

War in Ukraine: Between Solution Finding and Global Bloc Building

Gabriela McGuinty Cañete,
Maximilian Dippold and Yi-Chieh Chen

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Västra Finnbodavägen 2, 131 30 Stockholm-Nacka, Sweden

Tel. +46-841056953; Fax. +46-86403370

Email: info@isdpeu

Editorial correspondence should be directed to the address provided above (preferably by email).

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Abbreviations

ASEAN Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BRI Belt and Road Initiative

EU European Union

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

UN United Nations

UNSC United Nations Security Council

US United States

List of Contributors

Gabriela McGuinty Cañete, Maximilian Dippold and Yi-Chieh Chen were interns at the Stockholm Center for South Asian and Indo-Pacific Affairs, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Sweden.

Executive Summary

- The geopolitical landscape surrounding the war in Ukraine and the various proposed solutions to end the conflict are complex.
- The war has impacted global power relationships and highlighted not only the decline of the UN's rules-based order but also the challenges faced by established alliances such as NATO. It has also led to the emergence of new power blocs.
- The war in Ukraine is not merely a conflict between Ukraine and Russia, but a shaping force for the role of third parties in foreign conflicts.
- The proposed solutions reveal the medium and long-term geopolitical ambitions of the diverse actors involved. The Western strategy of sanctions and military support could influence the Indo-Pacific to deviate from its neutrality, while an opportunity for peace negotiations may arise if established neutrality is maintained.
- Despite the various proposed solutions, the international community does not expect the war to end soon, and Ukraine may find itself in a precarious position between the power struggles of emerging blocs.
- The multifaceted bloc building system and the intertwined geopolitical landscape present new challenges to global peace and security, requiring a nuanced and collaborative approach to conflict resolution.

1. Introduction

The war in Ukraine has had massive global repercussions and thus prompted responses from vastly different actors on the world stage. Russia's invasion, although concentrated in one geographic area, has impacted society at large in ways that cannot be understated. The war has brought to light the geopolitical affiliations and tensions around the world, challenging previous power relationships and the westernized rules-based international order. This paper examines the role of different actors, including the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), Indo-Pacific actors, and India, in finding a solution to the conflict and the impact of their actions on the global geopolitical landscape.

The European Union has been a key player in the conflict, with many member-states supporting Ukraine through sanctions and other measures. However, the EU's role has been complicated by its dependence on Russian energy and the fear of further antagonizing Russia. The United Nations, on the other hand, has faced an existential crisis due to its inability to effectively address the conflict, questioning its core capabilities of security and peacekeeping. As the UN's rules-based order declines, other players have aligned their strategies or formed new power blocs, leading to an increasingly global and intertwined geopolitical landscape.

The paper also explores the role of Indo-Pacific actors, including China, in the conflict. In Asia, economic, strategic, and military interdependencies can shape the balance of power and create unexpected alliances that contradict the traditional narrative of East vs. West. The paper also discusses the role of NATO and its crossroads, where it must decide whether to cede American influence in favor of a more Eurocentric alliance.

Despite the different proposed solutions to the war in Ukraine, the international community does not expect the conflict to end anytime soon. Moreover, the conflict is heavily shaping the role of third parties in foreign

conflict scenarios. The paper argues, therefore, that the diverse solutions proposed reflect the medium and long-term geopolitical ambitions of the actors involved.

The paper concludes by highlighting the common thread among the proposed solutions – that the war in Ukraine presents a dangerous position for Ukraine as it finds itself caught between the power struggle of new emerging blocs. The paper emphasizes the need for a solution that considers the interests of all the actors involved and addresses the root causes of the conflict. Ultimately, finding a solution to the war in Ukraine requires a complex understanding of the geopolitical landscape and a willingness on the part different parties to cooperate and compromise.

2. The United Nations and the Rules-Based International Order

2.1 The United Nations and the War in Ukraine

The United Nations' official stance on the war in Ukraine is to support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, and to call for a peaceful resolution to the conflict through dialogue and negotiations. This was most recently reiterated at the UN's 11th emergency special session where a resolution calling for an end to the war garnered support from 141 member-states.¹ The UN has consistently condemned the use of force and the violation of both international law and the UN Charter in the conflict. In abiding with these beliefs, the UN has reacted to the war in several ways.

