

Inaugural Essay

Russia – Ukraine War and the Contest for a New World Order: A Global South Perspective

Sk. Tawfique M. Haque

North South University, Bangladesh.
Email: tawfique.haque@northsouth.edu

Raymond Kwun-Sun Lau

North South University, Bangladesh
Email: Raymond.lau@northsouth.edu

Introduction

It has been over 300 days since Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022. The war between Russia and Ukraine, which began in 2014, has largely been viewed from a Eurocentric or Western perspective. From a Global South perspective, this crisis can be seen as part of a broader pattern of great powers' competition for influence and control in the region, often at the expense of smaller, weaker states. The conflict also has ramifications throughout the world, as countries scramble to align themselves with either Russia or the West, thereby exacerbating existing political and economic tensions. Additionally, the conflict has come at a huge humanitarian cost, with thousands of people displaced and suffering as a result of the fighting. Furthermore, the economic sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine could be seen as further exacerbating economic and political instability in the Global South. These countries have criticized the sanctions for their impact on the global economy and for causing economic hardship for their own citizens.

In a major speech on the war in Ukraine, US President Joe Biden argued that the conflict is a clear test for democracies around the world, and he portrayed the Ukrainian resistance against Russian forces as part of a “great battle for freedom.” “a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force” (The White House, 2022). By

contrast, in his phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated that “China is willing to work with Russia to continue supporting each other on their respective core interests concerning sovereignty and security.” By describing Putin as an “old friend,” President Xi highlighted Beijing’s willingness to “intensify strategic coordination between the two countries” (France24, 2022). While President Putin stopped short of calling his country’s use of force against Ukraine as a “war” and instead termed it a *special military operation* (Ensor, 2022), Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and Putin’s attempt to seek regime change by overthrowing the democratically elected Ukrainian government have not only reignited concerns about the possibility of large-scale interstate conflict in Europe, but also it has intensified great power rivalry in global politics. This is evidenced by the fact that both the American and Chinese leaders have fundamentally different attitudes towards the Russia-Ukraine war.

The United Nations (UN) has adopted at least two resolutions demanding Russia immediately end all military operations and highlighting the need for aid agency access and civilian protection in Ukraine. However, with the war in Ukraine heading for an “uncontrolled escalation” (*The Guardian*, 2022), the collective failure of the UN member states to stop Russia’s war against Ukraine represents the biggest crisis for the world body since the 2003 Iraq War.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine the dynamics of great power rivalry/competition ignited by the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. It also pays particular attention to the escalating tension between the United States and China in the Indo-Pacific/Asia Pacific. A discussion on the Global South perspective in addressing the Ukraine crisis follows suit. The article concludes with an analysis of the impact of the Great Power rivalry/competition on an emerging new world order.

The Ukraine Crisis and the Intensification of Great Power Rivalry/ Competition

With Russia staging what President Putin called a *special military operation* over Ukraine since February 2022, the Russian forces not only entered the Donbas and Luhansk regions but also attempted to take Kiev, the Ukrainian capital. Putin’s goal is to trigger a regime change by removing the democratically elected Ukrainian government under President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, since Moscow was determined to help

Ukrainians “liberate themselves from the burden of this absolutely unacceptable regime” (Aljazeera 2022a; DW News 2022b). In the eyes of the leadership in Moscow, the war with Ukraine is directly related to the potential broadening of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) infrastructure on Ukrainian territory. Russia, on its part, has been “seeking longer term security guarantees from the Alliance that Ukraine will not be admitted as a Member State and that NATO military infrastructure will not be deployed in the country” (Mills, 2022). Therefore, when the Ukrainian Parliament formally adopted a constitutional amendment in 2019 committing the country to membership in NATO, this, obviously, crossed President Putin’s red line (*Radio Free Europe*, 2019). Given that the threat posed by Ukraine’s pursuit of NATO membership is existential, it is strategically decisive for Russia to act before Ukraine’s eventual NATO membership becomes a *fait accompli*.

Opinion polls in Russia have shown that the majority of respondents support the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine. According to an analysis by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in September 2022, 20 percent of respondents said they did not support the war, yet still about 75 percent said they supported the war and believed that Russia could neither be on the “bad side” nor be defeated (Volkov and Kolesnikov, 2022). This is totally in line with the portrayal of Ukrainians by Russian state television as “aggressors persecuting Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine” (Dixon, 2022).

Furthermore, notwithstanding months of battlefield setbacks, both Kiev and Moscow have indicated no readiness to negotiate seriously an end to the war. This is largely attributed to President Putin’s long-held perception that the power and influence of the West, especially the USA, is in its eternal decline. As the West is in economic, moral and political crisis, the leadership in Moscow sees this as a unique and historical window of opportunity to create a counter-offensive, by stopping the West from imposing its will on the world (*Nikkei Asia*, 2022). On the other hand, NATO leaders believe that economic sanctions against Russia and a continuous supply of arms to Ukraine will isolate and weaken Russia, thus eventually ensuring Russia’s defeat in Ukraine.

