

# Deconstructing Triggers and Perspectives: Russia-Ukraine Dynamics

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## Abstract

The eruption of war between Russia and Ukraine dates back to the Treaty of Bucharest in April 2008 when the US and NATO exhibited their desire to include Ukraine and Georgia in the folds of NATO. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, had, in no uncertain terms, expressed his strategic objective of retaining Ukraine free of the influence of the West and especially of NATO. The reasons for the domination of Ukraine by Russia were known to the US and NATO, but in the pursuit of expansion of NATO, the Russian warning was lost sight of, and as a result, the situation in 2024 has become precarious. It is two years since 24 February 2022 and the war is still raging, and the world sees no respite. The intervention of the United Nations and the world powers has not resulted in a break in the battle. Ukrainians are getting punished for no fault of theirs, and the world leaders are busy playing strategic games. National security and economic growth for Ukraine are as important as any other nation on the planet, and getting involved in the war of dominance between the superpowers is detrimental to the sovereignty of Ukraine. The paper discusses the causes of the war, different perspectives and likely outcomes of the war.

## Introduction

Ukraine was once the blue-eyed federal state of the former USSR and was an equal partner in the formation of the USSR. World War II was a gory war for the World, and Ukrainians suffered immensely at the hands of Hitler, and Nazis massacred over a million Ukrainians. The massacre has been called 'genocide by Karell C. Berkhoff and many other historians<sup>1</sup>. Some Ukrainians saw Nazis as liberators, and that has not been appreciated by the Ukrainian political leadership even to this day<sup>2</sup>. Ukraine was part of the USSR and fought against the German invasion with the rest of the Russians in World War II. It has been a vital strategic state of the USSR as it has been the centre of defence forces, industrial

centre and food basket of the world. The Black Sea served as a trade corridor, and the Black Sea fleet provided naval strength. The breaking up of Russia that led to the independence of Ukraine has been a sore point in the geo-strategic challenge for Russia. Russian interests have led to Russia invading Ukraine twice in the last decade. The separation of Ukraine in 1991 has also not irked Russia to breaking point, but since the time the US and NATO expressed interest in Ukraine joining NATO, it has drawn an instant and sharp reaction from Russia. The NATO-Ukraine Commission (NUC) signed a Charter in 1997 on a Distinctive Partnership with Ukraine to strengthen the relations between the two. The process has further progressed with NUC supporting Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration process through their annual National Programme<sup>3</sup>. NATO has been supporting the cause of independence of Ukraine and has condemned Russian control of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia.

**Figure 1 MAP of Ukraine**



*Source:* <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>

The eruption of war between Russia and Ukraine dates back to the Treaty of Bucharest in April 2008 when US President Bush wanted to include Georgia and Ukraine in the Membership Action Plan. This American move was opposed by Germany and France, and the motion failed<sup>4</sup>. The issue sparked resentment in Russia. The tussle for NATO to support continued, and Russia, on its part, continued to oppose to the extent that Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Russian leader Vladimir Putin had, in no uncertain terms, expressed their strategic objective of retaining Ukraine free of the influence of the West and especially of NATO. The reasons were well understood by NATO and Russia, but in

the pursuit of expansion of NATO, the Russian warning was lost sight of, and as a result, the situation today has become precarious. It is over a year now that the war is raging, and the world sees no respite. The intervention of the United Nations and the world powers has not resulted in a thaw in the battle. Ukrainians are getting punished for no fault of theirs, and the leaders are stuck at playing strategic games. National security and economic growth for Ukraine are as important as any other nation on the planet, and getting involved in the war of dominance between the superpowers is detrimental to the sovereignty of Ukraine.

