



Tüfekçi, Özgür, “The Ukrainian War: A Realist Perspective on Geopolitical Implications and International Response”, *Karadeniz Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 11/23, ss.85-101.
DOI: 10.31765/karen.1647436

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Keywords: Ukrainian War, Russia, NATO, European Union, Realism

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ukrayna Savaşı, Rusya, NATO, Avrupa Birliği, Realizm

THE UKRAINIAN WAR: A REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE*

Özgür TÜFEKÇİ**

Abstract: Russia started the Ukrainian War through its occupation of Crimea in 2014, which subsequently evolved into a total invasion in February 2022 to become one of the most epic geopolitical conflicts of the 21st century. This paper employs the theory of Realism to examine the primary factors, international reactions, and geopolitical effects of this war. Realism serves as a robust theoretical framework for studying the movements of Russia alongside Ukraine, NATO, and the European Union, as it emphasises the importance of state autonomy, military capability, and security concerns. The war's examination reveals Russia's territorial expansion goals, which altered the post-Cold War political system by evoking Western military reactions and endangering European security structures. Throughout this assessment, the effects on European security are analysed together with NATO's strategic orientation and the modifications occurring in global alliances. This paper examines realist global governance challenges by analysing international military aid, diplomatic measures, and economic sanctions. In addition, the paper aims to identify the future trajectory of this war and its impact on international relations, drawing on realist principles of modern global power politics.

UKRAYNA SAVAŞI: ULUSLARARASI REAKSİYON VE JEOPOLİTİK YANSIMALAR ÜZERİNE REALİST BİR BAKIŞ AÇISI

Öz: Rusya, Ukrayna Savaşı'nı 2014'te Kırım'ı işgal ederek başlattı ve bu daha sonra Şubat 2022'de tam bir işgale dönüşerek 21. yüzyılın en önemli jeopolitik çatışmalarından biri haline geldi. Bu makale, bu savaşın temel faktörlerini, uluslararası reaksiyonları ve jeopolitik yansımalarını araştırmak için Realist teoriyi kullanmaktadır. Realizm, devlet otonomisi, askeri kapasitesi ve güvenlik endişeleri konusunda belirleyici olduğu için Rusya'nın Ukrayna, NATO ve Avrupa Birliği ile birlikte politikalarını incelemek için güçlü bir teorik çerçeve görevi görmektedir. Mevcut savaşın incelenmesi, Batının askeri reaksiyon göstermesine sebep olarak ve Avrupa güvenlik yapısını tehlikeye atarak Soğuk Savaş sonrası dünya düzenini değiştiren Rusya'nın topraklarını genişletme hedefini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu değerlendirme boyunca, Avrupa güvenliği üzerindeki etkiler NATO'nun stratejik yönelimi ve küresel ittifaklarda meydana gelen değişikliklerle birlikte analiz edilmektedir. Bu makale, uluslararası askeri yardım, diplomatik önlemler ve ekonomik yaptırımları analiz

Geliş Tarihi / Received Date: 26.02.2025

Kabul Tarihi / Accepted Date: 06.04.2025

ederek realist küresel yönetişimin zorluklarını incelemektedir. Ayrıca, makale, realizmin prensiplerini kullanarak bu savaşın nasıl evrileceğini ve

uluslararası ilişkiler üzerindeki etkilerini analiz etmektedir.

Introduction

The Ukrainian War, which people commonly name the Russo-Ukrainian War, started with Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 before turning into Russia's total invasion in February 2022.¹ The core disputed issue revolves around Ukraine's territorial sovereignty and its political preferences regarding its relations with the West. At the same time, Russia, NATO, and the EU play a significant role in shaping broader geopolitical dynamics.

The original causes of the conflict stem from multiple political discrepancies that divide Ukraine internally. The Euromaidan movement emerged as widespread demonstrations after the Ukrainian government relinquished its EU integration deal in 2013 while pursuing stronger ties with Russia. The Ukrainian protests evolved into a movement that forced the removal of President Viktor Yanukovich early in 2014, as the people sought pro-Western policies, democratic reforms, and anti-corruption measures. The political change received intense backlash from Russia, as it posed a resistance to Russian control in the region.² Russia's immediate annexation of Crimea occurred after Ukraine turned towards the West in March 2014, while international authorities viewed this action as a violation of international law. After Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, the east of Ukraine experienced war when Russian-backed separatists proclaimed independence from Ukraine. The conflict in the Donbas area caused extensive casualty rates while forcing mass population movements, which made the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine even more severe. Russian military support for eastern Ukraine grew progressively more profound as irregular groups faced off against Ukrainian forces, and soldiers from Russia improved weaponry and combat training and took part in actual fighting. Multiple peace agreements, starting with the Minsk II agreement in 2015, have not been able to halt the low-level conflict, which has continued through sporadic small-scale combat outbreaks.³

Russia launched a major invasion against Ukraine in February of 2022 to topple its government, along with its aim to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty and halt NATO-Ukraine cooperation. Russian military forces conducted advances toward the major cities within Ukraine, starting from Kyiv. The Ukrainian armed forces received significant Western support to defend their country, successfully forcing Russian troops to pull out from areas they had first seized. The attack on Ukraine generated universal disapproval from the international community against Russia as NATO and EU members and other Western partners offered military backing combined with economic penalties and diplomatic support to Ukraine.⁴

Russia and the West engage in an enduring war through Ukraine's territorial defence, which has become central to a political power struggle. The potential NATO membership of Ukraine is the main contentious issue. Russia views NATO's movements toward eastern countries as an immediate menace to its control. In contrast, Europe and the United States view Ukrainian membership in NATO and EU structures as crucial to curb Russian border encroachment.⁵ The war serves as a strategic centre through which Russia and Western countries exhibit their geopolitical rivalry. The war continues in 2025 because the frontlines constantly shift amid international diplomatic efforts to establish a truce. The international community closely monitors the war because it has a significant impact on worldwide security, economic stability,

¹ Thachuk & Tufekci, 2024.