Firstly, the UN has actively supported diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, including through the deployment of special envoys and the participation of Secretary General António Guterres in negotiations. At the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine in February 2023, Guterres reiterated that although "the guns are talking now, but in the end we all know that the path of diplomacy and accountability is the road to a just and sustainable peace... We must all encourage every meaningful effort to end the bloodshed and, at long last, give peace a chance."²

Secondly, the UN has actively condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine as illegal. In March 2022, the General Assembly reiterated the gravity of the invasion by adopting a resolution that acknowledged the unprecedented humanitarian grievances promoted by the Russian offensive.³ A month later, on April 7, the General Assembly suspended Russia's membership to the Human Rights Council.⁴ These resolutions have been politically and legally significant in calling out the criminal scale and nature of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Lastly, the UN has provided humanitarian aid to people affected by the conflict in Ukraine, including food, shelter, and medical assistance. Moreover, in March 2022, the UN had appointed three human rights experts to investigate possible violations of international law committed during the conflict.⁵ Around the same time, the UN and several humanitarian partners coordinated a first emergency appeal of about \$1.7 billion,⁶ targeted to assist Ukrainians in the country and refugees fleeing the conflict, later increased to \$2.24 billion⁷ as of April 2022. The UN has also called on all parties to ensure safe and unimpeded access for humanitarian aid to reach those in need.

Overall, the UN's reaction to the war in Ukraine has been to support efforts to resolve the conflict peacefully, while providing humanitarian assistance to those affected by the conflict. As mentioned, with the passing of several resolutions targeted at criminalizing the invasion, the UN has sought to send a message of support to Ukrainians.

2.2 The Rules-Based International Order

The events that have unfolded this past year have brought into question the legitimacy of our international world order, the significance of international security, and overall, the relevance of global institutions like the United Nations. In the years after the Cold War ended, the established stable and prosperous international order seemed to flourish. Based on principles championing a liberal world order, Western society has experienced a period of vast political and economic growth defined by guaranteed collective safety. This status quo has only increased over time as globalization has ensured our society's interconnectedness and with it, our dependence on one another. Yet in recent years, challenges to our world order have rocked the stability our society has come to take for granted. Geopolitical trends including heightened nationalism, protectionism, and "great power" competition are flourishing.⁸ These changes threaten the stability of our world order by weakening multilateral cooperation necessary to combat pressing challenges to the rules-based international order.⁹

The growing challenges to the international order hint at a potentially divisive future. For one, it seems like society is on the brink of shifting to a more multipolar world, especially where there is “a lack of coherence of geopolitical interests.”¹⁰ This is most demonstrated by the delicate balance of power between key actors on the world stage. China and the European Union have historically challenged each other’s soft power and today is no different. China is leveraging its sphere of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while EU initiatives like the Global Gateway focus on growing the EU’s influence.¹¹ Interests behind these relationships include settling geo-economic and political interests, including creating economic and financial dependence.¹² This has further weakened the established world order by emboldening individual states to not only prioritize but also impose their domestic agendas onto world dynamics. In recent years, Russia has answered this call and fought to gain regional influence “(e.g., positioning themselves as more reliable partners than their Western counterparts during the pandemic with vaccine diplomacy), and feeding anti-Western motives through disinformation (e.g., with a strong investment in the media), competition for partnerships, and support of anti-Western groups.”¹³ Russia’s violent invasion of Ukraine, with its fervent attacks on society and infrastructure, have exposed major weaknesses in the current rules-based international order. Further, the ability of the UN to act as the guarantor of international peace and security following Ukraine’s attack is seriously being questioned.

2.3 The UN, the EU, and the War in Ukraine

The EU and the UN have taken similar approaches to the conflict in Ukraine, including diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and humanitarian aid. Both have condemned Russia’s actions in Ukraine and advocate for a peaceful resolution. However, while the EU has strived to take up a more active role as an ally to Ukraine, the UN has prioritized peacekeeping. Some of the key differences are seen in the following areas:

Diplomatic efforts

The EU and UN have both engaged in diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. The UN Security Council has held several meetings to discuss the situation in Ukraine, but its ability to take decisive action has been limited by Russia's veto power. The EU has also engaged in diplomatic efforts, but it has fallen short of becoming a mediator between Ukraine and Russia.¹⁴

