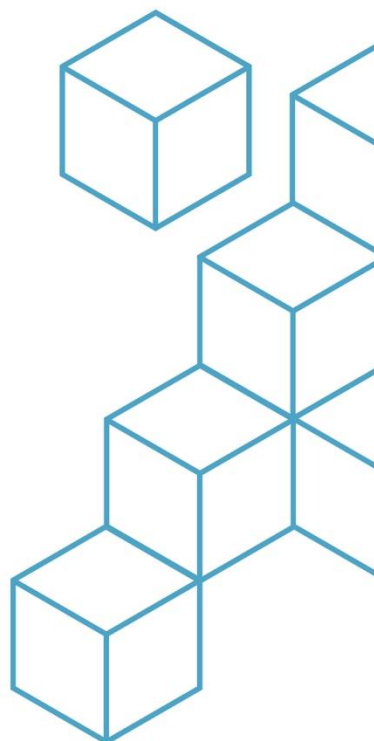


ANALYSES

Russia-NATO: Four Political Variants under Review



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The Russia–NATO metaconflict seems to blend traditional and innovative mechanisms of war and subordination of political economy to realpolitik. [Reuters]

The aftermath of the Ukraine war, as a protracted complex conflict, has revealed how the Russia–West geopolitical rivalry has entered uncharted territories with an asymmetrical war and unparalleled weaponry: hard power versus sanctions and other tools of political economy, or sticky power. It seems to be a misguided venture of power dynamics: bullets and rockets versus economic and financial warfare, perpetuating a long hurting stalemate for all stakeholders. This paper addresses how the standoff between Putin's Russia and Western powers may amount to a new geopolitical paradigm shift and raises questions about the validity of certain conceptual frameworks: the renewal of 'the Cold War', the imposition of a 'New World Order', and the (im)balance of an assumed 'Balance of Power'. These post–World War II mechanics of *Détente* were prolonged, after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, into the 21st century. The 'post' prefix endures the challenge of forecasting what would come after a three-decade prolongation of several concepts ushering to several unknowns of the Ukraine war postgame.

The ongoing dilemma of economic wars, besides the struggling armed confrontation inside Ukraine since 24 February 2022, has implied the need for a tabula-rasa re-conceptualisation of alternative frameworks in international relations. Moreover, another puzzle has emerged: is it a 'sixth-generation war' if we consider the disparity of weapons: Russia's hard power and military tools versus the West's sanctions and other restrictions of the political economy and dominance of sticky power? The question of a possible sixth-generation war builds on the differences of the fifth-generation warfare (5GW), which is conducted primarily through non-kinetic-military action, such as social engineering, misinformation, cyberattacks, along with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and fully autonomous systems. [\(1\)](#)

Policy makers, political elites and public opinion in different parts of the world live now at an age of uncertainties and emerging complexities. This is an understatement which presents several question-marks about how much confidence we may claim, as we are bewildered by forecasting the trajectory of the protracted war in Ukraine and the showdown between Putin's Russia and the re-energised NATO, amidst another fog of the war against the coronavirus and its emerging variants. This is the age of political and pandemic variants per excellence. Analysts, think tanks and governments in both the West and the East can neither make a prophecy with certitude about the course of the open-ended Russia-NATO showdown, nor provide a scientifically-based mechanism of eradicating coronavirus infections and containing their economic ramifications.

Western governments are not in favour of engaging in direct armed confrontation with Russian forces, while differences within the NATO persist about the best tactics that can fulfil U.S. Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin's objective: "We want to see Russia weakened." Some observers consider his comments "a clear sense of confidence that the strategy is clearly working." [\(2\)](#) The Ukraine war has been a good opportunity for U.S. President Joe Biden to push for the solidification of the NATO's raison d'être in terms of protecting Western Europe's security under the banner of U.S. military and technological leadership. However, it is a challenge for the NATO to consider what can be termed as a double-edge

sword plan of action vis-à-vis the prospects of admitting two Nordic state members: “a security that is enhanced by Finland and Sweden; but, an insecurity that is spreading across Eastern Europe.” [\(3\)](#)

