

THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN WAR ON ITS ABILITY TO PROJECT POWER GEOPOLITICALLY

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In recent years, Russia has gradually lost influence in peripheral states that traditionally used to gravitate around Moscow. China's significant investments in infrastructure development and trade with Central Asian states have isolated Russia, causing it to lose its importance and guiding role in the region. At the same time, Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has led to a complete breakdown in Russian-European relations and increased cohesion among Western nations. Although Russia has lost its role as the world's second-largest power to China, Sino-Russian relations remain a vital issue in regional and international dynamics due to the conjunctural alliance designed to shake the leading role of the US in the global security architecture. The struggle between the West and Russia creates imbalances throughout the international system, and the current World Order seems more disrupted than ever in the last 30 years.

Keywords: NATO; Russia; regional powers; China; Ukraine;

INTRODUCTION

Nearly two years after the start of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the predictability of the global security environment has diminished, and a wave of simultaneous crises in different geographic regions has taken its place. The transition from the Cold War bipolarism is over. Even though there are still two global players, the USA and China, due to globalisation, they are becoming irrelevant on their own and need other states to create strong alliances to counterbalance strategic adversaries. After the first 20 years of the 21st century, two camps can be distinguished: the Western states, which want to maintain the current security system, and the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis, which advocates the creation of a new world order. We thus see how states with undemocratic forms of government are rallying to counterbalance the geopolitical influence of the United States of America, the economic strength of the US-EU tandem and the military power of the North Atlantic Alliance. Although NATO comprises only European and North American states, it has begun to develop cooperation formats with global partners that share the same principles and values (Japan, South Korea, Australia etc.). Thus, the ideological confrontation takes on global dimensions.

The Chinese mediation of peace between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the signing of the strategic partnership between China and Palestine, the enlargement of BRICS with three Arab states and Iran, the repression of Syria in the Arab League, the increase in air incursions by Chinese forces around Taiwan and Chinese interference in the territorial waters of other sovereign states, the multitude of strikes against democratic regimes in the Sub-Saharan region, all represent significant events that have powerful implications in world geopolitics and highlight the strengthening of relations along the Beijing-Moscow-Tehran axis.

Although the increasing violation of the world order based on laws, rules, and order is taking place worldwide, the author considers that a possible disastrous outcome of the Russian army in Eastern Europe may significantly impact the world, disregarding the regional character of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. A potential positive Russian outcome in Ukraine will deal a heavy blow to Western states and reintroduce force diplomacy into international relations, and the possibility of invasions and wars will skyrocket. A possible negative outcome for Russia

in Ukraine could weaken it to an unprecedented degree, thus creating dramatic geopolitical changes, especially in the Caucasus and the Far East. If Russia's war effort is ultimately irrelevant because it cannot achieve its goals, Russia will become militarily and financially decimated. Victory for Ukraine and the West, or Russia's defeat, is the only way to achieve peace in the long term and deter other states from seeking justice by force. A Russian defeat would also resolve the frozen conflicts around the Black Sea and perhaps even a Euro-Atlantic positioning for Belarus, Serbia and Republika Srpska. If Russia wins the war in Ukraine, the force will gradually re-establish itself in international relations and regain its status as the world's third-largest power. China can invade Taiwan, banking on the West's accumulated fatigue.

The world is becoming increasingly multipolar as more and more states seek the status of regional powers and want a greater sphere of influence to give them strategic depth. Russia has declined as a world power but is still the world's most potent regional power. Annexing half of Ukraine will cement that status, while failure would consign it to radical changes produced by its neighbours or originating from within the multi-ethnic federation¹. To change the political regime in Russia, society would have to change. Vladimir Putin's political leadership of the Russian Federation for more than 20 years now seems to be perfectly in line with the consciousness and ideals of the Russian people.