Sanctions

While the UN has passed resolutions calling attention to the severity of the war, the EU has successfully imposed a range of economic sanctions, including restrictions on access to financial markets, trade restrictions, oil and gas import bans, and asset freezes.¹⁵ The EU bans revealed on February 25, 2023 prohibit exports of critical technology and industrial goods, imports of asphalt and synthetic rubber, and the transit of EU exported dual-use goods through Russia.¹⁶

Aid

Both the EU and UN have provided substantial aid to Ukraine in response to the conflict and to support the country's refugee outflow. The EU has specifically provided humanitarian aid in addition to around €3.6 billion in military assistance, including for lethal equipment.¹⁷ The UN has provided direct humanitarian aid to Ukraine, including food, shelter, and medical assistance.

2.4 Threat to International Security?

With the possible decline of our previously accepted world order on the horizon, future challenges to international peace and security should not be taken lightly. The rise of China, the decline in American power, the coronavirus epidemic itself plus its financial repercussions, and lately, Russia's invasion of Ukraine have all decimated the institutions of global governance that were "erected or renovated in the heyday of globalizing liberalism."¹⁸ The economic and geopolitical foundations of liberal global governance have become too weak to withstand increased threats towards

it.¹⁹ As such, many argue that the role of institutions has become obsolete; they are no longer a tool that can be used to combat growing economic and political instability.

Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has undermined the credibility of the UN in promoting and maintaining international peace and security. Last year on February 25, Russia, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), exercised its veto on a draft resolution that would have condemned its military aggression toward Ukraine.²⁰ Taking advantage of a serious flaw of UN diplomacy, Russia's veto powers were "a clear conflict of interest while it was also presiding over the Council's rotating monthly presidency."²¹ A lack of deterrence on this action raises questions about the Council's purpose and legitimacy in promoting global security. Further, the incapacity of the UN to draw an end to the war over a year into the conflict is "eroding trust in it."²² These facts point to a need to reform the 75-year-old UN system that is no longer equipped to address the scale of inequality and instability the world is facing.²³

While the inefficiencies of the United Nations have been highlighted by the war in Ukraine, as an institution whose primary goal is to protect the well-being of our society, focus should be placed on amending it. In a speech given at the United Nations General Assembly in September, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida emphasized that the United Nations "exists not merely for the great Powers, but for the entire international community, founded on the principle of sovereign equality for all Member States".²⁴ Thus, the UN needs to reassess its stance on international security and reform itself to strengthen its functions.

2.5 The United Nations and the Future of Peacebuilding

The United Nations, along with governments and other civil society organizations, has historically played a key role in mediation and peacebuilding. The maintenance of the peaceful status quo, established

post-Cold War, has functioned based on the world's desire to commit to certain unifying norms. These commitments, best exemplified in the UN Charter, outline issues that stem from challenges to state sovereignty and human well-being while codifying adequate responses to breaches of trust. Yet this relationship is only as successful as the actors party to it (and our world order) are willing to uphold the Charter. The invasion of Ukraine exemplifies how endorsing institutions like the UN, and by extension the Charter, may no longer hold the same weight as they once might have.

Critiques to the UNSC and the greater framework of the institution are not new. In the 1990s, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the sixth UN Secretary-General, called for reform of the UNSC²⁵ to make it more democratic and representative. He proposed increasing the number of permanent and non-permanent members and making the veto power less absolute. His successor, Kofi Annan, also advocated for the reform of the UNSC. He proposed expanding the Council's membership to reflect geopolitical realities "or risk becoming increasingly irrelevant"²⁶ and removing the veto power altogether. Ban Ki-moon, the eighth UN Secretary-General, also called for the Council to be more transparent, accountable, and effective in addressing global challenges.²⁷ He hinted at the current framework falling short of these goals. The current UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, has called for UNSC reforms to address the current geopolitical realities and make it more effective in addressing global challenges. Despite the calls for reform, the UNSC remains largely unchanged and is still criticized for being outdated and ineffective in dealing with current global issues. As the world faces new and complex challenges, it is crucial for the UN to adapt to the changing geopolitical realities and make necessary reforms to remain relevant and effective in maintaining international peace and security.

