

Why Ukraine Matters: Putin, Power, and the Fracturing World Order

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Abstract

This article explores the geopolitical implications of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, framing it as a pivotal event that may catalyze the formation of a new global order. The study argues that this conflict marks a reassertion of authoritarian influence against liberal democratic values and highlights the erosion of the post-Cold War international system. Using a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that includes discourse analysis of political speeches, journalistic sources, and strategic policy documents, the research identifies key ideological, economic, and military shifts that are reshaping global security dynamics. The literature review contextualizes the current crisis within broader historical frameworks - particularly Cold War precedents - while integrating recent findings on strategic alignment, authoritarian cooperation, and the weakening role of multilateral institutions. The analysis concludes that the United States and its allies must adopt a more adaptive and principled foreign policy in response to an increasingly multipolar and unstable world, characterized by rising geoeconomic fragmentation, nuclear escalation, and the coordinated rise of authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: Russia Ukraine War, Cold War Legacy, US-Russia Relations, Geopolitical Order, Global Security, Democracy

Introduction

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has emerged as a focal point of global attention, marking the most significant military conflict on the European continent since the Second World War. In response, European leaders, in coordination with other major democratic states, have mobilized collectively in an effort to counter what is widely regarded as an unprovoked act of aggression. Despite these efforts, the conflict shows little sign of resolution in the near future.

Although economic sanctions imposed on Russia have had a measurable impact, they have not sufficiently diminished the country's capacity to inflict widespread destruction on Ukrainian infrastructure and civilian life. Beyond a territorial dispute, this war has come to symbolize a broader geopolitical and ideological struggle. For Western nations, the conflict underscores deeper challenges facing the international order in the 21st century - challenges that are complex, evolving, and resistant to simple solutions.

Literature Review

Russian journalist Julia Ioffe believed that Putin - President of Russia had an "unfinished Cold War business" with the United States, which is why his aggression is not specifically directed at Ukraine or the West. Rather, he has always perceived himself as engaged in a broader struggle against the United States, having never fully come to terms with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In his view, Ukraine - a former Soviet republic - had effectively become a satellite state of the United States. Putin did not share the Western belief that the end of the Cold War marked a positive historical turning point. According to journalistic accounts, he envisioned a world order structured around two dominant poles: one located in Washington and the other in the Kremlin. This perspective was first publicly articulated during the 2007 Munich Security Conference, where he criticized American global leadership calling "unipolar" and expressed disappointment that the international political climate was being shaped unilaterally by the United States. (FRONTLINE PBS, 2022)

One of the most interesting stories that Julia Ioffe tells the Frontline PBS back in 2017 is the story of Putin during the Soviet Union collapse. Putin as a KGB officer, was stationed in Dresden, in the late 80s in East Germany. Collapse of the Berlin Wall catches him in Dresden. He watched as the Germany has changed and Soviet influence evaporated in front of his eyes. As he watches the events happening, he calls Moscow, his home, trying to understand what he has to do and get new orders. And Moscow doesn't respond. This event becomes "a massive trauma" for him. He learns the

lesson that if you let loose a bit, let oxygen sneak into the system its starts rotting right away. (FRONTLINE PBS, 2017)

This dynamic became particularly evident when Vladimir Putin temporarily stepped back from the presidency and appointed his close associate, Dmitry Medvedev, as his successor. During Medvedev's presidency, public discourse became more open, with increasing criticism of corruption and growing awareness of the country's democratic deficits. These developments contributed to a wave of protests, some of which included demands for Putin's resignation. The state responded firmly to the unrest, and Putin soon returned to the presidency.

Having witnessed the transformative power of mass mobilization in several former Soviet states - including Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, all of which experienced so-called "color revolutions" - Putin appeared to draw a key strategic lesson: that the introduction of foreign democratic influences into the post-Soviet space could act as a destabilizing force within what he perceived as Russia's imperial sphere of influence. From his perspective, such changes risked triggering a domino effect that could undermine the stability of Russia itself (FRONTLINE PBS, 2017)

American Historian John Lewis Gaddis in his book *The Cold War – A New History* argues that Americans and Soviets have always had a lot of similarities, since both of them were born in revolution. Both embraced globalist ideals, assuming that what worked at home would also work elsewhere. Both were the first continental states to expand across huge territories.

Both sides started the war with surprise attacks: Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, which prompted Hitler to declare war on the US four days later. However, the similarities would have ended there. Observers would have easily noticed significant variations. These differences lay beyond the start of the Cold War, deeply buried with the ideologies that both sides carry until now.

As it came to developing the postwar settlement, the two major sides were more evenly matched than the differences might imply. The United States had made no pledge to modify its long-standing policy of remaining out of European politics; Roosevelt had even guaranteed Stalin in Tehran that American forces would come home within two years of the war's end.