Given the dynamics of the security environment and Russia's desire at all costs to reassert itself globally, a paper is needed that highlights the main geopolitical consequences for Moscow in the course of waging its war of aggression. The scholarly approach to the subject focuses on qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena underlying Russia's essence, Russia's external desires and Russia's dynamics in relation to its neighbours. I have used journalistic material from various sources to draw objective conclusions in preparing the article. In what follows, I will make a historical and anthropological analysis of Russian society and highlight the main characteristics of Putinism exercised internally and the way it manifests itself externally. I will then analyse Russia's "good neighbourhood" relations with the states in its former sphere of influence and with the main actors in its vicinity (Turkey, China, and the European Union). At the end of the article, I will highlight how Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine impacts the whole world,

¹ I think this option is much more possible, since Russia still remains a nuclear power, having the largest nuclear arsenal.

not only economically or energetically, but by increasing other states' neo-imperial and revanchist appetite. "The tripolar system is the most unstable, as two powers will soon join forces to eliminate the third one" (Mussetti, 2023, p. 49).

WHO IS RUSSIA?

"Who is Russia?" is a question that has a complex answer. The good thing is that we must only give this answer once, as Russia has remained the same country with imperial and confrontational attitudes. The mentality of Russian leaders and the people's obedience to the anti-democratic character promoted from the top of the state is contrary to the modern security architecture.

To understand the psychology of the Russian people, we must analyse their history and extract, as objectively as possible, those habits that form the existential pattern of their being. Mongol domination for almost three centuries significantly impacted the Russians' historical, cultural, and social development. The pressure exerted by the Mongols poured a lot of paranoia and autocracy into medieval Russian society. With time, the Russians became tolerant of tyranny and obedient to their oppressors. Although they managed to liberate themselves, the Russians were left with the fear of never being invaded again. "Insecurity is the quintessence of Russian national subjectivity" (Kaplan, 2020, p. 292). It was Ivan the Terrible, Russia's first tsar, who initiated the strategy of attack as defence, and since then, this philosophy has become increasingly entrenched in Russian foreign policy. In order not to go through the humiliation of conquest again, the Russians felt the need to sit on the protection of geography, so they expanded to where the seas and oceans met. Through time, the Russian Empire expanded to the Arctic Ocean, the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea, the Caspian Sea, and the Pacific Ocean. After the Mongol Empire, the greatest threats to Russia came from the west. In the early 17th century, the Polish-Lithuanian State Union conquered Moscow. Three centuries later, Napoleon set fire to Moscow, and in the last century, Hitler reached the outskirts of the Russian capital. The Great Plain of Northern Europe stretches from northwest France to the Ural Mountains (which separate European and Asian Russia). This geographical area's lack of natural barriers has made it easy to invade from east to west and vice versa. Russians are now watching with concern as the North Atlantic Alliance moves closer to Moscow step by step. Latvia, a NATO member, is only 800 km from Moscow, while Estonia is not even 200 km from the old imperial capital, St Petersburg.

Russia's most significant expansion came after the Second World War. Between 1945 and 1989, Russian influence stretched from Berlin to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic Ocean to the border with Afghanistan. In 1991, the Soviet Union broke up into 15 "independent" countries, and Russia was reduced to the size it was before Tsarina Catherine the Great. Despite the territorial loss of the two key former Soviet Union republics (Belarus and Ukraine), the Baltic states, the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia's territory far exceeds the size of any other nation in the world. The Russian Federation stretches over 170 degrees of longitude, almost half the circumference of our planet. It is the country with the largest area, more than 17 million km², covers 11 time zones, and yet it wants even more territory. Paradoxically, although Russia's territory is almost twice the size of the USA, five times the size of India and 25 times the size of the UK, Russia's population is smaller than that of Bangladesh.

Russia is suffering an acute demographic decline, caused mainly by an ageing population, a declining standard of living, an underperforming medical system, chronic pessimism, and alcoholism. More and more studies predict that most Russian army recruits will soon be non-Slavs but Muslims. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has caused the exodus of many Russians with high skills to other countries. By the time Putin signed the partial mobilisation decree in September 2022, some 700,000 highly educated Russians had left the motherland. Russians are a nation that has always been at war. For the 21st century, they had no choice but to adopt a revisionist stance to reclaim its bordering areas where some 26 million ethnic Russians still live.

IS THERE A PACT BETWEEN A BEAR AND A DRAGON?

