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MANEKSHAW PAPER

India's Strategic Path
in Light of
Russia - Ukraine War

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CENTRE FOR LAND WARFARE STUDIES

Field Marshal Sam Hormusji Framji Jamshedji Manekshaw, better known as Sam "Bahadur", was the 8th Chief of the Army Staff (COAS). It was under his command that the Indian forces achieved a spectacular victory in the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971. Starting from 1932, when he joined the first batch at the Indian Military Academy (IMA), his distinguished military career spanned over four decades and five wars, including World War II. He was the first of only two Field Marshals in the Indian Army. Sam Manekshaw's contributions to the Indian Army are legendary. He was a soldier's soldier and a General's General. He was outspoken and stood by his convictions. He was immensely popular within the Services and among civilians of all ages. Boyish charm, wit and humour were other notable qualities of independent India's best known soldier. Apart from hardcore military affairs, the Field Marshal took immense interest in strategic studies and national security issues. Owing to this unique blend of qualities, a grateful nation honoured him with the Padma Bhushan and Padma Vibhushan in 1968 and 1972 respectively.

Field Marshal SHFJ Manekshaw, MC
1914-2008

CLAWS Occasional Papers are dedicated to the memory of Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw

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Abstract

As we understand the evolution of Russia, we can appreciate that the conflict with Ukraine was imminent. Russia had no other option but to challenge the Western influence through the use of its hybrid playbook and interference in the governance infrastructure. The timeline from 1989 to 2025 chronicles Russia's dramatic shift from a commanding superpower to a regional power grappling with fragmentation, internal challenges, and increasingly formidable external rivals. Hybrid tactics, war, diplomacy, and transnational networks all played their part, but, above all, the defining rhythm has been the fragmentation of power, identity, security, and allegiances. The historic outcomes forced Ukraine to embark on the path of war to safeguard its nationalist ambitions. Russia carefully chose Ukraine because all other plausible targets that aligned with Moscow's objectives were either protected by NATO or too small for their destabilisation to achieve the desired strategic outcome.

Ukraine's demographic evolution since 1991 reveals a significant transformation from a bipolar state balancing between Russia and Europe to a consolidated Ukrainian nation-oriented westward. Russia's attempt to use demography as a weapon, protecting "Russians abroad", has backfired enormously, leaving behind a Ukraine that is more Ukrainian, more European, and more united against Russia than ever before. Ukraine appears to be a

classic case of a curse due to Geography. It is caught between the deep sea and the Devil. It cannot join NATO as it also has to continuously guard against territorial annexation and hegemonic ambitions of Russia.

The application of game theory to the Russia-Ukraine war highlights the complex, rational yet deeply perilous decisions faced by both sides. The payoff matrix renders visible the grim logic at the heart of protracted conflict, illuminating why neither Russia nor Ukraine is likely to unilaterally ppursue a peaceful solution absent dramatic changes in the perceived payoff structure. For Ukraine, continued resistance remains the default strategic pathway.

India has chosen to focus on economic growth at a cost to its idealistic standings. Thus, India either does not follow the sanctions regimes or does not participate in UN mandates when called for. Thus, it projects itself as a neutral and non-committal partner in world affairs. Thus, India is isolated, and its only reliable partner is itself and its economic might. This means India cannot aspire to be a world or regional power in true sense but it will always be there in the world affairs calculus. Switzerland followed this strategy to great effect. However, a self-reliant, robust, and sanction-proof country is what would be required if we have to continue on this path.

Russia's: from Superpower to Core State of a Loose Federation

The period between 1989 and 2025 is one of the most significant transformative periods for global politics. Russia's journey, intertwined with the destinies of fifteen recently independent states, involved revolutionary upheaval, factional warfare, rapid realignments, and the persistent struggle to define spheres of influence (Britannica, 2025[1]).

The sudden disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 irretrievably altered the Eurasian landscape, marking a period in which Russia, stripped of its superpower status, emerged as the central state in a much looser regional configuration (Britannica, 2025). Each new independent republic, from the Baltics to Central Asia, faced dissimilar nation-building challenges and followed varied strategic decisions concerning alignment. The centrifugal

Figure 1: Post-Soviet world

forces of local nationalism were balanced by ongoing pressures from Moscow, Western institutions, such as the EU and NATO, and increasingly, China's economic and strategic ambitions (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021[2]). Russia's foreign policy vacillated between attempts to orchestrate reintegration through instruments like the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the use of coercive and hybrid tactics, including military interventions, energy leverage, and information warfare, to check the westward drift of its neighbours (CIRSD

Horizons, 2024[3]). Many previous Soviet republics, such as the Baltic states, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, moved closer to Western coalitions. In contrast, others in Central Asia and Belarus persisted within Moscow's circle, though frequently with rising autonomy and alternative partnerships. Today, Russia's sphere is a collage of challenged relationships, marked by both pockets of enduring control and zones of diminishing influence, epitomising the post-Soviet saga of geopolitical contestation and adaptation (CMI, 2022[4]).

The Collapse and Early Transition Period: 1989–1999

The late 1980s were marked by the liberalising transformations of Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika (restructuring), and glasnost (openness), which set off a chain reaction of nationalist movements and demands for sovereignty across the Soviet space (Britannica, 2025[5]). The Baltic states led the way, reviving independence movements (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021[6]). Throughout the Caucasus and Central Asia, republics began resisting Moscow's centralised control (CIRSD Horizons, 2024). The August 1991 coup attempt in Moscow augmented the collapse of the Soviet Union. Across the former USSR, parliamentary declarations of independence followed, culminating with the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December 25, 1991, and the creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) by Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Britannica, 2025). The result was the emergence of fifteen independent countries, dominion over diverse ethnic groups and distant territories was lost, and the world's first workers' state, once the superpower rival to the United States, vanished, shaping the new international order in one climactic month (Communist Crimes, n.d.[7]).

Boris Yeltsin sought democratic reorganisations and a market economy, but swiftly encountered severe domestic volatility and a disordered foreign policy. Yeltsin favoured initial cooperation with the West but was forced to balance Western aspirations with deepening insecurity over Russia's diminished status (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021). Nationalist regions inside Russia demanded autonomy, instigating heavy-handed responses, most conspicuously the Chechen wars. Internationally, Yeltsin prioritised engagement with the United States and Europe, hoping economic integration and partnership would help Russia recover

Figure 2: NATO after Cold War

(CIRSD Horizons, 2024). However, this initiative broke down over issues such as the expansion of NATO and intervention in the Balkans, fuelling reservations in Russia of encirclement and loss of influence (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021). The period saw efforts to utilise the CIS as a vehicle for reintegration, but the grouping proved institutionally weak (Britannica, 2025). Throughout the 1990s, Russia struggled to marshal the institutional clout and resources necessary to reassert its leadership (CIRSD Horizons, 2024). Moscow tried to foster economic unions with breakaway factions, but internal differences combined with the pressure of Western and Chinese markets, wreaked their impact (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021). In the Baltics, resistance to post-Soviet integration was unqualified; these states quickly moved to join European and transatlantic institutions (Britannica, 2025). Remarkably, in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Russia was able to preserve privileged security ties through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and bilateral military agreements, especially in states facing significant internal or border conflicts (CIRSD Horizons, 2024). Nonetheless, regional aspirations repeatedly weakened Kremlin influence (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2021).

Coercive and Hybrid Tactics

In the instantaneous repercussion, all previous republics scrambled to build new states, economies, and social conventions (Dabrowski, 2023[8]). While the Baltic states and Georgia persisted outside the CIS, the rest joined, albeit with diminished enthusiasm for integration (Commonwealth of Independent States, 2023[9]). Russia, inheriting the Soviet nuclear arsenal and embassies, became the recognized descendant in global organizations (Russia and the United Nations, 2005[10]). Several countries confronted ethnic, linguistic, and regional fault lines, occasionally erupting into

violence, which will be discussed later in the paper (Hughes & Sasse, n.d[11]).

Economically, the former Soviet states experienced a disastrous transition: GDP plummeted (Shleifer & Vishny, 1991[12]), unemployment skyrocketed (Eggers, 2006[13]), hyperinflation devastated families (Dissolution of the Soviet Union, 2022[14]), and the Soviet-era trade structure crumbled almost instantaneously (Shleifer & Vishny, 1991). Russia, while pursuing economic reforms, met its own chaos. The Ruble depreciated; privatisation generated massive disparity and cronyism (Russian Privatization and Oligarchs[15]). In the Baltics, by divergence, the ambition for Western-style reforms and the initial stage of liberalizing provided a reasonably steady course, notwithstanding teething adversity (Saavalainen, 1995[16]).

Russia's failure to offer appealing integration opportunities led to coercive actions designed at preserving influence (Bukkvoll, 2016[17]). Russia habitually used gas pricing, pipeline politics, and supply disruptions as leverage, especially against Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltic states (Sabadus, 2025[18]; Thornton, 2009[19]). Military interventions from Chechnya to Crimea, Donbas, Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia involved deploying troops or supporting separatism to control local governments (Russo-Ukrainian War, Wikipedia, 2014[20]). Cyber operations, disinformation, and subversion with the Baltics and Ukraine as primary targets for cyber intrusions, election interference, and propaganda campaigns were initiated (CyberPeace Institute, 2025[21]; Belfercenter, 2025[22]). The unresolved conflicts in Transnistria (Moldova), Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia/Azerbaijan), Abkhazia/South Ossetia (Georgia), and Donbas/Crimea (Ukraine) continue to provide Russia with

leverage (Post-Soviet Frozen Conflicts, 2020[23]; Frozen Conflicts Jaggedly Thawing, 2024[24]).

Russia challenged US unipolarity by seeking partnerships with China and India, and by supporting moves away from Western-led global governance (Titarenko, 2004[25]; GIS Reports, 2025[26]). Especially since 2008, Moscow was more willing to use military force, propaganda, and economic pressure to advance its interests, as seen in Ukraine, Georgia, and Syria (Russo-Georgian War, 2008[27]).

Putin's rise manifested in an era of assertiveness. The Second Chechen War (1999–2000) involved the ruthless recapture of Grozny and restatement of federal authority (Battle of Grozny, 1999-2000[28]; Second Chechen War, 2003[29]). Russia's social construct shifted toward authoritarian stability, and nationalist sentiment was rejuvenated. Externally, in 2004, the Baltic states, along with Central European nations, joined NATO and the EU, securing these countries decisively in the Western security and economic arrangement and eradicating them from Russian strategic control (NATO Expands, Russia Grumbles, 2004[30]; Integration, 1996[31]). The "colour revolutions" in Georgia (Rose Revolution, 2003[32]) and Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004) signalled growing battles over the region's orientation, with Western support for democratic movements divergent from Moscow's authoritative structures (Colour Revolution, 2005[33]). An upsurge of "frozen conflicts" continued: Russia maintained troops in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The CSTO could not ensure regional security, while Eurasian integration projects had limited success. Thus, these states hedged their bets through relations with the EU, China, and Turkey.

The August 2008 Russia-Georgia war epitomized an unambiguous reiteration of Russian military power in the post-

Soviet space (Russo-Georgian War, 2008[34]). Sparked by tensions over South Ossetia, Russian forces routed Georgian troops and occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia, recognising their independence despite global denunciation (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission, 2008[35]). The war-hardened divisions. Georgia severed diplomatic relations, accelerated Western integration. This model of interference and coercion became a template for future Russian interventions. The occurrence also augmented uncertainties in Ukraine, Moldova, and the Baltics and influenced their thinking that Moscow would use force to preserve its influence.

