



ANALYSES

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Accelerating a Multi-Polar World



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21 April 2022



Russia is directly challenging the global power position of the US and its Western allies in Ukraine. [Reuters]

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict is likely to accelerate a long-standing transition to a multi-polar world, one that will be increasingly shaped by a competition over strategic connectivity.

Just over one month after Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy made a surprise appearance [\(1\)](#) at Qatar's Doha Forum on 26 March. Speaking virtually from the embattled capital of Kyiv, Zelenskiy addressed the summit's audience and called for the world's leading energy producers to do their part to help Europe diversify away from Russian energy supplies. "The responsible states, in particular the state of Qatar...can contribute to stabilizing the situation in Europe," Zelenskiy said, adding that such states need to "increase energy production to make Russia understand that no state should use energy as a weapon and to blackmail the world."

Zelenskiy's address at the Doha forum was a stark reflection of the extent to which the conflict in Ukraine has become globalised in nature. While the conventional military component of the conflict is taking place on Ukrainian territory, the economic reach and broader geopolitical impact of the war

has spread far beyond Ukraine. The United States and European Union have passed unprecedented sanctions [\(2\)](#) against Russia, while global prices for key commodities like oil and natural gas have skyrocketed as a result of the conflict. Yet many European countries remain highly dependent on Russian energy and continue to indirectly bankroll Moscow's war campaign as a result, prompting Zelenskiy to reach out to Qatar and other energy suppliers to help support Europe's diversification and thus weaken Russia's strategic leverage.

All of this goes to show the interconnected nature of the global system and how significantly those connections can be redirected due to conflicts such as the one taking place in Ukraine. Financial, energy and weaponry flows, and indeed even the flows of people in the form of refugees and internally displaced persons [\(3\)](#), have been starkly impacted as a result of the Ukrainian conflict. The war has thus shaped the architecture of connectivity flows of the world, with Russia, Ukraine and the West each trying to shape such flows to secure and benefit their respective positions.

Just as importantly, these shifts in connectivity flows can be seen as indicators and precursors of a broader shift in the global power architecture. The Ukrainian conflict has impacted power relationships throughout the world, namely by accelerating the transition to a multipolar world order [\(4\)](#) that was already under way well before the war began. Russia is directly challenging the global power position of the US and its Western allies in Ukraine, while other actors are playing increasingly important roles in shaping both sides of the conflict and its impact on the broader world order, from China to Turkey to India. The global power architecture is thus changing before our very eyes, and an examination of the imperatives and strategies employed by these various players can offer clues on how the increasingly multipolar world order can be expected to evolve in the future as a result of the conflict in Ukraine.

The Roots of the Multi-Polar World

When analysing the evolving power architecture of the world as it relates to the Ukraine conflict, it is important to first begin with the US. It is the US that played the role of the most influential global power following the end of the Cold War, as it had the largest economy, wielded the most powerful and farthest-reaching military, and held great sway over the global financial system. As part of this great power role, one key geopolitical imperative for the US has been to maintain and increase its global influence while preventing the rise of other powers that could seek to challenge this influence. The US could use economic tools such as sanctions or military tools such as overseas interventions, while pushing for the expansion of US-led blocs such as the NATO.

However, the US dominant position as the sole global superpower began to be tested at the turn of the millennium following the 9/11 attacks, when Washington became absorbed with wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which drew much of its attention and resources to the Middle East and South Asia. This created a window of opportunity for other powers to emerge as global players, namely China and Russia, which had both been focused largely on their own internal issues. China witnessed rapid and prolonged economic growth since its admission to the World Trade Organisation [\(5\)](#) in 2001, while Russia was able to gradually recover from a chaotic 1990s under the political consolidation of President Vladimir Putin and an energy-fuelled economic recovery.

Amid their rise as global players, both Russia and China sought to challenge the US and Western-dominated global order. Russia announced its return as a regional power with a military invasion of Georgia in 2008, while the global financial crisis the same year showcased China's economic strength and paved the way for Beijing to grow as a major player in global trade and investment, culminating in Beijing's launch of the Belt and Road Initiative [\(6\)](#) in 2013. Each of these developments were products of Russia and China's own geopolitical imperatives to increase their regional and global influence, all

while challenging the influential role held by the US, which was no longer in a position to sustain itself as the sole global superpower.