The most important state that, although it does not show it, certainly does not want the victory of the Collective West is the **People's Republic of China**. On 4 February, Putin arrived in Beijing for a bilateral meeting with China's president. A few hours later, they attended the Winter Olympics opening ceremony. During the meeting, the two heads of state signed the Joint Statement on "Entering a New Era of International Relations and Global Sustainable Development" (Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, 4 February 2022). Chinese support for the non-enlargement of NATO in Eastern Europe in exchange for recognition of the One China policy and Taiwan's membership of the Chinese mainland is noted. Many international relations experts have called this joint statement a "no-holds-barred pact" between two states with a shared philosophy

of redesigning the current World Order and fighting common enemies (US, NATO, AUKUS, Japan). Unlike Russia, which is the loser of the geopolitical machinery since the fall of the Berlin Wall, China is the winner of globalisation.

Due to rapid economic growth and global influence, the Trump and Biden administrations have planned to resolve Russian-American differences to create an alliance to counterbalance China. To be sure, Beijing is Washington's most competent adversary, powerful enough to undermine its global hegemony. At first glance, the People's Republic of China appears neutral in this war, but it certainly has a long-term strategy. It is probably watching Russia's battle in Ukraine closely to understand what it needs or it does not need to do in a possible war to invade Taiwan. It is unclear whether China wants the war to last as long as possible so that Russia and the West become as weakened as possible or to end as soon as possible because of trade and global welfare. "China can quietly contemplate Russia's effort to reclaim its sphere of influence, knowing that this will not make it stronger, nor give it the resources to rebuild what it is destroying today, nor increase its already precarious economic strength, and will expose it more to its pressures in the resource rich Far East and Siberia" (Chifu, 2023, p. 217). The tactical alliance against US hegemony is more important now, and the rift between the two remains hidden for now. Still, Russia and China are natural enemies. The border between Russia and China is one of the longest in the world. It stretches for 4,209 km. Both are land powers and want to control Mackinder's Heartland. China has a much larger and more powerful army than Russia. In addition, only 22% of Russia's population is in its Asian part, which paradoxically comprises 75% of all Russian territory and concentrates most of its natural resources. Russia seems to be "slipping" Siberia if it accepts Chinese support for the war it is waging in the West, but also because it is hard to focus on the Far East if you have a war to fight in the West (Asia Times, 2023). Most towns have Chinese restaurants and businesses between the Ural Mountains and the Yenisei River. Many Russians from the Asian area holiday and shop on Chinese soil. For the first time in history, from 1 June 2023, Vladivostok, Russia's main port on the Pacific, will be used by China for its export goods. This is dramatic for Russia as it seems to be losing out in the west and east. The population of Vladivostok, one of the most important cities in the Asian part of Russia, is just over 600,000. Harbin, the most important Chinese city near Vladivostok, has a population of almost 10 million people. "It was a scenario Russia tried to avoid for over a century. During this time, Russia apparently believed that the key to controlling Vladivostok long-term was to isolate the city from the neighboring overwhelming Chinese environment. Now Moscow is breaking its century-old vows" (Ib.).

Former Russian Chief of the General Staff, General Nikolai Makarov, said that the most dangerous geopolitical enemies of the Russian Federation are NATO and China. It seems Putin took the former too seriously and forgot about the dangerous one. In addition to China's economic and demographic takeover of Asia, Russia, Beijing's increasingly active involvement in Central Asia is also noteworthy. On 17 May 2023, the China-Central Asia summit took place where Xi Jinping promised economic prosperity, infrastructure development and security guarantees for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (former Soviet republics). The lesson for Putin's Russia is simple: *"Empires die when they cannot revitalise or adjust their geo-economic, geo-strategic and geo-cultural orientations"* (Mussetti, p. 130).

