). Relations between ethnic Russians and host nations are often tense, as the latter seek to undo historical injustices. I observed in 2004 the deep animosity between Latvians and ethnic Russians when I organised an UNRISD conference in the Latvian capital of Riga (with the UNDP office in Latvia acting as hosts) to discuss the findings of our multi-country research project on Ethnic Inequalities and Governance of the Public Sector. The current Latvian deputy prime minister and defence minister, Artis Pabriks, who was a researcher at the time, conducted the Latvian study. Memories of the 60,000 or more Latvians deported to Siberia by Soviet leaders just after the Second World War were still fresh among Latvians, who also disliked the fact that Russians constituted the majority population in their capital city. Russians, on the other hand, complained about language laws and tough citizenship rules that made it difficult for Russians to obtain citizenship under the new government.

Putin has used the agitation of ethnic Russians for equal treatment as a basis for invading the new territories.

The forerunner to the invasion of Ukraine was Russia's intervention in the 2008 conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in Georgia, in which Russia supported and later recognised the two breakaway territories from Georgia. Despite the very small number of ethnic Russians in those territories, residents there now carry Russian passports. The big prize is Ukraine, which Putin regards as a spiritual and cultural home for Russians and which, as we have seen, hosts the largest number of Russia's diaspora. The pattern for annexation is clear: ethnic Russians complain about discrimination and declare independence in their localities, the Russian army is sent in to defend them, the Russian Parliament recognises the breakaway territories, and Putin formalises the process by incorporating the territories into Russia. The popular uprising in 2014 against the Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich (who was critical of Ukraine's application to join the EU), his removal

**Putin has used the agitation of ethnic Russians for equal treatment as a basis for invading the new territories.**

from office and subsequent exile to Moscow may have been a turning point for Putin.

The first invasion of Ukraine was in 2014 in Crimea, where ethnic Russians account for 65 per cent of the population. The failure of the Western powers to draw a line on Crimea emboldened Putin to mount a second invasion of the country. Again, as in the first invasion, ethnic Russians complained about maltreatment. They seized Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region, where they constitute a majority. The Russian military rendered support, Russia's Parliament recognised their autonomy and Putin sent in the military for a full invasion, which, this time, may involve the annexation of the entire country. Russia's strategy for the countries bordering its southern bounds, which are less antagonistic, involves the creation of a regional alliance (the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, and turning these countries into puppet states. This allowed Russia to send troops to oil-rich Kazakhstan in January 2022 to put down anti-government protests. The other non-Soviet country on Russia's southern border, Mongolia, relies on Russia to counter Chinese threats to its territory.

The two-plank strategy of disdain for the liberal rules-based world order and the annexation of ex-Soviet republics is underpinned by a policy of reducing Russia's economic dependence on the West in order to be able to withstand sanctions. *The Economist* (2022) reckons that Russia has reduced its debt to just 20 per cent of GDP, built formidable reserves of USD 620 billion and created a "fortress economy." The extent to which such measures will insulate the Russian economy, and the appetite of its *nomenklatura* and oligarchs for Western goods and services from the current raft of Western sanctions remains to be seen.

### ***Implications for Africa***

Russia's mission to upend the liberal rules-based multilateral order suggests a lack of confidence in its ability to use those rules to catch up with the West. Playing rogue is the weapon of great powers in decline. In this regard, Russia's behaviour contrasts sharply with that of China, a rising economic and technological powerhouse that seeks to use — not disrupt — the existing global arrangements to challenge Western hegemony and attain its goal of superpower status. Russia

is not even among the top ten largest economies in the world: its GDP of USD 1.4 trillion is dwarfed by those of the US (about USD 20 trillion) and China (USD 14 trillion). Russia's GDP equals that of Brazil, but lags behind India and even the Republic of Korea, with a population of only 50 million. Despite a few pockets of excellence and an educated workforce, Russia is also outmatched in the technological field: It spends just 1 per cent of its GDP on research and development; its corporations conduct little or no research; and the country as a whole trails China, the US, Japan, Korea, Germany, and India in patent applications. Its technological strength is in near-space exploration, rocket engines and military hardware; however, research suggests that there have been hardly any spillovers from such sectors into the civil sphere (Sanghi and Yusuf 2018).

While Russia is an economic dwarf, it ranks second to the US in the global firepower index, or military capability (Armstrong 2022), and has the largest number of nuclear warheads in the world — 6,257 to the US's 5,500 and China's 350 (World Population Review 2022). This asymmetry between military power and economic and technological prowess may explain Putin's infatuation with military might and willingness to use it to assert Russia's status as a global power. The wide-ranging sanctions recently imposed on Russia suggest that the West is willing to stand up to Russia by isolating it from vital areas of global finance, trade, investment, technology, entertainment and travel. The scale of the sanctions is unprecedented. We may well be witnessing the return of the Iron Curtain, which may plunge Europe into protracted instability as Russia fights back to break free from isolation. It is highly unlikely now that Ukraine will be admitted into NATO. However, the invasion has given NATO a new lease of life and produced an outcome that Putin wanted to prevent: NATO troops and potential instability on Russia's western border. Neutral Western countries like Sweden, Finland, Ireland and even

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Switzerland may abandon their longstanding policy of neutrality and seek NATO membership for protection. (*Editor's note:* Finland became NATO's newest member on April 4 upon depositing its instrument of accession to the North Atlantic Treaty with the United States.) Remarkably, the decision of Sweden and Switzerland to fully participate in the Western sanctions makes them vulnerable to Russian retaliation if they remain outside the military alliance.

### ***The doctrine of spheres of influence undermines the security of small nations***

The invasion and unfolding geopolitical crisis have serious implications for Africa. Three stand out in bold relief. The first is the danger of reinstitutionalising the doctrine of spheres of influence in the governance of the world system. Putin regards the territories of the former Soviet republics as “historical Russian land,” which suggests that Russia has the right to take them back or intervene in them to get the leaders of those countries to submit to Russian demands. Putin's address to the world on the day of the invasion is telling. In that long and rambling speech, he asserted, “The problem is that in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have noted is our historical land, a hostile anti-Russia is taking shape.”<sup>2</sup> This statement suggests that Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan belong to, and will always be contested by, Russia. Part of Putin's problem of seeing ex-Soviet republics as Russian territory is that the Russian empire was the only empire in Europe that survived the First World War. The Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and German empires all collapsed in 1918 and a host of new nations were born. The Russian empire was simply transformed into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics when the Bolsheviks took power in 1917. However, the fact that the ex-Soviet republics have enjoyed only three decades of independence doesn't mean they should lose it against their will.

Big powers have historically carved out areas that they regard as spheres of influence. The Monroe Doctrine, for instance, informed the foreign policy of the U.S. for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Under this doctrine, the

<sup>2</sup> Address by the President of the Russian Federation. 24 February 2022.

U.S. viewed efforts by European powers to influence or control countries in the Americas as a threat to US security. In exchange, the US agreed to not interfere in the affairs of Europe and its colonies. When, in 1962, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, decided to station nuclear weapons on Cuban soil, just 145 kilometres (90 miles) off the coast of the Florida, US President John Kennedy saw it as an act of war and threatened to take them out by blockading Cuba. Khrushchev caved in and Kennedy agreed to not invade Cuba.

As imperial powers, the foreign policies of France, the UK, and Portugal have also been driven by notions of spheres of influence. Britain struggled to maintain control of its ex-colonies after it agreed to give them independence; it created the Sterling Area and Commonwealth system to defend the waning international role of the pound sterling. Under this system, it tried to compel the newly independent countries to retain the colonial currency boards instead of creating central banks. Additionally, it encouraged these countries to maintain their reserves in the UK treasury and tie their currencies to sterling, while pursuing extremely restrictive fiscal policies, i.e., spending only what they earned as foreign exchange. In return, the UK would direct its investments, trade and aid flows back toward to those falling in line (Bangura 1983).