This, in turn, marked a transition to an increasingly multipolar world over the past decade, with Washington retaining a powerful global position but witnessing greater competition from the likes of Moscow and Beijing. Russia continued to push back against US and Western influence in the former Soviet Union and well beyond, as can be seen by Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 [\(7\)](#) following the pro-Western EuroMaidan revolution and its entrance into the Syrian conflict in 2015. China, meanwhile, leveraged its economic growth to compete with the US in theatres like the Asia Pacific, Africa and Latin America, while continuing to raise its profile within global financial institutions.

At the same time, other important players like the EU, India, Japan and Turkey became increasingly assertive in pursuing their own strategic interests as a result of these shifting geopolitical dynamics, some of which aligned with the US but others of which did not. The rise of political populism, the advancement of transformative and disruptive technologies [\(8\)](#) and the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has only reinforced the multipolar nature of the world and further fragmented the diffusion of power, both in its geographic concentration and its functions.

The Russia-Ukraine Conflict and the Intensification of the Multi-Polar World

The Russia-Ukraine conflict of 2022 should thus be seen in this context: it did not begin the transition to a multipolar world, but rather has accelerated a process that has long been underway. However, what is new and different is the manner in which Russia, China and other countries are now attempting to shift the multi-polar world in their favour. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has served as an example of not only the increased number of players that are important in shaping the global system, but also the diverse and complex manner in which they are able to influence it. More specifically, it highlights the intensified manner in which each of the major players are willing to use connectivity in a strategic way in order to meet their interests.

For Russia, the scale and scope of Putin's military operations are unprecedented as a means to stop Ukraine's alignment with the US and NATO. Russia's initial intervention in Ukraine back in 2014 was limited to Crimea and Eastern Ukraine and conducted in a largely hybrid capacity, with Moscow unwilling to go beyond a certain threshold in attacking Ukraine or challenging the West. But now, the Kremlin is prioritising security connectivity in the form of Ukraine's 'de-militarization' [\(9\)](#) and the direct invasion and occupation of Ukrainian territory, which is intended to undermine Kyiv's institutional connectivity with the West and to push back at the US position.

Moreover, Russia is not acting alone in challenging the US and the West in Ukraine. Russia's ally, Belarus - which, as a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation and the Eurasian Economic Union, is a reflection of Russia's own institutional connectivity - has allowed Russian forces and weaponry to be stationed on its territory. This proved essential to Russia's northern assault on Kyiv, and Minsk has also backed Moscow's position diplomatically, with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko supporting Putin in the war and furthering Russia's efforts to challenge the West.

The role of China has also been crucial to Russia's efforts to intensify the multi-polar world order. Like Belarus, China has also backed Russia diplomatically in the Ukraine conflict, with Chinese authorities blaming the US and the NATO for bringing "Russia-Ukraine rifts to a critical point" and accusing Washington of using the conflict to attempt to "contain Russia and China." Beijing has spoken out against the West's use of sanctions and economic restrictions against Russia, and the Russian Finance Minister praised [\(10\)](#) China for maintaining and increasing economic ties with Russia "in an environment where Western markets are closing."

However, while Beijing shares Moscow's aim of weakening the US and Western-led global order, China's support for Russia's conflict in Ukraine has only gone so far. Beijing is concerned about the global economic impact of a prolonged Ukrainian conflict in Ukraine; and Chinese telecommunications

giant Huawei has reportedly suspended (11) its operations in Russia due to fear of secondary sanctions from the US. Thus, while China has refused to support the West's position against Russia, Beijing has its own interests at stake and has used its significant economic leverage to play an important role in bringing Russian officials to the negotiating table.

Another important player that has emerged in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is Turkey, which has become a key mediator (12) in the conflict. While Turkey is a member of the NATO, it also has a strong economic and energy connectivity relationship with Russia and has refused to take part in Western-led sanctions. At the same time, Ankara has used its own form of security connectivity to supply Ukraine with key weapons such as TB-2 drones and has backed Kyiv diplomatically. This has given Turkey leverage with both the Ukrainians and the Russians, illustrating the increasingly complex web of power relationships in this multipolar world era.