The model of recognising pro-autonomy enclaves under Moscow's "protection" predicted changes in Ukraine six years later in the Donbas and Crimea regions. In the aftermath of Ukraine's EuroMaidan revolution, Russia seized Crimea in March 2014 through a swift military campaign and a debatable referendum (Russian annexation of Crimea, 2014[36]; Revolution of Dignity, 2014[37]). Concurrently, Moscow-backed separatists kindled unrest in Donbas, creating another frozen conflict. The West responded by imposing widespread sanctions and diplomatic isolation, essentially changing the strategic calculus and igniting a phase of conflict reminiscent of the Cold War. This estrangement triggered Ukraine's deep pivot toward NATO and the EU, notwithstanding Russian hostility. The Baltic states and Poland pushed for greater Western defence assurances, while Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia recalibrated their policies toward Brussels and Washington.

Moscow's security structure was additionally destabilised in 2020, as conflict erupted anew in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan (Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, 2020[38]). Although Russia negotiated a ceasefire and deployed

peacekeepers, its inability or unwillingness to protect Armenia, ostensibly a CSTO ally, sparked extensive disenchantment in Yerevan concerning Russian trustworthiness (Armenia Leaving CSTO[39]). Turkey's support for Azerbaijan signalled new power dynamics. Armenia sought alternative security partnerships, threatening Moscow's standing as a regional guarantor. Simultaneously, Central Asia's states witnessed a surge in Chinese influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan enjoying expanded investment, infrastructure, and trade opportunities (Belt and Road Initiative Kazakhstan, 2020[40]; Belt and Road Initiative Kyrgyz Republic[41]). This shift placed Russia in a secondary economic and strategic role throughout the region.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, intending to install a compliant regime (War in Ukraine, 2025[42]). The Ukrainian resistance, supported robustly by the West, transformed the conflict into an extended and brutal confrontation.

Inference

The timeline from 1989 to 2025 chronicles Russia's dramatic shift from a commanding superpower to a regional power grappling with fragmentation, internal challenges, and increasingly formidable external rivals. The era witnessed the fall of the Soviet empire, the tumultuous path toward post-Soviet statehood, flare-ups of ethnic and territorial conflict, rounds of integration efforts, and the ultimate emergence of Eurasia as a fiercely pluralistic, multipolar region. Hybrid tactics, war, diplomacy, and transnational networks all played their part, but, above all, the defining rhythm has been the fragmentation of power, identity, security, and allegiances. We would discuss the Russian Playbook in more detail subsequently.

As we understand the evolution of Russia, we can appreciate that the conflict with Ukraine was imminent. It was just a question of how and when. The demography and military imbalance, along with world reactions to other conflicts, paved the way for the current conflict. Further, Russia had no other option but to challenge the Western influence, as we have seen, through the use of its hybrid playbook and interference into the governance infrastructure. The historic outcomes forced Ukraine to embark on the path of war to safeguard its nationalist ambitions. Thus, War was imminent, as will be seen later also.

NATO, Russia, and the Geopolitical Frontline

The primary justification given by Russia for its invasion of Ukraine was the expansion of NATO and the associated security concerns (Mearsheimer, 2025[43]). To develop a thorough assessment, it is essential to consider multiple fundamentals. Russian planners probably took into account NATO's protection of neighbouring countries. When choosing Ukraine as the target, additional considerations, such as demographics, military capacity comparisons, and the global response following Crimea's annexation, would also have been evaluated (Mearsheimer, 2025; BBC News, 2025[44]). Leadership of the target country was also likely factored in (The Economist, 2022[45]). However, as has become evident, Russia misjudged most of these factors, a miscalculation that contributed to the prolonged conflict (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023[46]). To understand the Russian motive and the compulsions, we need to understand the uncertainties caused by the presence of NATO.

NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), headquartered in Brussels, is the world's most powerful military alliance. It was founded on April 4, 1949, by 12 member countries: Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, the United Kingdom, and the United States (NATO, 2023[47]; Britannica, 2025[48]). NATO was established as a collective defence pact primarily to counter the Soviet Union's expanding influence in post-World War II Europe

Figure 3: NATO

and to provide assurance to war-devastated European states wary of isolationism (NATO, 2023; Wikipedia, 2024[49]). At its core is Article 5, which declares that an armed attack against one member is considered an attack against all members, mandating a collective response, a principle invoked only once after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 (NATO, 2023; BBC, 2012[50]). From its original 12 founding members, NATO has expanded to 31 member states as of 2023, significantly shaping European security dynamics and its complex relationship with Russia, which is crucial to understanding why Ukraine became a focal battleground in the 21st century (Britannica, 2025; NATO, 2023).

Expansion

After its Cold War birth, NATO expanded rapidly. Turkey and Greece joined in 1952, followed by West Germany in 1955, integrating a key military power into the alliance (NATO, 2023[51]; Britannica, 2025[52]). Subsequent admissions included Spain in 1982 and many Central and Eastern European countries following the end of the Cold War. The post-1990 enlargement, notably Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic in 1999, marked NATO's eastward shift (NATO, 2023; Wikipedia, 2024[53]). In 2004, the "Big Bang" expansion admitted Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania, deepening NATO's reach into formerly Soviet-aligned regions (Britannica, 2025; NATO, 2023). More recent additions include Montenegro (2017), North Macedonia (2020), and Finland in 2023, the latest step in NATO's strategic expansion, leading to its current membership of 31 states, closely bordering Russia and reshaping the European security architecture (National Defence University, 2024[54]; StudyIQ, 2025[55]).

Figure 4: NATO Expansion

Russian Tactics to Counter

Moscow's playbook is "grey-zone" or hybrid confrontation. It prefers destabilisation, frozen conflicts (where legal sovereignty is divided or unclear), cyberattacks, economic blackmail, influence operations, and "little green men", rather than overt war with NATO's vast armed forces (Canadian Security Intelligence Service [CSIS], 2020[56]; The Conversation, 2024[57]; Centre for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2025[58]; Wikipedia, 2021[59]). Some major campaigns of the country are as under: -

Poland: From Buffer to Frontline State. Poland today is a NATO pillar, serving as a critical eastern anchor in the alliance and a key arms supplier to Ukraine. It functions as a vital logistics hub for the U.S., UK, and European militaries. Reinforcements and weapons consistently flow through Poland into Ukraine, while its territory hosts advanced American air defence and missile systems, including the Aegis Ashore missile defence base in Redzikowo. Historically part of Russia's "sphere of influence" during the Cold

Figure 5: Poland

War, Poland has emerged as central to European defence arrangements and NATO's eastern flank strategy. An attack on Poland would invoke NATO's collective defence under Article 5, making any Russian invasion "almost unthinkable" due to the immediate risk of catastrophic escalation (Polish Armed Forces, 2024[60]; Al Jazeera, 2025[61]). Poland is evolving as Europe's most gifted military power within NATO, with defence spending anticipated to reach 4.7% of its GDP in 2025, significantly exceeding NATO's standard 2% guideline (Wilson Centre, 2025[62]). The country hosts a permanent U.S. military presence, including the headquarters of the U.S. 5th Army Corps, and leads in hosting multinational NATO battalion and brigade-sized forces. It also enthusiastically contributes in Baltic Air Policing and maintains an extensive range of training facilities for large-scale NATO exercises such as Brilliant Jump 2024. Poland's strategic investments in modern armour, artillery, air defence, and unmanned aerial vehicles underscore its leadership role in reinforcing NATO's deterrence posture (NATO, 2023[63]). Additionally, Poland is increasingly vocal in urging European allies to augment their defence capabilities to address the growing security threat posed by Russia's aggression in the region. Anti-Russian sentiments and security concerns dominate political discourse, reinforcing Poland's unwavering commitment to NATO (New York Times, 2025[64]).

The "Grey Zone": Moldova, Georgia, and the Baltics. Instead of a direct attack on NATO, Russia focuses on "grey zone" tactics, which destabilise, divide, and delay Western expansion. Key examples include: -

o **Georgia (2008):** During the August 2008 conflict, after long-standing tensions with pro-Russian separatists in these territories, which were covertly supported by Moscow, Russia launched a military invasion under the pretext of protecting Russian citizens (Georgia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023[65]; DW, 2023[66]). Georgia lost control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remain occupied and internationally unrecognized except by Russia and a few aligned states (Euronews, 2025[67]; Wikipedia, 2025[68]). The resulting "frozen conflicts" challenged Georgia's sovereignty and stability, hindering its Euro-Atlantic integration. This effectively blocked NATO expansion into the Caucasus and served as a strong caution to other aspiring member states (CSIS, 2025[69]). This situation complicates Georgia's NATO membership prospects since Article 5 mutual defence guarantees cannot be extended to disputed and occupied territories. Consequently, while NATO officially supports Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations and partnership programs, it has hesitated to offer a Membership Action Plan (MAP) or a clear timeline

Figure 6: The occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia

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for accession to avoid confrontation with Russia (CSIS, 2025[70]; DW, 2023). Nevertheless, Georgia continues to deepen military cooperation with NATO through joint exercises and contributions to NATO operations, reinforcing its status as a key partner (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, 2023[71]; Euronews, 2025[72]).

o **Moldova (Transnistria, since 1992):** Russia has maintained troops, weapon depots, and a "frozen conflict" in Transnistria, a breakaway region on the Moldovan-Ukrainian border. This situation prevents Moldova's integration into NATO and enables Russia to destabilise the country at will (Wikipedia, 2025[73]). Approximately 1,500 Russian soldiers are currently stationed in Transnistria as part of the so-called Operational Group of Russian Forces, a remnant of the 1992 involvement during the Transnistria War, which resulted in de facto independence of the region under Russian protection (UKR World Congress, 2025[74]). Since the early chaotic post-Soviet years, Russia has

Figure 7: Transnistria

exploited ethnic, linguistic, and political divisions to maintain influence in Moldova through this frozen conflict and military presence (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2020[75]). Moldova remains highly reliant on Russian energy and is politically susceptible due to Russia-backed subversive campaigns (Moscow Times, 2025[76]). Recent reports indicate that the Kremlin plans to reinforce its presence, with intentions to deploy up to 10,000 troops, aiming to bolster military control and influence over Moldova's government trajectory, thereby further jeopardising Moldovan sovereignty and its European integration ambitions (Financial Times, 2025[77]; Reuters, 2025[78]). Russian military and political manoeuvres in Transnistria serve as a geopolitical tool to project power at Europe's doorstep, complicate Western efforts in Eastern Europe, and maintain a buffer zone against NATO expansion (Moldovan President Maia Sandu, 2025; OSCE reports[79]).

o **The Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania).** Russia has avoided direct incursion of the Baltic states but has instead conducted hybrid operations. For example, in 2007, the Estonian government's decision to reposition the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn, a Soviet World War II memorial, sparked protests among Estonia's Russian-speaking minority, escalating into violent riots known as the Bronze Night (Estonian World, 2024[80]). In tandem with these events, Estonia suffered a significant wave of cyberattacks targeting government websites, banks, media outlets, and political organisations. These attacks, widely attributed to Russian agents or proxies, included distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) that weakened public and private organisations for weeks (Wikipedia, 2007[81] Cyberattacks; BBC, 2017[82]). The

Figure 8: The Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)

cyber operations were a hybrid campaign to undermine Estonia without activating direct military conflict with NATO. The attack established the emerging role of state-sponsored cyberwarfare in geopolitical conflicts. Estonia's response involved solidifying its cyber defence capabilities and contributing to the creation of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn (Stratcom CoE, 2022[83]; MIT Cybersecurity, 2020[84]). This case remains seminal in understanding Russian "grey-zone" tactics that combine covert operations, cyberwarfare, and influence campaigns to achieve strategic aims while maintaining plausible deniability (The Conversation, 2024[85]).

o **Belarus.** Rather than pursuing out-and-out military incursion, Russia has advanced its influence in Belarus through the "Union State" framework, a political and military integration agreement signed in 1999 (Valdai Club, 2025[86]). Over time, this agenda has expanded to include substantial military cooperation, including the permanent locating of Russian troops on Belarusian soil and joint military training exercises. Belarus has progressively operated as a Russian military outpost, with Moscow leveraging the "common defence space" to project power westward, including launching the 2022 invasion of Ukraine from Belarus (Ukrainian Prism, 2025[87]). The 2024

Figure 9: Belarus

Treaty on Security Guarantees between Russia and Belarus solemnised mutual defence commitments, effectually binding Belarus's military arrangements to Russian strategic primacies (Belarus.by, 2025[88]). Russian tactical nuclear weapons have been deployed in Belarus, and joint military infrastructure and command systems have been expanded, further solidifying the integration (Valdai Club, 2025). Beijing's influence remains restricted due to Belarus's sturdier orientation with Russia. Despite Belarus's public assertions of sovereign policy, military-industrial cooperation is growing, with Belarusian factories producing critical components for Russian military equipment (Ukrainian Prism, 2025). Recent legislation proposed in 2025 codifies Belarus's strategic alignment with Russia, allowing automatic military responses if the Union State's territory is threatened, marking a significant escalation in Belarusian subordination to Russian military objectives (Lansing Institute, 2025[89]; United24, 2025[90]).