And through the franc zone, France continues to exercise considerable control over the monetary policies of the Francophone African countries and regards those countries as part of its sphere of influence. It intervenes regularly in those countries to change or prop up regimes; for example, it currently has 3,500 troops in Mali under the guise of fighting Islamist militants. Even during the Ebola crisis, Western assistance to the three West African countries affected by the virus (Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea) followed a spheres-of-influence logic, with the UK heavily involved in Sierra Leone, the US in Liberia, and France in Guinea (Abdullah and Rashid 2017).

The doctrine of spheres of influence has no place in the UN charter or international law. Indeed, the *raison d'être* of the UN (and its antecedent, the League of Nations) was

**The *raison d'être* of the UN (and its antecedent, the League of Nations) was to outlaw the quest for spheres of influence in world politics.**



to outlaw the quest for spheres of influence in world politics. The fundamental principles of the UN are the prohibition of force in settling disputes unless when sanctioned by the Security Council or for self-defence; acceptance of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and equality of all member nations; and respect for freedom and human rights.

These principles seek to outlaw war in the conduct of international relations. Despite their violation in many instances, they remain important for small states that do not have the resources to confront strong nations. Indeed, resistance to the doctrine of spheres of influence and military alliances informed the decision by developing countries to form the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War. Most developing countries still regard these principles as sacrosanct. It is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of developing countries (111) voted for the UN General Assembly resolution that “deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine,” and called

on Russia to “immediately, completely and unconditionally withdraw all of its military forces.” If Putin’s blatant attempt to relegitimise the doctrine of spheres of influence is allowed to stand, what will stop the former European imperial powers from affirming their right to intervene regularly in Africa, and even recolonise a few countries, by arguing that they created those countries in Berlin in the nineteenth century?

**What will stop the former European imperial powers from affirming their right to intervene regularly in Africa?**

### ***How a beleaguered Russia is likely to behave in Africa***

The second issue is how a beleaguered Russia is likely to behave in Africa. If the West’s sanctions bite, and Russia finds itself excluded from much of the European social, economic and political space, it is likely to become more paranoid and confrontational and would aggressively seek allies in non-Western regions, including in Africa. Africa’s open, fragmented, underdeveloped and contested policy space makes it a strong candidate for enhanced Russian intervention, big power politics and the creation of spheres of influence. Russia’s engagement with

Africa will be substantially different from Soviet engagement with the country during the Cold War. During the Soviet era, Russia had a progressive, anti-Western or anti-imperialist policy: It stood in solidarity with African countries in fighting European colonial domination and the obnoxious racist regime of apartheid South Africa. It provided technical, educational and financial aid as well as military assistance to many countries. And it did not associate itself with kleptocratic and bloody military regimes like those of Idi Amin of Uganda, Jean-Bedel Bokassa of Central African Republic, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire or Samuel Doe of Liberia, each of which was nurtured or supported in varying degrees by Western powers. Russia served instead as an inspiration to forces across Africa that were interested in transformative social change, even though in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola, where attempts were made to implement the Soviet model of development, it turned out to be a disaster.

A beleaguered, authoritarian, economically weak, rent-seeking capitalistic Russia that has been stripped of its aspirational ideology will be different. The current Russia will be highly transactional, aggressive and opportunistic. Russia's recent attempts to revive its flagging relations with African countries are instructive. Given its weak economy, it will not be a strong competitor in productive investments, trade and aid compared to China, the EU and the US. Russia's exports to Africa amounted to a mere USD 13 billion in 2019, and its foreign direct investment was estimated to be less than 1 per cent of Africa's total FDI stock in 2017 (Irwin-Hunt 2020). This is a pittance compared to China's FDI stock of USD 110 billion in Africa (Yu 2021) and China's USD 250 billion trade with Africa. Russian companies in Africa have largely focused on the extractive sector — such as diamonds, nickel, manganese, oil and gas — as well as nuclear energy, where they have a comparative advantage. Even though Russia is rich in mineral resources, it lost many of those resources to the new states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is believed that importing raw materials from Africa is cheaper than extracting them from Russia's remote regions that hold the bulk of its resources (Arkhangelskaya and Shubin 2013).

Increased Russian involvement in Africa's extractive sector, which has a history of corruption, bad deals and illicit transfers, is unlikely to be different from the West's, and recently China's, pillage of the continent's resources and

impoverishment of its people. In *Honest Account 2017*, *Global Justice Now* (2017) reported that, in 2015, Africa as a whole was a net creditor to the rest of the world (largely Western countries) by USD 41.4 billion. In other words, more resources (USD 203 billion — through tax avoidance, debt payments and resource extraction) were taken out of the continent than flowed in (USD 161.6 billion — through loans, remittances and aid). The Thabo Mbeki-led African Union–Economic Commission for Africa’s (2005) own report estimated that USD 50 billion left Africa as illicit financial flows every year. And *War on Want* (2016) reported that about 100, mostly British, companies listed on the London Stock Exchange controlled more than USD 1 trillion worth of resources in just five commodities — oil, gold, diamonds, coal and platinum — and a quarter of those companies are registered in tax havens. Russia’s quest for raw materials may spur enhanced greed and dirty tricks as it

tries to compensate for lost opportunities in the West. This may aggravate Africa’s resource drain.

**Russia is also likely to push African countries to transition to nuclear energy, where it has a huge advantage, citing the continent’s large deficit in power generation.**

Russia is also likely to push African countries to transition to nuclear energy, where it has a huge advantage, citing the continent’s large deficit in power generation. About 600 million Africans are estimated to be without access to electricity. Nuclear energy was one of the agenda items in the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi, attended by 42 African leaders. Russia is in negotiations with most North African countries, including Ethiopia,

Nigeria, Ghana, Zambia, and Rwanda, to sign nuclear energy deals, and has committed to provide 80 per cent of the funds to build Egypt’s first nuclear power plant for a whopping USD 25 billion (Chimbelu 2019). However, Russia has a poor record in large-scale infrastructure projects. Despite Nigeria sinking more than USD 10 billion into the Ajaokuta iron and steel project, the Russian company Tyazh Prom Export — contracted to build the plant in 1976 — failed to produce any steel before the project was abandoned in 1994. The failure of the Ajaokuta steel project was a huge blow to Nigeria’s quest for industrialisation. Nuclear reactors are expensive, capital-intensive, take years to build and have high maintenance

and safety costs. African countries should be wary of incurring unsustainable debts and permanent dependence on Russia to run and maintain reactors. It is not surprising that South Africa cancelled its agreement with Russia for a second nuclear plant in 2017, citing cost, after an environmental group successfully challenged the government in court. Surely, there must be cheaper and safer green energy alternatives—such as solar, hydro and wind power—to nuclear reactors in solving Africa’s electricity problem.

A beleaguered Russia is also likely to be heavily involved in the internal politics of African countries. Such intervention will be seen primarily through the prism of its conflict with the West and its need to secure whatever resources and economic opportunities it can get as it tries to evade sanctions and diversify its stuttering economy. Democratic norms and practices have not fared well in Africa after the wave of democratisation that ended military and one-party rule in much of the continent in the 1990s. There has been a serious democratic regression as incumbents in many countries change their constitutions to extend their rule. Also at work: Governing parties capture state institutions, harass opposition parties and restrict the rights of citizens. And elections are rigged to prevent a transfer of power.

By 2020, term limits had been modified or eliminated in 16 African countries (Siegle and Cook 2020), and in a list of controversial elections in the world, 50 are African (Wikipedia-c). Such setbacks in democratisation, security challenges and failure to improve the lives of citizens have encouraged the military to make a comeback in African politics (Ibrahim 2022). Military coups have occurred in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan, and Chad in the last two years. Western powers have been opportunistic in advancing the democracy agenda in Africa, punishing countries they dislike, while giving a pass to others until there is a breakdown of order. They have joined African regional organisations, which have failed to hold flawed democracies to account.