A complex metaconflict on the rise

The Ukraine war and the subsequent Russia-NATO showdown have showcased how conflicts may come in different forms and sizes of complexity. This complexity explains “why interventions may have un-anticipated consequences. The intricate inter-relationships of elements within a complex system give rise to multiple chains of dependencies.” [\(4\)](#) The management of the ongoing war has accentuated the interconnectedness between several global political, military and economic systems and related dependencies between states and alliances battling their luck at though geo-economic chessboards. Some academicians have conceived complexity as “a structural condition” of world politics and provides “the ontology behind challenging current research questions.” [\(5\)](#)

Neil E. Harrison argues for the value of complexity theory in international relations, given the unpredictability of events in world politics that have puzzled common expectations based on existing theories such as realism, liberalism, neo-realism, neo-liberalism or constructivism. As he explains, “the public and military desire the psychological comfort of discernible superiority, media amplify inter-nation conflicts, and the benefits of participation in the ideological mainstream preserve the distribution of power and inhibit changes in the historic patterns that transform inevitable conflicts into costly rivalries.” [\(6\)](#)

To help unpack such interconnectedness and dependencies, complexity theory provides a promising theoretical framework for analysing how social systems manage and recover from violent conflict. It has also showcased how certain “unexpected patterns, processes or properties arise from interactions among the elements of the system.” [\(7\)](#) So far, the emerging impact of the Ukraine War on Europe’s continental security and energy needs has defeated the European Union’s hope of embracing Russia as a ‘European’ nation, as it has opted for its status as a ‘Euro-Asian’ superpower instead. Contentious

mistrust between the White House, European capitals and the Kremlin have displayed deep complexity with ill-defined possible outcomes.

Depending on the degree of such complexity and why these great powers are at odds with each other over the future of Ukraine, one can argue there are three main types of disputes, conflicts and metaconflicts according to the challenges of their transformation and possible resolution. A dispute is an argument or disagreement over some tangible claims and can be settled by legal means and other alternative dispute resolution (ADR) including negotiation, mediation and arbitration. However, the second tier is conflict, and entails a higher density of differences and deep-rooted causes. Over the past 60 years of the solidification of conflict resolution as a new social science, theorists have suggested several definitions. I mention three specific ones: first, Lewis Coser conceives conflict as “a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the aims of opponents are to neutralize, injure, or eliminate rivals.” [\(8\)](#)

Second, Peace Nobel prize nominee Johan Galtung explains conflict is “a social system of actors with incompatibility between their goal-states. We shall show that surprisingly much can be said about conflict as such, with no reference to special types of conflicts. It is a property of social systems; then conceived of as a more or less interdependent systems of actors striving to achieve their goal-states. In the process it happens that they stand in each other’s way, or so they may believe, and this is where the system becomes a conflict system.” [\(9\)](#) Accordingly, the metaconflict over Ukraine accentuates this notion of the system and the overall incompatibility between competing political and economic structures.

Third, the Ukraine war also represents a metaconflict that has been managed by narratives and discourses either at the Kremlin, NATO headquarters, the White House or the United Nations Security Council. Narrative analysis theorist Sara Cobb highlights “the discursive process in which people struggle for legitimacy, caught in stories they did not make (by themselves) and all too often, cannot change---the network of social relationships, histories and institutional processes restrict the nature

of stories that can be told. Conflict, from this perspective is a narrative process in which the creation, reproduction and transformation of meaning itself is a political process— a struggle against marginalization and delegitimation, for legitimacy, if not hegemony. Narratives matter.”

Accordingly, several practitioners call for a metaconflict analysis. The task here it “to devise a meta-conflict approach is one which can address the many facets of a conflict whether these be structural (political or constitutional arrangements, legislation, economic and aid factors, etc.) or psycho-cultural (e.g. attitudes, relationships, divided histories) in a comprehensive and complementary manner... It is important that agreement on such facets is developed in tandem with the various parties to the conflict.” [\(10\)](#) From the perspective of renewed knowledge about disputes, conflicts and metaconflicts, new approaches have emerged in the last two decades with the hope of reaching a pragmatic and effective intervention strategies. One of them is conflictology as “the culmination of knowledge that helps us understand conflicts, crises, violence of all kinds, and, simultaneously, the compendium of transformation, intervention and aid techniques, resources and procedures.” [\(11\)](#)