² Shevsky, 2022.

³ Allan, 2022.

⁴ Corten & Koutroulis, 2023.

⁵ Dag, 2022.

and international order. The war intensifies global energy emergencies while breaking international supply systems. It makes nuclear powers more hostile, increasing the possibility of escalated conflict extending throughout more expansive areas or the global tapestry.⁶

The primary purpose of this research is to examine the Ukrainian War using the theoretical framework of realism. This article employs realist principles to analyse both the geographical impact of the war and the strategic agendas of the pursuing states, alongside international reactions that affect the conflict's progression. The Ukrainian War, according to realist analysis, demonstrates the status of an essential geopolitical contest where Russia fights to retain control of the region while preventing Ukraine from joining NATO and the EU. This war represents a crucial turning point in global power politics, reshaping European defence security and positioning NATO while also altering the structure of the international system. The research analyses the important motives and actions of participants to demonstrate how power struggles remain essential in international relations. This research employs realism as its primary theoretical framework to assess the driving factors and operational actions of the primary conflict participants in Ukraine. National interest forms the core of realism-based international relations theory, as states primarily focus on acquiring power and security. Realism defines the international environment as a state of anarchy, which compels states to protect themselves by relying on their resources to achieve survival goals. The theory emphasises national military strength, acquiring security guarantees, and maintaining equal power capabilities among states to determine state actions.

1. Theoretical Framework: Realism in International Relations

Realism is one of the longest-lasting and most prominent theories within international relations (IR) because it emphasises power, security, and state interests as fundamental elements for shaping global interactions. Realists view international systems as anarchic structures because global power does not exist that controls state behaviour or enforces any laws. When states operate independently in such an anarchic setting, they must protect themselves, resulting in multiple conflicts while states compete for power and resources. According to realists, states are the primary actors in international relations, as their international decisions primarily focus on achieving national priorities, including the preservation of power and security needs.⁷ The framework demonstrates value in analysing the Ukrainian War because it examines Russia's tactical planning and strategic objectives in conjunction with Ukraine and Western nations.

The essential doctrine of realism is based on its understanding of the international system as an anarchic system. Under anarchic conditions, states must provide their own means of safety and develop independent strategies, as no authoritative body exists to enforce rules. In anarchy, nations develop a power-based approach to protect their standing and strategic goals since no centralised authority exists to regulate international relations. Security in this environment requires states to narrow down their competitors while defending their territory, since powerful nations could endanger state sovereignty and diplomatic influence. States prioritised power balancing through military alliances and buildups to protect against potential threats without governance.⁸ Russia pursues security alongside power, driven by its concerns regarding NATO development and the strategic significance of Ukraine in this context.

According to realists, states form the fundamental actors within the international system because they represent the most critical and self-governing entities. States occupy a primary position in forming international relations, even though other authoritative organisations, such as international bodies and non-governmental entities, have supplementary roles. Realism defines international dynamics as state-based power contests aimed at acquiring power

⁶ Yılmaz, Kısacık, & Yorulmaz, 2024.

⁷ Finnemore, 1996.

⁸ Buzan, 2008.

and resources to achieve dominance.⁹ The essential duty of each state remains survival, which it sustains by maximising its power to dominate other nations. Russia employs Ukraine as a regional control measure while countering NATO expansion to establish its dominant strategic influence in Ukrainian territory. According to Realism, national security is at the centre stage. Realist theory prioritises state survival above all else, as national security necessitates that everything, from politics to economics, be subordinated for survival.¹⁰ States often initiate military actions for border defence and power preservation when they detect security threats from their neighbours. Moscow sees NATO membership possibilities for Ukraine as an existential-threatening issue that motivates its intervention during the Ukrainian War, according to realist theory perspectives.

A vital aspect of realism is its analysis of power relationships, as these elements define the key forces that control international relations. According to Realists, states continually seek power expansion as a fundamental method to protect their security, achieving this objective through the use of military forces, economic tools, and diplomatic instruments. Power balance serves states as a vital competitive tool, preventing any nation from achieving global supremacy.¹¹ States tend to partner with others to oppose new military powers emerging in their region and maintain balance when one state acquires excessive power. Eastern European entities engaged in a power struggle during the Ukrainian War since Russia fought to maintain Ukrainian dominance and block Western advancement, yet NATO, along with the EU, tried to reduce Russian power through Ukrainian backing and Russian opposition. The belief system of realist theory heavily refers to an understanding of human nature that demonstrates inherent self-interest-edness and power-seeking behaviours. According to Morgenthau, political actions derive from “interest defined in terms of power”, which policymakers display when international states operate on global stages.¹² The Russian annexation of Crimea, alongside its Ukrainian military operation, demonstrates its willingness to rebuild power while maintaining prestige, which started after the Soviet Union’s demise.¹³

The realist framework offers an understanding of the causes of the Ukrainian war and the strategic choices made by participating nations. From the realist standpoint, Russia continues to act in Ukraine because it intends to maintain its regional leader status, along with blocking NATO expansion and demonstrating strength within former Soviet states. Ukraine shifted towards the West because it needed security against Russian attacks, alongside the benefit of joining strong North American and European states to counter Russian dominance. The Western powers, comprising the United States, NATO, and the European Union, view the war as a means to prevent European destabilisation and halt Russia’s expansion of its borders, which would jeopardise the foundations of the liberal international order. Through realist analysis, we can understand that the Ukrainian War exists as a geopolitical bloc in which states compete to gain power, ensure their safety, and extend their influence over others. Realism reveals fundamental understandings about state conduct in chaotic systems by exploring Russia, Ukraine, and Western interests, frequently resulting in warfare. The ongoing Eastern European conflict reaffirms that realist principles remain vital for explaining state conduct, as they primarily address areas of state territorial claims, security, and power balance issues.