Russia has stepped in to prop up besieged African dictators by providing arms and military protection. Its state-owned arms export agency, Rosoboronexport, is the largest arms exporter to Africa, accounting for about 50 per cent of Africa’s arms imports. It is the second-largest arms exporter in the world after the US. Indeed, the armament sector plays a big role in Russia’s economy, as it accounts

for a large proportion of manufactured exports (Chatham House 2017). Algeria and Egypt are Russia's biggest clients in Africa, but Moscow has recently expanded sales to a number of sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria, Tanzania, Cameroon, Angola, and the Central African Republic (Episkopos 2020).

Russia uses its paramilitary or mercenary outfit, the Wagner Group — specialists in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism training, as well as use of military hardware — to challenge Western power in Africa and provide security to rogue African leaders who want to remain in power and roll back democratic change. In exchange, Russia receives concessions to extract mineral resources, commercial contracts or access to ports and airbases (Fasanotti 2022). The Wagner Group is active in the Central African Republic, where it has been accused of summary executions, torture and the indiscriminate targeting of civilian facilities (Parachini and Bauer 2021). Other countries falling under the brutal shadow of the mercenaries are Sudan (especially during Omar Al-Bashir's regime), Mozambique, Madagascar, Libya, Chad, Mali, and Burkina Faso. There has been a standoff between France and Mali, where French troops have been unable to beat back Islamist terrorists, despite committing 3,500 troops there since 2013. Faced with pressure from France, its European allies and African regional organisations to organise elections for a transition to civil rule, the military leader, Assimi Goita, invited the Wagner Group to bolster his security and declared the arrogant and pushy French ambassador *persona non grata*.

We are likely to see an aggravation of this kind of big-power competition in Africa in which Russia and willing African dictators try to beat back pressure for democratisation and the protection of human rights. Western governments may also be forced to give up all pretence of promoting democracy in Africa and may relate with countries primarily from the strategic perspective of countering Russian and Chinese penetration of the continent. It is indeed astonishing that although 25 African countries supported the General Assembly resolution that called on Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine, 17 countries abstained, eight did not vote and one voted against. Russia provides security through its Wagner Group to many of the states that abstained or stayed away, others are under sanctions themselves, and some have bilateral military co-operation agreements with Russia.

It is important to understand that Western powers became interested in the global democracy project only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For much of its history, the West practised democracy at home and realpolitik or pragmatism, as defined by its strategic and economic interests, overseas. This meant it could use force to achieve its objectives without following UN rules or international law and work with all kinds of despots and corrupt leaders whose interests were aligned with its own. Its cosy relations with the despotic regimes of the Gulf oil states underscore the latter point. Western powers failed to sanction or hold to account the Saudi

Arabian leadership after the Saudi Arabian journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, was butchered by Saudi officials at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul in 2018. Britain tried to use democracy as a tool to stagger its exit from its colonies in the 1950s and part of the 1960s, while devising new methods of influence and control, such as the Sterling Area system and the Commonwealth — but this was only for a brief period. France did not bother with the idea of injecting democracy into its decolonisation project, and Portugal was chased out of its colonies through armed struggles. Let us be clear: The belief that the US had become the only superpower in town after the collapse of the Soviet Union encouraged the West to cloak its global strategic interests with the ideals of democracy. We may be heading back to the stark days of authoritarian politics of the pre-1990s. It is difficult to believe that the West will firm up its already questionable commitment to democracy on the continent when faced with challenges from Russia and China, which have no interest in democracy.

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### ***Short term costs of the crisis***

One final issue that should be highlighted in discussing the invasion of Ukraine, and how it is likely to impact Africa, is the short-term effects of the rise in oil, gas and wheat prices. Russia is the world's second largest exporter of oil after Saudi Arabia; it is also the fourth largest gas exporter after the US, Qatar, and Algeria. And both Russia and Ukraine are major wheat producers, with Russia ranked third in the world after China and India, and Ukraine seventh. Both Russia and Ukraine account for 30 per cent of global wheat exports, and Ukraine is a major exporter of maize and vegetable oil. South Africa, for instance, imports about 30 per cent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine, and Russia is the second largest exporter of wheat to Nigeria. Supply chains in commodity production and marketing are often disrupted during global crises. It is not surprising that the prices of oil, gas, wheat and other grains, which were already rising in late 2021, have skyrocketed since the invasion.

The effects of price rises depend on whether a country is a net exporter or importer. For the big oil producers — Nigeria, Angola, Gabon, Libya, Algeria, Republic of Congo, Ghana, Equatorial Guinea, and Chad, for instance — the price increase in oil is likely to be a boon as state revenues will increase, especially if production is ramped up. Gas producers like Nigeria, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea may also take advantage of the cancellation of the Russo-German Nord Stream 2 oil pipeline if they can invest in the infrastructure for supplying gas across the Mediterranean into Europe (Iyora 2022). However, the vast majority of African countries do not produce oil or, if they do, are net importers. For these countries, the global oil price hike has translated into a sharp rise in the prices of petrol and related products as well as increases in transport fares. A similar problem can be observed with grain. The important wheat producers in Africa are South Africa, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Nigeria. However, all these countries are net importers. While the rise in wheat prices may improve the incomes of local farmers, it may hurt consumers as bread, pasta, noodles, biscuits and cakes become expensive.



## **Conclusion**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the current standoff between Russia and the West threaten world peace. The doctrine of spheres of influence, which informs Putin's invasion, is dangerous not only for former Soviet republics but also for African countries and other small nations around the world. It provides a justification for redrawing boundaries, annexing countries and undermining the territorial integrity of states, which is a fundamental principle of the UN. The isolation of Russia through the West's punitive sanctions may not only adversely impact Africa through oil, wheat and other grain price hikes, it may also create a Fortress Russia that will pursue an aggressive policy in Africa and other weak regions in order to gain allies, markets and raw materials and diversify its external relations. This is likely to impact African politics negatively as equally beleaguered African politicians who do not want to give up power may sign up for Russian protection. In this new dynamic, Western countries may be forced to abandon their already questionable support for Africa's troubled democracy project and engage with African countries through the prism of their rivalry with Russia.

The insistence of the West on maintaining NATO's open-door policy of admitting any country that seeks to join the alliance is dumb. Putin should withdraw from Ukraine, and Ukraine should not be admitted into NATO. The Cold War arrangements that kept Finland, which shares a border with Russia, out of the military alliances of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, while allowing the country to thrive as a Western social democracy, provide useful lessons. While the doctrine of spheres of influence should be rejected unreservedly, the security interests of all states that do not threaten the territorial integrity of other states should be respected. Putin seems to have overplayed his hand. The West cannot win a war against him because of his nuclear arsenal, but his economy can be crippled and the three decades of his citizens' exposure to, and enjoyment of Western lifestyles and contacts can be disrupted, fuelling resentment and possibly instability in his country. The invasion has done profound damage to Russia's relations with the West, which will be difficult to reverse as long as Putin and like-minded people around him are in power. Africa should brace itself for the challenging years ahead.

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Yusuf Bangura was a research coordinator at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) from 1990–2012. He was the lead author of the UNRISD flagship report “Combating Poverty and Inequality: Structural Change, Social Policy and Politics” (2010) and series editor of “Ethnic Inequalities and Governance of the Public Sector,” and “Developmental Pathways to Poverty Reduction” (both series were published by Palgrave Macmillan and UNRISD). In 2013–14, Bangura taught international political economy at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone.

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# Russia's Underperforming Military (and ours):

Convenient Lessons to Impede Learning<sup>1</sup>

*Image credit: Kosmogenez / Shutterstock.com*

## **Andrew Bacevich, Ph.D.**

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In Washington, wide agreement exists that the Russian army's performance in the Kremlin's ongoing Ukraine "special military operation"<sup>2</sup> ranks somewhere between lousy and truly abysmal. The question is: Why? The answer in American policy circles, both civilian and military, appears all but self-evident. Vladimir Putin's Russia has stubbornly insisted on ignoring the principles, practices and methods identified as necessary for success in war and perfected in this century by the armed forces of the United States.