Another framework has focused on Conflict Intelligence (CIQ) as “a set of competencies and skills used to manage different types of normative conflicts in diverse or changing situations effectively and constructively”, as illustrated by Peter Coleman, director of the Morton Deutsch International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution at Columbia University. [\(12\)](#) Coleman and his colleagues have identified “two meta-competencies—Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom—for adaptively managing different kinds of conflicts across contexts, and for transforming entrenched patterns of conflict. These represent two distinct but complementary competencies or modes of conflict engagement, which are associated with distinct types of conflict. The Conflict Intelligence and Systemic Wisdom framework differentiates conflicts according to their levels of complexity, destructiveness, and endurance over time.” [\(13\)](#)

In retrospect, the escalatory mood between the Kremlin, the White House and its European allies has entailed a metaconflict with grandiose magnitude since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. It has not been a

classic confrontation between serviceman and mercenaries, but a sticky war involving legions of financiers, bankers, business executives, hackers, influencers and spin doctors. The notion of war seems to be evolving rapidly and contests most of the legacy of World War II.

There is a significant shift toward “holistic doctrines that can comprehensively explain the multifaceted character of modern war, including the Russian concept of hybrid warfare, the American concept of fourth-generation warfare and the Chinese concept of unrestricted warfare. Permanent change and full-spectrum clashes are structural features of contemporary security environments.” [\(14\)](#)

Before delving into the four transformative political constructs of the post-Cold War era, it is important to study first how Russian president Vladimir Putin has solidified his position and precursors of his defence strategy vis-à-vis the NATO.

History on ‘steroids’

Putin’s conditions for NATO state-members to withdraw from eastern Europe and the dramatic war in Ukraine have caused a new dilemma of whether his approach is maximalist or limited in manoeuvring his will to power vis-à-vis the Western alliance, which he has often accused of ignoring “fundamental Russian concerns”, and “undermining Russia’s security.” He also laid out a well-calculated hypothesis: “Let’s imagine that Ukraine is a NATO member-state, and it initiates a military operation. What should we do then, [should we] fight against the NATO bloc? Did anyone think at least something about that? Apparently not,” as he stated in his speech 1 February 2022. [\(15\)](#)

Putin’s stance goes beyond the strategic significance of the 1988–1991 era when the Soviet Union found itself in a gradual progression toward internal disintegration and end of the federal government’s existence as a sovereign state. Mikhail Gorbachev’s ambition of reform turned into a period of political stalemate and economic backslide. He resigned in December 1991 and the Soviet parliament voted to end itself. As Putin rose to power in the Kremlin in 1998, he has shown strong commitment to the resurrection of Russia, as an imperial superpower, with a particular interpretation of history and

identity politics. In a 5000-word essay entitled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, he argues that “the name ‘Ukraine’ was used more often in the meaning of the Old Russian word ‘okraina’ (periphery), which is found in written sources from the 12th century, referring to various border territories. And the word ‘Ukrainian’, judging by archival documents, originally referred to frontier guards who protected the external borders.” [\(16\)](#)

Another revealing quote captures his logic of history and the unifying unit of analysis by which he lectured several Western leaders during their visits to the Kremlin. He asserts that “inside the USSR, borders between republics were never seen as state borders; they were nominal within a single country, which, while featuring all the attributes of a federation, was highly centralized - this, again, was secured by the CPSU's leading role. But in 1991, all those territories; and - which is more important - people, found themselves abroad overnight, taken away, this time indeed, from their historical motherland.” [\(17\)](#)

Putin’s dogmatic centrism of a ‘unified Russia’, or ‘historical Russia’, has been the backbone of his positioning in his multiple talks with Western leaders, including U.S. and French Presidents Biden and Macron, German Chancellor Scholtz, and NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg. During his visit to the Kremlin on 10 February 2022, Macron had to endure some marathon talks for nearly six hours. Two members of the French delegation recall how Putin gave Macron “five hours of historical revisionism,” and noticed the ability of Putin “to go on for hours rewriting history from 1997 on. He drowns you in these long monologues.” [\(18\)](#) Ironically, Putin’s revisionist inclinations of history and world politics have contested most of the dynamics of contemporary post-Cold War history.