2. Historical Context of the Ukrainian War

The roots of the Ukrainian War lie deep within Ukraine’s complex history, its relationship with Russia, and the broader geopolitical context of Eastern Europe. At the geographical junction where Europe and Russia meet, Ukraine has maintained an unstable position in international

⁹ Schmidt, 2007.

¹⁰ Jessop, 2007.

¹¹ Legro & Moravcsik, 2014.

¹² Morgenthau, 1948.

¹³ Dag, 2022.

politics because it has occupied this contested border for hundreds of years. Examining the origins of the war necessitates a comprehensive study of the long-standing Russian-Ukrainian-Western relationships and the key events that have shaped the conflict's conditions since 2014.

The historic geopolitical significance of Ukraine began when it served as a region under Russian imperial rule before becoming part of the Soviet Union. Throughout the centuries, most areas that now comprise Ukraine have been part of the Russian Empire, after which several cultural bonds have developed.¹⁴ Ukraine declared independence following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, yet Russia-Ukraine relations persisted as a fundamental cause of conflict. The Ukrainian population consists of two distinct groups because some point to Russia as their natural association in the eastern and southern regions. However, others in western and central areas follow European and Western paths for their national destiny. The territorial splits within Ukraine were significant factors that drove many internal conflicts throughout the war. Throughout the early 1990s, Ukrainian authorities faced continuous challenges in achieving state stability and sovereignty. The nation encountered numerous obstacles to political and economic reform due to institutional weakness, political factionalism, and pervasive governmental corruption. The diplomatic ties between Ukraine and Russia have become strained due to Russia's multiple control demands, including the control of energy resources and contested territorial boundaries, as well as its consistent pursuit of influencing neighbouring nations.¹⁵

The direct cause of the Ukrainian war was made possible by the Euromaidan demonstrations, which took place between December 2013 and February 2014. The protests were sparked when the Ukrainian government rejected the European Union association agreement and chose to pursue closer relationships with Russia. During the Euromaidan movement, Ukrainian society unified to fight for EU membership, anti-corruption measures, and democratic reforms.¹⁶ Ukraine's foreign policy underwent significant changes by severing its ties with Russia to establish closer connections with Western nations. The movement built momentum, eventually leading to violent protests between forces and paving the way for President Viktor Yanukovich's removal from power in February 2014. The political turmoil positioned Ukraine between uncertainty as the new government worked to shift its direction toward the European Union while distancing itself from Moscow's control.

The political transformation in Ukraine prompted Russian leaders to view this development as a direct challenge to their regional dominance. The Russian political administration under President Vladimir Putin saw Western expansion plans for Ukraine, especially related to NATO membership programs, as dangerous to its strategic objectives. Russia responded with immediate and forceful actions and took control of Crimea in March 2014 through annexation, while this Ukrainian region held both Russian-speaking citizens and the important military base at Sevastopol. The annexation of Crimea without Ukrainian government endorsement proved both damaging to Ukraine's national unity and blatantly unlawful under international principles. The Russian government made this strategic decision to incorporate Crimea because it sought Black Sea access while establishing regional dominance and seeking to block Ukraine from becoming a NATO member.¹⁷

After Russia annexed Crimea, tensions rose sharply in eastern Ukraine because Donetsk and Luhansk separatists established independence and then started battling Ukrainian government forces. The separatist groups obtained Russia's military assistance, together with basic logistical capabilities, which intensified the ongoing conflict. The confrontation brought lethal violence and forced numerous people to become homeless while creating immense humanitarian

¹⁴ Von Hagen, 2014.

¹⁵ D'Anieri, 1999.

¹⁶ Shevsky, 2022.

¹⁷ Biersack & O'lear, 2014.

problems within the affected regions. Representatives from the global community reacted to Russia's actions through diplomatic dissent supported by economic restrictions and military backing toward Ukraine.¹⁸ Western countries, headed by the United States and the EU, implemented economic restrictions targeting Russia because they wanted Moscow to stop backing separatists while returning Crimea to Ukrainian control. The international economic barriers failed to influence Russia's actions because they did not change the country's ongoing military involvement in Ukraine's war. Through both the Minsk I and Minsk II agreements that France and Germany mediated, there were failed attempts to create lasting peace in the conflict because both sides continued to violate their commitments.¹⁹

Russia activated its total armed forces to attack Ukraine in February 2022 to push the conflict to an escalated level. Russia presented the military action as a distinctive combat operation that guaranteed the Russian-speaking inhabitants of Ukraine and stopped Ukraine from joining NATO. Russia launched military strikes on Kyiv, together with Kharkiv and Mariupol, and attempted to topple the Ukrainian government. Through substantial Western financial backing and military assistance, Ukraine successfully resisted the swift downfall that Russian forces had planned. The Russian invasion has led to many horrible casualties, forced millions to leave their homes, and caused significant financial instability that has affected the entire world.²⁰ The Ukrainian War represents something beyond local proportions, containing profound geopolitical consequences. The fighting demonstrates a continuous struggle between Russia and the Western world to control Eastern Europe and its neighbouring post-Soviet states. The worldwide community observes this intense conflict as the global system's power dynamics, territorial disputes, and national sovereignty take centre stage during this war.

