



POLICY BRIEFS

Ukraine: Toward a Prolonged War of Attrition Fuelling Great Power Competition



***Aljazeera Centre For Studies**

August 17 2022



Encouraged by its early successes and the steady flow of Western military support, Kiev shifted course, abandoning negotiations and settling into more determined resistance. [Aris Messinis/AFP]

More than six months after it began, the war in Ukraine is no longer in the headlines, but it continues to grind on. Without any real decision on the part of the major powers, the war has evolved into a global crisis affecting most countries of the world, whether they are direct parties to the war or not.

Unable to achieve its original goal of a rapid, overwhelming defeat of the Ukrainian army, Moscow changed tack, adopting a strategy based on incremental progress and attrition. Encouraged by its early successes and the steady flow of Western military support, Kiev, too, shifted course, abandoning negotiations and settling into more determined resistance. If Russia's military strategy is to exhaust Ukraine, the West seems to see Ukraine as an arena in which to weaken Russia and the Putin government. Russia reportedly lost more than 15,000 soldiers in the first six months of the war, among them dozens of senior officers. Also, there are indications that the Russian war machine is struggling to produce necessary war material and recruit soldiers.

The war has not been limited to the battlefield. The sanctions on Russia and Russian officials sent Western companies fleeing from the Russian market, while Europe's decision to curtail Russian coal and oil imports has left Moscow scrambling to find new markets for its oil, where it is selling at less than the market rate. The freeze on Russian reserves in Western banks has further eroded its ability to fund the war.

Moscow responded with export controls and, more significantly, restrictions on natural gas supplies to Europe, on which some states, like Germany, are heavily reliant. It is still unclear what the full impact of this policy will be this coming winter, but Germany and France have already reverted to coal-generated electricity to meet the shortfall, regardless of the implications for climate change.

These developments combined with the long Covid-related closures and disruptions to supply lines to generate a growing global crisis. The four major powers involved in the Ukrainian crisis—China, Russia, the European Union and the United States—account for 60 percent of global GDP. It is no wonder, then, that their troubled economic and financial relations have thrown the rest of the world into disarray. The result has been rising prices for fuel and staple crops, shortages of necessary industrial components, and skyrocketing inflation. The crisis has exacerbated already existing problems everywhere, pushing some countries, like Egypt and Tunisia, to the brink of bankruptcy.

Russia started the war, but is in no position to end it. Ukraine is emboldened by Western support, and if Russia stops before achieving its declared objectives, it would spell the end for Putin. Both sides are thus counting on a protracted war of economic and military attrition to debilitate their opponents. Russia is hoping that economic pressure will divide the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and deter Europe from heeding what it sees as American dictates. In the meantime, it is strengthening

its alliance with China and building better relations with second-tier countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

The West, too, is counting on growing war casualties and economic and financial sanctions to weaken the Putin regime and erode Russia's ability to continue the war in the medium term. The United States is working to keep the NATO united by pressuring the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) to pump more oil to compensate for the loss of Russian energy supplies. It is also lobbying to bring Sweden and Finland into the NATO, which would be a severe blow to Russia's geostrategic security.

In the background, Russia and China are trying to upset the entire Atlantic-led world order, but this is no easy task. Looking at the three dimensions of state power (military, economic and soft) in each of the four great powers, we find that Russia has superior military capacities but only second-rate economic power; it lacks any real soft power. China has major military and economic power, but marginal soft power. The European Union is weak militarily, but is an economic and cultural powerhouse. The United States is a major power in all three realms.

This schematic suggests that Russia and China should challenge, if not lead, the world order as allies, but thus far China seems unwilling, seeing a close relationship with Russia as a burden on its economic influence and being reluctant to involve itself in long-standing Russian-European conflicts.

Nevertheless, Russia and China no longer need to play by the rules of the Euro-American international order. It is therefore likely that in this uncertain period of flux, the major four powers will vie to win friends and allies, giving second-tier powers like Turkey and India more influence if they can ably manage their foreign relations and avoid unnecessary alignment with any of the four major powers.

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