Historian Timothy Snyder has pointed out the “politics of eternity”, or “the belief in an unchanging historical essence”. [\(19\)](#) Other Russia observers pinpoint how Putin tries to capitalise not only on history, but also on identity politics with Slavic and Orthodox core of the region populations, and revival of Russian nationalism. Jeffery Mankoff of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies

(CSIS) in Washington recalls that “throughout Putin’s time in office, Moscow has pursued a policy toward Ukraine and Belarus predicated on the assumption that their respective national identities are artificial—and therefore fragile. Putin’s arguments about foreign enemies promoting Ukrainian (and, in a more diffuse way, Belarusian) identity as part of a geopolitical struggle against Russia echo the way many of his predecessors refused to accept the agency of ordinary people seeking autonomy from tsarist or Soviet domination.” [\(20\)](#)

These are the layers of Putin’s narratives as he produces and defends his principles of ‘justice’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘truth’ and ‘worldview’ within his own constructivist nuances. However, his rather static interpretation of history seems to collide with the West’s dynamic interpretation, or history dynamics, and the will to Westernisation and Europeanisation, which most of the fifteen former Soviet republics have pursued in the last three decades. Ukraine has, in the midst of a ferocious confrontation with Russian troops, maintained strong hopes it would get rapid admission into the European Union to help ease up Ukraine’s geopolitical vulnerability. As Mankoff put it, “Russian determination to bring Ukraine back into the fold despite the enormous economic price it is paying—not to mention the prospect of a grinding, bloody conflict that it could well lose—suggests that the current crisis goes beyond the question of Ukraine’s relationship with NATO.” [\(21\)](#)

In a joint news conference with visiting European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Kyiv on 11 June 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stated, “All of Europe is a target for Russia, and Ukraine is just the first stage in this aggression... This is why a positive EU response to the Ukrainian application for membership can be a positive answer to the question of whether the European project has a future at all.” [\(22\)](#) Von der Leyen told him in candid language, “you have done a lot in strengthening the rule of law, but there is still a need for reforms to be implemented, to fight corruption, for example.” Still, EU leaders have accepted Ukraine’s candidacy.

Meanwhile, Putin made a rather surprising statement about Ukraine’s leaning towards Brussels during the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum on 17 June 2022: “We have nothing against it. It's their

sovereign decision to join economic unions or not... It's their business, the business of the Ukrainian people." Such a soft-tone toward Ukraine's candidacy for the EU membership does not alter Putin's devotion to his own history and rigid defiance of the NATO's presence in eastern Europe. The variability of Putin's tactics vis-à-vis Ukraine's aspirations toward the EU and the NATO and counter tactics of the re-aligned West's call for a close examination of the decades-long circulating notions of the Cold War, balance of power, new world order, and the fear of what type the next possible war would be.

Another narrated 'Cold War'?

After Russian troops started their invasion of eastern Ukraine on 24 February 2022, most world politics watchers pointed to a 'return' or 'revival' of the Cold War era. James Hershberg, former director of the Cold War International History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center, sensed "it's very much a Cold War echo." [\(23\)](#) Ian Bremmer foresaw "the New Cold War could soon heat up." Others have cautioned that "Washington should prepare for the endgame. The world is headed toward another Cold War, with a new Iron Curtain likely to rise wherever the reach of Russian troops ends." [\(24\)](#) There has been wide-scale assumption that has alluded to a déjà-vu scenario of escalation and idle stalemate. Some observers believed in a replica of past violent showdown, and 'hostile actions' are akin to acts of war, and can easily slide into it — just as did the American oil embargo on Japan in 1941. [\(25\)](#)

Moreover, some views called for a historical reconstructivism in terms of connecting the dots between World War II in 1945 and the Ukraine war in 2022. There were hints that "future historians will talk about the first and second cold wars — separated by a 30-year era of globalization. The first cold war ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The second, it seems, began with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022." [\(26\)](#)

One can argue that these are simplistic interpretations of a 'renewed' Cold War and derive from a rather static interpretation of what drives global conflicts and metaconflicts. They sounded like political recycling of certain concepts and clichés inherited from the 1960s; and seem to ignore the temporality factor in deconstructing the new metaconflict. The simple notion of a reoccurring Cold War, or a possible 'Neo-Cold War', resists the changes of context and dynamics between 1940s and 2020s. Harvard philosophy professor George Santayana once said, "those who do not learn history are doomed to repeat it."