Given the 1930s, there was no guarantee that the wartime prosperity would continue, or that democracy would re-establish itself beyond the few countries where it still remained. The clear fact that the Americans and British could not have defeated Hitler without Stalin's assistance meant that World War II was a victory over fascism, not authoritarianism and its potential for the future. (Gaddis, 2005)

Henry Kissinger believed that the reconstruction of the international system in our time poses a great challenge to the art of statecraft. The price that will be paid for not solving this task will probably not be a major war between states, although in some regions this is not excluded. Rather, spheres of influence will be created, accompanied by certain domestic political structures and forms of governance – for example, the Westphalian model will be pitted against a radical Islamist version. Each of these spheres will be tempted to test its strength against other, illegitimate systems of order on its borders. With the latest communications and real-time networks, the tussle on the periphery will quickly turn into a continental or even global struggle for status and supremacy. Struggles between regions may prove more protracted than battles between nations. (Kissinger, 2020, pp. 526-527)

The Atlantic Magazine published a cover story by a journalist Anne Applebaum called “The Bad Guys are Winning”. In her article she wrote about Russia’s dominance over other states, like Belarus and Ukraine. She underlined that usually, authoritarian states give birth to other authoritarian states. Since, they are not capable of surviving solely on the regime while surrounded by democracies, they tend to reach out further beyond their borders in order to establish a system, that will bring even more so-called legitimacy to their country.

Applebaum mentioned that Democratic revolutions are contagious. If you can eradicate them in one country, you may be able to prevent them from spreading elsewhere. The 2014 anti-corruption and pro-democracy demonstrations in Ukraine, which ended in the fall of President Viktor Yanukovich's government, heightened concerns about democratic spread. Putin felt outraged by the protests, primarily because of the precedent they established. “Autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources – the troll farms... [that] pound home the same messages about the weakness of democracy and the evil of America.” (Applebaum, 2021)

In the third decade of the twenty-first century, China and Russia defy Washington, attempting to disrupt the current system while yearning for previous glory. Vladimir Putin considers himself the follow-up of Peter the Great. The possibility of nuclear war is no longer only theoretical. The new White House national security team learned that America's nuclear capacity is challenged by Russia’s threats to Kyiv. They were entering a new age that was far greater in complexity than the Cold War had been in its entirety. As

Russia's campaign on Ukraine sputtered, Putin and the Kremlin threatened to use nuclear weapons on Kiev. Every few months, the threat that Russia would deploy a nuclear weapon against its non-nuclear-armed adversary resurrected. (The Guardian, 2024)

During the Cold War the race between the Soviet Union and America included military, economic and technological advancements. Nowadays, this race has re-emerged, as economic world has been divided.

The World Economic Forum published the warning article about the global security risks of growing divisions, since the war in Ukraine has begun. Geopolitical tensions are also linked to an increased likelihood of geoeconomic conflict (sanctions, tariffs, investment screening), which is fueled by inequality, societal division, and other causes. Misinformation and disinformation, as well as societal polarization, remain important current dangers, just as they did last year. These two hazards are unsurprising given the rapid transmission of inaccurate or misleading information, which intensifies the other major risks we face, ranging from state-based armed conflict to extreme weather disasters. These risks also involve involuntary migration and displacement due to the ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East. In the next two years, uncertainty about the trajectory of present wars and their aftermath is likely to continue to exist and tensions abroad may rise. A loss of confidence and faith in international organizations' roles in conflict prevention and resolution has paved the way for more unilateralist actions. Humanitarian crises are growing and worsening as a result of financing limits and major powers' failure to focus on them consistently. As the state based armed conflicts continue, the level of Geoeconomic confrontation is rising. (World Economic Forum, 2025)

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East can perhaps lead into the risks of conflict over Taiwan with China. Regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the US administration's approach will be important to its development. Will the United States take a harder position toward Russia, hoping that such a step will deter further Russian escalation, or will it raise pressure on Ukraine, including limiting aid? In this particular circumstance, European governments may enhance their support for Ukraine. The range of probable outcomes over the coming two years is broad, ranging from greater escalation, including involving neighboring nations, to a tentative agreement to halt the fight.

Given humanity facing a wide range of ongoing armed conflicts, as well as escalation concerns in the two major international conflicts, the current fragility of the multilateral security system, which is centrally based on the UN Security Council (UNSC), is concerning. The United Nations Security Council has failed to prevent crises from growing, including

Russia's invasion of Ukraine and hostilities in the Middle East and Sudan. (World Economic Forum, 2025)

Convincing the non-Western world that the crisis in Ukraine is more than simply another European conflict is another issue; it threatens the entire future of international order. In conceptual terms, everyone agrees on this, especially when it comes to defending states' territorial integrity and sovereignty. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) voted unanimously to condemn Putin's "special military operation" soon after it began, and it acted similarly after Putin stated the "independence" of four Ukrainian provinces in September 2022, and again on the first anniversary of the assault on February 23, 2023. (European Union External Action, 2022)

Non-Western nations are also hesitant to intervene because they do not see the Russian invasion as distinctively vile; in their opinion, the invasion is no more severe than other military operations such as the US-led intervention in Afghanistan after 9/11, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and NATO missions in Kosovo in 1999 and Libya in 2011. (Lowy Institute, 2023)

The post-Cold War hope for a stable, liberal international order has unraveled. While the Cold War was defined by ideological rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, today's global conflict is more diffuse and unpredictable, shaped by the reassertion of authoritarian powers like Russia and China it looks more like the New Cold War with much more influence and threats based on the capabilities of informational warfare, military and technological advancements.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's military advancements, and the spread of coordinated authoritarian networks reveal that liberal democracies can no longer assume historical inevitability or moral superiority. The U.S. and its allies face not only external threats but also internal fatigue and skepticism about their global role. Meanwhile, Russia continues to disinform and justify its war against Ukraine, creating closer ties with other more authoritative states, like North Korea and Iran.