Being busy with the destructive war in Ukraine, *"Russia has already missed delivery deadlines for equipment and maintenance services to Cameroon and India – a key customer – and Russia may even be buying back its own exports to use in Ukraine"* (Defence News, 2023). In the top 15 companies producing military technology there are six Chinese companies. Like Russia, China offers cheap but high-quality weapons. Serbia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are not thinking twice when choosing between Russia and China. The Sino-Russian partnership benefits China on all fronts. In addition, at the Xi-Biden or Xi-Schulz meetings, the Chinese President, stated loud and clear that he does not tolerate Russia using nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

FRACTURE OF RUSSIA'S ARC OF INFLUENCE IN EUROPE

If we were to make a top three list of Russia's most significant geopolitical fears, it would look like this: Ukraine in NATO, a united Europe, and China. Russia has always benefited from the differences between the major European powers. It has been opportunistic enough to enter into alliances with other European states to maximise its influence over the old continent.

Russia's inability to declare war on a European NATO member state has led it to develop other strategies to divide and conquer Europe. The primary tool used by the Russian Federation is the *Gerasimov Doctrine*. It emphasises using a broad spectrum of means, both military and non-military, to achieve strategic objectives in conflict. It includes disinformation, propaganda, cyber operations, political campaigns and, in extreme cases, military action. An essential component of this approach is that these means are synchronised to create confusion and instability in the target society. Through the Gerasimov Doctrine, Russia can pursue strategic

objectives without launching an open war. Russia has become a specialist in 5D warfare (disinformation, deception, destabilisation, destruction, and disruption). Underlying this idea, we see Russia's involvement in: BREXIT, the election of Donald Trump, secessionist movements in Europe, Europe's energy policy and the funding of far-right populist parties claiming the mirage of sovereignty.

The European Union was created as an antidote to the nationalism and competitiveness that has constantly generated conflict on the European continent, from which Russia has benefited. With the naked eye, one can see how Europe is becoming stronger and more prosperous thanks to unity under the EU umbrella, yet there are Eurosceptics. The feeling is that, in recent years, far-right parties have gained more and more momentum, and the war in Ukraine has helped them incredibly because of the economic problems in every country. So, the upcoming elections in major European countries are creating chills. The free and democratic world has to make its financial contributions to the war effort by arming Ukraine, inflation, supporting refugees, and increasing energy or heating bills. It may not be fair, but it is correct. Maybe that's what Putin is counting on and why he didn't want to defeat Ukraine quickly. Perhaps the ultimate goal is not to conquer all of Ukraine but to wage war long enough until the West splits and the US turns its back on Europe. Putin's strategy is simple but effective: chaos to get people out on the streets and generate political change with pseudo-sovereignist governments. Three months before it took over the EU Council presidency (1 July 2022), the Czech Republic saw large-scale protests. Around 70 thousand people took to the streets to protest against NATO and for Czech neutrality in the war in Ukraine. Militarily, the USA and its European allies are helping to turn Russia's war in Ukraine into a significant strategic failure. The West has pursued an *"anything but Article 5"* support strategy for Ukraine. NATO states will not send soldiers from their professional armed forces to fight in Ukraine. Still, they will help the Ukrainian people with humanitarian assistance, economic support, and military support with weapons according to the needs of the Ukrainian armed forces, the goal being to weaken Russia as much as possible and deter other belligerent states.

It is fascinating the change of strategy among European states. Sweden and Finland expressed their intention to join NATO, which became a fact in the case of Finland, Moldova and Ukraine are EU candidates, Denmark and Norway have sent Ukraine lethal weapons and material support, and Switzerland has imposed sanctions on Russia. Perhaps the most critical development is that of Germany, which, before the war, was dependent on and subjugated by Putin's energy caliphate

but has now abandoned Nord Stream 2, delivered heavy weapons to Ukraine and, most importantly, will invest massively in the Bundeswehr. Paradoxically, along with Germany, Japan plans to invest some \$52bn in defence by 2023. According to the Ukraine Support Tracker, Germany is the European state that has invested the most in Ukraine's security, followed by the UK's contributions. France ranks 15th in this regard. Between 24 February 2022 and 31 May 2023, France provided about half a billion dollars for Ukraine, almost as much as Estonia and less than Lithuania. Turkey is also ranked 26th globally, contributing less than Luxembourg, and Romania does not appear in the top 30. One of the lessons the Europeans should learn from this war is the need to revitalise and materialise the discussion about the European Union Army: *"Europeans have been extremely lucky to have President Joe Biden's consensual transatlantic leadership. Just imagine the mess if Donald Trump had been in the White House when Putin's tanks barged into Ukraine"* (The Guardian, 2023). The rift between Europe and Russia seems total at the moment, and the confidence of the major European chancelleries in Putin ended when the Russian President promised the President of France and the Chancellor of Germany that he would not start any military invasion of Ukraine. The near future seems to follow this trajectory. Only a complete regime change could bring a historic reconciliation between post-Putin Russia and Europe.

