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Assessing the Russia-Ukraine War in 2024: Consequences and Scenarios of the Future

Zarys treści: Artykuł bada supermocarstwowe aspiracje Federacji Rosyjskiej pod przywództwem prezydenta Władimira Putina, które osiągnęły punkt kulminacyjny w postaci inwazji militarnej na Ukrainę w lutym 2022 r. Niniejsza analiza ukazuje kilka fundamentalnych czynników odpowiedzialnych za zagrożenia, jakie mocarstwowa polityka Kremla stwarza dla współczesnych systemów bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego, a przede wszystkim dla porządku politycznego Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, ale również dla całego świata.

Outline of Content: The article examines the superpower aspirations of the Russian Federation under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, which culminated in the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This analysis reveals several fundamental factors responsible for the threats that the Kremlin's superpower policy poses to contemporary international security systems, primarily to the political order of Central and Eastern Europe and the entire world.

Słowa kluczowe: Federacja Rosyjska, Ukraina, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, międzynarodowy system bezpieczeństwa, Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia

Keywords: Russian Federation, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian war, international security system, Central and Eastern Europe

Introduction

On 21 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin acknowledged the independence of two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine – the Luhansk People's Republic and the Donetsk People's Republic – and ordered troops to enter the disputed

region to carry out the so-called ‘peace operation’.¹ The next day, the Kremlin authorities recognised the claims of the pro-Moscow separatists to the entire Donbas region, thus setting the stage for a full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. It began with a combined attack by land, sea, and air forces on 24 February 2022. Initially, over a hundred missiles were fired from land platforms and warships at targets situated in Ukraine, followed by ground attacks along three main strategic axes: (1) north, from Belarus towards Kyiv; (2) eastern, from western Russia towards Kharkiv; (3) and southern, from the Crimea to Kherson.²

The international community immediately condemned the Russian invasion. On 2 March 2022, by a vote of 141 countries in favour, five against, and 35 abstentions, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted a resolution to refrain from further unlawful threats or use of force against any member state. The above order emphasised the immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all armed forces from Ukrainian territory.³ Two weeks later, on 16 March, the International Court of Justice, by thirteen votes to two, indicated interim measures against Russia to, among other things, “immediately suspend the military operation launched on 24 February 2022.”⁴ On 24 March, the General Assembly reiterated that Russia must comply with Resolution ES-11/1, demanding that the Kremlin authorities immediately cease all hostilities against Ukraine.⁵

Staunch in February 2022, Moscow’s military aggression against Ukraine comes eight years after Russia illegally invaded, annexed, and occupied Crimea in February 2014. The Russian invasion of the Crimean peninsula clearly violated Articles 2(3) and 2(4) of the UN Charter, which the UN General Assembly condemned on 27 March 2014.⁶ The Council of Europe further established that the result of the subsequent referendum organised by Moscow in Crimea and Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in March 2014 have no legal effect.⁷ Both

¹ ‘Russia-Ukraine Tensions: Putin Orders Troops to Separatist Regions and Recognizes Their Independence’, *New York Times*, 30 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/02/21/world/ukraine-russia-putin-biden> (accessed: 25 June 2023).

² V. Hopkins, N. MacFarquhar, S. Erlanger, M. Levenson, ‘100 Days of War: Death, Destruction and Loss’, *New York Times*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/03/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-100-days.html> (accessed: 25 June 2023).

³ ‘UN resolution against Ukraine invasion: Full text’, *Al Jazeera*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/unga-resolution-against-ukraine-invasion-full-text> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

⁴ International Court of Justice, ‘Allegations of Genocide under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 5 June 2023 (Ukraine v. Russian Federation: 32 States intervening)’, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/182> (accessed: 25 June 2023).

⁵ General Assembly, Res. ES-11/2, III 1-2 (28 Mar. 2022), <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/un-documents/document/a-res-es-11-1.php> (accessed: 25 June 2023).

⁶ General Assembly, Res. 68/262 (1 Apr. 2014), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/767883?ln=en> (accessed: 25 June 2023).

⁷ Council of Europe, Res. 1988, 16 (9 Apr. 2014), <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/xref/xref.xml-2html-en.asp?fileid=20873&lang=en> (accessed: 26 June 2023).

acts of Russian aggression in 2014 and 2022 contradict the United Nations Charter and the 1994 ‘Budapest Memorandum’, in which Russia explicitly committed to respecting Ukraine’s “independence and sovereignty and existing borders”.⁸ The memorandum also requires Russia to refrain from “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine”.⁹

Although Ukraine is putting up fierce resistance, Russian military operations are expected to intensify as well. The Russian war against Ukraine is entering a new, dangerous, and difficult-to-predict phase. Moreover, they are associated with far-reaching and radical geopolitical and economic implications, which are hazardous for the European continent as well as the entire world. The attempt by the Kremlin authorities to unilaterally grant sovereignty to the separatist state known as the Donetsk People’s Republic and the Luhansk region quickly turned into a large-scale invasion, which was supposed to lead to the overthrow of the government in Kyiv and the occupation of all of Ukraine.¹⁰