3. Realist Analysis of the Ukrainian War

The Ukrainian War can be primarily understood as a geopolitical battle between nations seeking control, protection, and state interest. The theory of realism provides a practical analytical framework for explaining the fundamental drivers of the principal participants involved in this war, including anarchy, security challenges, and power stability. The realist principles of power-seeking and the defence of strategic interests, together with the need for state survival, guide the behaviour of the key actors involved in the Russian aggression against Ukraine, as Ukraine aligns with Western partners for security purposes.

According to realism, the primary objective remains the security and defence of national sovereignty.²¹ The ongoing conflict for Russia centres on securing regional domination while keeping Western expansion led by NATO away from its established zone of power. Russia faced rising threats to its strategic position in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as NATO and the European Union expanded their boundaries into Soviet territories. The geographical position and historical connections between Ukraine and Russia made the country a principal conflict zone. From a realist perspective, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and waged war on Ukraine in 2022 primarily to defend its national security borders, along with reestablishing control of vital regions. Russia's aggressive behaviour is caused mainly by its fear of NATO expansion, which explicitly targets Ukraine's participation. For Russia, the expansion of NATO represents not only a political development but, more specifically, it poses an immediate strategic and military threat to Russia's security, as it reduces Russia's regional influence and power.

¹⁸ Singh, 2023.

¹⁹ Åtland, 2020.

²⁰ Thachuk & Tufekci, 2024.

²¹ Walt, 2010.

Realism emphasises the preservation of national sovereignty and territorial integrity as core aspects of the ongoing Ukrainian War.²² The Ukrainian response to Russian provocations arises from national security requirements and a determination to keep its borders whole despite foreign aggression. Ukraine fights for its survival as an independent nation, beyond merely defending physical borders, since the war also challenges its sovereign identity. Given Ukraine's push to join NATO, along with the European Union, realist theory suggests that the nation seeks to counter Russian power along strategic Western lines. For Ukraine, NATO membership is essential to counter Russian aggression, as it promises security and protection from potential territorial losses while maintaining national autonomy. Realist theory identifies the balance of power as a fundamental concept that emerges when analysing the Ukraine war. The Ukraine war is an ongoing battle to determine power dominance across Europe and worldwide. For decades, NATO has acted as a counterforce to Russia, maintaining the political balance in the region. NATO deeply needs to support Ukraine since Ukrainian security matters, but also because the alliance must protect its status as a trusted defensive organisation. The future inclusion of Ukraine into NATO would strengthen Western power positions in Europe to such an extent that it would create a difficult challenge against Russian influence.

The desire for power forms the core of how states operate according to realism, and Russian conduct shows precisely this concept. Through the leadership of Vladimir Putin, Russia has developed a foreign policy that aims to reestablish its great power prominence and dominance over the former Soviet territories. Russia views Ukraine as a crucial battleground for achieving global dominance in power politics. After Crimea's invasion and military actions in Ukraine, Russia maintains regional dominance to stop Ukraine from joining the Western-aligned international community. The Russian diplomatic objectives display an effort to establish and preserve its power position while acting as the dominant force across Eurasia. According to realism, the global reaction to this war is primarily driven by power dynamics and security considerations.²³ The United States, along with NATO and the European Union, delivered critical military funding, economic benefits, and diplomatic backing to Ukraine to balance Russia and maintain European peace. The West supports Ukraine through military aid while implementing financial sanctions on Russia because these measures enable NATO defence security and Ukrainian state sovereignty preservation.²⁴ The West takes actions supported by realism because nations pursue their interests through military backing, economic pressure, and alliance-making. The support of Ukraine by Western nations provides military assistance to counter Russian aggression and communicates to Moscow the boundaries of its territorial ambitions and the requirements of international law.

The conflict in Ukraine represents a battle for dominance in power, influence, and security protection alongside control of regional influence between Russia and Western nations, who have been continually in dispute over Ukraine. According to realist thought, states rely on power dynamics and competitive international relations patterns to determine their external actions.²⁵ The realist perspective explains Russia's invasion of Ukraine as well as Ukraine's joining Western alliances and global reactions using the foundation of states safeguarding their security interests through competitive activities within the unregulated international system. This analysis reveals how power politics drives the Ukrainian conflict and demonstrates the reason why diplomatic attempts alongside international criticism fail to stop the ongoing hostilities, because Russia and Ukraine strive to maintain their current territorial positions.

²² Biersteker, 2013.

²³ Nissen & Dreyer, 2024.

²⁴ Allison, 2022.

²⁵ Rosenberg, 2024.