Each metaconflict evolves according to its temporal and dynamic web of entanglements. Putin has used conventional weapons in Ukraine, but he put Russia's nuclear deterrent forces on alert on 27 February, three days after the invasion, as well. Such a scary scenario has brought back the nightmarish silhouette of the Cuba crisis of 1961. Still as Mark Twain famously said, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme." The post-Cold War era and sequence of events since 1989 have some validity in studying the context of the Ukraine War. However, the dynamics and trajectory of the current Kremlin-NATO showdown differ from the reality and old geopolitical rivalry of the 1960s and 1970s, and call for better nuanced framework of understanding and analysing the metaconflict.

Balance of power

Since the war erupted in Ukraine, there has been increasing caution in EU and NATO headquarters in Brussels about how to deal best with the Kremlin's strategy and to avoid any armed confrontation in eastern Europe. Military historian Rick Atkinson conceives the new order of battle in Europe as very fluid. He points out, "in less than three months, the strategic landscape has changed profoundly — invigorating a NATO military alliance that had seemed nearly moribund, undermining if not neutering Russian imperial ambitions, and reasserting American leadership in a robust coalition of like-minded liberal democracies." [\(27\)](#)

Henry Kissinger, former U.S. secretary of state and so-called 'master of grand strategy' said at a Financial Times forum held in June 2022, "We are now living in a totally new era." He also argued that Putin "obviously miscalculated Russia's capabilities to sustain a major enterprise — and when the time comes for settlement ... we are not going back to the previous relationship but to a position for Russia that will be different because of this — and not because we demanded it but because they produced it." [\(28\)](#)

Putin's strategy builds on what Russians call "correlation of forces and means (COFM)". This strategic formula describes "the military balance between two opponents at the global, regional, and local levels by providing a relative rating of one side's military superiority over the other. A COFM calculation primarily serves as an operational planning tool that uses general quantitative and qualitative indicators." [\(29\)](#)

In contrast, the Biden administration's national defence strategy maintains the existence of threats of both Russia and China exist. While delivering the revised classified strategy to Congress on 28 March 2022, the Pentagon pointed out in a public statement that Russia was posing 'acute threats', with China remaining "our most consequential strategic competitor and the pacing challenge." [\(30\)](#) Secretary of State Anthony Blinken asserts that "China is the only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it. Beijing's vision would move us away from the universal values that have sustained so much of the world's progress over the past 75 years." [\(31\)](#) He is sceptical about a possible rapprochement, but also determined to pursue further containment of China. He underscores the United States "can't rely on Beijing to change its trajectory. So, we will shape the strategic environment around Beijing to advance our vision for an open and inclusive international system." [\(32\)](#)

Blinken and other U.S. officials' discourse seems to capitalise on the original framework of containment designed by George Kennan in his anonymous essay, "X-Article", formally titled, "The Sources of Soviet

Conduct", published in Foreign Affairs in July 1947. He called for countering "Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world" through the "adroit and vigilant application of counter-force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy." There is noticeable return to the containment strategy in Washington in dealing with China and Russia. Still, the White House has not shifted away from its priority of maintaining a favourable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region. Some analysts wonder whether these rivalries can be "managed in Cold War 2.0 or if it will be more dangerous than its forerunner."

[\(33\)](#)

Now, containment is called back again to serve a double-shift task in Biden's foreign policy and the preservation of the United States' leadership of the West and standing in world politics. The Ukraine war could be a good opportunity for adjusting and rebalancing Biden's strategic priorities in Indo-Pacific, Europe, the Gulf and the Middle East. Still, the question lingers whether the reproduction of containment is good enough, or strategically sufficient, to give the Biden administration some leverage to outperform two-rival superpowers with is a common goal: the pursuit of undermining U.S. power and influence in the world, maximising their de-dollarisation efforts and endangering the position of the dollar as the reserve currency.

New world order

The Ukraine war has stirred debate of two main hypotheses: a) the end of a shacking world order that ran out of steam with the end of a unipolar system guided by the United States. Harvard International Relations Professor Stephan Walt is sceptical about considering the war in Ukraine a "decisive turning point in the history of humanity." However, he acknowledges it signals the end of the brief "unipolar moment" (1993-2020) when the United States was the world's sole genuine superpower and because it heralds a return to patterns of world politics that were temporarily suppressed during the short era of unchallenged U.S. primacy." [\(34\)](#)

Among political circles in Washington, there is growing belief that the liberal world order has been struggling, or possibly on life support, since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. President Biden, in his inaugural address, called democracy “fragile.” Putin had said in an interview with the Financial Times on June 2019 that “the liberal idea” had “outlived its purpose”, and became “Every crime must have its punishment. The liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population.”