In the aftermath of these events, the United States, the European Union, Australia, Canada, Japan, and other NATO partners imposed harsh sanctions against Russian banks, politicians, and business elites, intending to cut Russia off from the global economy. Previously unthinkable sanctions were imposed on Moscow, including restricting Russian banks’ access to SWIFT, cutting off technology supplies, and restricting flights and freight to Russia.¹¹ Despite solemn declarations of support for Ukraine by the UN General Assembly and Western nations, NATO has prudently denied any plans to send military forces into the country, impose a no-fly zone, or escalate threats to avoid an even more violent conflagration. In addition, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his generals have vowed to respond to any foreign interference with military force, even nuclear weapons. It is very difficult to predict what will happen next, but this will be the most transformative development of the conflict in Europe since the Second World War.¹²

The research method used in these analyses aims to highlight and assess the most important issues related to the Russian-Ukrainian war and its current circumstances, which are included in the methodological-analytical framework

⁸ General Assembly, Security Council, ‘General and Complete Disarmament Maintenance of International Security’, 19 Dec. 1994, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_1994_1399.pdf (accessed: 26 June 2023).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ K. Matsuzato, ‘The First Four Years of the Donetsk People’s Republic’, in: *The War in Ukraine’s Donbas*, ed. D.R. Marples (Budapest–Viena–New York, 2022), pp. 43–66.

¹¹ M. Gollom, ‘How expelling Russia from SWIFT could impact the country. And why there’s reluctance to do so’, *CBC News*, 26 Feb. 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220226092109/https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/swift-sanctions-russia-banking-ukraine-1.6365146> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

¹² R. Bäcker, J.R. Rak, ‘(Dis)Engagement in the Russia-Ukraine War’, *Politichnye Zhittya*, no. 4 (2022), pp. 18–21.

used to study armed conflicts with the use of violence. Hence, the following procedures were used to study the source materials: content analysis, semantic study, as well as enquiries typical of inductive and deductive research methods used in nomothetic sciences (explaining problems, defining issues, formulating solutions and rules characterising armed conflicts, etc.) and ideographic sciences (describing individual facts). Therefore, using the above research methods – combined with reduction – allows the narrowing of the research field according to the subject of this piece.

The Russian-Ukrainian Conflict: Specificity and Practicalities of the Military Clash and Its Geopolitical Circumstances

Russia, which lost its status as a global power due to the collapse of the ‘Soviet Empire’ (USSR), quickly revived its imperial tendencies in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The dynamic development of the countries of Asia and other regions of the world and the involvement of the Kremlin in the countries of Africa and South America caused a change in the international balance of power to the detriment of the democratic nations of the West. Russia saw this as an opportunity to pursue its strategic interests, prioritising rebuilding its superpower status in world politics by monitoring the transformation of the global international security strategy through the transition from the current unipolar system to a multipolar world order. This paradigm was based on developing close relations with countries with an ‘anti-Western’ province, such as China and Iran.

Despite the Kremlin administration’s strenuous efforts to restore Russia’s status as a world power from the period of imperial splendour, the current state system seems to be much less ‘cosmopolitan’ than in the era of Tsarist Russia or even the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, for Putin, this is not a problem but rather an advantage. The current ‘political correctness’ defines the current political system of the Russian state in nationalist terms that emphasise deep historical ties with the Russian imperial cultural past. At the same time, the cultural traditions of many other nations and communities inhabiting the vast territory of Russia are ignored. Moreover, various cultural and religious traditions try to impose the character of ‘Russianness’, understood as an element that unifies and integrates modern-day Russia’s ‘national identity’.¹³ The religious factor plays an important role here. After a long era of systemic atheisation and persecution of the Christian faith, President Putin restored the importance of the Orthodox Church and officially presented himself as a defender of its traditional – through and through – Christian and

¹³ A. Karatnycky, ‘Ukraine’s Orange Revolution’, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 84, no. 2 (2005), pp. 35–52; A. Kappeler, *Ungleiche Brüder: Russen und Ukrainer vom Mittelalter bis zur Gegenwart* (München, 2023).

Russian cultural values. In this context, the president of Russia is formally exposed as the absolutist counterpart of the tsar, protecting 'Holy Russia' from the evils of the outside world.¹⁴

To regain its former imperial glory, Russia's political strategy favours strengthening nationalist tendencies to rebuild its influence, especially in the former USSR's geopolitical space and neighbouring regions. For this reason, Russia was not satisfied with the invasion of Georgia in 2008 or the invasion of Crimea in 2014. In 2022, the Putin administration launched a large-scale attack on Ukraine. Thus, the existing paradigm of global security, which guarantees the modern world order based on the provisions of international law, has been questioned.¹⁵ Launching the military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Putin justified military actions to stabilise the socio-political situation in this part of the former Soviet empire. Therefore, official propaganda portrayed the Ukrainians as a "variety" of recalcitrant Russians – stray sheep who should now be returned to the fold – and not as a nation to which international treaties guaranteed political sovereignty and independence after the collapse of the USSR.¹⁶ However, the military operations themselves were called "special military operations".¹⁷