The future of the UN has been fervently analyzed by multiple actors in the IR realm. Amendments to the structure, scope, and reach of the UN and its Charter have been considered, yet the challenge lies in the

ever-evolving state of our world order. One plausible path for the future of the UN is an unofficial “concert of powers” with limited executive powers but with a permanent secretariat engaged in quiet diplomacy.²⁸ Anne-Marie Slaughter, CEO of New America and former Obama administration official, further proposed the creation of a 25-member Security Council “with weighted voting rather than a veto, an Economic and Social Council, and a Global Information and Monitoring Council, all staffed by senior government ministers with the power to propose initiatives.”²⁹ According to Slaughter, these changes would ensure a more representative and thus, more effective, UN when it comes to dealing with global issues. Yet, former French diplomat and current Special Advisor to Institut Montaigne, Michel Duclos, rebukes Slaughter’s ideas. He points to the fragility of a 25-member Security Council when great powers, and their individual ambitions, are in the mix. The fear is that an “informal director” of the United States, China, India, and EU would transpire.³⁰ These proposals are all challenged by the question of membership but underline the necessity of having a global institution like the UN tackle global issues.

The UN and other international agencies are particularly essential in humanitarian roles “to mitigate and contain suffering.”³¹ In the case of Ukraine, the UN has proven it can assist with Secretary-General António Guterres securing the evacuation³² of Ukrainians under siege by Russian forces in Mariupol’s Azovstal steel plant last April as well as distributing food to over 6.7 million people and cash assistance to 1.7 million people since the war’s onset.³³ Richard Gowan, the UN director of International Crisis Group, argues that while “such steps fall far short of conflict resolution, [...] conflict mitigation is still a valuable political and moral task when nothing else is possible.”³⁴

Yet, successful and long-term peacebuilding is an approach that needs to be “integrated more consciously” into conflict response, especially from the UN.³⁵ As humanitarian agencies like the UN will keep withstanding the worst of conflict management, peacebuilding needs to be at the

forefront of how they address these issues. The humanitarian sector is operating with a lack of multidimensional thinking and therefore impeding efforts to build sustainable peace. As an essential precondition for other social development efforts, peacebuilding from a multifaceted approach should be infallible.³⁶ The UN needs to revisit its peace and security functions to better understand the role it can play in facilitating effective peacebuilding in an era of major power competition and intrastate warfare.

2.6 Solutions from a UN Perspective

When looking at the UN as an actor with the ability to influence the course of the Russia-Ukraine war, much is at stake. For one, the prolonged state of the war has proven how there is no 'one size fits all' solution to the conflict. However, given the many problems of the UN and its Charter that the war has brought to the forefront, the institution needs to effectively reform to better adapt and respond to evolving conflicts. As Mandeep Tiwana, Chief Programmes Officer at CIVICUS, highlights there are five key steps the UN should take in direct response to Russia's aggression to guarantee international peace and security:³⁷

1. *Enforce Accountability for Evidence-Based Human Rights Abuse*

The UN and state diplomatic delegations need to set stronger demands to uphold accountability for governments that abuse human rights norms. Putin has a long history of persecuting civil society, independent media, and political opposition. These "blatant abuses of UN Charter principles and direct violations of international humanitarian law" should condemn him to strict sanctions. Tiwana argues that Russia should be placed in "diplomatic isolation by UN member-states" while also being suspended from UN bodies and international investigations. Furthermore, states should abolish commercial relationships that "benefit Russia's military infrastructure as it is involved in committing war crimes."

2. Amend Veto Power

As has been evidenced over the past couple of months, the UN lacks oversight when one of the P5s instigates a war. The conflict management tools the UN has come to count on (disposal, mediation, peacekeeping) become obsolete in such a scenario. This flaw should instigate reform by means of Security Council permanent members voluntarily abdicating their arbitrary veto powers.

3. Encourage Civil Society Participation

Governments that abstained from or directly opposed resolutions condemning Russia's invasion should be pressured to account for public opinion ahead of further action at the UN. This could be conducted through parliamentary debates and citizen dialogues. Tiwana understands that while the impact of this action could be ineffective in one-party authoritarian states like Cameroon, China, or Cuba, it could prove fruitful in electoral democracies like Bolivia, India, or South Africa.

4. Depoliticize Human Suffering & Involve Women

According to the Security Council Resolution 1325, women should have "equal" and "full" participation in conflict resolution given their disproportionate suffering in any conflict.³⁸ In abiding by this, the international community must depoliticize human suffering "by states that tend to vote on perceived short-term interests rather than principle."