### **Triggers of Russia-Ukraine War**

A complex web of geopolitical interests, historical tensions, and Putin's ambitions have contributed to the current crisis, though Russia's desire to maintain Ukraine under its influence remains the fundamental cause of the conflict. Some of the causes are listed below: -

- ☒ The Geographic location of Ukraine and Russia. Both countries lie on the borders of Europe and Asia. Allied Forces and the Axis forces fought bitterly in this region. This was the time when Ukraine was part of the USSR. This was the area that fought both World Wars bitterly. NATO and WARSAW pacts were created around this area after the collapse of the WARSAW pact after the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. NATO has since then gained prominence in the region, and the power game paved the way for the US to influence Ukraine. "The Icon and the Axe" mentions the statement of Librarian of Congress James H. Billington, who is an expert on Russian culture. He said,

*"Geography and not history has dominated Russian thinking. Harsh seasonal cycles, a few distant rivers, and sparse patterns of rainfall and soil fertility controlled the lives of the ordinary peasant, and the ebb and flow of nomadic conquerors often seemed little more than the senseless movement of surface objects on an unchanging and unfriendly sea. In other words, the very flatness of Russia, extending from Europe to the Far East, with few natural borders anywhere and the tendency for scattered settlements as opposed to urban concentrations, has for long periods made for a landscape of anarchy, in which every group was permanently insecure."*<sup>5</sup>

- ☒ Russia desires to maintain Ukraine within its sphere of influence. Ukraine has close historical and cultural ties with Russia, and many Russians see Ukraine as part of "Greater Russia." Belarus and Ukraine were called Little Russians after the breakup of the Soviet

Union; Russia was unwilling to accept Ukrainian independence and sovereignty<sup>6</sup>.

- ☒ NATO's eastward expansion. Russia sees NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe as an encroachment on its national and strategic interests. Ukraine's desire to join NATO is seen as a threat by Russia.
- ☒ The fall of Ukraine's pro-Russian government in 2014. The Ukrainian Revolution in 2014 ousted Viktor Yanukovich's pro-Russian government and ushered in a pro-Western Ukrainian leadership. This upset the balance of power in Ukraine that Russia wanted to maintain.
- ☒ The conflict in eastern Ukraine. Since 2014, a conflict has been going on between Ukrainian government forces and Russian-backed separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Russia has denied direct involvement but has supported the separatists.
- ☒ Economic interests. Ukraine has valuable natural resources and economic assets that Russia does not want to lose influence over. This includes Ukraine's large natural gas pipelines to Europe.
- ☒ President Putin's ambitions. Some analysts believe President Putin wants to restore Russia's influence and rebuild the Russian empire, and invading Ukraine helps achieve this goal. Russia is the weakest of the three power players: the US, Russia, and China. Russia's strategic national interests are considered one of the major reasons for influencing the breakaway factions of the erstwhile USSR<sup>7</sup>.
- ☒ Russia has long opposed Ukrainian moves towards integration with the West. In 2004, the Orange Revolution erupted after a disputed election, bringing a pro-Western government to power for the first time. Russia tried to prop up pro-Russian candidates and parties in Ukraine to maintain influence.
- ☒ In 2008, NATO promised that Ukraine would eventually join the alliance, further angering Russia. Ukraine has sought NATO membership to protect itself from Russian aggression.
- ☒ After the 2014 revolution that ousted the pro-Russian Yanukovich government, Russia annexed Crimea and backed separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine. This led to international sanctions against Russia but failed to deter further Russian aggression.
- ☒ Ukraine has significant natural resources that Russia does not want to lose access to, including large coal reserves, iron ore, natural

gas, and other minerals. Russia also relies on Ukrainian pipelines to export gas to Europe.

- ☒ Putin has made no secret of his view that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a mistake and has expressed a desire to reverse some of those changes. Reasserting control over Ukraine would be a symbolic victory for Putin.
- ☒ There are deep ethnic and cultural ties between Russia and Ukraine that Putin has exploited to portray the conflict as a “liberation” of ethnic Russians in Ukraine. However, most Ukrainians see themselves as a separate nation from Russia.
- ☒ Putin has also expressed concerns about NATO expansion and the potential deployment of Western troops and weapons near Russia’s border if Ukraine joins the alliance. NATO countries have provided both financial aid and weapons to Ukraine to fight the Russian forces.