However, it is important to note that the conflict is not just confined to Russia and Ukraine. Instead, the war in Ukraine has evolved into a global crisis affecting virtually every country in the world. Moscow has

not been able to achieve its original goal of a quick and overwhelming victory over the Ukrainian army. President Putin has found himself mired in a protracted conflict. The Ukrainian government, in the eyes of the Russian leadership, was spreading propaganda and intending to make the country “become the eternal enemy of Russia” through colluding with “its Western allies” (*The Guardian*, 2022). This has not only exacerbated Russia’s negative relationship with the West, but also “created the conditions for a new Iron Curtain between NATO member states and Russia” (Davis and Slobodchikoff, 2022).

In many ways, this Ukrainian crisis is characterized by the involvement of four major powers—China, Russia, the European Union, and the United States (*Aljazeera Centre for Studies*, 2022). On the one hand, the liberal democracies in the West/Global North, including the US and the EU, have shown a high degree of solidarity and commitment in rallying support for Ukraine, imposing sanctions on Russia and high-ranking Russian officials, curtailing Russian coal and oil imports (*CNN News*, 2022; *DW News*, 2022a), as well as freezing Russian reserves in Western banks. On the other hand, countries in the developing world/Global South have adopted relatively restrained and ambiguous stances towards the crisis. For example, while reaffirming support for Russia’s security concerns, China has not only refrained from providing substantial support to Russia, but also refused to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (*Aljazeera*, 2022b). India, Russia’s major supplier of weapons, and a potential partner with the US against China, seems to adopt its traditional non-alignment foreign policy approach. Also, while Turkey has called for a diplomatic solution to the conflict and has expressed concern over the impact of the conflict on regional stability, Brazil has condemned the use of military force and has called for dialogue to resolve the conflict. Iran, on the other hand, has criticized the use of force in Ukraine and has called for a political solution to the conflict. In this context, the international response to the Ukrainian crisis appears to be disjointed and fragmented: “the unity and resolve of the great powers from the Global North in deep contrast to the ambivalent and restrained stances coming from the Global South” (Ghincea, 2022).

Yet, perhaps most significantly, the Russian-Ukraine war has gradually been translated into a great power game. As the war drags on, it is becoming clear that the international order is “increasingly divided with the United States and its status quo-oriented democratic allies in

NATO, Japan, South Korea, and Australia on one side and the revisionist autocracies of China, Russia, and Iran on the other” (Kroenig, 2022). In this sense, notwithstanding the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the great power competition has not disappeared, since Ukraine has become “an outlet for the accumulated acrimony between the rival great powers (Bochkov, 2022; Davis and Slobodchikoff, 2022).

Escalating US-China Great Power Competition

Along with the sharply deteriorated relationship between Russia and the United States, the ongoing great power competition between the United States and China has also escalated because of the war in Ukraine. China’s growing ambitions and assertiveness on the world stage are reflected in President Xi Jinping’s desire for “striving for achievement” and cultivating a “New Type of Great Power Relations” with the United States since he came into power in 2013 (Yan 2014; Qi, 2015). Underlying Xi’s intent to adopt a more proactive approach in China’s foreign policymaking is his strong belief in his country’s “national rejuvenation,” which is known as the “Chinese Dream” (*Global Times*, 2021). The essence of the Chinese Dream, in President Xi’s own words, is “a rich and powerful country, revitalizing the nation and enhancing the well-being of the people,” and that it constitutes “the inner meaning of upholding and developing socialism with Chinese characteristics” (“General Secretary Xi Jinping Explicates the ‘Chinese Dream’,” 2016).

Therefore, since China “has achieved a tremendous transformation,” as the country “has stood up, grown rich and is becoming strong,” there is no reason why China has to shy away from world leadership. Instead, as the Chinese leader argued, “it is time for us to take centre stage in the world and to make a greater contribution to humankind” (*BBC News*, 2017). It is against this backdrop that China’s foreign policy has been reoriented into a more assertive direction, known as “wolf-warrior diplomacy” (Zhu, 2020). This increasingly muscular foreign policy behavior of China, which is characterized by Beijing’s increasing willingness to defend China’s core national interests, represents the elevated status of China as an emerging economic superpower and the irreversible process of Beijing’s growing self-confidence on the world stage. In this sense, the rise of China as “the biggest player in the history of the world”—as Graham Allison (2017) has argued in his 2017 book,

Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?—has heralded a new balance of power known as geo-economics: “the use of economic instruments (from trade and investment policy to sanctions, cyberattacks, and foreign aid) to achieve geopolitical goals.”