The second hypothesis is the lack of a steady world order during the post-Cold War era. Most of the dynamics of international relations have implied a set of power games between China, Russia, the United States and Europe. Recent geopolitical tensions and the Ukraine war were driven by the search for an up-to-date multipolar system, and dynamic geopolitical significance of other players, notably China and Russia and some regional powers like France, Turkey, Iran and India, while Australia has entered the AUKUS pact with the United States and the United Kingdom.

Still, Putin argues the world is a chaotic situation since “there are no rules at all.” He rejoices some of the benefits of the Cold War era as “there were at least some rules that all participants in international communication more or less adhered to or tried to follow.” In his suggestive essay, “The Coming World Order”, Marc Saxer argues that Russia has “overestimated its strength”, and “only China and the US as powers capable of setting and maintaining order.” [\(35\)](#) He concluded their focus on their competition over global hegemony has convinced them to avoid being dragged into this ‘European conflict’.

There is more resonance of the second hypothesis considering the Ukraine war as part of a timely struggle or competition over which great powers can shape a new world order. Russia and China find themselves well-prepared and well-positioned to challenge the Pax Americana. Retired U.S. Navy Admiral and former NATO Commander in Europe James Stavridis proposes a metaphor of how good cars age and wane. He says, “the global system was built in the 1950s, and if you think of it as a car from those years, it is battered, out of date in some ways, and could use a good tune-up. But it is still

on the road, rolling along, and, ironically enough, Putin has done more in a week to energize it than anything I can remember.” [\(36\)](#)

A sixth-generation war?

The Russia-NATO metaconflict seems to blend traditional and innovative mechanisms of war and subordination of political economy to realpolitik. The Ukraine war seems to be notorious for the involvement of more modern components. Military experts point out that the Russian version of ‘shock and awe’ includes “airstrikes, drones and hypersonic missiles in order to overwhelm the Ukrainians, as well as threats of nuclear sabre-rattling to deter the direct intervention of NATO.” [\(37\)](#) Meanwhile, the Kremlin positions its economic weaponry to counter Western sanctions. Some Russia observers foresee Russia’s pursuit of “asymmetric means to hit back and impose costs on the West. Cyberattacks, political influence and disinformation campaigns, money laundering and corruption efforts are few of the many tools in its toolbox.” [\(38\)](#)

A new puzzle has emerged regarding whether it is a sixth-generation war if we consider the disparity of weapons: Russia’s hard power and military tools versus the West’s sanctions and other restrictions of political economy. It derives its significance from Russian military strategists’ approach to dividing the world into continental and oceanic “theatres of military action” (teatri voennykh deistvii [TVDs]). Chief of Russia’s General Staff, Army General Valery Gerasimov, explained the role of the military in operations in Syria since September 2015 with an emphasis on the “limited” application of hard power, culminating in articulating this as an emerging “strategy of limited actions”, by waging “non-contact” warfare and employing “high-precision weapons systems”. [\(39\)](#)

The idea of a possible sixth-generation war builds on the differences of the fifth-generation warfare (5GW), which is conducted primarily through non-kinetic-military action, such as social engineering, misinformation, cyberattacks, along with emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and fully

autonomous systems. The term “fifth-generation warfare”, coined in 2003 by Robert Steele, has been described as a war of "information and perception". [\(40\)](#) However, there is a debate whether fourth-generation wars “had yet to fully materialize”. [\(41\)](#)

Robert Johnson, Director of the Changing Character of War Programme at Oxford University, explains in terms of cost-benefit analysis, Putin’s war is no longer worth the military success that might be achieved. It could prove to be a classic example of operational achievements failing to turn into strategic victory. Putin has failed to grasp that for Ukrainians, this is now in an existential war and they will resist. Russia cannot now achieve its strategic ends and risks a culminating point of stalemate.

Some realists imply the notion of ripeness in ending the Ukraine war. Walt proposes several possible outcomes as he wrote in April 2022, “Sooner or later, the fighting in Ukraine will stop. No one knows how or when or what the final resolution will be. Maybe the Russian forces will collapse and withdraw completely (unlikely). Maybe Russian President Vladimir Putin will be removed from power and his successor(s) will cut a generous deal in the hopes of turning back the clock (also unlikely). Maybe the Ukrainian forces will lose the will to fight on (very unlikely). Maybe the war will grind on in an inconclusive stalemate until the protagonists are exhausted and a peace deal is negotiated (my bet).”