The causes of the conflict can be seen as a complex blend of geopolitical competition, economic motivations, cultural influences, and Putin’s ambitions, all of which escalated tensions and led to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. At the heart of the matter is Russia’s reluctance to recognize Ukraine as a fully sovereign and independent state. The Russian strategic viewpoint regarding NATO expansion and the perceived indirect influence of the US in Ukraine have deeply unsettled Russia, surpassing tolerable levels of concern.

### **Perspectives of the Russia-Ukraine Dynamics**

The Russia-Ukraine war commenced on 24 February 2022 with Russian forces invading Ukraine on a large scale, entering from multiple directions, including from Belarus, Crimea, and Russian territory. The very next day, on 25 February 2022, the US and EU imposed heavy sanctions against Russia.<sup>2nd</sup> March 2022 saw Russian forces capturing the Crimean Peninsula, which had been under Ukrainian control since 2014. President Putin declared that he was trying to create a “buffer zone” between Russia and NATO to protect Russia. He called NATO support for Ukraine an aggressive expansion of NATO<sup>8</sup>.

While Russian forces have captured the Luhansk and Donbask region of Ukraine, they have so far failed to take major Ukrainian cities like Kyiv, Kharkiv and Odesa. They are currently engaged in street battles with Ukrainian forces around Kyiv.

Media reported that the humanitarian situation deteriorated rapidly, with over one million Ukrainians fleeing to neighbouring countries as refugees. Millions more are internally displaced.

Western nations have imposed severe economic sanctions on Russia, targeting banks, businesses and individuals connected to the government. Some Russian banks have been cut off from the SWIFT international payment system.

NATO and Western allies have provided humanitarian aid, military equipment and intelligence support to Ukraine but have ruled out direct military intervention. They want to avoid a direct confrontation with Russia. Russia has captured south eastern part of Ukraine<sup>9</sup>.

Peace talks between Ukrainian and Russian officials have been ongoing, but there has been no breakthrough yet. Ukraine wants a ceasefire and the withdrawal of Russian troops, while Russia wants Ukraine to adopt a neutral status with security guarantees. Russian forces have a military advantage; they have faced stronger resistance and international pressure than expected. The Ukrainian people remain defiant and determined to resist the Russian invasion.

## Discussion

Likelihood of a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia?

☒ NATO is a defensive alliance and has no intention of attacking Russia. NATO's core purpose is to defend its member states, not act as an aggressive invasion force. However, including Norway and Sweden into its fold and assuring Ukraine of the same is aggressive posturing that directly threatens Russia's strategic space. More so, US President Jo Biden expressed his concerns about making Ukraine a growth-oriented country that is capitalist and democratic in nature. In a joint press conference on 12 December 2023, while meeting President Zelensky, President Biden remarked,

*"Mr. President, I will not walk away from Ukraine, and neither will the American people. A clear bipartisan majority of people across the United States and in Congress support your country. They understand, as I do, that Ukraine's success and its ability to deter aggression in the future are vital to security for the world at large."*<sup>10</sup>

NATO leaders have repeatedly stated that no NATO troops will be sent to Ukraine to fight Russian forces. They have made it clear that NATO will not be directly involved in the Ukraine conflict militarily. Indirect

support by the UK, France, Germany, and Poland has provided military weapons, guns, aircraft, and other support to Ukraine. Council of Foreign Relations has reported that the US has spent US \$74.3 billion on developments in Ukraine. This includes 25% on security assistance and 32% on war weapons and equipment<sup>11</sup>.

NATO getting directly involved could drastically escalate the conflict and risk a full-scale war between Russia and the West. Both sides want to avoid this scenario. President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, has openly warned NATO and other countries not to violate the land or air space of Ukraine and Russia. Russia has warned of “catastrophic consequences” if other countries intervene militarily in Ukraine<sup>12</sup>. He has stated that any country that violates the red line will be treated as an enemy. He has announced that he will not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if required and has deployed them to be used in case of any serious violation.

NATO’s Article 5 collective defence clause, which states that an attack on one ally is an attack on all, only applies to NATO members. Ukraine is not a NATO member. That is a saviour as of now, and war can be avoided using this clause. NATO’s aggressive expansion on the North-Western and Western border is considered a direct threat by Russia<sup>13</sup>.