Borders with NATO

During his tenure, Russian President Vladimir Putin unexpectedly expanded NATO's frontier with Russia instead of reducing it. When he came to power in 1999, Russia shared only 210 kilometres of border with NATO, but by 2023 this figure had grown nearly twelve-fold to 2,555 kilometres, principally due to Finland's accession. In fact, within just one year, Putin's actions doubled Russia's direct NATO border, taking it to approximately 2,500 kilometres after the alliance admitted its 31st member. Although the Kremlin vindicated its war in Ukraine as a skirmish to limit NATO's presence, the consequence has been reversed, a point underscored by NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, who remarked that Putin "went to war against Ukraine with a declared aim to get less NATO. He's getting the exact opposite" (Stoltenberg,

2023[91]). If he conquered the entirety of Ukraine, he'd still enlarge his border with NATO.

LENGTH OF RUSSIA'S BORDER WITH NATO
Before - 1215 km
After - 2555 km

+1340km

2023 FINLAND

APPLICATION TO JOIN SWEDEN

1949 NORWAY

2004 ESTONIA

2004 LATVIA

1949 DENMARK

2004 LITHUANIA

1999 POLAND

1955 GERMANY

APPLICATION TO JOIN UKRAINE

1999 CZECH REPUBLIC

2004 SLOVAKIA

2004 ROMANIA

1999 HUNGARY

Russia

Figure 10: Border with NATO

Why Russia Chose Ukraine (and Not Poland)

The 2022 attack on Ukraine fundamentally toughened NATO's stance (NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2024[92]). Poland, now a frontline state, has become a lynchpin of Western defence in Europe, heavily reinforced and supplied (Wilson Centre, 2025[93]; Al

Jazeera, 2025[94]). An attack on Poland or the Baltics would no longer be diplomatically ambiguous but would trigger a full NATO response under Article 5 (BBC, 2012[95]; NATO, 2023[96]). The buildup since 2022, including NATO's rapid reaction force expansion, increased U.S. deployments, and the accession of Finland, has closed loopholes that may have tempted the Kremlin before the Ukraine war (StudyIQ, 2025[97]). Ukraine was chosen because it was the largest non-NATO state leaning Westward, seen as the "weakest link" in NATO's eastward trajectory (Mearsheimer, 2025[98]; The Economist, 2022[99]). Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltics (before they joined NATO) all faced various blends of direct military coercion and hybrid aggression (CSIS, 2025[100]; Freedom House, 2023[101]). Yet only in Ukraine did Russia choose all-out war, underscoring the deterrent power of Article 5 (NATO Parliamentary Assembly 2024[102]; CFR, 2025[103]).

Strategic Buffer and Security Doctrine. Moscow's worldview has historically emphasized the importance of strategic depth, seeking friendly buffer states between itself and Western powers to safeguard its borders and geopolitical interests. Ukraine, being a vast country situated between Russia and the NATO frontier, offers vital geographic insulation. In contrast, Poland provides no such buffer, as attacking it would provoke immediate NATO confrontation due to its alliance commitments (Geopolitical Monitor, 2024[104]; Carnegie Endowment, 2020[105]; Wikipedia, 2004[106]). This quest for buffer zones is deeply embedded in Russia's strategic culture, shaped by its long history of invasions and territorial losses, and informs Russia's contemporary security policy, including actions in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2024[107]; Columbia University, 2024[108]).

Testing the West. Although Ukraine engaged in deepening relations with NATO through initiatives such as joining the

Partnership for Peace in 1994, the NATO-Ukraine Commission in 1997, and the Intensified Dialogue program in 2005, it lacked Article 5 membership protections (Wikipedia, 2025[109]; The Conversation, 2023[110]). Ukraine's ambitions for NATO and EU membership were the focus of intense deliberation. In 2010, under President Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine officially abandoned its goal of NATO membership, reaffirming a neutral status while maintaining cooperation with the alliance (BBC, 2014[111]). Following the 2014 Euromaidan revolution and Russia's annexation of Crimea, Ukraine's parliament renounced its non-aligned status, re-committed to NATO ambitions, and sought to enhance military cooperation with NATO (Euronews, 2025[112]). In contrast, Poland was deeply embedded in NATO, having joined in 1999 (NATO, 2023[113]). It hosts U.S. troops and is integrally linked with NATO logistics and military infrastructure, making it a critical frontline state and ally with full collective defence protections under Article 5 (Wilson Centre, 2025[114]).

Military Reality. For Russia, attacking Ukraine was a calculated "doable" option (Mearsheimer, 2025[115]). Moscow wagered that the West would respond with sanctions and aid, but not full-scale military intervention (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, 2024[116]). Attacking Poland, by contrast, would require Russia to confront the U.S. military and its European allies head-on, threatening regime survival, a risk the Kremlin was unwilling to take (CFR, 2025[117]).

Internal Calculations & Leadership. Internally, Russia regarded Ukraine as more vulnerable due to current revolutions, distinct divisions between eastern and western regions, prevalent corruption, and feeble agreements of Western backing. Ukraine's political instability and demographic splits significantly factored into Moscow's calculus (Statista, 2025[118]; CFR, 2025[119]). Conversely, Poland was modernized and armed to NATO standards, seen as

much harder to destabilize or overrun, with a more cohesive society and stronger governance structures (Wilson Centre, 2025[120]; NATO, 2023). Russia's overwhelming military strength compared to Ukrainian forces, combined with perceived weak leadership and internal divisions within Ukraine, further influenced Moscow's decision-making (Global Firepower, 2025[121]; CSIS, 2025[122]).

Inference

Russia carefully chose Ukraine because all other plausible targets that aligned with Moscow's objectives were either protected by NATO or too small for their destabilisation to achieve the desired strategic outcome. Instead, Russia adopted a long-term strategy of "divide and freeze," aiming at NATO's periphery but never its core (Atlantic Council, 2025[123]; NATO Parliamentary Assembly, 2025[124]). Ukraine was the largest, most significant country outside NATO, central to Russia's idea of its regional "sphere of influence" and a safeguard against the West.

Ukraine's Demographic Transformation (1991-2025)

Ukraine was part of the USSR from its inception in 1922 until its collapse in 1991 (Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 2015[125]). Ukraine's demographic evolution since independence in 1991 provides crucial insights into the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022[126]). The country has experienced a dramatic population decline from 52 million to approximately 36-37 million people, accompanied by fundamental

Figure 11: Ukraine, the Heart of Russia

shifts in ethnic composition, language use, migration patterns, and political orientation (Reuters, 2024[127]). Most significantly, the demographic bridges that once tied Ukraine to Russia have been systematically severed, first gradually through natural processes, then accelerated by Russian aggression since 2014 (Foreign Policy, 2024[128]).

Regional Differences in Ethnicity in Ukraine

Figure 12 shows the percentage of ethnic Russians in each of Ukraine's oblasts (regional administrative units)[129]. About 17 per cent of Ukrainians identify as ethnic Russian, but they are clustered in the east and south of the country (2001 census[130]). There are many historic reasons for this ethnic divide, including migration from Russia in Soviet times to industrial regions in eastern Ukraine, but we won't get into that (Minority Rights Group International, (n.d.).[131]).
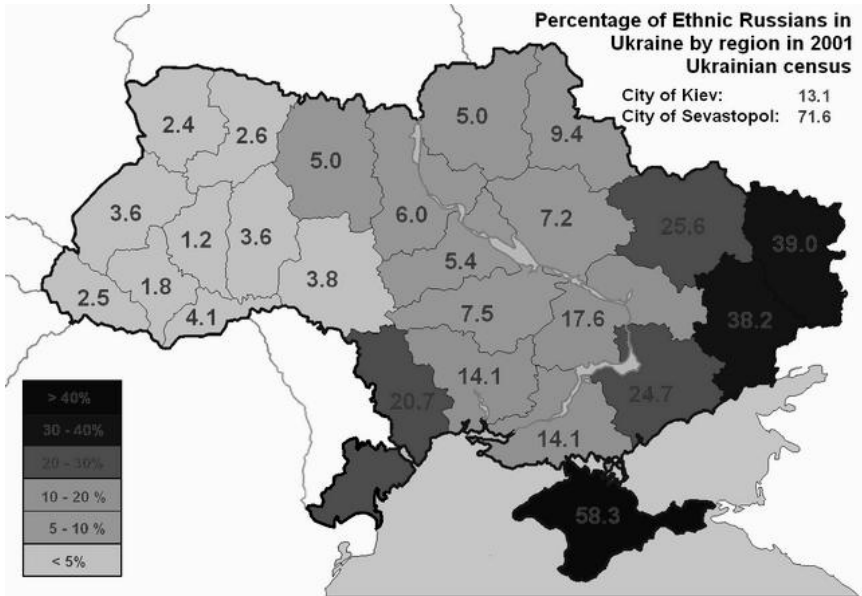
Figure 12: percent of ethnic Russians in each of Ukraine's oblasts

Regional Differences in Language in Ukraine

Figure 13 shows the percentages of Ukrainians whose native language is Russian (ZIOZZ, 2022[132]). Again, we observe a stark divide separating the south and east from the rest of the country (The Conversation, 2025[133]). Comparing with the ethnicity map, you can also see that many Ukrainians who are not ethnic Russians speak Russian as their native language (State Statistic Service of Ukraine, 2004[134]).

Figure 13: Percentages of Ukrainians whose native language is Russian

When you look closer, at the sub-regional level, you can actually see that the Russian language is concentrated in Crimea and in the large cities and industrial areas of the south and east (Harvard Ukraine Research Institute, 2015[135]). Rural areas in the east are predominantly Ukrainian-speaking (The conversation, 2025[136]).
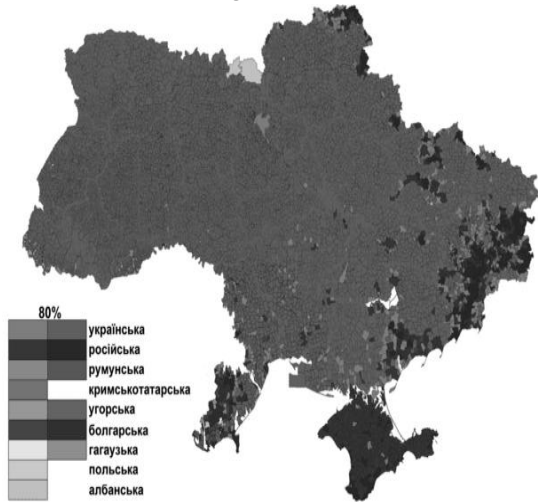
In 2012, the Kivalov-Kolesnichenko Law granted "regional language" status to Russian and other minority languages in areas where they constituted more than 10% of the population (Venice Commission, 2019[137]). This effectively made Russian co-official in much of eastern and southern Ukraine. However, following the Constitutional Court's 2018 ruling that declared the 2012 law unconstitutional, Ukraine adopted comprehensive language legislation in April 2019 (United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, 2019[138]). This law made Ukrainian mandatory in most spheres of public life, including public administration and government, education, media, healthcare, social services, and economic activities (Library of Congress, 2019[139]). Notably, the law provided exemptions for EU languages and indigenous languages like Crimean Tatar, but not for Russian (United Nations Office of the High Commission for Human Rights, 2019[140]). Before 2014, approximately 34% of Ukrainians used Russian as their primary language, while by 2022, only 14.5% reported using Russian as their primary language, while 57.4% used Ukrainian (Kiev International Institute of Sociology, 2025[141]).