5. Restructure UN Operations

As mentioned earlier on, various proposals on amending the UN are circulating. The fact of the matter is that the existing, "state-centric, bureaucratic ways of functioning insulate decision-making from the suffering experienced by communities around the world." Thus the UN should consider reforming a top priority following the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Reforms should be bound by stronger "approaches to civil society participation and people's representation" as well as by "measures to ensure strict compliance by states with international law and UN Charter

principles".³⁹ This would include more diversified perspectives to the UN while restating its legitimacy in global governance.

The UN plays a unique role in both mediating the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and shaping the foundation for peacebuilding post conflict. This underscores the institution's importance in geopolitical crises. Yet the UN's inability to legally bind its resolutions sets the stage for its subsequent involvement to be largely shaped by other actors on the world stage.

3. Western Blocs and Unions

3.1 NATO-Western Cohesion Put to the Test

Another supra-national organization that is struggling to find its role in this war is NATO. On the one hand, the situation is all too reminiscent of Cold War dynamics, in which two ideologically different blocs are once again confronting each other. On the other hand, a closer look reveals how different the circumstances are from the events that occurred over 30 years ago. This current invasion marks a turning point for NATO, its future strategy, and its approaches to solutions. Overall, NATO is trying to draw and communicate a clear line on how its military support towards third countries will look like. The top priority of its short-term strategy is to avoid becoming an active conflict partner, while at the same time balancing one of its core statutes of crisis prevention and management. The latter influences how NATO is defining offensive and defensive actions even though they contribute to the same goal. For example, NATO is repeatedly rejecting Ukraine's calls for a no-fly zone as it would include active involvement of NATO's air force.⁴⁰ Instead, it is contributing to building up Ukraine's air defenses by supplying anti-aircraft missiles. While the goal to mitigate the threat of Russian airstrikes remains the same, the means of how it is achieved express NATO's clear motivation to act as a defensive partner.

In the medium term, it will be interesting to observe how the American role in NATO will evolve. The war has exposed the different threat levels and interests of individual allies and has shifted attention to a more Euro-centric security situation. While the U.S. will remain the driving force behind the alliance, it must recognize emerging calls from smaller members that joined NATO during the 1997 eastward extension. Reacting on the different threat levels of its Eastern members will be NATO's biggest challenge and requires a rethinking of its primary task of collective defense.

Indeed, NATO keeps doubling down on its commitment to include Ukraine into the alliance but the U.S. and NATO Secretary General, Jens Stoltenberg, keep insisting that it will not happen as long as the war is still raging.⁴¹ Instead, as the war highlighted the importance of resilience, NATO pursues the strategy of gearing up its defensive capabilities within the alliance and involving less controversial new members like Finland and Sweden.

In its 2022 Strategic Concept, NATO places Russia as their main threat, even before international terrorism.⁴² It promises to adapt and develop, politically and militarily, to face a more competitive world. This statement does not only refer to the security situation regarding Russia. NATO's behavior will also be closely monitored by China. The way NATO is interpreting its statutes and how far the U.S. is willing to go for its allies will determine Beijing's geopolitical strategy.⁴³ NATO therefore has to work with the double burden that every action also sends a signal to China. In the face of an impending Sino-Russian bloc formation that remains a delicate juggling act. NATO's proposed solution to the war will therefore stay within its statutes. The threat of escalation will prevent more offensive measures against Russia, however, NATO's major challenge will be to balance the interests of the U.S. against the interests of its Eastern European partners. Currently, the Europeanization of NATO seems to be in full swing as evidenced by a joint declaration on EU-NATO cooperation on January 10, 2023.⁴⁴ This third joint declaration between NATO and EU defines the war in Ukraine as the highest security risk and at the same time welds the two parties closer together in terms of military cooperation. The forthcoming behavior of NATO regarding its Eastern fringes will demonstrate whether this will bind the EU closer to American interests or whether the EU will assume a more important and independent role within the organization.

