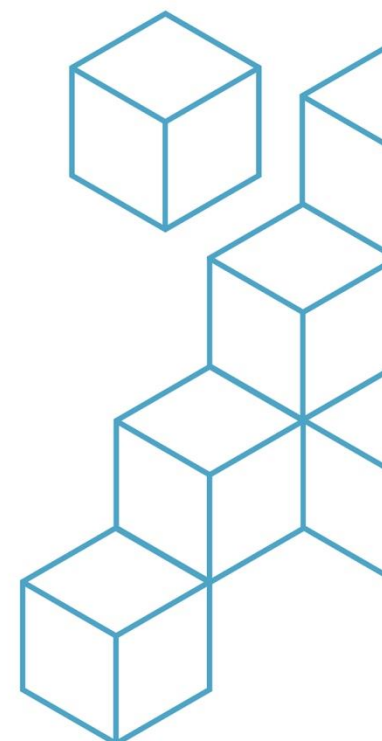


POLICY BRIEFS

The End of the Post-Cold War Era: Russia's Adventure in Ukraine Reshapes the Entire World Order



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Even if the Russian army does manage to occupy Ukraine, maintaining control of the country seems a distant prospect. [AFP]

On 24 February 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin finally made his plans clear. After a months-long build-up of troops on the Ukrainian border, he ordered a full-scale invasion of the neighbouring country. The invasion was immediately met with heavy Western sanctions on Russian institutions and figures, including Putin himself. Two days later, it was reported that Western forces had agreed to cut off Russia from SWIFT, the international bank messaging system.

Although tensions between Ukraine and Russia have been rising since the autumn, war was neither inevitable nor necessary. Russia's mobilisation was explicitly linked to its long-standing demand that NATO membership for Ukraine be taken off the table permanently. Although the Biden administration was aware of the Russian mobilisation as early as September 2021, it showed no willingness, before or after the situation reached the point of crisis, to negotiate on the substance of Russia's security demands, saying more than once that NATO membership is open to all European states and the decision rests with NATO, not the United States.

Although we do not know the specifics of Russian-US communications in the run-up to the invasion, there are reports that Putin proposed precautionary security arrangements that would establish military coordination and communication lines between Washington and Moscow in NATO states close to Russia. In other words, at least with regards to Ukraine, Russia was seeking modest guarantees, of the type previously given to President Gorbachev on the eve of German reunification in 1991.

The Western response, as conveyed to Putin by French President Emmanuel Macron, was that NATO membership for Ukraine was currently not under discussion, but the possibility of future membership could not be excluded. It is likely that Putin ordered preparations for an invasion early on in the hope that the mobilisation would compel the United States and other Western states to make concessions. The decision for war was likely not taken until he became certain that even minimal concessions were not forthcoming.

Indeed, the Biden administration's response seemed designed to encourage Moscow to invade, by repeatedly declaring that invasion was imminent, sending military assistance to Ukraine and threatening sanctions on Russia, even while making it clear that neither the United States nor NATO would send troops to Ukraine. We can only guess at the apparent reluctance to stop the slide to war, though it is no secret that the United States has looked warily at Russia's gradual integration into Europe over the past ten years and Europe's increasing dependence on Russian energy.

Putin could have similarly avoided war. Despite Russia's legitimate security demands, war was not the only way to achieve them, as evidenced by Moscow's success in reclaiming and strengthening its influence in its near abroad in recent years by other means. War was particularly avoidable given that NATO membership for Ukraine remains a distant possibility as long as the latter does not exercise sovereignty over all its territory.

Although the situation is in flux, some implications of the war for the international and Middle Eastern landscape are already apparent.

First, the war will certainly heighten hostility between Russia and its people and Ukraine and its people. Sanctions will also stymie Russian development, cut off Russia from global markets, and isolate it from Europe perhaps even more fully than in the Cold War. The invasion not only restores the wall between Russia and Europe, but will also serve to array Europe behind US leadership. If Putin wins a quick and clean victory, which is looking more doubtful by the day, he will no doubt move beyond Ukraine to set up a security belt of dependent or neutral states in Russia's European and Asian periphery. A decisive victory would also embolden Russia's Middle Eastern allies, particularly Iran and Turkey, in their regional aspirations.

If no negotiated solution is reached, the world is likely to coalesce around three spheres of influence: Russian, Chinese, and Euro-Atlantic. (Talk of a Russian-Chinese alliance is premature). Oil producing states in the Middle East like Qatar and Algeria will assume greater importance as Europe weans itself off Russian energy, and Turkey will regain its strategic weight in the Russian-Western balance of power.

For now, the invasion does not seem to be proceeding in line with Russian expectations and seems unlikely to result in a rapid victory. Even if the Russian army does manage to occupy Ukraine, maintaining control of the country seems a distant prospect. The announcement of low-level Russian-Ukrainian talks without preconditions suggests that Russia is looking to return to the diplomatic track as its military action flounders, but it is difficult to imagine the talks achieving anything without US participation. But how ever events pan out, so far, they have proved the military truism that no battle plan survives the first engagement.

****This is a summary of a policy brief originally written in Arabic, available [here](#).***