In the eyes of Washington policymakers, China's growing assertiveness in its foreign policy-making and its geo-economic offensive has shaken the very foundation of the United States as a hegemonic power in the Asia-Pacific in the past four decades. By paying increasing attention to the growing challenge of China's ambitions, the Trump Administration, in its December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) singled out the “Indo-Pacific,” which stretches from the west coast of India to the western shores of the United States, as a distinctive region for the advancement of US national interests. With China being perceived as a strategic “competitor” and “revisionist” power trying to “shape a world antithetical to US values and interests” (Sevastopulo, 2017), “Indo-Pacific” has gradually become a “whole-of-government” approach, which is known as the Indo-Pacific Strategy, after the continuous use of the term in official US strategy papers since 2017 (Garamone, 2017). In this setting, a multinational collective response to the significant challenges posed by China to the US and its Asian partners and allies is deemed necessary and urgent. In the context of this emerging Indo-Pacific strategy, the most obvious manifestation of this multinational collective response is the revitalization of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which is also known as “the Quad”) since 2017 (Brunnstrom, 2017; Choong, 2018).

Obviously, the growing acceptance of the Indo-Pacific concept and the revitalization of the Quad reflect a growing sense of hostility between the United States and China. In important respects, this growing sense of US-China hostility is attributed to the worsening strategic distrust between the two major powers. The wolf-warrior diplomacy launched by an increasingly confident and assertive China and the Indo-Pacific strategy advocated by an increasingly vigilant and suspicious US are on a collision course: China feels confident enough to quest for greater international prestige as a result of its rise to great power status, while the US is feeling increasingly uneasy about China's growing assertiveness on the world stage and the potential challenge China poses to the ruled-based international order.

After Ukraine: Impact on an Emerging New Global Order

To be sure, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has not only triggered a rapid deterioration of the relationship between Moscow and the West. It has also highlighted the escalation of great power competition, especially between a US-led liberal democratic alliance and a Russia-China non-democratic axis. While global politics in the post-Cold War period may have become multipolar and multicivilizational (Juergensmeyer, 2014), the disjointed response between countries in the Global North and Global South reflects the fragmented policy-making mechanism of the international community.

Proponents of the idea of a new world order argue that globalization, technological advancements, war and the shifting power dynamics between nations are leading to the formation of a new global order, with new rules, norms, and institutions. They point to the rise of non-Western powers like China and India, the decline of American hegemony, and the declining importance of international organizations like the United Nations, as evidence of this change. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on the global economic order and the balance of power between nations. As mentioned earlier, the fallout from the war has contributed to increased tensions between Russia and the West, leading to economic sanctions and a decrease in economic cooperation between the two sides. The conflict has also intensified the push for greater economic diversification and reduced dependence on the US dollar as the dominant global currency. Countries such as China and Russia have increased the use of their own currencies (instead of the US dollar) in international trade and finance (Bhusari and Nikoladze, 2022). India is also planning to do the same (The Times of India, 2022).

Additionally, the conflict has led to increased calls for a greater role for regional organizations such as the European Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in shaping the global economic order. This includes calls for increased regional economic integration and the development of alternative financial and trade systems. Overall, the fallout from the Ukraine war has created a more fragmented and uncertain global economic landscape, as nations seek to assert their own interests and reduce their dependence on traditional centers of economic power. In many ways, the conflict in Ukraine is widely considered to be a failure of the rules-based world order, as it demonstrates the inability of extant international institutions and treaty agreements to prevent and

resolve conflicts. The war has also highlighted the limited effectiveness of economic sanctions and diplomatic efforts in resolving the conflict.

The rules-based world order, which is based on the principles of international law, the UN Charter, and other multilateral agreements, was established after the Second World War to promote peace, stability, and cooperation among nations. However, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine suggests that these principles and agreements are not being upheld. Countries are pursuing their own national interests at the expense of the greater good. But this is not the first time that the rules-based world order faced criticism because of its double standards, as is evident from the involvement of the western powers in the war with Iraq, Libya, Syria and the Israel-Palestine conflict, all of which have questioned the integrity of the existing world order.

This failure of the rules-based world order has had far-reaching implications, not just for Ukraine and the region, but for the global system as a whole. It has resulted in a loss of trust in international institutions and has raised questions about the effectiveness of the current system in promoting peace and stability. It has also contributed to a growing sense of nationalism and protectionism as nations assert their own interests in a world where the rules-based system is seen to be failing.

Still, perhaps most important, the disjointed international response to the Russia-Ukraine war has suggested that the United States can no longer act as the uncontested leader of the global order, since China and Russia do not seem to accept the US-led Western-centric rules-based world order. With larger powers trying to protect their interests while exerting their influence, it is almost certain that countries in the Global South will get involved in, and be affected by, the intensifying competition between the major powers. As South Asia and the Indian Ocean region are becoming a significant arena of major power competition, the task facing policymakers of those smaller and emerging powers in this region is to maintain a strategic equilibrium in their relations with major powers by not taking sides during conflicts. After all, whether countries in the Global South will be able to control their own destiny by resisting the influence of major powers will become the litmus test of leadership amidst the growing competition and deepening mistrust between major powers.

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