3.2 The Nascent Unity of the EU

Somewhat similar to NATO, the EU is finding itself in a difficult and ever-changing position. In the beginning of the invasion, it was oscillating

between taken by surprise and being too petrified to take unified measures against Russia. However, the ongoing war has shaped the Union's behavior, strengthened its cohesion, and even expanded its toolset of foreign policy actions beyond just words of condemnation and economic sanctions. Though Brussels is reluctant to admit it openly, it keeps positioning itself as an active conflict party rather than a mere systemic rival. While warnings from Eastern European countries about Russia's invasion were mostly overheard,⁴⁵ it transformed into a justified fear that the invasion could spill over to the EU's eastern borders. The Polish missile blast incident on November 15, where two people were killed, brought the war to EU ground.⁴⁶ Although it was later found out, that a Ukrainian air defense missile caused the explosion,⁴⁷ the nervous tension on whether it was a deliberate Russian attack could be felt across the EU. Nearly two-thirds of European youth fear that the war could spread across Europe and a study of similar numbers show youth supporting a stronger stance against Russia.⁴⁸ With its geographical proximity, its increasingly unified demeanor, and the public opinion on its back, the EU will assume a critical role in the solution to this war.

3.3 Legal Perspective and Solutions

From a legal perspective, the terms on which a solution could be found are clearly set out. All EU members acknowledge Article 2(4)⁴⁹ of the UN Charter with its respect for territorial integrity and therefore, a solution must be grounded on the territorial status quo pre Crimea's annexation in 2014. There is also a unified consensus that Ukraine should dictate the terms on which peace negotiations should be held and that the EU stands strongly behind Kyiv. However, given the discrepancy between its almost reluctant actions during the Crimea annexation and the extensive measures after this current invasion, there is a possibility that the EU will deviate from its supportive role. As morbid as it may sound, either the Crimea or Donbas region could be used as a bargaining chip to draw a conclusion to the war without Russia losing too much face. Putin has already recalibrated the original goals of his so-called *special military operation*, leaving the only realistic demand to be the integration

of Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea.⁵⁰ Trading these regions for peace instead of a prolonged and costly war at Europe's borders could be an incentive for the EU to prompt Ukraine to rethink its terms of peace. The first signs of a shift in this direction can already be seen, as of April 2023 a Ukrainian senior official did not exclude negotiations about the current status of Crimea instead of adhering to a military solution.⁵¹

The EU's strategy of solving the war or at least dealing with a prolonged conflict scenario is split into inward and outward oriented solutions. The outward oriented strategy follows the Western blueprint of dealing with foreign conflict scenarios that violate the interests of the EU: Sanctions – Assistance – Reconstruction – Migration. A multitude of economic sanctions were imposed on Russia and its allies, Belarus and Iran, in response to the invasion.⁵² It is debatable whether the measures had a negative short-term economic effect. The EU's sanctions on Russian oil and gas led to increases in energy prices and granted Russia a 41 percent revenue boost in its crude oil exports,⁵³ further fueling the war efforts. Experts, however, predict that the economic sanctions will be felt in a medium to long-term timespan, with some even going so far as to envisage a complete economic collapse.⁵⁴

The effects of export restrictions on high-tech components and dual-use items⁵⁵—with both civilian and military applications—are already being felt not just in the form of supply shortages in Russia's industrial sector but also on the battlefield. Russia's military is heavily dependent on Western technology components,⁵⁶ giving Europe a significant upper hand. Restrictive visa measures, cutting off Russian air carriers, and suspended broadcasting of Russian news outlets has further led to the degradation of European-Russian relations.⁵⁷ The legal basis for these sanctions is laid down by the Council of the European Union and are mostly justified by the illegal annexation of foreign territory.⁵⁸ The unprecedented wave of sanctions shows Brussels' willingness to completely isolate Russia in an economic, cultural, and military capacity, aiming for a solution where Russia cannot feasibly be involved in a Pan European concept.