<sup>1</sup> This paper first appeared in *TomDispatch* on September 13, 2022. It is republished with permission from *TomDispatch* and Andrew Bacevich.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Osborn, and Polina Nikolskaya, "Russia's Putin Authorises 'Special Military Operation' against Ukraine," *Reuters*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-putin-authorises-military-operations-donbass-domestic-media-2022-02-24/>.

Put simply, by refusing to do things the American way, the Russians are failing badly against a far weaker foe.

**Put simply, by refusing to do things the American way, the Russians are failing badly against a far weaker foe.**

Granted, American analysts — especially the retired military officers who opine on national news shows — concede that other factors have contributed to Russia's sorry predicament. Yes, heroic Ukrainian resistance, reminiscent of the Winter War of 1939–1940 when Finland tenaciously defended itself against the Soviet Union's more powerful military, caught the Russians by surprise. Expectations that Ukrainians would stand by while the invaders swept across their country proved wildly misplaced. In addition, comprehensive economic sanctions imposed by the West in response to the invasion have complicated the Russian war effort. By no means least of all, the flood of modern weaponry<sup>3</sup> provided by the United States and its allies — God bless the military-industrial-congressional complex — have appreciably enhanced Ukrainian fighting power.

Still, in the view of American military figures, all of those factors take a backseat to Russia's manifest inability (or refusal) to grasp the basic prerequisites of modern warfare. The fact that Western observers possess a limited understanding of how Russia's military leadership functions makes it all the easier to render such definitive judgments. It's like speculating about Donald Trump's innermost convictions. Since nobody really knows, any forcefully expressed opinion acquires at least passing credibility.

The prevailing self-referential American explanation for Russian military ineptitude emphasizes at least four key points:<sup>4</sup>

1. First, the Russians don't understand *jointness*, the military doctrine that

<sup>3</sup> Justin Tasolides, Maureen Mcmanus, Eden Harris and Cassie Semyon . "Biden Announces \$3B in Military Aid for Ukraine as Russia's Invasion Hits Six-Month Mark." *Spectrum News*, last modified August 24, 2022. <https://www.nyi.com/nyc/all-boroughs/news/2022/08/23/biden-us-ukraine-russia-aid-3-billion-six-months>.

<sup>4</sup> Kori Schake, "Russia's Military Is Incompetent. That Makes It More Dangerous," *The Washington Post*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/17/russia-military-failing-dangerous/>.



- provides for the seamless integration of ground, air and maritime operations, not only on Planet Earth but in cyberspace and outer space;
2. Second, Russia's land forces haven't adhered to the principles of *combined arms* warfare — first perfected by the Germans in World War II — that emphasize the close tactical collaboration of tanks, infantry and artillery;
  3. Third, Russia's longstanding tradition of top-down *leadership* inhibits flexibility at the front, leaving junior officers and noncommissioned officers to relay orders from on high without demonstrating any capacity to, or instinct for, exercising initiative on their own;
  4. Finally, the Russians appear to lack even the most rudimentary understanding of battlefield *logistics* — the mechanisms that provide a steady and reliable supply of the fuel, food, munitions, medical support and spare parts needed to sustain a campaign.

Implicit in this critique, voiced by self-proclaimed American experts, is the suggestion that, if the Russian army had paid more attention to how U.S. forces

**By implication, Russian military ineptitude obliquely affirms the military mastery of the United States.**

deal with such matters, they would have fared better in Ukraine. That they don't — and perhaps can't — comes as good news for Russia's enemies, of course. By implication, Russian military ineptitude obliquely affirms the military mastery of the United States. We define the standard of excellence to which others can only aspire.

### ***Reducing war to a formula***

All of which begs a larger question, one the national security establishment remains steadfastly oblivious to: If jointness, combined arms tactics, flexible leadership and responsive logistics hold the keys to victory, why haven't American forces — supposedly possessing such qualities in abundance — been able to win their own equivalents of the Ukraine War? After all, Russia has only been stuck in Ukraine for a little more than a year, while the U.S. was stuck in Afghanistan for 20

years and still has troops in Iraq almost two decades after its disastrous invasion of that country.<sup>5</sup>

To rephrase the question: Why does explaining the Russian underperformance in Ukraine attract so much smug commentary here, while American military underperformance gets written off?

Perhaps written off is too harsh. After all, when the U.S. military fails to meet expectations, there are always some who will hasten to point the finger at civilian leaders for screwing up. Certainly, this was the case with the chaotic U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. Critics were quick to pin the blame on President Biden for that debacle, while the commanders who had presided over the war there for those 20 years escaped largely unscathed.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some of those former commanders — like retired general and ex-CIA Director David Petraeus, aka “King David,”<sup>7</sup> — were eagerly sought after by the media as Kabul fell.<sup>8</sup>

**In essence, this becomes an argument for sustained generational incompetence.**

So, if the U.S. military performance since the Global War on Terror was launched more than two decades ago rates as, to put it politely, a disappointment — and that would be my view — it might be tempting to lay responsibility at the feet of the four presidents, eight secretaries of defense (including two former four-star generals) and the various deputy secretaries, undersecretaries, assistant

<sup>5</sup> Meghann Myers, “U.S. Troops Will Likely Be in Iraq for Years to Come, Central Command Boss Says,” *Military Times*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2022/03/18/us-troops-will-likely-be-in-iraq-for-years-to-come-central-command-boss-says/>.

<sup>6</sup> Michael O’Hanlon, “Botched Withdrawal Scarred Biden’s Presidency, Plunged Afghanistan Further into Strife,” *USA Today*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/columnist/2022/08/29/biden-blame-botched-afghanistan-withdrawal/10266319002/>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Hastings, “King David’s War,” *Rolling Stone*, February 2, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/king-davids-war-182421/>.

<sup>8</sup> Mychael Schnell, “David Petraeus Says the Outcome in Afghanistan Is ‘Catastrophic,’” *The Hill*, June 8, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/568068-david-petraeus-says-the-outcome-in-afghanistan-is-catastrophic/>.



secretaries and ambassadors who designed and implemented American policy in those years. In essence, this becomes an argument for sustained generational incompetence.

There's a flipside to that argument, however. It would tag the parade of generals who presided over the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (and lesser conflicts like those in Libya, Somalia, and Syria) as uniformly not up to the job — another argument for generational incompetence. Members of the once-dominant Petraeus fan club might cite him as a notable exception. Yet, with the passage of time, King David's achievements as general-in-chief, first in Baghdad and then in Kabul, have lost much of their luster. The late "Stormin' Norman" Schwarzkopf and General Tommy Franks, their own "victories" diminished by subsequent events, might sympathize.

**Military theorists prefer to conceive of war as essentially knowable, predictable and eminently useful — the Swiss Army knife of international politics.**

Allow me to suggest another explanation, however, for the performance gap that afflicts the twenty-first-century U.S. military establishment. The real problem hasn't been arrogant, ill-informed civilians or generals who lack the right stuff or suffer from bad luck. It's the way Americans, especially those wielding influence in national security circles — including journalists, think tankers, lobbyists, corporate officials in the military-industrial complex and members of Congress — have come to think of war as an attractive, affordable means of solving problems.

Military theorists have long emphasized that by its very nature, war is fluid, elusive, capricious and permeated with chance and uncertainty. Practitioners tend to respond by suggesting that, though true, such descriptions are not helpful. They prefer to conceive of war as essentially knowable, predictable and eminently useful — the Swiss Army knife of international politics.

Hence, you see the tendency among both civilian and military officials in Washington not to mention journalists and policy intellectuals, to reduce war to a phrase or formula (or better yet to a set of acronyms), so that the entire

subject can be summarized in a slick 30-minute slide presentation. That urge to simplify — to boil things down to their essence — is anything but incidental. In Washington, the avoidance of complexity and ambiguity facilitates marketing (that is, shaking down Congress for money).