War and (Un)-Peace: A Threat to the Present-Day Concept of International Security

The institutional collapse of the USSR meant that Russia was primarily deprived of vast territorial areas as well as demographic structure. Thus, although the Kremlin remained one of the world's most important centres of political power, the state lost its superpower status. Despite this, the Russian Federation has never given up on its dream of becoming a great power with global significance and imperial aspirations. Along with surviving the painful period of political transformation in the 1990s, the twenty-first century began an intensified process of rebuilding the state's superpower position. Thanks to the combination of new circumstances in the international arena, Russia has significantly benefited from the global increase in prices for energy and mineral resources, which has contributed to the reconstruction of the political and economic power of the state. During this period, the authorities in the Kremlin began to openly emphasise that it was difficult

¹⁴ J.W. Lamoreaux, L. Flake, 'The Russian Orthodox Church, the Kremlin, and religious (il)liberalism in Russia', *Palgrave Communications*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2018), pp. 1–4.

¹⁵ L. Fix, M. Kimmage, 'Putin's Last Stand: The Promise and Peril of Russian Defeat', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 102, no. 1 (2023), pp. 15–21.

¹⁶ A. Kappeler, *Kleine Geschichte der Ukraine* (München, 2014), p. 262.

¹⁷ S. Vedyashkin, 'Russia Shouldn't Negotiate With "Vassal" Ukraine, Ex-President Medvedev Says', *Moscow Times*, 11 Oct. 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/11/russia-shouldnt-negotiate-with-vassal-ukraine-ex-president-medvedev-says-a75263> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

for it to come to terms with the unipolar formula of the world political order led by the US.¹⁸

Russia made great efforts to increase its political effectiveness and be accepted as a tremendous and severe power. It took a hard fight to strengthen and expand its spheres of influence, especially in the former USSR countries and the immediate vicinity. The growing influence of the West on the territory of the former USSR countries, as well as the expansion of the EU and NATO to the East, have significantly narrowed Russia's room for manoeuvre. For this reason, Moscow has repeatedly expressed its discomfort and concern. Fascination – and even esteem – for liberal values presented by Western countries and the democratic awakening in countries belonging to the former Soviet sphere of influence played a prominent role here. In other words, the inhabitants of these regions began to prefer – instead of “Soviet-Russian” – Western political culture as a role model for their political systems. However, this fact later became an essential source of resentment and conflict.¹⁹

Although the EU and NATO did not pose a direct threat to the security of the Russian Federation – which has a powerful military arsenal, including nuclear weapons – they did, however, pose a challenge and created uncertainty and even anxiety for the authoritarian regime of Moscow. In other words, although the enlargement of NATO and the EU to the East did not pose a direct threat to Russia, these organisations could hinder the implementation of the great-power aspirations and aspirations of the Russian Federation. It is because states that enjoy the support of the West or are formally integrated with the Western security system have found it more challenging to incorporate them into the Russian sphere of influence. Thus, they constituted a serious problem for Moscow's expansive political strategy.²⁰

The nature and specificity of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict should also be considered in this context. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has caused a geopolitical storm that heralds far-reaching changes in the international order of the modern world. Compared to the assault on Ukraine by Nazi Germany in 1941, the above conflict became the largest and most destructive war in Europe since the end of the Second World War. Moreover, serious fears exist that this could begin a new Cold War or even escalate into the Third World War. Ukraine's fierce resistance, supported by the United States and its allies, has dashed Russia's hopes of a quick and decisive victory. It is difficult to predict exactly how this conflict will transform the current international order. However, it is almost inevitable. The Russo-Ukrainian war will undoubtedly be a turning point, as will the Cold War that began in 1945. Also, the current era of globalisation, initiated by the

¹⁸ E. Rumer, *Russia and the Security of Europe* (Washington, 2016), pp. 4–16.

¹⁹ J. Lawless, J. Wilson, S. Corbet, 'NATO deems Russia its 'most significant and direct threat'', *AP News*, 29 June 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-nato-zelenskyy-politics-jens-stoltenberg-54c91903690f0d56537fa40ada88d83c> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, heralds a fundamental paradigm shift in the contemporary international security strategy.²¹

Yet, on the eve of the Russian invasion in 2022, Ukraine was among the poorest countries in Europe. The main reasons for this were the high corruption and the slow pace of economic liberalisation and administrative reform of state institutions. As stated by Oliver Bullough: “Since 1991, officials, members of parliament, and businessmen have created complex and highly lucrative schemes to plunder the state budget. The theft has crippled Ukraine. The economy was as large as Poland’s at independence. Now, it is a third of the size. Ordinary Ukrainians have seen their living standards stagnate, while a handful of oligarchs have become billionaires”.²² Nevertheless, the Russian invasion has significantly damaged Ukraine’s economy, as well as prospects for economic development and improvement of the living standards of its citizens. Only in the first year after the Russian invasion did the country’s GDP fall by as much as 35 per cent compared to the pre-war period.²³