Ukraine's Population Decline: A Demographic Crisis

Ukraine began its independence in 1991 with approximately 52 million people, making it the second-largest post-Soviet state after Russia (Radio Free Europe, 2025[142]). This population represented significant demographic weight in the post-Soviet space and provided substantial human capital for nation-building (United Nations Population Division, 2024[143]). The country has experienced

a relentless decline from 52 million people at independence in 1991 to an estimated 36-37 million in 2025, representing a staggering 30% population loss over just three decades (Centre for European Policy Analysis, 2025[144]). The decline accelerated significantly during key political and military crises (Foreign Policy, 2024[145]). Between 1991 and 2001, Ukraine lost 3.6 million people, mainly due to economic instability, emigration, and declining birth rates following the Soviet collapse (State Statistic Service of Ukraine, 2001[146]).
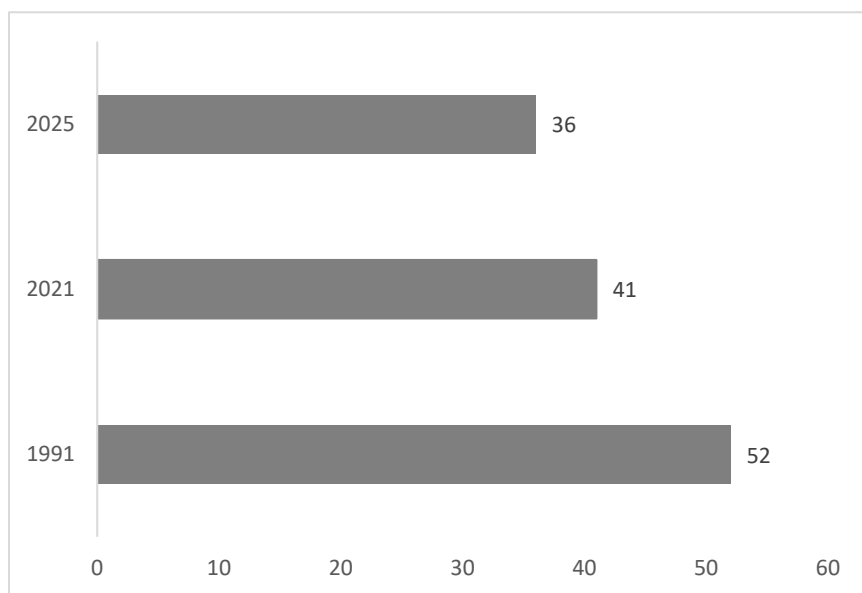
Figure 14: Population in Millions

The pace continued through the 2000s, with the population falling to approximately 45 million by 2014, just before Russia annexed Crimea (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2025[147]). The period from 2014 to 2021 saw an acceleration of demographic losses, with the population dropping to 41 million excluding Crimea and occupied parts of Donbas (Al Jazeera, 2024[148]). These 4 million declines over seven years reflected both the immediate impact of territorial losses and increased emigration due to regional instability (German Economic Team, 2022[149]). The full-

scale Russian invasion in 2022 triggered the most dramatic phase of population loss, with current estimates placing Ukraine's population at 36-37 million people (Al Jazeera, 2024). This demographic catastrophe stems from multiple interconnected factors: Europe's lowest birth rates (approximately one child per woman), massive emigration for economic opportunities, an ageing population structure, and, most recently, war casualties and refugee displacement exceeding 6.7 million people abroad (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2025). The trend represents not just a statistical decline but a fundamental transformation of Ukrainian society, with profound implications for the country's future economic recovery, military capabilities, and geopolitical relationships (Centre for European Policy Analysis, 2025).

Transformation of Ethnic Composition

The 2001 Ukrainian census, the only comprehensive demographic survey of independent Ukraine, revealed the ethnic composition as shown in Figure 15 (State Statistic Service of Ukraine, 2001). This represented a shift from the Soviet period, when Russians constituted 22.1% of the population in 1989 (World Bank, 2024[150]). The loss of Crimea and parts of Donbas, combined with emigration and demographic changes, has dramatically altered Ukraine's ethnic composition (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022[151]). In territory currently controlled by Kyiv, ethnic Russians now constitute approximately 5-6% of the population (The Conversation, 2025).

Figure 15: Ethnic composition

Migration Patterns

During the first two decades of independence (1991-2014), migration patterns reinforced Ukraine's ties to Russia. Millions of Ukrainians worked in Russia, particularly in construction and service sectors, and dense cultural and family connections existed across the border. The period following Crimea's annexation (2014-2017) marked a fundamental shift in migration patterns. Ukrainian migration to Russia decreased by approximately one-third between 2012 and 2017. Migration to Poland tripled to half a million people by 2017. The EU's granting of visa-free travel to Ukrainian citizens in June 2017 facilitated this westward migration. By 2021, Poland hosted more Ukrainian workers than Russia did, marking a historic reversal (German Economic Team, 2022).

Post-2014 Political Realignment

This ethnic and linguistic divide coincides with a cultural and political divide. Figure 16 shows the percentage of the vote Yanukovich received in each region in 2010 (Geovisualist, 2013[152]). Even though the election was decided by only about 3.5%,
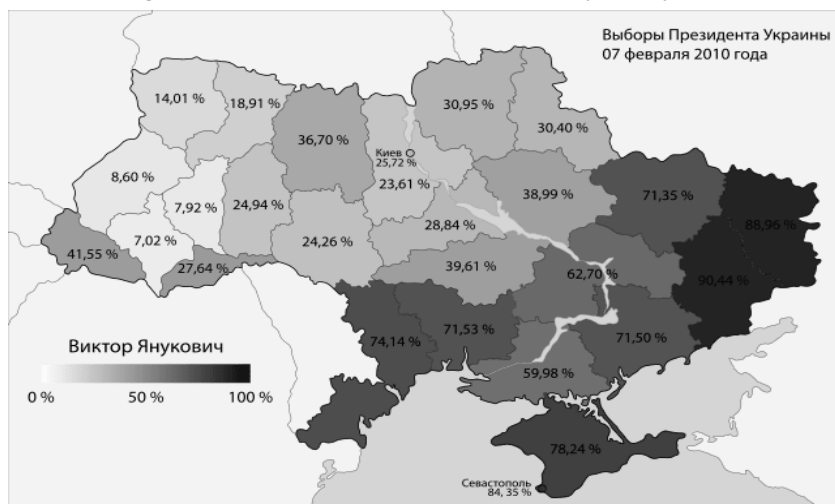

Figure 16: Percent of the vote by region captured by Viktor Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential election

Yanukovych didn't even get 10% in some areas of western Ukraine, while he carried over 90% in Donetsk Oblast (where he is from) in the east (Harvard Ukraine Research Institute, 2015). That's a geographically divided electorate. Eastern and southern Ukraine, especially urban areas, are ethnically, linguistically, and culturally closer to Russia than the other parts of the country (Geovisualist, 2013). Yanukovych and his Party of Regions have their power base in the east and south, and their supporters are much less likely to be upset at forgoing closer relations with the EU, and much more likely to favour closer ties with Russia (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022). Moreover, the economic threats allegedly made by Putin would have affected the pro-Yanukovich regions more because they are industrial areas that sell a lot of goods to Russia (Geovisualist, 2013).

As we saw earlier, Ukraine exhibited a clear east-west political divide for most of its independence (Harvard Ukraine Research Institute, 2015). In 2014 annexation of Crimea removed a heavily pro-Russian region (58.5% Russian population) from Ukraine's political equation as well as the Donbas Conflict, which further separated the most pro-Russian parts of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, where Russians constituted 38-39% of the population (State Statistic Service of Ukraine, 2001). Pro-Russian parties either collapsed, transformed, or were banned. The Opposition Platform was prohibited in 2022, followed by the Party of Regions in 2023. The government later banned 11 pro-Russian political parties, citing national security concerns (World Socialist Web Site, 2022[153]). The full-scale Russian invasion completed Ukraine's political realignment (Kyiv Independent, 2025[154]). By May 2022, support for Russia had collapsed even in traditionally pro-Russian regions, wherein in Eastern Ukraine only 4%, down from 53%, and in Southern Ukraine only 1% viewed Russia favourably, down from 45% (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022). Thus,

Russian hegemonic behaviour created anti-Russian and pro nationalistic fervour, which was likely not anticipated by Russia.

Ukraine's Political Structure (1991 to date)

Ukraine declared independence in 1991 and established a semi-presidential system supported by the 1996 Constitution. The President is the head of state and commander-in-chief, the Verkhovna Rada is a unicameral parliament with legislative authority, and the Cabinet of Ministers shares executive powers accountable to both the President and Parliament. The judiciary is formally independent with a Constitutional Court established. Under President Leonid Kuchma, presidential powers strengthened toward a "super-presidential" model. Economic privatization led to oligarchic clans influencing politics, especially in parliamentary party blocs which were fragmented and unstable, undermining governance (Wikipedia, 2025[155]).

The 2004 Orange Revolution effectively confronted electoral fraud, leading to constitutional amendments shifting Ukraine toward a more parliamentary-presidential system that increased Parliament's powers and fashioned more checks on the presidency. From 2010 onwards, Viktor Yanukovych reestablished presidential powers by dissolution of the 2004 reforms, consolidated power, undermined judiciary independence, and aligned Ukraine more closely with Russia, notably rejecting an EU Association Agreement in 2013. As we saw earlier, the pro-Russian government faced massive unpopularity due to the realignment of demographic patterns. Mass protests (Euromaidan) led to his ouster in 2014 and reinstatement of the 2004 constitutional order. 2014 onwards under Petro Poroshenko, Ukraine continued its parliamentary-presidential system, signed the EU Association Agreement, and pursued decentralization and anti-corruption reforms amid conflict after Russia annexed Crimea and supported separatists in Donbas

(Chatham House, 2025[156]). In 2019, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's party won a parliamentary majority. The government operated as a parliamentary-presidential republic with a President responsible for foreign policy and defence, Parliament controlling the Cabinet, and a judiciary under reform pressure. Foreign policy turned firmly toward Euro-Atlantic integration, with increasing tensions with Russia (Britannica, 2025[157]). As we experienced, Ukraine's political structure was tilted towards Russia since its independence up to 2014.

Ukraine's Foreign Policy Shift Post Crimea (2014)

Russia's illegitimate occupation of Crimea in 2014 concluded Ukraine's prior multi-vector harmonizing strategy between East and West, marking Russia as an aggressor and driving Kyiv to a pivotal Western alignment. Ukraine revoked its "non-aligned" status in 2014, making NATO membership a strategic goal. Defence spending tripled, and the military was reformed along NATO standards, with Ukraine becoming a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner by 2020. Ukraine signed the EU Association Agreement (2014–2017), gained visa-free EU travel, and amended its constitution in 2019 to enshrine EU and NATO membership as national goals. Ukraine actively pursued international legal cases against Russia over Crimea. The West imposed sanctions on Russia, provided military aid to Ukraine, and formed regional security partnerships such as the British-Polish-Ukrainian trilateral pact to support Ukraine's defence. Public support for NATO surged from around 20% in 2013 to over 50% after Crimea. Ukrainian language and cultural policies emphasized national identity distinct from Russia (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020[158]).