To cite one small example of this, consider a recent military document entitled “Army Readiness and Modernization in 2022,”<sup>9</sup> produced by propagandists at the Association of the United States Army. It purports to describe where the U.S. Army is headed. The manuscript identifies “eight cross-functional teams” meant to focus on “six priorities.” If properly resourced and vigorously pursued, these teams and priorities will ensure, it claims, that “the army maintains all-domain overmatch against all adversaries in future fights.”

**In Washington, the avoidance of complexity and ambiguity facilitates marketing (that is, shaking down Congress for money).**

**When it counted last year in Kabul, American forces demonstrated anything but all-domain overmatch.**

Set aside the uncomfortable fact that, when it counted last year in Kabul, American forces demonstrated anything but all-domain overmatch. Still, what the Army’s leadership aims to do between now and 2035 is create “a transformed multi-domain army” by fielding a plethora of new systems, described in a blizzard of acronyms: ERCA, PrSM, LRHW, OMVE, MPF, RCV, AMPV, FVL, FLRAA, FARA, BLADE, CROWS, MMHEL, and so on, more or less *ad infinitum*.

Perhaps you won’t be surprised to learn that the Army’s plan, or rather vision, for its future avoids the slightest mention of costs. Nor does it consider potential complications — adversaries equipped with nuclear

<sup>9</sup> “Army Readiness and Modernization in 2022,” Association Of The United States Army, June 15, 2022, <https://www.ausa.org/publications/army-readiness-and-modernization-2022>.

weapons, for example — that might interfere with its aspirations to all-domain overmatch.

Yet the document deserves our attention as an exquisite example of Pentagon-think. It provides the Army's preferred answer to a question of nearly existential importance — not “How can the Army help keep Americans safe?” but “How can the Army maintain, and ideally increase, its budget?”

Hidden inside that question is an implicit assumption that sustaining even the pretense of keeping Americans safe requires a military of global reach, one that maintains a massive global presence. Given the spectacular findings of the James Webb Telescope,<sup>10</sup> perhaps *galactic* will one day replace *global* in the Pentagon's lexicon. In the meantime, while maintaining perhaps 750 military bases on every continent except Antarctica,<sup>11</sup> that military rejects out of hand the proposition that defending Americans where they live — that is, within the boundaries of the 50 states comprising the United States — can suffice to define its overarching purpose.

And here we arrive at the crux of the matter: Militarized globalism, the Pentagon's preferred paradigm for basic policy, has become increasingly unaffordable. With the passage of time, it's also become beside the point. Americans simply don't have the wallet to satisfy budgetary claims concocted in the Pentagon, especially those that ignore the most elemental concerns we face, including disease,<sup>12</sup> drought,<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “Webb Space Telescope,” NASA, December 21, 2022, <https://webb.nasa.gov/>.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Kroll and Patterson Deppen, “The All-American Base World,” *TomDispatch*, August 19, 2021, <https://tom-dispatch.com/the-all-american-base-world/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Coronavirus in the U.S.: Latest Map and Case Count,” *The New York Times*, last modified January 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/us/covid-cases.html>

<sup>13</sup> Diana Leonard, “Southwest Drought Is the Most Extreme in 1,200 Years, Study Finds,” *The Washington Post*, last modified February 15, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/02/14/southwest-megadrought-worst-1200-years/>.

fire,<sup>14</sup> floods<sup>15</sup> and sea-level rise,<sup>16</sup> not to mention averting the potential collapse of our constitutional order. All-domain overmatch is of doubtful relevance to such threats.

To provide for the safety and well-being of our republic, we don't need further enhancements to jointness, combined arms tactics, flexible leadership and responsive logistics. Instead, we need an entirely different approach to national security.

### ***Come home, America, before it's too late***

Given the precarious state of American democracy, aptly described by President Biden in his September 2022 address at Independence Hall in Philadelphia,<sup>17</sup> our most pressing priority is repairing the damage to our domestic political fabric, not engaging in another round of "great power competition" dreamed up by fevered minds in Washington. Put simply, the U.S. Constitution is more important than the fate of Taiwan.

I apologize: I know that I have blasphemed. But the times suggest we weigh the pros and cons of blasphemy. With serious people publicly warning about the

**To provide for the safety and well-being of our republic, we don't need further enhancements to jointness, combined arms tactics, flexible leadership and responsive logistics. Instead, we need an entirely different approach to national security.**

<sup>14</sup> Adam Beam, "Flashbacks: Charred California Town No Stranger to Wildfire," *AP News*, September 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/wildfires-fires-california-evacuations-climate-and-environment-dacb2184b-8caed322f2d81959c92cef8>.

<sup>15</sup> Brady Dennis and Sarah Kaplan, "Jackson, Miss., Shows How Extreme Weather Can Trigger a Clean-Water Crisis." *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2022/08/31/jackson-water-crisis-mississippi-floods/>.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Mooney, "Greenland Ice Sheet Set to Raise Sea Levels by Nearly a Foot, Study Finds," *The Washington Post*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2022/08/29/greenland-ice-sheet-sea-level/>.

<sup>17</sup> C-SPAN, "President Biden Full Speech on Democracy," YouTube, September 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JemWkV2Vcic>.

possible approach of civil war<sup>18</sup> and many of our far-too-well armed fellow citizens welcoming the prospect,<sup>19</sup> perhaps the moment has come to reconsider the taken-for-granted premises that have sustained U.S. national security policy since the immediate aftermath of World War II.

More blasphemy! Did I just advocate a policy of isolationism?

**What I would settle for is a modicum of modesty and prudence, along with a lively respect for (rather than infatuation with) war.**

Heaven forfend! Instead, what I would settle for is a modicum of modesty and prudence, along with a lively respect for (rather than infatuation with) war.

Here is the unacknowledged bind in which the Pentagon has placed itself — and the rest of us: By gearing up to fight (however ineffectively) anywhere against any foe in any kind of conflict, it finds itself prepared to

fight nowhere in particular. Hence, the urge to extemporize on the fly, as has been the pattern in every conflict of ours since the Vietnam War. On occasion, things work out, as in the long-forgotten, essentially meaningless 1983 invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada. More often than not, however, they don't, no matter how vigorously our generals and our troops apply the principles of jointness, combined arms, leadership and logistics.

Americans spend a lot of time these days trying to figure out what makes Vladimir Putin tick. I don't pretend to know, nor do I really much care. I would say this, however:

**Putin's plunge into Ukraine confirms that he learned nothing from the folly of post-9/11 US military policy.**

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Marche, *The Next Civil War: Dispatches From the American Future* (New York: Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Joe Walsh, "U.S. Bought Almost 20 Million Guns Last Year — Second-Highest Year On Record," *Forbes*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joewalsh/2022/01/05/us-bought-almost-20-million-guns-last-year---second-highest-year-on-record/>.

Putin's plunge into Ukraine confirms that he learned nothing from the folly of post-9/11 U.S. military policy.

Will we, in our turn, learn anything from Putin's folly? Don't count on it.

### **About the author**

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Bacevich's essays and reviews have appeared in a variety of scholarly and general interest publications including *The Wilson Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*. His op-eds have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times*, among other leading newspapers. He is also the editor of a volume, *The Short American Century: A Postmortem*, which was published in 2012.



# Ending the War in Ukraine: Three Possible Futures<sup>1</sup>

Image credit: Stanislavskyi / Shutterstock.com

## **Rajan Menon, Ph.D.**

*Spitzer Professor of International Relations,  
City College of New York/City University of New York;  
Senior Research Scholar, Columbia University;  
Fellow, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, I was easing my way into a new job and in the throes of the teaching year. But that war quickly hijacked my life. I now spend most of my day poring over multiple newspapers, magazines, blogs and the Twitter feeds of various military mavens, a few of whom have been catapulted by the war from obscurity to a modicum of fame.<sup>2</sup> Then, there are all those websites to check out, their color-coded maps and daily summaries catching the conflict's rapid twists and turns.