While the military conflict has made Russia the subject of criticism and its actions condemned by the international community, Ukraine has gained worldwide support. As stated by UN’s political affairs Chief Rosemary DiCarlo, the Russian occupation is contrary to international law, and the global community fully recognises Ukraine’s sovereignty, unity, independence, and territorial integrity.²⁴ The destruction by Russian forces of many parts of the country by murdering, raping, torturing, deporting, and terrorising defenceless civilians, attempts to destroy Ukrainian identity, and attempts to wipe modern independent Ukraine off the map by killing and Russifying its population will be referred to as genocide.²⁵

The Russian Federation’s occupation of a sovereign state in violation of international law has made Russia even more isolated in the international arena. As the war drags on, the occupying forces are using – and will probably continue to use – several inhumane methods (including the extermination of civilians),

²¹ A. Taylor, ‘Russia’s attack on Ukraine came after months of denials it would attack’, *Washington Post*, 24 Feb. 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/24/ukraine-russia-denials/> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

²² O. Bullough, ‘Welcome to Ukraine, the most corrupt nation in Europe’, *Guardian*, 6 Feb. 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/04/welcome-to-the-most-corrupt-nation-in-europe-ukraine> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

²³ A. Mackinnon, R. Gramer, ‘The Battle to Save Ukraine’s Economy From the War’, *Foreign Policy*, 5 Oct. 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/05/russia-ukraine-war-reconstruction-european-bank-odile-renaud-basso/> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

²⁴ ‘So-called referenda in Russian-controlled Ukraine ‘cannot be regarded as legal’: UN political affairs chief, *UN News*, 27 Sep. 2022, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/09/1128161#:~:text=%E2%80%9CUNilateral%20actions%20aimed%20to%20provide,as%20legal%20under%20international%20law.%E2%80%9D> (accessed: 26 June 2024).

²⁵ K. Hook, ‘Why Russia’s War in Ukraine is a Genocide: Not Just a Land Grab, but a Bid to Expunge a Nation’, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 July 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/why-russias-war-ukraine-genocide> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

which can be described as crimes against humanity. Although most of the world's countries (140 countries) – especially the US and its Western allies – consider Ukraine a sovereign and independent state, some countries, such as China and India (38 countries), do not take a position. Only Belarus, North Korea, Syria, and Eritrea (4 countries) have openly supported Russian military actions against Ukraine. Mali and Nicaragua, on the other hand, abstained. The Russo-Ukrainian war continues to arouse the interest of the whole world in political, economic, and security dimensions, taking on various extents. The above clash has also witnessed the polarisation of public opinion and sharp conflicts of interest between global and regional modern powers.²⁶

Political and economic interests undoubtedly play a prominent role in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Therefore, attitudes towards this conflict vary greatly. Among European countries, despite certain dissonances in their attitudes to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there is a general disagreement with the Kremlin's military actions. In this context, the EU does not see the attack on Ukraine only as a military invasion of a sovereign state. For most Western countries, the Russian-Ukrainian war is a serious violation of international law and a significant challenge to the current global order and cooperation strategy. Moreover, this military conflict also threatens the modern concept of security, a fundamental element of peaceful coexistence based on democratic political principles.

Outlooks for Russian-Western Relations: The End of an Epoch and Possible Scenarios for the Future

Russian military combats aimed at overthrowing the Ukrainian government are motivated by many overlapping factors. The most crucial issue is what Russia perceives as a threat to the current European security architecture after the Cold War. Hence, the Kremlin authorities are particularly concerned about the announcements of leading Western politicians about the possibility of NATO expansion to the east, i.e., to the territories of the so-called 'post-Soviet states'. The Kremlin also considers the proximity of pro-Western Ukraine as unacceptable. In the opinion of the Russian ruling elite, Ukraine – as a sovereign state – should not even exist, let alone apply for membership in NATO structures.²⁷

Another sticking point is energy security, particularly Russia's frustration with the inadequate infrastructure for transporting Ukraine's exported natural gas.

²⁶ J. Gans, 'These 6 countries sided with Russia in UN vote on Ukraine war', *Hill*, 23 Feb. 2023, <https://thehill.com/policy/international/3871761-these-6-countries-sided-with-russia-in-un-vote-on-ukraine-war/> (accessed: 10 Oct. 2024).

²⁷ T.G. Carpenter, 'Many predicted NATO expansion would lead to war. Those warnings were ignored', *Guardian*, 28 Feb. 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/28/nato-expansion-war-russia-ukraine> (accessed: 9. Aug. 2024).