THE BLACK SEA CHESSBOARD

A real *game-changer* in the security architecture of Southeast Europe is the calibration of Russian interests with Turkish interests in the Black Sea region. Turkish-Russian relations are complex, characterised by cooperation and rivalry in equal measure. Turkey is where East meets West, European Christianity meets Islam, and many distinct cultures and civilisations intersect. In geopolitical terms, **Turkey** is the easternmost point of NATO and the only remaining open communication channel between the West and Russia. Turkey is a very atypical NATO member because Erdogan puts Turkey's interests first and then those of its allies. Thus, over the last 20 years, Turkey has adopted a transactionalist attitude, being with the West and the rest, due to its geographical position, which gives it an overwhelming strategic importance.

Turkey is the only state in the Black Sea region that can compete on equal terms with Russia. However, Turkey and Russia have the same strategy for the Black Sea. They both advocate regionalisation of the sea and do not want the presence of the US or the EU. Given the interdependencies between the two, a diplomatic conflict

would come with a multitude of consequences, both economic and geopolitical. Russia has been blessed with the largest natural gas reserves in the world, the second-largest coal reserves, and the eighth largest oil reserves. This is perfect, considering that Turkey depends on oil, energy, and raw materials imports.

Since the beginning of the war, Turkey has accused Russia of violating international law and does not recognise the annexation of the people's republics in eastern Ukraine or the Crimean Peninsula. Erdogan knows that whoever controls the Crimean Peninsula controls the Black Sea. If you add South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ukraine's Pontic littoral to Russia's territory, it becomes obvious who is the biggest threat to Turkey's existence. Before the NATO summit in Vilnius, Turkey gave Russia the coup de grace and accepted the transformation of the Baltic Sea into a NATO lake by accepting Sweden's membership. In response, not two weeks later, Russia unilaterally withdrew from the Black Sea Grains Pact, causing much instability in the Black Sea and the African continent. The Wider Black Sea Region is the most unpredictable area in Europe because of Russia and the frozen conflicts that can flare up at any time. During the Vilnius summit, the Black Sea was recognised for the first time as an area of strategic importance. *"The communiqué dedicates a paragraph to the Black Sea region for the first time in the history of NATO summits. However, it consigns the Black Sea region to paragraph 79 in a total of 90 paragraphs"* (The Jamestown Foundation-1, 2023). It seems that NATO is self-investigating the imminent risks in the Black Sea, but even so, it does not want to get so involved in Russia's "yard", or it cannot because of the Montreux Convention.

General Ben Hodges, former commander of US ground troops in Europe and author of the US strategy for the Black Sea region, visited Romania in August 2023 and proposed a trilateral alliance of NATO Black Sea states to deter Russia. Erdogan plays neither for NATO, Russia, nor China. He only plays for Turkey. In the 100 years of the Turkish Republic's existence, Erdogan is considered the second most important Turk after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Turkey's current President would do whatever it takes to enter the history books and restore the influence of the Ottoman Empire. The war in Ukraine gives him the perfect opportunity. It is possible that Erdogan, strategic and challenging as he is, will wait quietly until Russia's forces become weak enough, just before the Ukrainians enter the Crimean Peninsula. If Ukraine wins the war, Zelensky may allow Turkey, under the NATO banner, to build a military base in Crimea on the ruins of the old Sevastopol base. Turkey will then clear the Caucasus of Russian troops stationed there, transitioning from the *Blue Homeland doctrine*

to influence and strategic depth in the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea. This is how Erdogan wants to be remembered. Interestingly, NATO is nowhere to be found in this scenario. It is simply the individual intentions of NATO states. The Mine Countermeasures Group in the Black Sea was recently set up under Turkish leadership, with Romania and Bulgaria as crucial members.