[\(42\)](#)

Other views foresee a growing retaliatory mood inside the Kremlin against the West. The gathering of several leaders at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June was a signal of Russia’s pursuit of an eastern geopolitical block. Max Bergmann predicts Russia’s “nonstop pursuit” of sanctions with some support of China and other complicit states, and even the use of “burner banks” that pop up to handle a transaction, will get sanctioned and go away. It will use shell companies, smugglers and the criminal underworld to gain access to materials. It will, in short, act like North Korea. [\(43\)](#)

Avril Haines, Director of U.S. National Intelligence, told Congress recently that Putin intended to achieve his goals, because in his judgment, Russia had a greater willingness to endure challenges than his adversaries. Lieutenant General Scott Berrier, Head of the Defence Intelligence Agency, acknowledged that the war was “at a bit of a stalemate” with neither side winning. The stalemate could last for a while, but if Russia declares war (as opposed to calling it a military operation) and mobilises thousands of more soldiers, the situation could change. [\(44\)](#)

Conclusion: Where will the resolution framework come from?

The current geopolitical impasse between Russia and the NATO will persist in time and complexity. The fluidity of the four political constructs - Cold War, balance of power, new world order and the fifth-sixth-generation war debate - discussed in this paper, is still far away from reaching a minimum rapprochement between the Kremlin and Western powers for the following reasons:

1. Russia and NATO are not engaged in a zero-sum showdown with one winner and one loser as realpolitik enthusiasts would argue. But, it is an absolute zero-sum where both parties end up losing. Russian and Western economies will struggle and wane over time in an aimless venture of hurting stalemate. Differences of political temporalities between Putin’s revisionist approach to history and the West’s assumption of eternal weakness after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Putin has harkened back to an ahistorical past to justify his decisions in the present. He has weaponised history to solidify his claims over Crimea in 2014 and eastern Ukraine in 2022. He stated, “in territories adjacent to Russia, which I have to note is our historical land, a hostile ‘anti-Russia’ is taking shape,” Putin said in another address ahead of the invasion. “For our country, it is a matter of life and death, a matter of our historical future as a nation.”
2. The post-Ukraine War dynamics have shown an incomplete subordination of forces and strategies among four global players: Russia, China, the U.S. and the E.U. Russia has gone beyond

any other nation to coordinate a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. But, Chinese officials are not keen on siding fully with the Kremlin. They have implied that the ‘no limits’ partnership has a few limits. U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan at the White House stated he has not seen evidence of China providing military support to Russia. Beijing’s diplomacy seeks to secure its interests in the Indo-Pacific region than drumming up support for Moscow.

3. The Transatlantic relations between the United States and Europe will pivot around the solidification of the NATO. Biden is enthusiastic about reinforcing NATO-US leadership as well as mending fences with several Europeans governments. During his news conference at the White House with Finish president Sauli Niinistö and Swedish Prime minister Magdalena Andersson mid-May 2022, Biden asserted that “today, there is no question: NATO is relevant, it is effective, and it is more needed now than ever. The indispensable alliance of decades past is still the indispensable alliance for the world we face today and, I would argue, tomorrow as well.”
4. The eclipse of the liberal left’s discourse and peace theory. What matters now is how the West and Russia can manipulate their hard and sticky power capabilities. Realpolitik enthusiasts feel confident now that political realism is back to explain best world dynamics, and that “great powers compete for power and influence and others adapt as best they can.” [\(45\)](#) However, soft power theorist Joseph Nye considers any realist assertion that “so much for soft power” as a response that “betrays a shallow analysis”. [\(46\)](#) He acknowledges that hard military power has dominated the short-run battle. But, he argues that “the effects of soft power tend to be slow and indirect in international politics. We can see the effects of bombs and bullets right away, whereas the attraction of values and culture may be visible only in the long run.” [\(47\)](#)
5. Any potential outcome of the Russia-NATO showdown will not emerge out of the wishful political dialectic between the Kremlin and the White House, nor from the calls of UN Secretary-General António Guterres for the enactment of an urgent and immediate humanitarian

ceasefire. The long-term transformation of the metaconflict will require a shift of the EU position from stakeholder to mediator between Moscow and Washington.

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