It was 'Nord Stream II', the now-closed oil and gas pipeline connecting Russia with Germany and the rest of West Europe, that was supposed to address some of Russia's concerns. In this context, Putin's desire to correct what the Kremlin sees as a historical injustice by reclaiming former Russian territories ceded to Ukraine during Soviet times is understandable.²⁸

Considering the above analyses, the future of relations between Russia and the West depends on the course of the war in Ukraine. Putin's war with Ukraine itself has drastically changed Russia's political relations with Western countries, making it impossible to return to any form of partnership in the foreseeable future. It is hard to imagine Western governments cooperating in harmonious relations with the Kremlin regime if it remains in power and refuses to accept responsibility for the damage done to Ukrainian infrastructure and, above all, for war violations and crimes against humanity. Furthermore, negotiating any constructive agreement does not seem easy in the face of the annexation of four more Ukrainian provinces.

Therefore, it is difficult to predict how the outcome of this war will affect Ukraine and Russia, as well as the collective West and the 'global South'. Whether a rules-based multilateral order will be restored and how significant players and regions will measure up to each other remains. In this respect, the outcome of the war will be decisive. Broadly speaking, one can imagine many possible scenarios.

The Prospect of a Ukrainian Victory: Strategic Withdrawal of Russian Troops and Peace Agreement

The first and probably least likely scenario assumes that Russia, in the face of losses, withdraws strategically and hands over two separatist regions of Donbas to a 'peacekeeping' mission. Recognising that the costs of continuing the military campaign are too high, the Russian ruling elites could decide to maintain a permanent military presence in both separatist regions based on newly created defence and cooperation treaties. Under these circumstances, however, the West could continue fully supporting Ukraine militarily, politically, and economically until Russia finally withdraws its troops from Ukrainian territory. Containment and deterrence are once again crucial elements in determining the West's approach to Russia to preclude further escalation into a full-fledged war between Russia and NATO. While Russia's use of tactical nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out, such a situation would only lead to an almost complete breakdown of relations with the Kremlin. It would – probably – contribute to further isolation. Moreover, it also applies to Russia's relations with the 'Global South', including China.

²⁸ V. Besson, 'The Ukraine/Russia conflict: an accelerator to the energy crisis', *KPMG*, 8 Sep. 2022, <https://kpmg.com/fr/fr/blogs/home/posts/2022/03/how-the-russia-ukraine-crisis-impacts-energy-industry.html> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

Nevertheless, Ukraine's victory can, therefore, be defined in various ways. The fact that Moscow has failed to push Ukraine back into its sphere of influence (*Русский мир*) can be considered a victory for Ukrainian courage and love of freedom and independence. However, regardless of the outcome of this war, it will be a long road to complete reconstruction and reconciliation, both internally and in relations with Russia and the Russians.²⁹

Whatever form Ukraine's victory might take, it would have enormous consequences for Ukraine and Russia.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, the reconstruction of Ukraine would be a significant undertaking that could not be carried out without large-scale international support comparable to the Marshall Plan after the Second World War. A severe concern would also be whether Russia could be forced to pay at least some of the war damage it caused to Ukraine and whether the West could use the Russian Central Bank's frozen assets of about \$300 billion for reconstruction and rebuilding.³¹ The EU should play a central role in this undertaking, especially in the context of Ukraine's obtaining the status of a candidate country aspiring to fast membership in NATO and EU structures. However, EU membership negotiations will continue to be based on conditionality and entail a complex internal transformation process to consolidate the rule of law and fight corruption.³²

Ukraine's victory would, therefore, mean a severe defeat for Russia, not only in the military but also in the political dimension. In other words, it would end Putin's dream of restoring the Russian empire and forcing Ukraine to join the Russian world, dominated by Russian culture and its 'traditional values'. It would not be the first time in history that a military defeat would also lead to a change of internal regime. The Russian political authority, based on autocracy, repression, and legitimized by propaganda, would have to bear the consequences of military defeat: political, economic as well as moral.

But there are also other possibilities of a possible turn of events. It may mean a new 'time of trouble' in which individual regions of Russia will want to gain independence, engaging in internal conflicts and civil wars. It would neither threaten the entire state's internal stability nor raise serious questions about the control of nuclear weapons. Russia's failure could also lead to the takeover

²⁹ I. Lovett, M. Walker, M. Luxmoore, 'Ukraine's Offensive Begins with Ground Gained, Tanks Lost', *Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-counteroffensive-notches-small-gains-after-costly-early-assaults-288c7907> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³⁰ R. Spencer, 'Ukrainians kill top Russian general with British-supplied missile', *Times*, 12 July 2023, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ukrainians-kill-top-russian-general-with-british-supplied-missile-dxfkc5cqw> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³¹ J. Valero, S. Bodoni, A. Nardelli, 'EU Sees Legal Grounds to Use Seized Russian Central Bank Assets', *Bloomberg*, 26 Jan. 2023, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-01-26/eu-sees-legal-grounds-to-use-seized-russian-central-bank-assets?in_source=embedded-checkout-banner (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³² *Ibid.*

of power by another – even more authoritarian – political regime. A new rule by a nationalist and revanchist leadership who would wait for another chance to impose their will on other parts of the Russian world, presumably including Ukraine. However, a democratic revolution in Russia seems the least likely option since over half a million – mostly young – Russians have left the country since this phase of the war on February 24. The potential for change seems to be diminishing accordingly, and the loyalty of those left behind still needs to be tested.³³