<sup>1</sup> This article was first published by *TomDispatch* on June 26, 2022, and is republished with permission from *TomDispatch* and Rajan Menon.

<sup>2</sup> "Michael Kofman," Twitter, accessed December 30, 2022, [https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/KofmanMichael?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor).



I'm not writing this as a lament, however. I'm lucky. I have a good, safe life, and I follow events a world away from the comfort of my New York apartment. For Ukrainians, the war is anything but a topic of study. It's a daily, deadly presence. The lives of millions of people who live in or fled the war zone have been shattered. As all of us know too well, many of that country's cities have been badly damaged or lie in ruins, including people's homes and apartment buildings, the hospitals they once relied on when ill, the schools they sent their children to, and the stores where they bought food and other basic necessities. Even churches have been hit.<sup>3</sup> In addition, nearly 13 million Ukrainians (including nearly two-thirds of all its children) are either displaced in their own country or refugees in various parts of Europe, mainly Poland.<sup>4,5</sup> Millions of lives, in other words, have been turned inside out, while a return to anything resembling normalcy now seems beyond reach.

**For Ukrainians, the war is anything but a topic of study. It's a daily, deadly presence.**

No one knows how many noncombatants have been slaughtered by bullets, bombs, missiles or artillery. And all this has been made so much worse by the war crimes the Russians have committed.<sup>6</sup> How does a traumatized society like Ukraine ever become whole again?

To break my daily routine of following the ongoing nightmare from such a distance, I decided to look beyond the moment and try to imagine how it might indeed end.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Stanford, "The Destruction of Ukraine's Churches Is a Tragedy – but Faith Endures," *The Telegraph*, April 17, 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2022/04/17/destruction-ukraines-churches-tragedy-faith-endures/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Situation Ukraine Refugee Situation," UNHCR, last modified January 3, 2023, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine/location?secret=unhcrrestricted>.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Macias and Holley Ellyatt, "EU Looks for Natural Gas Alternative to Russia; Fighting Rages in Severodoneck," *CNBC*, June 14, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/14/russia-ukraine-live-updates.html>.

<sup>6</sup> "Ukraine: Executions, Torture During Russian Occupation," Human Rights Watch, May 18, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/18/ukraine-executions-torture-during-russian-occupation>.

## **Current battle lines**

It's easy to forget just how daring (or rash) Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine was. After all, Russia aside, Ukraine is Europe's biggest country in land area and its sixth-largest in population. True, Putin had acted aggressively before, but on a far more modest and careful scale, annexing Crimea and fostering the rise of two breakaway enclaves in parts of Donbas — the eastern Ukrainian provinces of Lugansk and Donetsk — which are industrial and resource-rich areas adjoining Russia. Neither was his 2015 intervention in Syria to save the government of Bashar al-Assad a wild-eyed gamble. He deployed no ground troops there, relying solely on airstrikes and missile attacks to avoid an Afghanistan-style quagmire.

**The campaign to conquer key cities Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv failed disastrously.**

Ukraine, though, was a genuinely rash act. Russia began the war with what seemed to be a massive advantage by any imaginable measure — from gross domestic product (GDP) to numbers of warplanes, tanks, artillery, warships and missiles. Little wonder, perhaps, that Putin assumed his troops would take the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, within weeks, at most. And he wasn't alone. Western military experts were convinced that his army would make quick work of its

Ukrainian counterpart, even if the latter's military had, since 2015, been trained and armed by the United States,<sup>7</sup> Britain and Canada.<sup>8</sup>

Yet the campaign to conquer key cities Kyiv, Chernihiv, Sumy, and Kharkiv — failed disastrously. The morale of the Ukrainians remained high and their military tactics adept. By the end of March, Russia had lost tanks and aircraft worth an estimated \$5 billion,<sup>9</sup> not to speak of up to a quarter of the troops it had

<sup>7</sup> Corey Flintoff, "U.S. Army Begins Training Ukrainian Soldiers," *NPR*, June 25, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/25/417511636/u-s-army-begins-training-ukrainian-soldiers>.

<sup>8</sup> David Ljunggren, "Canada to Send 200 Military Trainers to Ukraine, Says Risk Low," *Reuters*, April 14, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-ukraine-crisis-canada-idCAKBN0N51LW20150414>.

<sup>9</sup> Joe Saballa, "Russia Loses \$5 Billion in Military Equipment Amid Ukraine War: Report," *The Defense Post*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.thedefensepost.com/2022/03/14/russia-military-equipment-ukraine/>.

sent into battle.<sup>10</sup> Its military supply system proved shockingly inept, whether for repairing equipment or delivering food, water and medical supplies to the front.

Subsequently, however, Russian forces have made significant gains in Ukraine's south and southeast regions, occupying part of the Black Sea coast, Kherson province (which lies north of Crimea), most of Donbas in the east, and Zaporozhzhia province in the southeast. They have also created a patchy land corridor connecting Crimea to Russia for the first time since that area was taken in 2014.

Still, the botched northern campaign and the serial failures of a military that had been infused with vast sums of money and supposedly subjected to widespread

**Bit by bit, Russia's advantages started paying off.**

modernization and reform was stunning.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, the intrepid Ukrainian resistance and its battlefield successes soon produced a distinctly upbeat narrative of that country as the righteous David defending the rules and norms of the international order against Putin's Russian Goliath.

In May, however, things began to change. The Russians were by then focused on taking the Donbas region. And bit by bit, Russia's advantages — shorter supply lines, terrain better suited to armored warfare, and an overwhelming advantage in armaments, especially artillery — started paying off. Most ominously, its troops began encircling a large portion of Ukraine's battle-tested, best-trained forces in Donbas where besieged towns like Sievierodonetsk, Lysychansk, Lyman, and Popasna suddenly hit the headlines.

Now, at the edge of ... well, who knows what, here are three possible scenarios for the ending of this ever more devastating war.

<sup>10</sup> Mark F. Cancian, "Russian Casualties in Ukraine: Reaching the Tipping Point," Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 31, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-casualties-ukraine-reaching-tipping-point>.

<sup>11</sup> Andrew S. Bowen, "Russian Armed Forces: Military Modernization and Reforms," Congressional research service, July 20, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11603.pdf>.

## 1. *De facto* partition

If — and, of course, I have to stress the conditional here, given repeatedly unforeseen developments in this war — Putin’s army takes the entire Donbas region, plus the whole Black Sea coast, Ukraine is rendered smaller and landlocked. At this point, Putin might declare his “special military operation” a success, proclaim a ceasefire, order his commanders to fortify and defend the new areas they occupy. In his way, he saddles the Ukrainians with the challenge of expelling the Russian troops or settling for a *de facto* partition of the country.

Putin could respond with air and missile strikes to knock out any subsequent Ukrainian efforts to claw back lost lands. These would only exacerbate the colossal economic hit Ukraine has already taken,<sup>12</sup> including not just damaged or destroyed infrastructure and industries, a monthly budget shortfall of \$5 billion,<sup>13</sup> and an anticipated 45 percent decline in GDP this year,<sup>14</sup> but billions of dollars in revenue lost because it can’t ship its main exports via the Russian-dominated Black Sea. An April 2022 estimate of the cost of rebuilding Ukraine ranged from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion, far beyond Kyiv’s means.<sup>15</sup>

Assuming, on the other hand, that Ukraine accepted a partition, it would forfeit

**An April 2022 estimate of the cost of rebuilding Ukraine ranged from \$500 billion to \$1 trillion, far beyond Kyiv’s means.**

<sup>12</sup> Rajan Menon, “The Economic Shock Waves From the War in Ukraine Will Impact Us All,” *The Nation*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/ukraine-economic-crisis/>.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Martin and Volodymyr Verbyany, “Ukraine Needs Nations to Follow Up on Aid to Fill \$5 Billion Gap,” *Bloomberg*, April 24, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-23/ukraine-needs-nations-to-follow-up-on-aid-to-fill-5-billion-gap>.