The situation is similar to the Bay of Pigs crisis or possibly worse. The US wishes to remain a uni-polar power in the world and is pursuing the policy of establishing democracy through the use of power in any country that does not have democracy<sup>14</sup>. Western leaders appear determined to impose severe economic costs on Russia through sanctions but avoid a direct military confrontation that could spin out of control. The powers involved have to be extremely sensitive about the fact that Putin considers NATO support to Ukraine as an intervention in its close proximity and in Russian strategic space. There is simply no strategic, military or political advantage for NATO to get directly involved in the current Ukraine conflict militarily. The risks would far outweigh any potential gains.

The prevailing consensus is that while Western condemnation of Russia’s actions in Ukraine has been resolute, the likelihood of direct intervention by NATO forces remains remote. Both NATO and Russia are strategically inclined towards containment measures, aiming to forestall an escalation of hostilities that could destabilize not only the region but also have far-reaching implications for European stability. Scholarly discourse underscores the emphasis placed by NATO on employing economic sanctions and providing substantial material support to Ukraine as key

strategies for exerting pressure on Russia. The prospect of a direct military clash between NATO and Russia is considered highly improbable within academic discourse due to a range of factors.

### **Futuristic Perspective**

There are a few possible ways forward to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict:

**A ceasefire and peace agreement:** This would likely involve Ukraine agreeing to remain neutral and not join NATO in exchange for Russian troops withdrawing and an end to hostilities. Ukraine may also have to concede control of Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine. Both sides would need to agree to a lasting ceasefire.

**International diplomatic intervention:** The UN, European Union, and other international bodies could play a larger role in facilitating negotiations between Russia and Ukraine. Outside parties could propose frameworks for a settlement and exert diplomatic pressure on both sides.

**Russian military defeat:** If Russian forces suffer significant setbacks and are unable to achieve their objectives, Russia may be forced to accept a ceasefire on unfavourable terms. However, a total military defeat for Russia is unlikely.

**Economic pressure on Russia:** Continued and intensified sanctions on Russia may eventually force Putin to end the conflict in Ukraine. However, Russia has large foreign currency reserves that could cushion the blow in the short term.

**Regime change in Russia:** If Putin is removed from power through internal political upheaval, his successor may be willing to end the conflict and repair relations with the West. However, regime change does not appear imminent.

**Direct negotiations between Russia and Ukraine:** Both sides sitting down for comprehensive talks represents the best chance for an enduring resolution. Ukraine would need security guarantees to ensure its sovereignty and territorial integrity. Russia would want assurances Ukraine would not join NATO.

In synthesis, a multifaceted strategy encompassing diplomatic initiatives, economic leverage, and direct diplomatic dialogue emerges as the optimal trajectory forward. The potential for a protracted military deadlock or a definitive Russian triumph via extensive bombardment is



deemed improbable in securing a lasting peace accord. The absence of an immediate resolution is further compounded by entrenched mutual distrust between the conflicting parties. However, the imperative of fostering constructive discourse and pursuing pragmatic compromises remains paramount in navigating a viable pathway towards conflict resolution.

## Conclusion

The ongoing war that was initiated in 2022 persists without a clear end in sight, its complexity further compounded by the Israel-Hamas conflict. The United States finds itself entangled in both regions, providing economic and military backing to both Israel and Ukraine, straining its resources. NATO continues to offer steadfast support to Ukraine, although Russia's acceptance of Ukraine's NATO membership remains distant. The potential threat of Russia resorting to nuclear measures, along with the unpredictability of such a scenario, may dissuade NATO from directly intervening in the conflict. Russia perceives Ukraine and the Black Sea as crucial to its strategic interests and is unlikely to tolerate external interference in its vicinity.

Moreover, China's role in supporting Russia adds another layer of complexity. As an ally to Russia, China's backing bolsters Russia's position and complicates the dynamics further. The economic repercussions of the war are significant, especially for European nations heavily reliant on Russian oil and gas, serving as a deterrent to further escalation.

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