In the case of the Ukrainian victory, the future of Russia-West relations will be determined by the fate of the present regime, or the outcome of the government system change in Moscow. The possibility of a retaliatory power suffering from a Weimar-type set of symptoms or prevalent instability with pro-self-rule movements from the North Caucasus to ethnically defined units in Siberia should not be underestimated. In such cases, the West should – first of all – respond to contain instability within Russia’s current borders. The retaliatory regime in Moscow could also be stopped and prevented from retaking risks against Ukraine only by ensuring it could not regain its military strength and restart the war. In all such cases, a constructive relationship with Russia would be unlikely as internal problems would distract attention from external endeavours. Moscow’s relations with Beijing may also precede rebuilding affairs with Europe and the West.³⁴

Russia’s Pyrrhic Victory

The second scenario would involve Russia increasing brutal military pressure on Ukraine and ultimately overthrowing the government in Kyiv and other key cities to install a new political regime. Putin has repeatedly denied Ukraine’s right to exist and falsely accused its leaders of promoting Nazism while portraying his military campaign as a ‘military intervention’ of necessity, not choice. Russia’s stated strategy is ‘escalation to de-escalate’. While Russia may be able to claim victories in key cities due to its overwhelming military superiority, the heavy losses it will sustain will make it virtually impossible to occupy, let alone hold, all of Ukraine. Fierce Ukrainian resistance, regular supplies from the United States and the EU, and growing public opposition in Russia are also likely to complicate Moscow’s efforts.³⁵

What was initially expected to be a short war (Blitzkrieg) could easily turn into a long-term conflict, claiming thousands of soldiers and civilians and turning at least

³³ Lovett, Walker, Luxmoore, ‘Ukraine’s Offensive’.

³⁴ S. Charap, M. Priebe, ‘Avoiding a Long War: U.S. Policy and the Trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict’, *Rand*, 7 June 2023, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA2510-1.html> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³⁵ K. Stepanenko, ‘The Kremlin’s Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut’, *Institute for the Study of War*, 24 May 2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlin%E2%80%99s-pyrrhic-victory-bakhmut-retrospective-battle-bakhmut> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

4 million Ukrainians into refugees seeking refuge in EU member states. The UN estimates that more than 10 million Ukrainians have been displaced. The devastating sanctions against Russia's industrial, technological, energy, and financial sectors, including the country's exclusion from SWIFT, could trigger a dangerous Russian response, including massive cyberattacks, especially against NATO countries.³⁶

With China's support waning, the anticipated economic partnerships between Russia and China seem less likely. Still, Russia could seek a mutually damaging confrontation with the United States and the EU. Whatever happens, the United States and Europe must continue to increase military spending and support for Ukraine and NATO members, contributing to new patterns of escalation. Whatever victory Russia claims, it will almost certainly be a Pyrrhic victory. Russia's fragile economy, increasingly isolated from international banks, flights, and freight, will deepen domestic frustration. Tens of thousands of educated Russians have already fled the country to avoid economic ruin. Alternatives remain, including a ceasefire in light of the ongoing talks, diplomatic efforts led by China or Turkey motivated by their economic interests, and even regime change at home.³⁷

The Menace of Regional Conflict Escalation

The third scenario assumes an escalation of armed conflict involving countries located beyond the Russian-Ukrainian borders. Fearing Russian expansionism and seeking protection from the West, countries such as Georgia and Moldova will seek to accelerate their accession to EU structures. Several NATO members in the Baltic states have already invoked the relevant Article 4. Nevertheless, an Article 5 declaration would automatically trigger an extension of the war with Russia. There are also increasingly frequent calls from Ukraine and some Western experts to establish a no-fly zone over Ukraine. In this case, NATO insists that it has no intention of enforcing it to prevent Russia from escalating. In turn, Russia, if it is not threatened, will try to stop the war from spreading beyond Ukraine unless it considers a threat to its national security to be real.³⁸

Nevertheless, if Putin interprets the threat as existential, including economic collapse, he could launch a series of retaliatory actions that could have serious regional and international consequences. Russia is likely to respond to Western sanctions with economic warfare, perhaps even trying to disrupt global trade in goods, especially oil, gas, wheat, and other products. However, Russia's options

³⁶ 'How many Ukrainian refugees are there and where have they gone?', BBC, 4 July 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60555472> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³⁷ K. Ng, Y. Ma, 'How is China supporting Russia after it was sanctioned for Ukraine war?', BBC, 17 May 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/60571253> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

³⁸ A. Higgins, 'In Former Soviet States, a Tug of War Between East and West', *New York Times*, 3 June 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/03/world/europe/russia-georgia-moldova-ukraine-war.html> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

gradually shrink as the West removes itself from Russian energy and raw materials. As the war drags on, the risk of escalation is still real, potentially leading to the Third World War. Russia has already threatened to attack NATO supply lines.³⁹ Belarus is also reluctant to join the fight on Russia's side.