4. Geopolitical Implications of the Ukrainian War

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine produces extensive geopolitical consequences which extend beyond Ukraine and Russia's borders. The worsening conflict has transformed European politics and modified geopolitical systems. The conflict influences the European security framework, NATO military deployments, and power realignment. The Ukrainian War highlights significant power competition tensions while revealing weaknesses within the international order. Geopolitical rivalry shapes state conduct and upcoming global political developments through the actions of essential actors in this conflict between the United States, NATO, the European Union and Russia. The war has proven to be an enormous geopolitical force, severely affecting European safety measures. European security has undergone significant changes due to the conflict, which necessitates both NATO's organisational transformations and forecasts for its forthcoming military strategy. The war revived NATO after World War II because it became crucial for European countries to face potential threats from Russian aggression as they worked to protect their borders. Many Eastern European countries have re-discovered the importance of NATO for their defence through the ongoing Ukrainian war, as the conflict highlights the necessity of multilateral security support. The eastern member states of NATO, including Poland and the Baltic countries, led active demands for enhanced military measures and stronger eastern border defences from NATO.²⁶

The war has drawn attention to NATO's capacity to handle the multiple threats and security instabilities throughout Eastern Europe. Russia views NATO advances beyond the Soviet former territories and Eastern European states as a threatening move, thus becoming an essential cause of the ongoing conflict. Ukraine's desire to enter NATO continues to receive Western backing, but Russia interprets this development as a threat to its historic foreign policy domain. NATO faces challenging decisions to assist Ukraine while protecting European security from new outbreaks without further escalation. The war has significantly impacted the European Union's strategic direction and capacity to maintain unity, compelling the EU to develop diplomatic and economic responses. EU member states are working together to lead the international effort to impose sanctions on Russia, focusing on the vital sectors of energy, finance, and defence. European economic stability faces significant challenges following the economic sanctions against Russia, as Europe had previously relied heavily on Russian energy supplies.²⁷ The war has prompted the EU to reassess its international presence as members continue to debate how the bloc should respond uniformly to external crises. The Ukraine crisis has provoked EU member states to debate stronger integration of their defence forces to achieve strategic independence and minimise their reliance on foreign actors, especially the United States.

The conflict intensified the confrontation between Russia and the West, escalating into a global struggle over ideas and political power. Russia uses its war to reconstruct its authority among the rest of the countries while fighting against the political environment it considers unfavourable following the end of the Cold War era. The Russian military invasion of Ukraine aims to bring back its control over Eastern Europe while confirming its dominance throughout the region. Russia's aggressive conduct has driven Western powers to isolate Russia in every fiscal aspect, political matters, and foreign relations. Economic and diplomatic cut-offs from Western powers, combined with international sanctions, created further isolation for Russia, prompting it to seek support from various actors.²⁸

The Ukrainian War led Russia and China to restructure their bilateral relations, which significantly altered the global power composition. The escalation of Russian isolation throughout the West is pushing Moscow toward a strategic partnership with China, which would provide

²⁶ Palavenis, 2025.

²⁷ Knodt, Ringel & Bruch, 2024.

²⁸ Bruin, Voetelink, & Klomp, 2024.

financial backing and political support. The partnership demonstrates the advancement of Russian-Chinese ties across energy platforms, commercial domains, and defence sectors, thereby shaping international power balances. Changing circumstances have prompted China to forge stronger ties with Russia, particularly as Moscow opposes the United States' global influence.²⁹ The complex alliance between Russia and China is a significant power transition, demonstrating that China and Russia are forming counterbalancing blocks against Western domination. The geopolitical effects of war lead to likely realignments among global political alliances and changes in international power dynamics. During the ongoing war, new international groupings are forming as Türkiye, India, and other nations from the Global South approach their decisions cautiously. The international community shares condemnation toward Russia, but many countries differ in their views regarding the war and how Western nations handle it.³⁰ Many countries in the Global South refuse to take a stance while urging diplomatic discussions and peaceful conflict resolution. The ongoing war reveals extreme fractures within global diplomatic structures as states form strategic alliances based on varied strategic policy goals that will likely redefine the international order.

The Ukrainian War resulted in extensive geopolitical effects that extended throughout Europe and impacted global power dynamics. It transformed European military security while revitalising NATO membership and enhancing regional confrontation between Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted weaknesses in global economic and energy frameworks, compelling countries to reassess their diplomatic relationships and adjust their strategic approaches.³¹ The significant geopolitical implications of this ongoing war will emerge based on how various key actors address existing challenges as the conflict persists.

5. International Responses to the Ukrainian War

Different international actors offer various responses to the Ukrainian War, driven by diverse strategic goals that align with their political values and operational objectives. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 received prompt worldwide criticism, particularly from Western nations, even though different political alliances exhibited varying reactions. The ongoing conflict has elicited various responses, including military aid, economic sanctions, and diplomatic and humanitarian measures, all aimed at achieving specific political objectives and meeting strategic requirements. Global organisations face difficulties in handling conflicts while maintaining stability due to the growing multipolarity of this period. The international support for Ukraine stands out for its dual military aid and financial backing from Western nations, particularly the United States, the European Union and NATO allies. European nations understood that Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought an immediate danger to Ukraine's existence in addition to threatening European regional security. The United States and its NATO allies have provided substantial military aid to Ukraine, including advanced weaponry, intelligence cooperation, and military training.³² The provided military supplies have proven indispensable to Ukraine, as they strengthen its military capabilities to counter Russian aggression. Major financial support from Western countries consists of economic aid through loans and grants, military-dedicated assistance to Ukraine's government operations, and economic stabilisation throughout the war.

The West has enacted severe economic sanctions to damage Russia's economic footing while restraining its fighting force. The economic restrictions focus on Russia's energy industry, financial sector, and military and technological systems to cut Russia off from world markets

²⁹ Ikenberry, 2024.

³⁰ Diesen, 2024.