This realignment fostered greater national unity and civic engagement, especially in response to external threats, which contributed to the country's ability to mobilize against Russian

aggression. Ukraine's full Western alignment by 2021, rooted in the Crimea-triggered shift, was viewed by Russia as a serious strategic threat, prompting the full-scale 2022 invasion aimed at reversing Ukraine's Western integration (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020).

Inference: Demographic Realities

Russia's military interventions have achieved the opposite of their stated goals (Foreign Policy, 2024[159]). By annexing Crimea and occupying parts of Donbas, Russia removed the very populations it claimed to protect from Ukraine's political equation (Jamestown Foundation, nd[160]). The loss of pro-Russian regions has left Ukraine more ethnically and politically Ukrainian than at any point since independence (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022). Further, the war has accelerated the demographic reorientation toward Europe and away from Russia (Foreign Policy, 2024). The demographic transformation has profound implications for any future peace settlement (Foreign Policy, 2024). With ethnic Russians comprising only 5-6% of the population in government-controlled territory, Russia's demographic influence has mainly been eliminated (The Conversation, 2025). The banning of pro-Russian parties and the shift in public opinion have created unprecedented political unity around European integration (Kyiv Independence, 2025).

Ukraine's demographic evolution since 1991 reveals a significant transformation from a bipolar state balancing between Russia and Europe to a consolidated Ukrainian nation-oriented westward (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2022). The loss of 16 million people since independence (52 million to 36 million), the reduction of ethnic Russians from 17.3% to 5-6% of the population, the pivot in migration patterns from Russia to the EU, and the complete transformation of the political landscape have fundamentally altered the Ukrainian state (Carnegie Endowment

for International Peace, 2022). Russia's attempt to use demography as a weapon, protecting "Russians abroad", has backfired enormously, leaving behind a Ukraine that is more Ukrainian, more European, and more united against Russia than ever before (Foreign Policy, 2024). The demographic connections to Russia have been scorched, and Ukraine's future lies inevitably with Europe. There is mounting acceptance of a situation where Ukraine integrates with NATO and the EU while accepting provisional loss of territory, parallel to West Germany after WWII.

Russian Playbook, Crimea Annexation, and World Reaction

Russia's Annexation of Crimea, 2014

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 marked one of the most consequential shifts in post-Cold War European security. Russia's decision was not spontaneous: it was shaped by both strategic imperatives and deep-rooted security fears. On the one hand, the peninsula provided Moscow with control over Sevastopol, the home of its Black Sea Fleet and its only warm-water port capable of projecting power into the Mediterranean (Mankoff, 2014[161]). On the other hand, NATO's eastward enlargement and Ukraine's post-Maidan westward drift intensified Russian perceptions of encirclement and vulnerability (Charap & Colton, 2017[162]; Tsygankov, 2015[163]). Taken together, these dynamics help explain why Crimea, more than any other part of Ukraine, became the focal point of Russian action.

Strategic Significance of Sevastopol and the Black Sea Fleet.

At the heart of the Crimean annexation was Russia's determination to maintain control over Sevastopol, home to the Black Sea Fleet. As Mankoff (2014) highlights, this base serves as "Russia's only warm-water naval facility giving it access to the Mediterranean and beyond" (p. 61). After the 2010 Kharkiv Pact,

Russia was legally permitted to lease its naval facilities in Crimea until 2042. However, the 2014 Maidan Revolution raised doubts about the pact's survival under a pro-Western government. Allison (2014) observes that "the rapid change of government in Kyiv raised acute concerns in Moscow that agreements underpinning its basing rights might not be honoured" (p. 1263).

NATO Expansion and Russian Security Concerns.

Beyond the naval foundation, Moscow's choice was intensely prejudiced by NATO's eastward expansion. Russian leaders have long conceptualised NATO enlargement as an existential threat to their security (Charap & Colton, 2017; Tsygankov, 2015). As Charap and Colton (2017) explain, "in Russia's political imagination, NATO enlargement was not benign but existential" (p. 42). From this standpoint, preventing Ukraine, particularly Crimea, from becoming a NATO outpost was considered a strategic necessity (Charap & Colton, 2017). Tsygankov (2015) underscores this interpretation, arguing that Russian elites framed the annexation as a defensive step, designed to "prevent NATO's presence at the very heart of Russia's historical and strategic sphere" (p. 198). Accordingly, what the West viewed as aggression, Moscow justified as a pre-emptive measure to protect its security interests (Tsygankov, 2015).

Regime Legitimacy and Domestic Politics.

By 2011–2012, Putin faced rising protests and public dissatisfaction following disputed parliamentary elections and his return to the presidency (Gel'man, 2015[164]). The annexation of Crimea created a "rally 'round the flag" effect. Public opinion shifted dramatically as the move was framed as the return of lost Russian lands and a correction of historical injustice (Kudelia, 2014[165]). Almost overnight, Putin's approval ratings surged to above 80%, marking one of the highest peaks of his presidency

(Levada Centre, 2014[166]). In this sense, Crimea became a powerful tool of domestic legitimation, allowing the Kremlin to stifle dissent, redirect public grievances outward, and consolidate political authority (Sakwa, 2015[167]).

Strategic Timing.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was the culmination of deep-rooted historical narratives and calculated opportunism. The political predicament in Ukraine and the geopolitical reluctance of the West offered a strategic window of opportunity. By combining cultural narratives with pragmatic timing, Russia effectively consolidated control of Crimea.

Ukraine's internal crisis, following the flight of President Viktor Yanukovych, left Kyiv politically unhinged and militarily feeble. At the time, Ukraine's army was sternly underfunded, underprepared, and unable to mount a rapid defence (Freedman, 2014[168]). This weakness created an opening for what became, in practice, a rapid and largely bloodless takeover by "little green men", Russian forces without insignia (Galeotti, 2017[169]). International dynamics supplemented Putin's gamble. The United States and the European Union, wary of direct military escalation, restricted their responses to diplomatic condemnation and sanctions. Putin accurately calculated that the West would not resort to military intervention (Mearsheimer, 2014). Lastly, annexation also assisted a long-term strategic goal of hindering Ukraine's integration with NATO and the European Union. Because unresolved territorial disputes prevent NATO and EU entry, controlling Crimea and later fuelling conflict in the Donbas functioned as a structural veto on Ukraine's Western trajectory (Charap & Colton, 2017).

The Civilizational Narratives.

Historically, Ukraine has been viewed in Moscow not merely as a neighbour but as the "civilizational core" of the Russian world, central to the narrative of imperial continuity (Tsygankov, 2015). The notion that Kyiv could be "lost" to the West was framed as an existential blow to Russia's identity as a great power (Sakwa, 2015). From this perspective, Crimea became a symbolic frontline in Russia's refusal to allow Ukraine's full integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. Moscow's behaviour can be read as a signal to the West that Ukraine lies firmly within Russia's sphere of influence and that any attempt to pull it westward would be met with resistance (Mearsheimer, 2014[170]). Crimea's annexation thus signalled not only geopolitical defiance but also an ideational struggle for empire, identity, and historical legitimacy (Tsygankov, 2015). Externally, it reinforced Russia's long-standing discernment of Ukraine as a civilisational buffer indispensable to preserving its identity and status. Combined, Crimea held far larger value for Russia than territory alone: it became both a domestic political lifeline and a symbolic reaffirmation of Russia's imperial claim.

Historical and Identity Factors.

Crimea holds a unique place in Russia's historical perception, often invoked as "sacred ground" central to its national identity. Although formally transferred to Ukraine in 1954 by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, many Russians never fully recognized Crimea as "Ukrainian territory" (Plokhy, 2015[171]). Russian narratives instead emphasize Sevastopol as the cradle of naval glory, recalling its defence during the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the Second World War (Allison, 2014[172]). Putin amplified these themes by describing Crimea as Russia's "spiritual source," referencing the baptism of Prince Vladimir in Chersonesus in 988 AD, often portrayed as the origin point of Russian Orthodoxy and statehood (Pomeranz, 2014[173]). Moscow depicted the 2014 Maidan uprising as

a radical nationalist coup threatening the rights of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking Ukrainians in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. As Sakwa (2015) explains, "the Kremlin justified its actions in Crimea by invoking the mission to protect Russian compatriots" (p. 93). This narrative of protection both legitimised interventions domestically and appealed to a long-standing idea that Russia bears responsibility for ethnic kin outside its borders (Tsygankov, 2015).

Russia's annexation of Crimea was not a singularly motivated act, but rather the convergence of historical identity claims and strategic calculations. By linking Crimea to Russia's sacred history, Orthodox roots, and duty to protect Russian speakers, the Kremlin legitimized its move in cultural and moral terms. Meanwhile, Ukraine's political fragility, Western hesitation, and the opportunity to permanently foreclose NATO and EU accession provided the enabling conditions. The move was meant to secure its southern flank and regime legitimacy while simultaneously blocking Ukraine's NATO/EU future (Treisman, D. 2016[174]). Ironically, it achieved the opposite in the long run, hardening Ukraine's Western orientation and isolating Russia globally.

Ukraine's Reaction to the Annexation of Crimea

Immediate Denunciation and Legal Response. In response to Russia's annexation of Crimea in early 2014, Ukraine condemned the move as an illegal occupation and a blatant violation of its sovereignty (Charap & Colton, 2017). Kyiv took immediate diplomatic actions, including recalling its ambassador from Moscow and officially designating Crimea as "temporarily occupied territory" under Ukrainian law (Sakwa, 2015). Subsequently, Ukraine sought legal recourse to contest the annexation through international judicial bodies, filing cases against Russia in the International Court of Justice (ICJ), the European Court of Human Rights, and the Permanent Court of

Arbitration (Allison, 2014). Ukraine's commitment to the "de-occupation strategy" reflected a firm refusal to negotiate Crimea's status, underscoring Kyiv's objective to regain control and restore its territorial integrity (Tsygankov, 2015).

Strategic Security Policy Shift. The annexation also provoked a significant transformation in Ukraine's security policies. In 2014, Ukraine abandoned its previous "non-aligned" military status, instead publicly declaring NATO membership a central strategic goal (Mankoff, 2014[175]). This shift was accompanied by a substantial increase in defence spending and comprehensive military reforms designed to modernize the Ukrainian armed forces (Freedman, 2014).

Ukraine treated Crimea as temporarily occupied territory and reoriented its foreign policy toward the West. The world's reaction was a mix: the West imposed sanctions and isolation, while many non-Western states stayed neutral, preventing a full global consensus but leaving Russia diplomatically weakened.

Unrest in Donbas (Eastern Ukraine)

Crimea as a Precedence for Separatism. The swift and largely bloodless annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 set a powerful precedent for pro-Russian groups in Donetsk and Luhansk. Moscow's demonstration that international borders could be fundamentally redrawn through force emboldened separatist movements across eastern Ukraine (Charap & Colton, 2017). This "Crimea model" of intervention was effectively replicated in the Donbas region, where armed groups sought greater autonomy or outright independence from Kyiv (Allison, 2014). The annexation provided a blueprint for exerting influence and destabilizing Ukraine's territorial integrity beyond Crimea's borders.