Danger of Spillover of the Conflict to Other Regions of the World

The fourth scenario assumes that the war in Ukraine could be associated with the deterioration of the situation due to an unexpected crisis in the South China Sea or another theatre of conflict, for example, between India and Pakistan, Iran and its neighbours, and North Korea. It is possible that the EU and NATO will face a combination of the above scenarios, together with the growing crisis in Taiwan under the influence of China. Although there are significant disagreements that could deepen due to the disastrous start of the war in Ukraine, Russia and China have already embarked on a strategic rapprochement. China's support for Russia is admittedly weak, although Beijing is doing its best to maintain a balanced response, given its extensive investments in Russia and the region under Moscow's influence.⁴⁰

China is currently unhappy with Russia's poor performance. The EU is also carefully balancing its support for Russian aggression against a sovereign nation while condemning violations of sovereignty in the UN Security Council. However, China's calculations could also change if Russia somehow manages to strategically occupy key areas of Ukraine and secure its objectives. For example, China could take belligerent action to send a signal to Taiwan, including aggressive use of its air and naval forces. China has reportedly conducted several missions using fighter jets in Taiwanese airspace.⁴¹

China could also duplicate Putin's strategy: instead of an all-out military attack, it could first provoke a political-military crisis and threaten to use force. To this end, the Chinese Communist Party could pass a law outlining steps to reunify Taiwan and threaten a military response if it is not accepted and followed. It would not only drastically divert attention from the US and NATO but would allow Russia to divide its weakened position in the EU and take increasingly bold actions in Ukraine and countries with which it shares borders, such as the Baltic states, Finland, and Norway.

³⁹ N.P. Walsh, S. Dean, K. Jeznach, 'From \$7 graffiti to arson and a bomb plot: How Russia's "shadow war" on NATO members has evolved', CNN, 10 July 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/10/europe/russia-shadow-war-nato-intl-latam/index.html> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

⁴⁰ R.J. Heydarian, 'Fallout: Ukraine Crisis Upends Russia's Role in the South China Sea', *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 25 March 2022, <https://amti.csis.org/fallout-ukraine-crisis-upends-russias-role-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

⁴¹ Ng, Ma, 'How is China supporting Russia'.

Rise of Uncontrolled Conflict and Chaos

The fifth and increasingly likely scenario is that Russia will suffer severe setbacks on the battlefield, leading to rapid and unpredictable escalation and chaos. Despite its vastly superior capabilities, the Russian military has suffered significant losses, which will undoubtedly increase as the war intensifies. The high losses are attributed to the poorly equipped, trained, and prepared Russian military. Therefore, the massive losses and the drop in morale among the troops are unsustainable.

A Russian military defeat and the resulting humiliation could lead to a loss of trust in the Russian leadership and an increase in protests and social unrest. Such a scenario would only increase concerns about the integrity of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal. An even more dangerous outcome would be if Russia were to use tactical chemical or low-yield nuclear weapons to deter Ukrainian forces and reverse the course of the war since its doctrine assumes the use of such weapons on the battlefield.⁴²

Nuclear Threat

The most terrifying of all scenarios for a Russian-Ukrainian war is radical escalation and the nuclear threat, especially with using strategic nuclear weapons. Russian diplomats, including Sergei Ryabkov, have warned in recent months that the Kremlin could respond with 'military-technical' means and deploy nuclear weapons 'in Europe' if NATO does not end its expansion eastward. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has repeatedly warned of the "nuclear" element and the danger of a 'Third World War'.⁴³

Many Western military analysts believe that Russia is bluffing about nuclear weapons. However, there are reasons to be cautious. The principles for managing military cyber escalation are not fully formed and remain ambiguous. In particular, the principles and manner of making decisions regarding the deployment and use of tactical nuclear weapons are not necessarily shared and binding for all nuclear powers. Nevertheless, de-escalating military operations is extremely difficult in the current chaotic geopolitical conditions. In the case of the war in Ukraine, however, Putin has staked both his credibility and the rationale of his party on one card. It is about the unequivocal demilitarisation of Ukraine and the reversal of NATO's expansion to the east. The fundamental priority of Russia's great-power foreign policy is also at stake: "What do we need a world for if Russia is not in it?"⁴⁴

⁴² Ch. Bamberg, 'Reckless escalation in Ukraine war', *Counterfire*, 27 June 2024, <https://www.counterfire.org/article/reckless-escalation-in-ukraine-war/> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

⁴³ 'Moscow "Not Ruling Out" Nuclear Deployment Amid U.S. Plans for Weapons in Germany', *Moscow Times*, 18 July 2024, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2024/07/18/moscow-not-ruling-out-nuclear-deployment-amid-us-plans-for-weapons-in-germany-a85758> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

⁴⁴ H. Williams, K. Hartigan, L. MacKenzie, R. Younis, 'Russian Nuclear Calibration in the War in Ukraine', *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, 23 Feb. 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-nuclear-calibration-war-ukraine> (accessed: 9 Aug. 2024).