<sup>14</sup> “Russian Invasion to Shrink Ukraine Economy by 45 Percent This Year,” The World Bank, April 10, 2022, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/04/10/russian-invasion-to-shrink-ukraine-economy-by-45-percent-this-year>.

<sup>15</sup> Vivienne walt, “Who Will Pay to Rebuild Ukraine? Economists Have a Plan for Russia to Foot What Could Be a \$1 Trillion Bill,” *Fortune*, April 21, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/04/21/ukraine-reconstruction-cost-rebuild-economists-plan-russia-foot-trillion-bill/>.

substantial territory, and President Volodymyr Zelensky could face a staggering backlash at home. Still, he may have little choice — his country could find the economic and military strain of endless fighting unbearable.

Ukraine's Western backers may become war weary, too. They've just begun to feel the economic blowback from the war and the sanctions imposed on Russia, pain that will only increase. While those sanctions have indeed hurt Russia, they've also contributed to skyrocketing energy and food prices in the West — even as Putin profits by selling his oil, gas and coal at higher prices. The U.S. inflation rate, at 8.6 percent last month,<sup>16</sup> is the highest in 40 years, while the Congressional Budget Office has revised estimates of economic growth — 3.1 percent this year — down to 2.2 percent for 2023 and 1.5 percent for 2024.<sup>17</sup> All this as mid-term elections loom and President Biden's approval ratings, now at 43.2 percent, continue to sink.<sup>18</sup>

Europe is also in economic trouble. Inflation in the Eurozone was 8.1 percent in May, the highest since 1997, and energy prices exploded.<sup>19</sup> Within days of the Russian invasion, European natural gas prices had jumped nearly 70 percent,<sup>20</sup> while oil hit \$105 a barrel,<sup>21</sup> an eight-year high. And the crunch only continues.<sup>22</sup> Inflation in Britain, at 8.2 percent, is the worst since 1982. On June 8, less than four

<sup>16</sup> “Inflation in America May Be Even Worse than Thought,” *The Economist*, June 13, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/06/13/inflation-in-america-may-be-even-worse-than-thought>.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Franck, “CBO boosts U.S. GDP growth estimates, says inflation has topped and will cool to 2% by 2024,” CNBC, May 25, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/25/cbo-releases-us-gdp-growth-inflation-estimates.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Nate Silver, “How Popular Is Joe Biden?” FiveThirtyEight, last modified April 16, 2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-approval-rating/>.

<sup>19</sup> Luke Hurst and Natalie Huet, “UK Inflation Eases but Remains Painful. Which Countries in Europe Are Being Worst Hit?” *Euronews*, December 14, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2022/12/14/record-inflation-which-country-in-europe-has-been-worst-hit-and-how-do-they-compare>.

<sup>20</sup> Neil Hume, Emiko Terazono and Tom Wilson, “European Gas Prices Soar and Oil Tops \$105 after Russia Attacks Ukraine,” *Financial Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/c6303127-5edf-4256-9c25-ef-fa75766002>.

<sup>21</sup> Hume, Terazono and Wilson, “Gas Prices Soar and Oil Tops.”

<sup>22</sup> Joe Wallace and Eric Sylvers, “European Natural Gas Prices Jump as Russia Cuts Supplies Again,” *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified June 15, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/european-natural-gas-prices-jump-as-russia-cuts-supplies-again-11655313931>.

months after the Russian invasion, gasoline prices in the UK reached a 17-year high.<sup>23</sup> The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development anticipates that the French, German, and Italian economies (the three largest in Europe) will contract for the rest of this year, with only France's registering an anemic 0.2 percent growth in the fourth quarter.<sup>24</sup> No one can know for sure whether Europe<sup>25</sup> and the U.S.<sup>26</sup> are headed for a recession, but many economists and business leaders consider it likely.

Such economic headwinds, along with the diminution of the early euphoria created by Ukraine's impressive battlefield successes, could produce "Ukraine fatigue" in the West. The war has already lost prominence in news headlines. Meanwhile, Ukraine's biggest supporters, including the Biden administration, could soon find themselves preoccupied with economic and political challenges at home and ever less eager to keep billions of dollars in economic aid and weaponry flowing.

The combination of Ukraine fatigue and Russian military successes, however painfully and brutally gained, may be precisely what Vladimir Putin is betting on. The Western coalition of more than three dozen states is certainly formidable, but he's savvy enough to know that Russia's battlefield advantages could make it ever harder for the U.S. and its allies to maintain their unity. The possibility of negotiations with Putin has been raised in

**The combination of Ukraine fatigue and Russian military successes, however painfully and brutally gained, may be precisely what Vladimir Putin is betting on.**

<sup>23</sup> Tsvetana Paraskova, "Record UK Gasoline Prices See Biggest Daily Surge In 17 Years," [OilPrice.com](https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Record-UK-Gasoline-Prices-See-Biggest-Daily-Surge-In-17-Years.html), June 8, 2022, <https://oilprice.com/Latest-Energy-News/World-News/Record-UK-Gasoline-Prices-See-Biggest-Daily-Surge-In-17-Years.html>.

<sup>24</sup> "Economy: European Recession Slowing Global Economy, Says OECD," OECD, September 6, 2012, <https://www.oecd.org/newsroom/economyeuropeanrecessionslowingglobaleconomysaysoecd.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Elliot Smith, "'We See a Big Recession in the Making': Top CEOs Are Fearing the Worst in Europe," *CNBC*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/05/06/we-see-a-big-recession-in-the-making-top-ceos-fear-worst-in-europe.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Tristan Bove, "Over Two Thirds of Economists Believe a Recession is Likely to Hit in 2023," *Fortune*, June 14, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/06/13/recession-economists-survey-2023-inflation-interest-rates/>.

France, Italy, and Germany.<sup>27</sup> Ukraine won't be cut off economically or militarily by the West, but it could find Western support ever harder to count on as time passes, despite verbal assurances of solidarity.<sup>28</sup>

All of this could, in turn, set the stage for a *de facto* partition scenario.

## **2. Neutrality, with sweeteners**

Before the war, Putin pushed for a neutral Ukraine that would foreswear all military alliances. No dice, said both Ukraine and NATO.<sup>29,30</sup> That alliance's decision, at its 2008 Bucharest summit, to open the door to that country (and Georgia) was irrevocable. A month after the Russian invasion began, Zelensky put neutrality on the table, but it was too late.<sup>31</sup> Putin had already opted to achieve his aims on the battlefield and was confident he could.

Still, Russia and Ukraine are now a year and a half into the war. Both have suffered heavy losses and each knows that the war could drag on for years at a staggering cost, without either achieving its aims. The Russian president does control additional chunks of Ukrainian territory, but he may hope to find some way of easing Western

**Before the war, Putin pushed for a neutral Ukraine that would foreswear all military alliances. No dice, said both Ukraine and NATO.**

<sup>27</sup> Alexander Smith, "Are Cracks Showing in the West's Support for Ukraine?" *NBC News*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/humiliate-russia-west-divisions-ukraine-support-putin-rcna31218>.

<sup>28</sup> Pjotr Sauer, "Scholz, Macron and Draghi Vow Support for Ukraine's EU Bid on Kyiv Visit," *The Guardian*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jun/16/kyiv-ukraine-olaf-scholz-emmanuel-macron-mario-draghi-russia-war>.

<sup>29</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "Ukraine Urges Nato to Hasten Membership as Russian Troops Gather," *The Guardian*, April 6, 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/06/ukraine-pressures-nato-for-membership-as-russia-amasses-troops-at-border>.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Crowley and David E. Sanger, "U.S. and NATO Respond to Putin's Demands as Ukraine Tensions Mount," *The New York Times*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/26/us/politics/russia-demands-us-ukraine.html>

<sup>31</sup> Pavel Polityuk and Oleksandr Kozhukhar, "Ukraine Willing to Be Neutral, Says Russia Wants to Split Nation," *Reuters*, March 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/rockets-strike-ukraines-lviv-biden-says-putin-cannot-remain-power-2022-03-27/>.



sanctions and also avoiding being wholly dependent on China.