Local Socioeconomic and Political Conditions. Donbas possessed significant economic and social ties with Russia, making it particularly vulnerable to separatist agitation. The region's economy was heavily reliant on coal mining, steel production, and arms industries closely linked to Russian markets (Sakwa, 2015). A large Russian-speaking population, heavily influenced by Russian state media narratives, viewed the pro-Western Maidan movement with scepticism and hostility (Tsygankov, 2015). The collapse of local political authority following the flight of President Yanukovych, himself a native of Donbas, produced a power vacuum that further destabilized the region (Mankoff, 2014).

Russian Covert Support and Destabilization Strategy. Russia played an active role in fomenting unrest in the Donbas by providing covert support to separatist forces. This support included the deployment of agitators, the supply of weapons, and the use of "little green men", unmarked soldiers who operated unofficially, paralleling tactics used in Crimea (Galeotti, 2017). The Kremlin intended to extend instability beyond Crimea, thereby preventing Kyiv from consolidating pro-Western control over all of Ukraine (Charap & Colton, 2017). This approach contributed to the prolonged conflict in eastern Ukraine, complicating efforts to resolve the crisis through diplomacy.

Crimea and Donbas: Exposing Russian Intent

Strategic Link. The annexation of Crimea and the unrest in Donbas are connected through Russia's broader strategic objectives. Crimea's annexation primarily focused on securing territorial control, particularly over the critical Black Sea naval base at Sevastopol, ensuring Russia's military foothold in the region (Mankoff, 2014). In contrast, the unrest in Donbas centered around political control aimed at keeping Ukraine weak, divided, and unable to consolidate a pro-Western national government (Charap & Colton, 2017). Together, these actions align with Moscow's

strategy of maintaining influence over Ukraine by controlling vital territory while fomenting internal fracture.

Tactical Link. Crimea's annexation established a template or "playbook" for Russian intervention that was subsequently replicated in Donbas. The tactics involved seizing key government buildings, organizing hastily arranged referendums with questionable legitimacy, and invoking the need to protect Russian-speaking populations as justification for intervention (Allison, 2014). Donbas militants closely mimicked this pattern, using similar methods of occupation and calls for Russian protection to deepen instability in eastern Ukraine (Galeotti, 2017).

Geopolitical Link. At the geopolitical level, both Crimea and Donbas serve Russia's grand strategic goal of blocking Ukraine's integration into NATO and the European Union. Crimea's annexation physically removed a portion of Ukrainian territory, making it difficult for Kyiv to assert full sovereignty (Sakwa, 2015). Concurrently, the ongoing conflict in Donbas institutionalizes instability, creating a "frozen conflict" that acts as a structural barrier to NATO and EU membership, since unresolved territorial disputes preclude accession (Charap & Colton, 2017). Collectively, these dual strategies have significantly complicated Ukraine's Western ambitions and reshaped regional security dynamics.

Russian Playbook

Timeline & Location	Action by Russia	Legal Status & Recognition	Global Reaction & Notes	References
1992 — Moldova (Transnistria)	Russian 14th Army supported separatists in Transnistria	No annexation or recognition	OSCE mediation ongoing; no UN recognition;	Sakwa (2015); Tsygankov (2015)

Timeline & Location	Action by Russia	Legal Status & Recognition	Global Reaction & Notes	References
	War		conflict remains unresolved	
2008 — Georgia (South Ossetia & Abkhazia)	War with Georgia; Russia recognized Abkhazia & South Ossetia as independent	Recognized by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Syria; mostly rejected worldwide	EU-brokered ceasefire; repeated UN and OSCE affirmations of Georgia's sovereignty	Allison (2014); Wilson (2008); Sakwa (2015)
2014 — Ukraine (Crimea)	Annexation after Russian-organized referendum	Incorporated into Russia; rejected internationally	UNGA Resolution 68/262 (100–11–58) declared annexation invalid; sanctions by US, EU, G7; Russia suspended from G8	Mankoff (2014); UNGA (2014); Allison (2014)
2014–2021 — Ukraine (Donbas)	Directed/semi-denied support for separatists in Donetsk & Luhansk	Not annexed; "republics" unrecognized	Minsk accords (2014, 2015); ongoing sanctions by Western states	Charap & Colton (2017); Sakwa (2015)
2015 — Syria	Military intervention supporting Assad	No annexation; intervention at Assad's	Western condemnation for civilian bombings; no	Galeotti (2017); Freedman (2018)

Timeline & Location	Action by Russia	Legal Status & Recognition	Global Reaction & Notes	References
		invitation	international territorial dispute	
Jan 2022 — Kazakhstan	Paratrooper deployment via CSTO at Kazakhstan government's request	No annexation	Seen as regional power show; limited Western reaction	Götz (2019); Tsygankov (2015)
Feb–Oct 2022 — Ukraine (Full-scale invasion)	Full-scale invasion; sham referendums; claimed annexations of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson	Claimed annexation; rejected worldwide	UNGA Resolution ES-11/4 (143–5–35) condemning annexations; massive sanctions; NATO strengthened military aid to Ukraine	UNGA (2022); Menon & Rumer (2015); Charap & Colton (2017)

Table 1: Russian Playbook

Inference

Russian Playbook appears to be of creating/abetting separatist enclaves, recognize (Georgia) or annex (Ukraine), and finally lock in leverage or territory. Global pattern has been overwhelming non-recognition of border changes, sanctions, and deterrence from Western alliances; many Global South states abstain but do not recognise the changes. China, India, Brazil, and South Africa (BRICS) did not recognise the annexation but avoided condemning

Russia strongly, calling for dialogue and peace instead. Belarus, Venezuela, and North Korea openly backed Russia.

The unrest in Donbas was a direct spillover of Crimea's annexation. Crimea proved Russia could redraw borders, and Donbas became the tool to cripple Ukraine internally, ensuring it couldn't fully join Western institutions. Crimea was the "land grab," Donbas the "pressure valve." Crimea secured Russia's geostrategic position. Donbas kept Ukraine politically fractured. However, the misjudgement by Russia led to Ukraine's Irreversible pivot to NATO/EU, defence reform, anti-Russian identity consolidation, constant drain on resources, but also accelerated Western integration and military resilience. Both were intended to halt Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic integration but instead, they hardened Ukraine's Western trajectory.

Ukraine appears to be a classic case of a curse due to Geography. It is caught between the deep sea and the Devil. It cannot join NATO as it also has to continuously guard against territorial annexation and the hegemonic ambitions of Russia. Ukraine loses all semblance of Independence as Russia could at any stage recommence all-out war, which Ukraine has to defend against. Ceasefire with the handing over of territory and acceptance of Russia to allow Ukraine to join NATO as a security guarantor appears to be the only way forward at this stage. As we see other factors, we would also be able to analyse why Ukraine delayed joining NATO and is paying the lost opportunity cost. As we analyse other factors, more solutions may appear.

Strategic Alternatives for Ukraine: Game Theory and the Russia-Ukraine War

Russia and Ukraine's contemporary relationship is rooted in centuries of fluid borders and shifting allegiances (Wikipedia contributors, 2008a[176]). The end of the Soviet Union brought

Ukraine's westward pivot, culminating in aspirations to join NATO and the European Union (Wikipedia contributors, 2008b[177]). This trajectory exacerbated Russian anxieties about encroaching Western influence on its borders, prompting Moscow to escalate its military posture (International Institute for Research, 2017[178]). Ukraine's determination to retain sovereignty and its resilience in the face of aggression is sustained by a strong national identity and support from Western allies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024[179]). The "security dilemma", whereby one state's defensive measures are perceived as threats by another, spiralling into escalation, is clearly evident in this rivalry (Terman, 1999[180]).

The Russia-Ukraine war is a paradigmatic illustration of the interplay between strategic decision-making, historical grievances, and international alignments (Smith, 2024[181]; Johnson, 2023[182]). The enduring conflict has captured the attention of policymakers, military strategists, and scholars alike, not only for its immediate geopolitical implications but also for the underlying rational calculations that guide each side's choices (Williams & Lee, 2023[183]; Brown, 2024[184]). A nuanced understanding of this war is possible through the lens of game theory, especially via payoff matrices and the concept of Nash equilibrium (Morris, 2022[185]; O'Donnell & Zhao, 2024[186]). Game theory does not predict outcomes; instead, it elucidates rational strategic options and the potential consequences of each, given the anticipated reactions of adversaries and allies (Jackson & Morelli, 2020[187]; Powell, 2022[188]). Game theory's central premise is that rational actors seek to maximise their utility in any interaction, taking into account not only their choices but also the potential responses of other players (Osborne & Rubinstein, 2022[189]; Dixit & Nalebuff, 2021[190]). In the context of the Russia-Ukraine war, both sides are driven by a complex mix of historical memory, existential fears, material interests, and the pursuit of international validation (Gessen, 2023[191]; Yaffa, 2022[192]).

The Payoff Matrix

The classic 2x2 payoff matrix, depicted in the provided image, models the possible strategic choices for two players, Russia and Ukraine: Fight or Do Not Fight (Osborne & Rubinstein, 1994[193]). Each cell of the matrix contains a pair of utilities: the first for Russia, the second for Ukraine. These numbers represent the subjective desirability of the outcomes, incorporating tangible factors such as territorial control, military casualties, economic strain, and less tangible but critical concerns like prestige and long-term sovereignty (Ahrabi, 2022[194]; Ho et al., 2022[195]).

	Ukraine: Fight	Ukraine: Do Not Fight
Russia: Fight	**A** 1,1	**B** 3,0
Russia: Do Not Fight	**C** 0,3	**D** 2,2

The Nash equilibrium arises in those cells where neither side has an incentive to unilaterally change its strategy. As per the matrix, "Fight-Fight" (1,1) represents a tragic equilibrium where both sides endure heavy costs but remain locked in conflict to avoid even worse perceived outcomes. Conversely, the "Do Not Fight-Do Not Fight" outcome (2,2) is Pareto-optimal, offering the greatest combined payoff, but it is elusive, hindered by mistrust and strategic insecurities.

Quadrant A: Continued Hostilities

When both Russia and Ukraine continue fighting without declaring a ceasefire, several direct and indirect repercussions follow:

- **Humanitarian Crisis**: Continued warfare perpetuates civilian casualties, infrastructure destruction, and mass displacement, worsening conditions in both countries (Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025[196]; UNHCR, 2022[197]; OHCHR, 2025[198]).

- **Economic Impact**: War-related expenses and sanctions deepen economic hardships (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022[199]; Wikipedia, 2022[200]).

- **Geopolitical Polarization**: The conflict hardens divisions between Russia and the West, intensifying NATO and EU support for Ukraine, and sustaining sanctions on Russia, which in turn seeks alternative alliances (International Political Science Association, 2024[201]).

- **Risks of Escalation**: Prolonged hostilities heighten the danger of spillover, destabilization, and possible escalation beyond current boundaries (Wikipedia, 2022; Atlantic Council, 2025[202]).

- **Domestic Pressures**: Russia faces potential erosion of troop morale and increasing domestic political challenges; Ukraine sustains resistance but faces continual strain (Atlantic Council, 2025).

Quadrant B: Unilateral Ukrainian Ceasefire

If Ukraine were to declare a unilateral ceasefire while Russia continues offensive operations, several adverse consequences would ensue:

- **Territorial Concessions**: Ukraine would de facto legitimise Russian territorial gains in regions such as Donbas and Crimea (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024[203]).

- **Negotiating Weakness**: With armed resistance halted, Ukraine's leverage at the negotiating table would decrease, exposing it to more extensive Russian demands (International Institute for Research, 2017[204]).

- **Domestic Turmoil**: Ukrainian domestic politics would become fraught, as conceding ground without reciprocal guarantees could stoke popular unrest and erode trust in leadership (Chatham House, 2024[205]).