Most recent findings suggests that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a realignment of global power structures, with authoritarian states - particularly Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea - forming loosely coordinated networks to challenge Western dominance. Scholars and policy institutions identify a growing system of "networked autocracy," where regimes collaborate through disinformation, military support, and economic ties, particularly in evading sanctions and reshaping global supply chains. Recent findings from RAND and CSIS highlight the hybrid nature of the conflict, combining traditional warfare with cyberattacks, drone deployment, and narrative warfare across platforms like Telegram. (RAND, 2024)

Russia's global outreach, particularly in Africa and the Global South, has rebranded its position from pariah to counter-Western partner,

complicating Western diplomatic efforts. Simultaneously, new diplomatic platforms such as India's Voice of the Global South Summits and shifting roles of middle powers suggest a move toward strategic autonomy and multipolar diplomacy. (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2025)

The post-Cold War liberal order appears increasingly fragile, with institutions like the UN Security Council struggling to adapt. Economically, Russia's transition into a war economy reflects long-term militarization trends, while sanctions and geoeconomic fragmentation push states to reassess trade alliances. Overall, the literature points to a strategic environment marked by nuclear tension, institutional crisis, and the declining moral authority of liberal democracies - raising urgent questions about global stability, deterrence, and the future of multilateralism. (Cooley, 2025)

Conclusion

The international system now operates in an age of strategic uncertainty, where nuclear threats, economic fragmentation, and declining global trust in institutions heighten the risk of conflicts around the world. Democracies must confront this reality with a clear-eyed strategy: to resist authoritarian influence, rebuild multilateral frameworks, and reinvest in the moral and structural resilience of the international order. Failing to do so may lead to a world governed not by laws and cooperation, but by power struggles and permanent instability.

At this stage, it is exceedingly difficult to forecast the future trajectory of global developments resulting from the full-scale war in Ukraine. Nonetheless, one fact is evident: when a geopolitical actor actively seeks to establish a robust alliance against the United States and its democratic partners, it becomes imperative to approach the situation with strategic vigilance and analytical rigor.

Historical precedent suggests that the United States possesses the capacity to challenge and dismantle authoritarian regimes. However, the current crisis presents a far more complex and multifaceted challenge, as it transcends conventional armed conflict. The confrontation is not solely military - it encompasses ideological, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. Therefore, it is critical that the United States reassess its posture, invest in strengthening its national defense capabilities, and continue providing unwavering support to Ukraine. A Ukrainian defeat would likely embolden the Russian Federation to advance anti-democratic movements globally, thereby threatening the liberal international order.

It is equally essential for the United States to sustain and deepen strategic cooperation with its European allies in support of Ukraine. On a global scale, diplomatic recalibration is necessary with states that maintain economic relations with both the U.S. and Russia, yet have refrained from

participating in Western sanctions and claim a position of so-called "neutrality." These countries occupy a pivotal space in the broader geopolitical landscape, and engaging with them strategically could prove vital in containing authoritarian influence.

In such a precarious global environment, it is imperative that the United States sustain a firm and principled approach toward Russia. Premature lifting of sanctions, acquiescence to the annexation of Ukrainian territories, or the projection of a willingness to accept any compromise for the sake of peace would severely undermine U.S. credibility and global democratic resilience. What is needed now is a foreign policy grounded in unwavering principles - akin to the one that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In today's context, such a policy must be both resolute and adaptive, capable of addressing the evolving nature of geopolitical conflict while defending the foundational values of liberal democracy.

In this context, Ukraine's future security and sovereignty are best supported by the fulfillment of past commitments made to the country. A particularly important example is the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, under which Ukraine agreed to relinquish its nuclear arsenal in exchange for assurances of sovereignty, security, and a path toward Euro-Atlantic integration. Fulfilling these promises is not only a matter of strategic necessity but also of moral and legal responsibility for the international community - especially for the Western signatories of the memorandum.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary research methodology that draws on policy analysis, discourse analysis, and strategic studies. Primary source material includes public speeches, international resolutions, and official statements from both Western and Russian officials. To capture the evolving nature of contemporary conflict and geopolitical shifts, this research integrates recent policy reports from leading think tanks. The sources included in the article support analyzing how the war in Ukraine is reshaping international order across military, diplomatic, and ideological dimensions.

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