

## Reimagining Geopolitics after the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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The world today is not the same as it was before February 24, 2022 when Russia attacked Ukraine. By launching a full-scale war against Ukraine, Russia has demonstrated its assertiveness and boldness in crossing the red line without fear of repercussions, as well as its capacity to engage in regional power rivalry. Hence, as the situation transpires, it invokes a series of significant questions about the future of geopolitics as well as peace and security dynamics in the region. This issue brief will investigate briefly the following questions: What ends Putin wants to achieve in Ukraine? Is it the metaphorical end to the unipolar parity of the United States? Is it the win for Russia and Putin and an opportunity to forge another “Soviet Union” or Putin will lose not only Ukraine but also Russia? How it will impact Europe, will it become a buffer zone between the US and Russia, or Russia will be able to polarize it? And last but not the least, what does the war portend for this region and Pakistan?

### **What ends Putin wants to achieve in Ukraine?**

One, Putin wants to assure its interests and security in the region and the small powers such as the post-Soviet and Baltic states as well as the major powers in the region to understand and guarantee it. Putin asserts that Russia’s interests are as legitimate as those of the West and that the United States and Europe have been disregarding them which is true for the most part as the United States and Europe have rejected the Kremlin’s narrative of grievance growing most notably on the breakup of the Soviet Union and especially the separation of Ukraine from Russia. Not only that, but Russia has been numerous times invaded by the West. In the twentieth century, during its civil war from 1917 to 1922, it was invaded by anti-Bolshevik allied forces, including some from the United States. During World War II, Germany invaded twice, resulting in the deaths of 26 million Soviet citizens. Putin has made a direct link between this past and Russia's current fears about NATO infrastructure nearing its borders, emphasizing Moscow's requests for security guarantees. Thus, for Russia the fear is that Ukraine was being turned into “a springboard against Russia” and more specifically, a launching pad for NATO aggression. Given this backdrop, Putin's ultimate goal is to reverse the effects of the Soviet collapse, break the transatlantic alliance, and renegotiate the Cold War-era geographic settlement.

Putin also believes that Russia has an unalienable claim to a privileged interests area in the post-Soviet space. This means that its former Soviet neighbours should avoid joining any anti-Moscow alliances, such as NATO or the European Union and Putin made this demand clear in two treaties offered by the Kremlin on December 17: Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries, as well as Sweden and Finland, must swear to permanent neutrality and cease their pursuit of NATO membership. This would need NATO to return to its 1997 military posture and presence, which was in place when the Soviet Union split apart and will ensure Russia that pro-Russian governments are in power in countries bordering Russia, including, most notably, Ukraine.

### **What are the stakes for Putin to win the war? What are the consequences if he loses the war?**

For Russia, victory in Ukraine could take various forms. It can come in the form of Russia’s occupation of Ukraine as it happened with Crimea and Donbas region. It can also be in the form of a sustainable

settlement or Russia could involve the installation of a compliant government in Kyiv. Russia's current strengths are its preeminent military power in the region, the support of regional allies such as China, Turkey, India, and Iran - the countries that seek multipolarity in the world and have shown, albeit tacitly a show of hand in their support to Russia, a Europe reliant on Russian gas and energy, a Russia that has reemerged in the world in the Putin era and can engage its foes in various hotspots, and finally, Russian influence and presence in the region. Alternatively, the defeat of the Ukrainian military, the negotiating of a Ukrainian capitulation, the crippling of the country, and regime change might essentially turn Ukraine into a failed state. All of this, however, will come at a high cost and obstacles for Russia.

One, to achieve the above, Russia will have to substantially subdue Ukraine and give it a devastating blow. Russia's activities will be scrutinised by the rest of the globe. Every war is a public relations struggle, and given the stronghold of the West on the international mass media, Putin's conflict in Ukraine has connected Russia with an unwarranted invasion on a peaceful neighbour, huge humanitarian misery, and numerous war crimes. This will be an impediment to Russian foreign policy in the future at every turn.

Secondly, not seen at the moment happening in the world stage except in the economic sphere, the nexus of power against Russia, the United States, the European Union, and a number of countries—including Australia, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea— will join hands to show collective action against Russia and to Russia's defeat in Ukraine. Already, the United States and its allies and partners are imposing harsh costs on Moscow. Certainly, they can do more especially the United States by imposing the secondary sanction as it imposed on Iran.

Thirdly, given the scale at which Russia initiated the war, it seemed it will conduct a lightning strike or a blitzkrieg operation, all prepared to pound on Kiev and decapitate the Ukrainian government. However, it has been two weeks, and Moscow appears to be no closer to imposing neutrality or establishing Russian suzerainty over Ukraine with the Ukrainian population showing resistance to the incursion. Even if Russia can establish a governmental framework in Ukraine, the question is whether it will be able to dominate the Ukrainian populace and preserve order in a country where the people are opposed to Russian rule and control. This is further confounded with the fact that Ukraine is huge in size and has a recent democratic history.