- **Western Confidence**: Allies may hesitate to maintain robust support, fearing Ukraine's resilience is waning (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

For Russia, such a scenario allows consolidation of territorial control, greater diplomatic manoeuvring, potentially via forums like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and circumvention of some Western sanctions. However, military expenditure and war casualties would continue, and international opprobrium and sanctions would likely persist (BBC News, 2025[206]).

Quadrant C: Unilateral Russian Ceasefire

Conversely, if Russia declared a unilateral ceasefire:

- **Ukrainian Scepticism**: Previous Russian ceasefires have been widely viewed in Ukraine as tactical ploys rather than genuine roadmaps to peace, often accompanied by accusations of ongoing bombardments even during announced truces (BBC News, 2025).

- **Operational Risk for Russia**: With Ukraine continuing offensives, Russian forces could be vulnerable, potentially losing strategic ground (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

- **Strategic Manoeuvring for Ukraine**: Ukraine might exploit the opportunity to press its battlefield advantage or reclaim lost territory (International Institute for Research, 2017[207]).

- **Diplomatic Ramifications**: The credibility of Russian ceasefires would be further undermined, risking greater diplomatic isolation (United Nations Press, 2025[208]).

International observers typically view unilateral Russian ceasefires as insufficient, emphasizing negotiated, reciprocal arrangements with robust verification and security guarantees (UN Press, 2025[209]).

Quadrant D: Mutually Agreed Ceasefire

The most constructive path towards peace would be a mutually agreed ceasefire, but significant obstacles loom:

- **Russian Terms**: Recognition of occupied territories (including Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson), Ukrainian neutrality, limited military capabilities, and the lifting of sanctions.

- **Ukrainian Terms**: Full withdrawal of Russian forces, restoration of sovereignty, prisoner and child returns, war crimes accountability, and security guarantees, especially the right to choose alliances.

- **International Involvement**: Calls for independent monitoring, humanitarian access, and mechanisms enforcing compliance in ceasefire terms (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025[210]).

Negotiations have repeatedly foundered over irreconcilable positions, Russia seeking recognition of its territorial gains, Ukraine refusing to relinquish sovereignty. Even short-term or confidence-

building ceasefires risk unravelling without genuine engagement (Reuters, 2025[211]).

Strategic Alternatives for Ukraine

From the above discussion, it appears that the options with Ukraine are limited and are enumerated below: -

Continued Military Resistance: One option is sustained armed resistance, leveraging international military aid, drone warfare, and tactical resilience to contest Russian advances. Given the current balance of forces, Ukraine's continued fighting aims to recover territory, maintain pressure on Russia, and keep Western support engaged (BBC News, 2025[212]). The risks remain high: civilian suffering, infrastructure losses, and the risk of escalation.

Negotiation with Preconditions: Ukraine could seek negotiations with stringent preconditions, such as insistence on territorial integrity, robust security guarantees, and international monitoring. While the likelihood of Russian acquiescence is low, such a posture preserves Ukraine's standing and aligns with Western expectations (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025[213]).

Strategic Compromises: Under extreme pressure, Ukraine might consider strategic compromises: accepting limited losses (such as status quo territorial borders), neutral status, or temporary limitations on arms. Such bargains, while deeply controversial, may become necessary if battlefield realities dictate (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025).

Diplomatic Escalation: Ukraine could work to expand diplomatic pressure on Russia, leveraging international forums, sanctions, and legal actions (e.g., International Criminal Court prosecutions for war crimes) to isolate Moscow further (United Nations Press, 2025[214]). Diplomatic escalation is a secondary front that could influence battlefield calculations over time.

Internal Mobilisation: Robust domestic mobilization, marshalling public support, innovating military technology, and strengthening civil resilience, remains an essential facet of Ukraine's defence strategy. It also helps maintain Western faith in Ukraine's determination (Chatham House, 2024[215]).

Inference

The application of game theory to the Russia-Ukraine war highlights the complex, rational yet deeply perilous decisions faced by both sides (Ahrabi, 2022[216]). The payoff matrix renders visible the grim logic at the heart of protracted conflict, illuminating why neither Russia nor Ukraine is likely to unilaterally pursue a peaceful solution absent dramatic changes in the perceived payoff structure (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025; United Nations Press, 2025). For Ukraine, continued resistance remains the default strategic pathway, but it carries profound risks and costs, including civilian suffering and economic strain (BBC News, 2025; Norwegian Refugee Council, 2025[217]). Diplomatic efforts, strategic compromise, and internal mobilization complement military options but are constrained by historical animosities and present-day realities (Chatham House, 2024; Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). Unless new mechanisms or shifts in cost-benefit calculations emerge, mediated by international actors or shaped by domestic political changes, the tragic equilibrium of conflict is likely to persist, with severe consequences for both countries and the global order.

Lessons for India: Building Resilience and Strategic Autonomy

India confronts a rapidly shifting world following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The war did more than redraw battle lines; it compelled Russia to swiftly adapt to isolation, sanctions, and changing alliances (Connolly & Hanson, 2022[218]). For India, the

Russian experience serves not just as a warning but as practical lessons on maintaining resilience and independence during turbulent times (Pant & Joshi, 2022[219]).

The main highlights of the conflict could be summarised as under: -

- The Russian playbook was always of aggression and interference with all its neighbouring countries, which had gained independence post breakup of the Soviet Union. This was irrespective of the fact whether the said country supported it, opposed it, or remained neutral. The analogy could be drawn with Sino India relationship, which would remain a troubled border in the foreseeable future, which India has to mitigate.

- The modus of annexation and fermenting trouble based on shared history or demography was exploited by Russia in Ukraine. A similar analogy could be drawn to the Indo-Pakistani relationship, where Pakistan would continue to ferment unrest inside India, irrespective of any agreements or international forums. Thus, India has to cater to suitable deterrence on its western front for a long time.

- The long-drawn war also points to the fact of self-reliance, long strategic logistic plan, resuscitation of the country post conflict, as well as the inefficiency of the international community to influence a ceasefire.

Lessons for India

The concept of security has expanded across borders, domains, and even into the digital and cognitive realms. Traditional warfare now coexists with cyberattacks, AI-enabled surveillance, space conflicts, and disinformation campaigns. We are witnessing the

rapid evolution of multi-domain warfare, deep supply-chain vulnerabilities, and a growing centrality of dual-use technologies.

A major terror attack in Pahalgam led to a swift and high-impact military response from India, highlighting the persistent volatility of the India-Pakistan equation and the risk of sudden escalation under a nuclear umbrella. Meanwhile, the Indo-Pacific remains a contested theatre of influence, shaped by China's growing assertiveness, maritime expansionism, and deepening friction with the West. The Ukraine war, the China-Taiwan tensions, and instability across West Asia signal the return of power politics, regional instability, and strategic unpredictability.

Adding to this volatility is the return of U.S. President Donald Trump, whose foreign policy approach, characterised by unilateralism, trade protectionism, and withdrawal from global frameworks, is injecting fresh uncertainty into international affairs. Amidst these challenges, the United Nations has been largely sidelined, playing only a marginal role in crisis mediation and conflict resolution.

India has chosen to focus on economic growth at a cost to its idealistic standings. Thus, India either does not follow the sanctions regimes or does not participate in UN mandates when called for. Thus, it projects itself as a neutral and non-committal partner in world affairs. When our relations with China soured, we drifted closer to the US, and when those relations were threatened, we shifted our stance and are now contemplating closure ties with China and Russia. Similarly, we have oscillated with other countries at our choosing. This stance, though, benefits in an economic sense but antagonises the world. Thus, India is isolated, and its only reliable partner is itself and its economic might. This would ensure India cannot aspire to be a world or regional power but it will always be there in the world affairs calculus. Switzerland

followed this strategy to great effect. However, a self-reliant, robust, and sanction-proof country is what would be required if we have to continue on this path. In this challenging environment, India must recalibrate, not just to deter threats, but to convert insecurity into opportunity. The lessons that could be derived by India are mentioned subsequently.

Overdependence is Perilous. Russia's dependence on energy exports to Europe was a weakness. When sanctions hit, Russia lost important customers overnight and had to urgently find new buyers, especially in Asia (Gabuev, 2023[220]). India should never allow a single country or group of countries to supply more than a quarter of its energy, technology, or defence requirements. Diversifying partnerships and supply chains is not just prudent; it is vital (Evans, D, 2024[221]).

Immunity against Sanctions. Western sanctions quickly cut Russia off from financial systems, logistics, and technology (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). It had to invent new payment methods and rely more on local solutions. India should prepare now: build strong indigenous financial systems, backup payment networks, and a robust digital infrastructure so the economy can withstand external shocks (Tyagi et al., 2025[222]). Focus on indigenisation and the manufacturing sector should be our endeavour.

Narratives Management. Despite attempts, Russia found it difficult to win over global public opinion. Credibility and trust cannot be built overnight (Kortunov, 2023[223]). India should strengthen its international presence by sharing genuine stories of inclusion, cooperation, and progress, investing in global media, scholarships, and think tanks to counter misinformation and build trust abroad (Ramabadran, S, 2023[224]). However, this narrative should be credible, accurate, and focused. The time for idealistic sermons is over and India cannot force a monopoly on it.

Strategic Freedom. Russia's isolation forced it to join China's camp, thus narrowing its options (Gabuev, 2023). For India, strategic autonomy needs to be supported by robust, multi-dimensional relationships, not only within the QUAD or BRICS but also with Gulf states, major economies, and emerging players worldwide. This means being prepared to cooperate on India's terms (Pant & Joshi, 2022). India appears to have embarked on such a journey. It would be prudent to study the Switzerland model to derive some lessons in this regard. We have gone from non-alignment to alignment with all, which requires a different set of capabilities and resources. We need to build those, and they could be studied separately.

Energy Security. Russia resorted to discounted oil sales to stay afloat, reshaping global energy flows (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). India should strengthen its defences with long-term energy contracts, substantial reserves, and a swift transition to renewables and nuclear power, protecting itself against global supply disruptions (Reuters, 2025[225]). Akin to the Green Revolution we require a Power Revolution in the near future so as to mitigate dependence on any one source.

Self-Reliant Technology. Russia's tech industries were severely impacted by sanctions on chips, AI, and aviation components (Ars Technica, 2022[226]). India must prioritise semiconductor production, AI, cloud infrastructure, and defence electronics as vital to national security, investing in domestic innovation and safeguarding itself from supply disruptions (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Streamline export clearances by establishing a single-window mechanism and back Indian platforms with diplomatic outreach, defence attaché engagement, and long-term support commitments to boost buyer confidence. We require urgent scaling up of iDEX and incentivise DRDO partnerships with startups, MSMEs, and private firms to rapidly develop disruptive

technologies, especially in AI, UAVs, electronic warfare, and space. We could utilise challenge-based models to accelerate prototyping and deployment. We should promptly invest in national-level cyber defence capabilities, secure data links, hardened satellite infrastructure, and multi-sourcing of critical components to withstand hybrid and space-based threats.

Economic Warfare. Sanctions, trade disruptions, and financial cut-offs demonstrated how swiftly non-military tools can be weaponised (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). India requires contingency plans: redundancy in critical systems, robust local alternatives, and regular stress tests simulating large-scale disruptions. By implementing redundancy, developing robust local alternatives, and conducting regular stress tests, India can enhance the resilience of its critical infrastructure. These measures will ensure the continuity of essential services during disruptions, safeguarding the nation's economy and security (Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, n.d.[227]). 13. To seize this geopolitical and technological moment, we must strengthen our Integrated Threat Assessment Body for real-time, multi-domain risk monitoring across geopolitical, cyber, and tech domains.

Gross National Power. Russia's extensive military power was not sufficient to achieve its objectives. Economic resilience, technological innovation, and prudent diplomacy are equally vital (Pant & Joshi, 2022). India must strike a balance, modernise its military, while also fostering a robust economy and technology sector (Singh R, 2023[228]). We should create integrated clusters linking academia, industry, and the military for rapid prototyping and tech development to future-proof India's defence posture. This war has shown that anything and everything could be and would be turned into an instrument of warfare.