³¹ Panda, 2024.

³² Deni & Aronsson, 2024.

and limit its war capabilities. The economic measures adopted cut Russia off from global markets while blocking important technological equipment and impounding the financial resources of prominent Russian figures and organisations. Western powers cut off Russia's path to global finance as part of their economic measures by banning it from using SWIFT payment services. Russian businesses suffered significant damage due to economic sanctions, but these measures triggered widespread economic consequences, affecting energy system prices and material delivery networks. The political and economic structure of the European Union takes an active role in handling the ongoing regional conflict. With the EU, NATO supports Ukraine by implementing sanctions, applying diplomatic pressure, and providing humanitarian relief. The Russian invasion has compelled EU authorities to reassess their energy strategy, as they had previously relied heavily on Russian energy resources.³³ The EU is working in two directions to respond to the situation by pursuing various energy supply alternatives, including renewable energy expansion and new fossil fuel providers that are not under Russia's influence. Through its humanitarian aid initiative, the EU supports millions of displaced persons by providing assistance both domestically within Ukraine and across Europe.³⁴

Due to intricate geopolitical factors that affected the circumstances, the United Nations and other international organisations exhibited limited effectiveness in responding to the war. Russia's permanent member position on the Security Council prevents the UN from taking vital, decisive actions because the body allows Russia to veto any proposed decision. The United Nations General Assembly frequently debates Russia's military operations; however, the Security Council cannot authorise binding decisions or military action despite repeated calls for peace. The problem arises from the weaknesses of the UN system, as major powers that participate in conflicts can veto outside interventions.³⁵

China made distinctive moves concerning the war because it shared important strategic priorities with Russia and deepened its political bonds with both nations. China manifested concern about the human toll of the conflict, yet purposely avoided publicly criticising Russian military campaigns. The Chinese stance aims to strengthen diplomatic ties with Russia because this alliance has gained strategic importance for China's global competition with the United States and Western powers. China leverages its strategic advantages through the war by securing Russian energy resources, thereby enhancing its global influence and power. China takes a calculated approach to the situation, aiming to avoid extensive involvement in the conflict and steer clear of angering Western economic partners and worldwide public opinion. And also, China demonstrates its support for Russia through the expansion of its trade agreements and its refusal to comply with Western sanctions while balancing these developments against international reactions.³⁶

The Global South countries have adopted complex diplomatic responses to the war, advocating for peaceful negotiation while remaining neutral between the Russian and Western blocs. Several nations throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America have expressed concerns about the war's impact on their economies, citing food shortages and financial disruptions resulting from the ongoing military operations. The nations exhibit prudence when supporting both sides, condemning Western military actions while also requesting conflict resolution. Many Global South nations maintain neutrality in the Ukraine conflict to avoid entanglement in Russian-Western disputes that do not concern them and preserve friendly ties with both sides.³⁷ The war demonstrates that international communities are increasingly divided, as every nation chooses strategic objectives and political alliances based on its economic and geographic

³³ Panda, 2024.

³⁴ Saracino, 2024.

³⁵ Morse & Coggins, 2024.

³⁶ Düben, 2024.

³⁷ Nadkarni et al., 2024.

priorities. Russia has taken international pressure as an opportunity to distance itself from the international society and strive towards achieving its regional political objectives. Russia has fought against the sanctions by implementing both domestic economic changes and enhancing diplomatic ties with China and India while waging military operations in Ukraine. Russia utilises its energy resources for political purposes by reducing its natural gas exports to European nations, aiming to lower their military support for the war and influence their stance on the conflict. The Russian leadership illuminates the Ukrainian conflict as a fight for national sovereignty, which opposes Western imperialistic aggression, yet simultaneously uses euphemisms aimed at igniting nationalistic feelings.

The differing strategic interests of worldwide actors have shaped the multiple expressions of international reaction toward the Ukrainian War. The Western states provide Ukraine with comprehensive military aid alongside financial support. Still, Russia counters this assistance by increasing its military presence and building strategic partnerships with nations outside the Western sphere. The United Nations maintains limited involvement in this war, but China and multiple Global South nations approach the situation diplomatically and with restrained standpoints.

6. The Balance of Power and the Role of Deterrence

Power balance, along with deterrence, is an essential principle in international relations that guided the Ukrainian War. The power-based Realist theory helps researchers understand how force dynamics and security measures work in this war. The strategic ability of actors to stop others from taking defined actions by threatening counterattacks is a central factor in defining how major participants approach the Ukrainian war. Ukraine's military and diplomatic activities, alongside Russia and Western nations, depend heavily on power distribution and preventive defensive tactics.

According to the balance of power theory, maintaining peace requires an equal distribution of power, thereby avoiding situations where one actor controls others. Russia's attempted invasion of Ukraine sets off an essential power shift in the region that Western countries view as Moscow's deliberate attempt to spread its dominant position across the region.³⁸ In the Russian view, the war stems from its determination to regain full control of Ukraine as it battles to prevent NATO from spreading further because Russia considers NATO expansion to represent a threat to its survival. The Western powers aim to stop Russian efforts in Europe to shift regional power dynamics as they strive to prevent Ukraine from affiliating with NATO and EU institutions. International responses to Russian aggression by the United States and NATO have depended significantly on deterrence strategies. Different forms of deterrence exist, but the Ukrainian War has mainly seen such efforts displayed through financial sanctions and NATO military deployments in Eastern European regions. The primary objective of these preventive measures is to prevent Russia from escalating the conflict while demonstrating to Moscow that attempts to expand its territorial control will entail significant costs. Through financial sector and energy export restrictions, as well as military production restrictions, economic sanctions have been designed to reduce Russia's economic capabilities and investment possibilities for sustaining its military actions. The success rate of sanctions in deterring Russia remains disputed, as experts indicate that its domestic strength and alliances with China and other non-Atlantic countries reduce their effectiveness.³⁹

The military implementation of deterrence has been achieved by providing Ukraine with technologically advanced weapons. Support for anti-tank missiles, along with air defence systems

³⁸ Diesen, 2024.