Any outcome that goes beyond the above calculations will be considered a failure, which limits the range of options for a negotiated solution. Much depends on events on the war front, from the achievement of political and military goals by Russian forces to the consequences of Western-imposed economic sanctions and the possibility of social demonstrations in Russia. International conditions will also play a significant role, including the results of the US presidential election in November 2024, as well as the evolution of economic relations and military cooperation between Russia and China and Russia's dramatic isolation from global financial and trade networks.

In any case, there are no good options in the Russian-Ukrainian war. The level of trust and mutual willingness to negotiate between NATO, Russia, and Ukraine is currently virtually non-existent. Despite the emerging aspirations for negotiations between Russia and Ukraine, few win-win scenarios exist. There are many lose-lose scenarios. As with any military conflict, the motivation and legitimacy of the actions taken can be expected to change over time, depending on local and international developments. However, it is more than ever imperative that NATO and its allies demonstrate strong resistance to Russia's aggression, identifying – and embracing – all viable options for de-escalating the Russian-Ukrainian war. It is also essential that NATO and the EU do everything possible not to demonise the Russian people. The Western world must make Russians aware of the real consequences of the war in Ukraine and build bridges of mutual understanding. It will help strengthen resistance to Putin and his political regime rather than cultivating strategies to isolate Russia's civil society from the West.

Conclusion

According to Kremlin analysts, both the systemic structure of the Russian Federation and the geopolitical formula of the Commonwealth of Independent States – established on 8 December 1991 as a result of the “Bialowieza Agreements” – are unstable, largely illegal, and even accidental. The political actions undertaken by President Putin clearly indicate the desire to change the world order created after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In their activities, the authorities in the Kremlin use the entire spectrum of political, economic, and military tools to return to their former hegemonic position not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also in the whole of international relations.⁴⁵

Russian experts, studying the contemporary changing international reality, preach a theory about the collapse of the geopolitical balance of power, in which the United States – with its ideals and liberal values – loses, and in its place, there is a ‘great geopolitical revolution’ (great reset). A strategic transformation

⁴⁵ A. Kozyrev, *The Firebird: The Elusive Fate of Russian Democracy* (Pittsburg, 2020), pp. 17–69.

is taking place, which emerges new leaders of the international order and shapes a multipolar world of various power centres. This world is distinguished by multiple non-hierarchical ideas, patterns, and cultures, but highly dynamic and multifaceted. In this world, Russia – or rather the ideologues influencing the Kremlin's policy – sees itself as a model non-consumer society, preferring such values as religion, spirituality, and tradition, which guarantees a return to the great-power position. The above ideals, philosophy, and even military force can be a tool of international influence. According to Russian analysts, one should accept the fact that the growing importance of Eurasia will characterise the following decades. It will become the “axis of the world” around which international politics will be shaped. Therefore, the geographical location, existing potential, opportunities, civilisational wealth, as well as great-power aspirations open up lucrative prospects and opportunities for civilisation for Russia.

However, as long as the current political regime in the Kremlin remains in power, Russia-West relations will be based on containment, deterrence, and coordinated efforts to limit Russian influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Only a fundamental change in Russia's political strategy could bring a new relaxation or more constructive relations in the security and cooperation policy field. Under the current political regime, such a reset remains completely unthinkable. The start and continuation of a bloody war aimed at eliminating Ukraine as an independent state have become a challenge for the entire Western world. However, as long as the Russian political regime has the will and ability to continue its aggression, this conflict has little chance of a peaceful resolution in the near future.

Abstract

This article examines the superpower aspirations of the Russian Federation under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, which culminated in the military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This analysis reveals several fundamental factors responsible for the threats that the Kremlin's superpower policy poses to contemporary international security systems, primarily to the political order of Central and Eastern Europe and the entire world. The research questions concerned the fundamental issues responsible for the primary forms of antagonism destabilising mutual relations between Russia and Ukraine in the context of the multidimensional dynamics of contemporary geopolitical conditions. The discourse presented by the Kremlin authorities indicates ambiguity, ambivalence of meaning, multifacetedness, and even incoherence of the Russian narrative on international security issues, especially in the context of the war with Ukraine. Hence, the above issues are considered the most complex sphere of contemporary problems related to the intricate relations between Russia and Ukraine. Diagnosing the impact of the factors discussed here can help understand and, over time, shape more effective international security strategies, as well as create better support programs that will allow for more effective solutions to the security problems of Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, finding answers to such research questions is vital in the context of contemporary global political changes, which – in connection with the issue of “political correctness” – are becoming a serious challenge to the entire global concept of international security.

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