The Global South Is Rising. Many countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia have refused to align with Western sanctions on Russia (Gabuev, 2023). India can strengthen its position in the Global South by exporting digital tools, supporting development finance, and sharing knowledge (Sajjanhar, 2025[229]). We could promote globally competitive indigenous platforms like BrahMos, Akash, and Pinaka through targeted marketing, joint ventures, and G2G (government-to-government) frameworks. Position India as a trusted supplier for countries seeking non-aligned, affordable, and reliable alternatives.

India's 10-Year Roadmap

Looking ahead, India should base its strategy on these lessons, with a detailed action plan for 2025–2035 as under: -

Energy Security. India's energy resilience depends on diversifying suppliers and building large reserves to hedge against global volatility. This approach secures the present, but the future lies in simultaneously scaling renewables and nuclear power (Nuclear Business Platform, 2025[230]). By 2040, India could operate hybrid systems combining solar, wind, and storage, stabilised by nuclear small modular reactors for baseload requirements. Cross-border clean energy corridors, linking South Asia and beyond, could enable India to export green hydrogen and ammonia, positioning the country as a net energy influencer (PIB India, 2024[231]). To achieve this, long-term contracts for critical inputs, regulatory predictability, and investment in grid modernisation will be essential. In this scenario, energy security is not only defensive, protecting against supply shocks, but also transformative, granting India leverage to shape global energy flows. Such leverage can recalibrate alliances and underpin India's role in a green multipolar order (ICFS, 2025[232]).

Financial Autonomy. Financial sovereignty requires spreading the adoption of UPI and RuPay abroad to create a parallel digital financial sphere anchored in India (National Payments Corporation of India, 2023[233]). Settling more international trade in rupees reduces dependence on the dollar and shields against coercive sanctions. Backup payment systems, independent of SWIFT, would insulate India from vulnerabilities in the global financial infrastructure (India Briefing, 2024[234]). By the 2030s, India could lead a rupee-settlement bloc across the Global South, offering a third pole in global finance. This system could also ease remittances, trade, and investments across Africa and Asia (EnKash, 2025[235]). Simultaneously, India must build sovereign digital currency frameworks, emergency clearinghouses, and reserves to withstand financial shocks. If executed effectively, this autonomy will not isolate India but embed it as a reliable partner for countries seeking non-politicised alternatives. Such leadership would give India not just economic strength but also normative influence in global finance (The Institute of Cost Accountants of India, 2023[236]).

Technological Sovereignty. Building domestic semiconductor fabs is critical to reducing dependence on volatile global supply chains (Press Information Bureau, 2025[237]). By establishing a national AI grid, India could democratize access to computing for startups, academia, and government agencies (NITI Aayog, 2025[238]). A sovereign AI and cloud infrastructure ensures data security and protects against extraterritorial regulations (India Semiconductor Mission, 2025[239]). This sovereignty allows India to set global standards in ethical AI and trusted digital platforms (Economic Times, 2025[240]). Linking semiconductor and AI development with trusted partners strengthens resilience against disruptions (Swarajya Magazine, 2025[241]). In the long run, India could become a hub for affordable chips and AI services tailored to

the Global South (LinkedIn, 2025[242]). Such positioning reduces dependence on Western or Chinese-controlled systems and strengthens India's role as a provider of digital public goods (Press Information Bureau, 2025). The fusion of domestic infrastructure with open-source models offers both security and innovation at scale (NITI Aayog, 2025).

Defence Industry Revamp. India's defence sector must move from import-dependence to co-development and export of high-tech platforms (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Establishing a rapid capabilities office could accelerate project lifecycles, ensuring quick prototyping and deployment (Pant & Joshi, 2022). This approach allows India to leapfrog traditional platforms and focus on drones, cyber systems, and space assets (Pant & Joshi, 2022). By the 2030s, India could emerge as a top-five defence exporter if it embraces joint ventures and dual-use technologies (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Exporting such systems would deepen strategic ties with partners across Asia and Africa (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Building competitive domestic ecosystems also reduces outflows of foreign exchange on arms imports (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Co-development builds trust, while exports enhance India's credibility as a security provider (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Ultimately, a reformed defence sector embeds India not only as a consumer but as a producer shaping global security markets (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

Supply Chain and Minerals. Securing long-term contracts for key minerals like lithium, cobalt, and rare earths is vital for sustaining India's energy transition (Press Information Bureau, 2023[243]; Exim Bank of India, 2025[244]). Establishing recycling hubs within India can reduce dependence on foreign supply and promote sustainable mineral value chains (Logistics Insider, 2025[245]). Streamlined customs processes for strategic goods ensure resilience during crises and support friend-shoring and regional supply chain alliances (PwC India, 2025[246]). Such measures position

India favourably within global critical mineral supply networks (Centre for Social and Economic Progress, 2024[247]). By 2035, India could lead a consortium of Global South economies pooling resources for critical materials, strengthening regional cooperation (Civils Daily, 2025[248]). Developing battery storage technologies domestically adds a new layer of autonomy to energy security (Exim Bank of India, 2025). Efficient logistics corridors linking ports, railways, and airports will further secure flows of vital goods (Logistics Insider, 2025). These steps convert supply chain vulnerability into an opportunity for leadership in strategic minerals management (CSEP, 2024).

Diplomatic Connector Role. India's diplomatic edge lies in its ability to convene diverse actors through mini-laterals and mediation platforms (Gabuev, 2023). Institutionalising annual summits focused on conflict resolution would anchor India as a global mediator (Gabuev, 2023). Exporting digital public goods like Aadhaar-based platforms builds long-term trust with developing economies (Gabuev, 2023). These tools enhance governance capacity abroad and cement India's role as a technology partner (Gabuev, 2023). By positioning itself as the "diplomatic connector," India bridges the divide between North and South (Gabuev, 2023). This role is not only geopolitical but normative, shaping the architecture of cooperation in the multipolar order (Gabuev, 2023). Stronger institutional capacity will ensure India becomes a problem-solving hub for global governance (Gabuev, 2023). Such a role expands both hard influence and soft legitimacy (Gabuev, 2023).

Information is Power. Establishing a global India Media Fund could amplify Indian narratives and counter disinformation campaigns (Kortunov, 2023). Quick rebuttal mechanisms would enhance India's ability to manage crises of perception (Mujumdar, 2023). Expanding scholarly linkages across universities fosters

long-term knowledge diplomacy (Kortunov, 2023). By 2030, India could anchor a media and academic ecosystem trusted across the Global South (Mujumdar, 2023). Cultural industries such as film and music add depth to this influence (Kortunov, 2023). Together, media, academia, and culture build a sustained narrative capacity. This approach ensures India sets norms for digital trust and information integrity (Kortunov, 2023).

Sanctions Readiness. Preparing playbooks for sanction scenarios is critical to insulating the Indian economy (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). Reserves of critical imports and financial buffers strengthen resilience (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). Regular readiness drills build institutional muscle to respond under pressure (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). By 2030, India could offer sanctions resilience frameworks as a service to partners (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). Such frameworks might include alternative payment systems and logistics insurance (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). This shifts India from being a vulnerable state to a provider of stability (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). Offering sanctions-readiness as a partnership tool enhances India's value to the Global South (Connolly & Hanson, 2022). It also reduces exposure to economic coercion from major powers (Connolly & Hanson, 2022).

Maritime Security. Expanding surveillance and logistics in the Indian Ocean secures India's vital sea lanes (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Satellite, drone, and undersea assets together could form an "Indian Ocean Watch" by 2035 (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Logistics hubs across Mauritius, Andamans, and Oman enhance rapid deployment capabilities (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Maritime strength is not only about deterrence but also about humanitarian response (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Swift disaster relief enhances India's soft power and credibility as a security provider (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Partnerships with regional navies ensure a layered security architecture (Pant & Joshi, 2022). Maritime security thus integrates

hard power with humanitarian leadership (Pant & Joshi, 2022). This dual capacity strengthens India's influence across the Indo-Pacific (Pant & Joshi, 2022).

Food & Fertiliser Security. Stockpiling food and fertiliser reserves builds immediate resilience against global shocks (Vajirao Institute, 2025[249]). Long-term contracts with key suppliers insulate India from supply volatility (Grant Thornton India, 2024[250]). Building logistics systems for rapid rerouting ensures continuity during crises (Grant Thornton India, 2024). Climate change will make such resilience essential as global disruptions intensify (FAO, 2011[251]). By 2035, India could anchor climate-resilient food corridors across Asia and Africa (World Bank, 2021[252]). Fertiliser partnerships would secure inputs critical to agricultural productivity (Vajirao Institute, 2025). Smart logistics leveraging digital technologies make these systems efficient and adaptable (Grant Thornton India, 2024). Food and fertiliser security thus transforms India from a vulnerable importer to a regional stabiliser (AGRA, 2023[253]).

Conclusion

Russia's predicament serves as a clear warning: great powers that lack resilience and diversity are susceptible to sudden isolation (Connolly & Hanson, 2022; Kortunov, 2023). India has to make difficult decisions; it must embed resilience into every aspect of its national strategy. By hedging risks, strengthening its economic and technological foundations, and harmonising its role as a connector, India can become a genuinely indispensable power, valued everywhere, reliant on no one (Pant & Joshi, 2022; Stuenkel, 2022).

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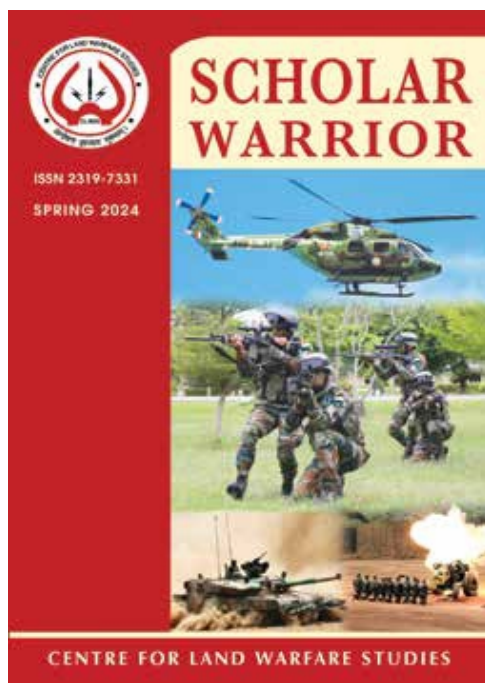
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As we understand the evolution of Russia, we can appreciate that the conflict with Ukraine was imminent. Russia had no other option but to challenge the Western influence using its hybrid playbook and interference into the governance infrastructure. Russia's attempt to use demography as a weapon, protecting "Russians abroad", has backfired enormously, leaving behind a Ukraine that is more Ukrainian, more European, and more united against Russia than ever before. Ukraine appears to be a classic case of curse due to Geography. It is caught between the deep sea and the Devil. It cannot join NATO as also has to continuously guard against territorial annexation and hegemonic ambitions of Russia. For India, the Russian experience serves not just as a warning but as practical lessons on maintaining resilience and independence during turbulent times.

• • •

Brigadier Navneet Bakshi, commissioned into the MARATHA Light Infantry, has served for over 30 years. An Infantry officer with extensive operational experience, he has spent more than two decades in Counter-Terrorist operations in Jammu & Kashmir and the North East. He has commanded and served in critical appointments along both the Northern and Western borders.

A graduate of the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) and the Higher Defence Management Course (HDMC), he has been an instructor at the SC Wing and is a subject matter expert in capital procurement and defence budgeting. The Officer is presently serving as a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS).

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