Yet another such illustration of the complex multipolarity of the Ukraine conflict is the role played by India, which has become an important security partner for the US when it comes to China. However, like Turkey, India has refused to support US and Western sanctions against Russia, with Delhi having its own pragmatic relationship with Moscow when it comes to energy imports and weaponry purchases. It was a reflection of the multipolar world order that, during a meeting (13) between US President Joe Biden and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 11 April, Modi was noncommittal to US requests that India refrain from increasing its oil purchases from Russia to help squeeze Russia in the energy sector.

Thus, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has revealed the complexity of the power architecture of the world. While the US was once in a dominant position in the global order, it now faces more competition from the likes of Russia and China, while presumed allies like Turkey, India and even certain EU states like Hungary (14) have carved out their own independent roles vis-à-vis the conflict. It is true that the West can still use powerful economic tools such as sanctions to pressure Russia, while the US and NATO's own security connectivity to Ukraine in the form of weapons and logistical support has been

unprecedented. However, the intensive nature of Russia's most recent intervention in Ukraine and Moscow's calculation that the US and the NATO would not intervene directly to stop it is in and of itself perhaps the clearest illustration of how the multi-polar world order has accelerated.

Of course, there is a scenario in which the US global position is strengthened as a result of the Ukrainian conflict. In this case, Russia would suffer heavy losses and not achieve any of its military objectives in Ukraine, while the survival of Putin's regime itself could be threatened as a result of immense economic pressure from the West and growing discontent on the home front. The US would be able to leverage its status as a major economic, security and technological player and rally its partners in Europe and beyond behind its cause to support Ukraine against Russia. But even in this scenario, there will be states such as China that will push back against the US position globally, while others, from India to Turkey, maintain their own pragmatic path.

Looking Ahead

This brings us back to Zelenskiy's speech in Doha. For all of the US and Western support for Ukraine in its conflict with Russia, Zelenskiy is well aware that the NATO is unlikely to accept his country as a member anytime soon and that he must look beyond just the West for assistance. This explains Zelenskiy's outreach to Qatar and other energy producers at the Doha Forum to redirect Russian energy flows away from Europe. This also explains why Zelenskiy reached out for support not only to Kyiv's traditional allies in the US and Europe, but also why the Ukrainian leader has made impassioned appeals for support to audiences in Japan, South Korea, Israel and elsewhere. All of this shows that there are many important players that can and do shape the Ukraine conflict, and the way they influence it can and does come in many forms, serving as a reflection of how the world is becoming increasingly multipolar.

However, such an evolution of the world order is not necessarily a bad thing for the US, nor for the West as a whole. After all, it was in the unipolar context, when the US was the dominant global power and wielded disproportionate military and economic power, that it allowed itself to be pulled into long and gruelling conflicts like those in Afghanistan and Iraq. [\(15\)](#) The US learned the hard way that such a demonstration of power can prove highly costly and can have negative strategic consequences. While such conflicts and military interventions contributed to the rise of a multipolar world, they also taught the US a valuable lesson on the limitations of hard military power (something that Russia is also likely to experience as the Ukrainian conflict continues to drag out).

Looking ahead, what is perhaps most important in this increasingly multipolar world is not that there are more influential players throughout the global system, but rather the types of power that they will wield. Conventional military power is still likely to be a significant sign of influence as the Russia-Ukraine conflict clearly shows, but so is the ability to channel other connectivity flows - whether functional flows like energy or trade or institutional [\(16\)](#) and cultural [\(17\)](#) flows - towards the strategic interests of a particular state. And the more such flows and those interests can be integrated and implemented with a long-term vision in mind and aligned with other partners, the more successful a state is likely to be in meeting its broader strategic objectives.

Thus, the question of whether the Russia-Ukraine conflict weakens or consolidates the United States' position in the world remains an open one that has yet to be answered. Partly, this will depend on the manner in which the conflict plays out on the ground and what its final result will be. But more fundamentally, the answer will depend on which state - whether the US, Russia, China or others vying for global influence - will shape connectivity flows in a way that is most strategically effective and that incorporates as many allies and partners as possible within the global system towards its vision of the future of the world order. What is clear is that the multipolar nature of the world is here to stay, and the power architecture of the world will be increasingly shaped by this dynamic and complex competition over strategic connectivity.

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