These circumstances might revive the neutrality option.<sup>32</sup> Russia would retain its land corridor to Crimea, even if with some concessions to Ukraine. It would receive a guarantee that the water canals flowing southward to that peninsula from the city of Kherson,<sup>33</sup> which would revert to Ukrainian control, would never again be blocked. Russia would not annex the “republics” it created in the Donbas in 2014 and would withdraw from some of the additional land it’s seized there. Ukraine would be free to receive arms and military training from any country, but foreign troops and bases would be banned from its territory.

Such a settlement would require significant Ukrainian sacrifices, which is why candidate membership in the European Union (EU) and, more importantly, a fast track to full membership — one of that country’s key aspirations — as well as substantial long-term Western aid for economic reconstruction would be a necessary part of any deal. Expediting its membership would be a heavy lift for the EU, and such an aid package would be costly to the Europeans and Americans, so they’d have to decide how much they were willing to offer to end Europe’s biggest conflict since World War II.

### **3. A new Russia**

Ever since the war began, commentators and Western leaders, including President Biden, have intimated that it should produce, if not “regime change” in Russia, then Putin’s departure. And there has been no shortage of predictions that the invasion will indeed prove Putin’s death knell.<sup>34</sup> There’s no evidence, however,

<sup>32</sup> Stephen Van Evera, “To Prevent War and Secure Ukraine, Make Ukraine Neutral,” Defense Priorities, February 19, 2022, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/to-prevent-war-and-secure-ukraine-make-ukraine-neutral>.

<sup>33</sup> Anton Troianovski and Malachy Browne, “Satellite Imagery Shows Ukrainian Water Flowing Again to Crimea, as Russia Nears Big Objective,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/world/europe/crimea-water-canal-russia.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, “Why Vladimir Putin will fall,” *The Hill*, March 15, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/598108-why-vladimir-putin-will-fall/>.

that the war has turned his country's political and military elite against him or any sign of mass disaffection that could threaten the state.

Still, assume for a moment that Putin does depart, voluntarily or otherwise. One possibility is that he would be replaced by someone from his inner circle who then would make big concessions to end the war, perhaps even a return to the pre-invasion

*status quo* with tweaks. But why would he (and it will certainly be a male) do that if Russia controls large swathes of Ukrainian land? A new Russian leader might eventually cut a deal, providing sanctions are lifted, but assuming that Putin's exit would be a magic bullet is unrealistic.

Another possibility: Russia unexpectedly becomes a democracy following prolonged public demonstrations. We'd better hope that happens without turmoil and bloodshed because it has nearly 6,000 nuclear warheads,<sup>35</sup> shares land borders with 14 states, and maritime borders with three more. It is also the world's largest country, with more than 17 million square kilometers (44 percent larger than runner-up Canada).<sup>36</sup>

So, if you're betting on a democratic Russia anytime soon, you'd better hope that the transformation happens peacefully. Upheaval in a vast nuclear-armed country would be a disaster. Even if the passage to democracy isn't chaotic and violent, such a government's first order of business wouldn't be to evacuate all occupied territories. Yet it would be so much more likely than the present one to renounce its post-invasion territorial gains, though perhaps not Russian-majority Crimea, which, in the era of the Soviet Union, was part of the Russian republic until, in 1954, it was transferred to the Ukrainian republic by fiat.

**A new Russian leader might eventually cut a deal, providing sanctions are lifted, but assuming that Putin's exit would be a magic bullet is unrealistic.**

<sup>35</sup> Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Russian nuclear weapons, 2022." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 78, no. 2 (2022): 98-121.

<sup>36</sup> "Map of Russia," *Nations Online*, accessed December 19, 2022, <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/russia-political-map.htm>.

## ***This needs to end***

The suffering and destruction in Ukraine and the economic turmoil the war has produced in the West should be compelling enough reasons to end it. Ditto the devastation it continues to create in some of the world's poorest countries like Kenya,<sup>37</sup> Ethiopia,<sup>38</sup> Somalia,<sup>39</sup> and Yemen.<sup>40</sup> Along with devastating droughts and local conflicts, the conflict has led to staggering increases in the price of basic foods (with both Ukrainian and Russian grains, to one degree or another, blocked from the market). More than 27 million people are already facing acute food shortages or outright starvation in those four nations alone, thanks at least in part to the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>41</sup> Yes, the war is Europe's biggest in a generation, but it's not Europe's alone. The pain it's producing extends to people in faraway lands already barely surviving and with no way to end it. And sadly enough, no one who matters seems to be thinking about them. The simple fact is that, in 2022, with so much headed in the wrong direction, a major war is the last thing this planet needs.

## ***About the author***

Rajan Menon is a recipient of the Ellen Gregg Ingalls Award for Excellence in Classroom Teaching at Vanderbilt University; the Joseph F. Libsch Award for Distinguished Research at Lehigh University; and the Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Award for Distinguished Teaching presented by the Lindback Foundation. He was selected as a Carnegie Scholar (2002-2003) and has received fellowships and grants from the Woodrow Wilson Center, the Council on Foreign Relations, the Rockefeller Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, and the United States Institute of Peace.

<sup>37</sup> Abdi Latif Dahir and Malin Fezehai, "We Buried Him and Kept Walking": Children Die as Somalis Flee Hunger," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/11/world/africa/somalia-drought-hunger.html>

<sup>38</sup> Dahir and Fezehai, "Children Die as Somalis Flee Hunger."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

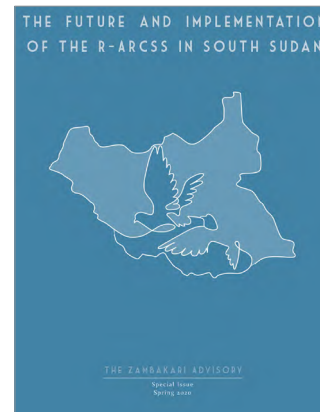
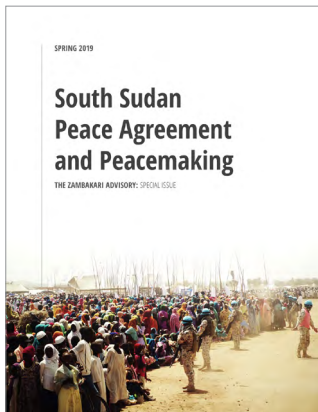
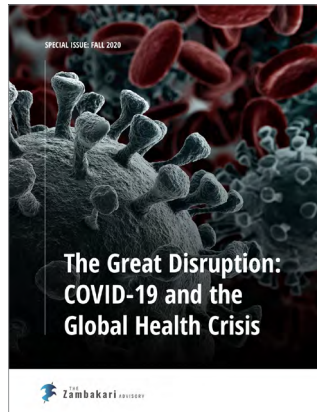
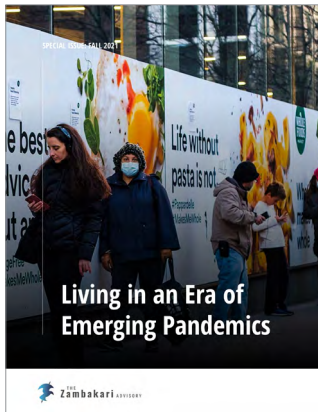
<sup>40</sup> Omer Karasapan, "Yemen in the Shadow of Russia's War on Ukraine," Brookings, April 18, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2022/04/18/yemen-in-the-shadow-of-russias-war-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>41</sup> Karasapan, "Russia's War on Ukraine."

Menon has written more than 50 opinion pieces and essays for the *Los Angeles Times*, *Newsweek*, *Financial Times*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Newsday*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Boston Globe*, and *washingtonpost.com*. He has appeared as a commentator on National Public Radio, ABC, CNN, BBC, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and World Focus (PBS).

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