Furthermore, Putin's forces might become mired in a costly occupation of Ukraine and reducing a neighbouring country to poverty and disorder. Simultaneously, there are chances that the incursion if turned into a long war can roll in Russia's slow economic decline and increasing global isolation. And, most importantly, Putin may lose the support of the Russian people and elites, on whom he relies to keep his power.

### **Is it an opportunity for Putin to forge another “Soviet Union”?**

It's difficult to say how far Putin will go to achieve his goals while the scenario is still unfolding. Since taking office, Putin's main goal has been to persuade the West to treat Russia as if it were the Soviet Union, a power to be feared and revered, with unique privileges in its neighbourhood and a say in every major international issue. Over the years, Putin has also showed and claimed that Russia has an unalienable right to a seat at the table when it comes to significant international decisions. The West must acknowledge that Russia is a member of the global board. Critically speaking, Putin has essentially achieved this goal after what he describes as the humiliation of the 1990s, when a disintegrated Russia was obliged to conform to the plans of the US and its European allies. Today, Moscow wields veto power in the UN

Security Council, and its status as an energy, nuclear, and geographic superpower forces the rest of the world to consider its viewpoints. Following the 2008 conflict with Georgia, Russia upgraded its military and is now the preeminent regional military force with the ability to project influence globally.

Furthermore, Russia has established its power in other region, such as the Middle East. Russia shifted the Syria's war's trajectory, rescued Syrian President Bashar al-Assad from defeat, and then used military might to gain diplomatic pressure. Moscow has also increased its regional clout in many Middle Eastern war torn countries, and has kept Assad as a reliable partner for Russia's power projection.

### **What does it signify for the security of Europe?**

The current situation between Russia and Ukraine is about far more than Ukraine's potential membership in NATO. In a nutshell, it is about the future of the European system formed after the fall of the Soviet Union. Weakening the transatlantic alliance might allow Putin to dismantle the post–Cold War international system championed by Europe and the US in favour of one more accommodating to Russia.

A new era for the United States and Europe will begin if Russia gets control of Ukraine or succeeds to destabilise it on a large scale. Leaders in the United States and Europe would be faced with the combined issue of rethinking European security while avoiding being pulled into a bigger conflict with Russia. This is already happening when Ukraine requests NATO to declare Ukraine a no-fly zone; the request was denied by both the EU and the US under the pretext of escalating the war. As a result, the two responsibilities—vigorously protecting European peace while cautiously avoiding military escalation with Russia—may not be mutually exclusive. If Russia uses military force to achieve its political goals in Ukraine, Europe will not be the same as it was before the conflict. Not only will the United States' primacy in Europe be questioned, but any belief that the European Union or NATO can maintain peace on the continent will be a relic from the past. Instead, Europe's security will have to be confined to safeguarding the EU's and NATO's core members. Ultimately, the EU and NATO will no longer be able to pursue ambitious policies beyond their own boundaries if they are regarded to be under the influence of Russia.

### **The end of unipolarity for the United States?**

After the Obama administration, the United States seems to be divided and inconsistent regarding its foreign policy. The Trump administration trumped about pulling the US from NATO and halting its funding while Biden administration is trying to cobble and repair the relations between the EU and the US. Both Putin and the EU can hardly predict the situation after 2024 and that makes the United States an unreliable partner for the EU and also show the weakness of US in pursuing a consistent policy in the world.

Secondly, the states in the EU, the main ally of US in the world, are dealing with their own domestic issues and challenges and hardly demonstrate the capability or wither to hamper the Russian incursion in its backyard, let alone going into the loggerhead. The new German government is still finding its political feet, while France and the Baltic states are struggling with domestic instability. Furthermore, because gas and energy are the lifeblood of Europe's economy and society, the EU's energy dependence on Russia gives Russia additional clout over the continent. The Kremlin is well aware that the energy issue has the potential to polarise European countries.

Another critical aspect of the problem is that the US has significant commercial equities in Europe. With commerce in products and services exceeding \$1.1 trillion in 2019, the European Union and the United States are each other's major trade and investment partners. A well-functioning, stable Europe

complements American foreign policy in areas such as climate change, nonproliferation, global public health, and managing tensions with China and Russia. If Europe is destabilised, the United States will find itself in a far more isolated position in the globe.

**What does the war portend for the region and Pakistan?**

A bigger conflict in Ukraine would have the unintended effect of Russia and the US encountering each other as foes in other regions of the world, and as we know from Cold War history, the Third World would be their playground. The nuclear threshold might maintain the conflict at a low level, allowing for proxy warfare in the Middle East and Africa, as well as other Third World nations, to punish them for supporting with the opposing bloc.

Given the mounting economic complaints, catastrophic losses, and other challenges resulting from the Afghan conflict, Pakistan must establish a neutral balance to pursue its strategy while guaranteeing peace and security both inside and beyond the area in the changing regional context.

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