³⁹ Tsouloufas & Rochat, 2023.

and other military equipment, to Ukrainian forces achieves an objective where Russian aggression would produce higher costs than any potential gains. The Western nations, including the United States and NATO members, offer Ukraine defensive capabilities through their support, but maintain cautious measures to stop their forces from fighting against the Russian military. By deploying forces and conducting military drills, NATO effectively enhances its military deterrence against Russian aggression, conveying that an attack on any NATO member state would prompt collective action.⁴⁰

Nuclear escalation threats maintain a critical position when it comes to deterrence operations in the Ukrainian War. Russia exercises its nuclear capabilities to prevent Western countries from intervening in its territories. The strategic defence of Russia bases nuclear deterrence as its primary operational element, and this concept emerged as Russia's dominant voice throughout the war period. Officials from Russia indicate that direct NATO intrusion brings destructive risks, which may include nuclear weapon deployment.⁴¹ The threat of possible nuclear escalation forces Western strategists to operate under limited options, thus creating a more dangerous strategic balance. The Western nations refrain from military intervention, but nuclear risks act as a barrier that forces NATO to use non-lethal resources and diplomatic methods as its primary instruments to handle Russian actions. The way countries deter activities relates to the complex management of Ukraine's support while avoiding confrontation with the Russian nuclear arsenal.

From the viewpoint of realism, deterrence primarily functions to establish stability by maintaining advantageous military positions.⁴² The war in Ukraine presents a significant challenge to regional power dynamics as Russia seeks to alter the post-Cold War system in Europe. While targeting additional Russian territorial gains, the West seeks to uphold European security structures that emphasise state borders and non-hostile state policies. The war demonstrates the central role of power in international affairs, as all involved parties attempt to enhance security while protecting themselves against external threats. The ultimate resolution of the Ukrainian War will have significant global implications for power dynamics across Europe and other continents. Russia's achievement within Ukraine could inspire other authoritarian states to escalate international disputes, leading to new regional conflicts that restructure global power politics. A Russian defeat or deterrence will strengthen global adherence to NATO and territorial sovereignty principles while fighting for the liberal international order. Regardless of any potential post-war scenario, the geopolitical future hinges heavily on deterrence methods and power balance.

The ongoing Ukrainian War demonstrates that the concepts of balance of power and deterrence remain central to modern international relations. Deterrence principles have persisted unaltered as states strived to ensure their security, protect their interests, and maintain global status since the Cold War methods were developed.⁴³ Russia, along with the West, is currently conducting an intense competition that will influence the destiny of Ukraine, Europe, and the entire global framework. Ukraine's war conclusions will determine its national future and the path of international politics worldwide for an extended period.

7. The Impact of the War on Global Geopolitics

The war in Ukraine has fundamentally transformed global geopolitics since it modified Europe's security profile and redefined international power balances and political and economic relations. This war reveals the weaknesses of post-Cold War international systems by undermining the fundamental, unquestioned principles of national borders, national independence,

⁴⁰ Mälksoo, 2024.

⁴¹ Frederick, Cozad & Stark, 2023.

⁴² Jervis, 1979.

⁴³ Ibid.

and peace through unity. The war's further development generates international influences that will transform global geopolitics in the upcoming decades. The Ukrainian War produces the security architecture of Europe as its most critical outcome. Due to the war, European nations are now embracing different defence and security priorities, as Russia has demonstrated its aggressive nature near European borders. The Russian invasion of Ukraine brought Eastern European fears of Russian territorial expansion back to life, while NATO now leads a fresh argument concerning its defensive posture and strategy requirements. The war has strengthened the defensive security perspective of NATO members throughout Eastern Europe. The international demand for NATO expansion and heightened military funding from Poland, the Baltic States and Central European nations has emerged because Ukraine's fate is directly linked to its national security.⁴⁴ NATO finds itself in a complex situation due to this war, and NATO continues to provide military resources to Ukraine but shows restraint in direct battlefield operations against Russian forces. NATO reduced its Ukraine assistance to protective support and defensive reinforcements near Ukraine's eastern border because of the heightened risk of regional warfare, including nuclear conflict.⁴⁵ Through detailed consideration, NATO demonstrates its awareness of the global challenge Western powers face to stop Russian aggression, yet avoid war escalations leading to total devastation.