On 4 September 2023, Erdogan travelled to Sochi, Russia, for bilateral talks with Putin. The topics on the Turkish President's list for discussion included the naval blockade of Ukraine, restrictions on freedom of navigation in the Black Sea, hostile actions targeting the Sukru Okran ship sailing to the Ukrainian port of Ismail, drone attacks at the mouth of the Danube, and Moscow's refusal to allow 12 merchant ships, which were stationed in the ports of Mykolaiv and Kherson, to return to Turkey. There are not many times when Erdogan can be bullied and left without a response, but Russia's President managed to do it. *"Putin told Erdogan publicly that Russian warships have been deployed to protect the South Stream and Blue Stream pipelines that carry Russian gas to Turkey. It was a slight to Erdogan, implying that Turkey's own navy was not up to the task. It was also a reminder that Russian warships feel free to patrol relatively close to Turkish waters"* (Socor-1, 2023). Erdogan did not return to Turkey empty-handed but secured several major economic projects to further increase Turkey's dependence on the EU, among Putin's promises: the natural gas hub that will make Turkey the most prominent regional distributor, as well as faster progress on the construction of the Akkuyu nuclear power plant (which will generate 10% of Turkey's electricity consumption).

According to the national interest, Erdogan's Turkey can be characterised as a flexible, adaptable, and changeable actor. It can renounce its status as a NATO ally if the situation requires it and can create new alliances depending on the moment's circumstances. It seems normal considering Turkey's peripheral geographic location compared to its Euro-Atlantic allies. Turkey is the only country within the North Atlantic Alliance that maintains an open dialogue with Putin and has not imposed economic sanctions on Russia, and in fact, continues to do business with the aggressor state. On the other hand, Turkey seems to support Ukraine militarily by supplying it with Bayraktar drones while refusing to sell them to Russia. The Turkish company has invested over \$100 million in a factory that will produce Bayraktar drones and one that will facilitate the maintenance of these UAVs, both located on Ukrainian soil. A possible sale of Bayraktar Akinci UAVs is currently being negotiated. If this scenario becomes reality, it will be the first time that one of the warring

parties sends HALE (High Altitude Long Endurance) class drones into combat. With the delivery of F-16s, Ukraine will begin to have air capabilities comparable to Russia's, and the fate of the war may change in the West's favour.

CONCLUSIONS

The whole world is wondering how long Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine will last, as it has enormous implications everywhere. The world is a living organism, like a human being, it has its ups and downs. It has upward periods of prosperity and wealth and downward periods in which more and more regions are engulfed in chaos and war. Russia's war in Ukraine is creating a humanitarian disaster, economic stagnation and collapse, widespread armament and the risk of nuclear war, a food crisis, an energy crisis, and a deteriorating security situation in other parts of the world.

It is tough to analyse a war that is in full swing and shows no sign of stopping any time soon, but in this article, I wanted to bring to the fore the main coordinates that may suggest the beginning of a new World Order. Russia cannot be easily defeated on the battlefield, but it cannot win the war in Ukraine, and the world will undoubtedly look different at the end of this conflict. Some 80 weeks of military confrontation have passed at the time of writing. In the chess game on the front, the armed forces seem to be in continuous expectation, with no apparent prospect of ending Russian aggression.

At the end of the war, whatever the outcome, Ukraine will need reconstruction, security guarantees and EU membership. International law seems irrelevant in the face of powerful, nuclear-capable states constantly undermining it and aggressing against their neighbours, and the UN Security Council is increasingly proving its insignificant role in resolving the planet's major geopolitical crises. Perhaps a change in the World Order should start by reforming the UN and the machinery of the Security Council.

It is imperative that in the event of a Ukrainian victory, when Russia will be perceived as a pariah state and seen as easy prey by the Chinese dragon, the European Union and the USA intervene to support Russia's democratisation and resilience-building efforts so as not to leave a power vacuum to be filled by Communist China. Following the Treaty of Versailles (1919), France humiliated Germany, and in precisely 21 years, Nazi Germany invaded France. We must learn the lessons of history and not let Russia fall into the arms of China.

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