The global world order exhibits deep divisions since Western powers clashed with countries from the Global South during the Ukrainian War. Most Asian and African states, as well as numerous Latin American territories, maintain a stance between full support for Russian actions and strict adherence to Western condemnation while enforcing economic restrictions on Moscow.⁴⁶ Multiple states have shown their concern about the Ukrainian immigrant issue, yet have avoided taking complete positions on Russia versus Ukraine. These states maintain a distance from this war, which does not affect them directly, as they prefer to avoid confrontation between global actors. The Global South is a third power between Russia and the West, demonstrating a significant change in contemporary global politics by creating a multi-polar international structure. The war exposed the waning power of the West, particularly the United States, as it lost its ability to determine international outcomes. The international community has observed substantial Western power in handling the Ukraine war through sanctions and military aid, yet these nations have struggled to achieve unified global support. China, India, and other countries have adopted a strategy regarding Russia that is unclear, with China specifically deepening its ties while Western relations deteriorate. Global politics now demonstrate an increasing trend towards multipolarity, as China, Russia, the United States, and other regional powers directly influence world dynamics.⁴⁷

The Russia-China partnership presents itself as one of the principal global realignments that emerged after the war began. Russia is experiencing growing isolation from Western countries, so it seeks economic support and diplomatic endorsement from China. The asymmetric partnership between Russia and China encompasses expanded energy exchanges, joint military cooperation, and strategic initiatives. By backing Russian interests, China effectively enabled Russia to mitigate the economic impact of Western economic restrictions. China deliberately abstains from explicit support for Russian military actions, focusing instead on establishing a geopolitical strategy to balance the United States.⁴⁸ The developing strategic bond between Russia and China has significantly impacted Asian and global power dynamics, as both powers share common goals to counter Western interests.

⁴⁴ Wolff, 2025.

⁴⁵ German, 2025.

⁴⁶ Alden, 2023.

⁴⁷ Dag & Tufekci, 2023.

⁴⁸ Dag & Tufekci, 2022.

The war had significant economic effects that extended beyond the limits of European territories. The financial sanctions targeting Russian territory have caused extensive changes in the global trade and energy markets. Europe now urgently needs new oil and natural gas supplies, given that Russia has restricted its energy exports to European nations. Global energy markets have undergone significant transformations, prompting the United States and other energy-developing nations to step in and replace the missing energy supplies. Global energy prices have increased as the disruption of energy supplies spreads across international markets, creating economic instability that primarily affects countries dependent on imported energy resources.⁴⁹ The war has increased global supply chain instability through its effects on agricultural product transport. The grain-exporting capacity of Ukraine and Russia has been severely impacted by the war, resulting in both nations struggling to ship wheat while global food shortages persist. Most African and Middle Eastern countries with a dependency on Ukrainian and Russian grain have experienced increased food costs and critical food shortages, which exacerbate their economic difficulties.⁵⁰ The wartime disruptions of supply chains illustrate the global economic interdependency and demonstrate that conflicts in distant regions impact worldwide business activities and development strategies.

The consequences of this war also influence the international order at a global geopolitical level. The Ukraine invasion has sparked widespread scepticism about post-World War II structures based on sovereign principles, territorial integrity, and peaceful dispute settlement methods. Russia's actions have sparked critical examinations of how effectively international institutions, such as the United Nations, can prevent aggression while maintaining peace. The inability of the UN Security Council to take decisive action against Russia's invasion reflects severe weaknesses of today's international system, which faces barriers in responding to major-power competition.⁵¹ The Ukrainian War has revolutionised global power politics by changing regional security structures, revealing evolving power distributions, and building a more decentralised worldwide system. The war has highlighted weaknesses within contemporary international organisations, revealing significant differences between Western and Global South countries, as well as Russia's emerging strategic alliances with China. Global trade, energy, and food security markets have faced severe economic disruptions due to this war. The duration of the war will determine how global geopolitics unfolds, influenced by the strategic moves made by key players and the resilience of international organisations alongside the global community's capacity to manage significant changes in worldwide arrangements.

Conclusion

A turning point emerged in international relations because of the Ukrainian War, which had significant consequences throughout Europe and the world. A realist perspective describes this war as nations fighting to safeguard power and defend their complete security within an unregulated global framework. Russia utilised its regional expansionary motives and NATO's eastward expansion as motivation to challenge the European relations established in the post-Cold War era. Ukraine continues to defend itself against Russia with Western support in a battle that demonstrates how states protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity as fundamental elements of strategic behaviour across the world.

The power balance in Europe underwent significant changes as a result of this war, which revived concerns about Russian territorial ambitions while making NATO and the European Union essential to achieving European security goals. The disagreement between major nations has limited the United Nations' ability to intervene as a mediator since the outbreak of

⁴⁹ Zhou et al., 2023.

⁵⁰ Zhang et al., 2023.

⁵¹ Morse & Coggins, 2024.

the war. The inability of international diplomacy to halt or limit the escalation of war demonstrates the growing cold relations among powerful nations and the challenges faced in maintaining global peace in a new global order. The ongoing war has revealed weaknesses in the established global structure and put the stability of this worldwide system to its limits since the end of the Cold War. The future of the war will rely on a few key factors, including Ukraine's resilience, the West's ability to remain united in its response, and whether Russia can achieve its goals without further escalating the conflict. The outcome of the war will likely have long-term implications for European security, NATO's role, and the global distribution of power. Suppose Russia's ambitions are limited and Ukraine keeps its sovereignty. In that case, it might result in a more substantial commitment to the post-Cold War international order, reinforcing the ideas of territorial integrity and self-determination. If Russia manages to alter the geopolitical landscape in its favour, it could set a risky precedent for future conflicts, making territorial changes seem normal and intensifying competition among great powers.

The Ukrainian War is crucial in global politics, demonstrating that power dynamics remain significant today. The war has altered the security situation in Europe and highlighted the more significant challenges the international community faces in navigating the complexities of a multipolar world. The war underscores the significant impact of state interests, power, and security on the direction of international relations, whether through military, diplomatic, or economic means. The ongoing war will significantly impact global geopolitics, shaping historical events for many years to come.

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