The EU's assistance strategy consists of humanitarian, political, financial and military support.⁵⁹ Ukraine's capability to resist the invaders and their willingness to fight back led to optimism that the country can become a buffer zone between Russia and the EU. The assistance goes beyond mere humanitarian and political measures. Financial and, especially, infrastructure support, aim to increase Ukraine's stability and therefore combat endurance. Russia's strategic shift towards attacking crucial energy infrastructure left Ukraine particularly vulnerable to the winter. With the EU's shipment of energy supplies and shelter items, first aid kits, and protective clothing, Brussels recognizes the winter as a crucial factor in the war. For the first time in its history, the EU is also providing lethal aid, channeled through the newly created European Peace Facility fund.⁶⁰ As of March 2023, the fund will mobilize €7.9 billion worth of military equipment to Ukraine. With complicated multilateral arms exchanges, reactivation of old military arsenal, and active training for Ukrainian soldiers, EU member-states are seeking to avoid undermining their own military operational readiness while still being wary of becoming an active party to the war. Above all, the delivery of the German Leopard 2 tank represents the current pinnacle of European arms deliveries.⁶¹ Around 50 tanks, which stem from several European army stocks, are intended not only to increase Ukraine's defensive capabilities, but also make a decisive contribution to offensive efforts to recapture occupied territories.⁶² This unprecedented range and scope of support demonstrates the EU's newfound understanding as a political entity to bring about geopolitical solutions, venturing into territories that might previously have been the preserve of NATO or the UN. Moreover, *reconstruction* measures that go beyond immediate assistance are already being drafted. Calls for a second Marshall Plan are already being promoted by German Chancellor Scholz and President of the European Commission von der Leyen.⁶³ Much like the U.S.' intention with the initial Marshall Plan, the EU wants a reinvigorated Ukraine as a strategic partner on its Eastern border.

Lastly, by making *migration* one of its pillars of assistance, the EU has learnt from its mistakes in the 2015 European migrant crisis. An

immediate reaction, faster distribution, and simplified temporary refugee status combined with a higher acceptance among the EU population and higher educational level of the immigrants could even lead to a potential contribution to EU's labor force by Ukrainian refugees.⁶⁴

The reaction to the refugee situation and the careful consideration of military assistance to not weaken its own defensive capability are also part of EU's inward oriented strategy. Gearing up for different outcome scenarios, the EU follows a mixture of resilience and deterrence. The main deterrence comes through an increase in military spending, Sweden and Finland's possible NATO accession, and increasing efforts in military cooperation, like a joint military procurement system or granting better military mobility within the Union.⁶⁵ The deteriorating relation with Russia unveiled delicate dependencies and domestic weak points. The EU is still in the process of finding and establishing solutions to strengthen its energy and IT infrastructure, countering disinformation campaigns, reducing economic and strategic dependencies on Russian oil and gas, and dealing with the autocratic tendencies of some members. A new crisis management strategy with a Multiannual Financial Framework,⁶⁶ inflation management and investment stimulations, was established to mitigate the negative economic effects on the EU population and thereby ensure support for prolonged sanctions and a continuing hard stance on Russia. While these strategies are pointing towards a new era of European bloc building, it remains questionable whether the EU will bandwagon with U.S. interest or if it will emerge as an independent balancing power on the European continent.

3.4 New Bloc on the Horizon?

As its own balancing power, the EU has a distinct toolset that could help solve the conflict or at least contain Russia's imperialistic ambitions elsewhere. First, the EU has the capacity, experience, and legitimacy to host and support peace negotiations. Although peace seem far-fetched at the moment, the tide of war can be unpredictable and the possibility to hold fast negotiations could be a potential exit scenario. Although the EU

would not be neutral ground, it would have the necessary “geopolitical importance” as Putin keeps proclaiming, when talking about possible negotiation partners. It is therefore imperative that the EU provides an easily accessible platform for peace talks with a flexible range of participants like NATO, U.S., or non-EU members and a scalable multilayered peace process, ranging from bilateral to multilateral frameworks.

Another EU-exclusive strategy is a solution using an integration approach. Integrating Ukraine and other former Soviet states threatened by a Russian invasion into the EU network not only creates a strong Eastern border, subsequently isolating Russia, but also spins a net of allies, which is less threatening than an Eastern NATO expansion. The EU’s integration strategy is a multilayered approach, containing a mix of economic entanglement, development support, and migration. However, their strongest tool remains the prospect of EU accession. Granting Ukraine candidate country status amid the war on June 23, 2022,⁶⁷ the EU sent a strong signal of support, refuting its reputation as a hesitant and rigid structure. Furthermore, granting Moldova candidate country status and reinforcing the intentions of integrating Georgia and Western Balkan States into the EU supports this integration strategy.⁶⁸ But the utilization of the accession process as a foreign policy tool runs the risk of deviating from a rational and sustainable EU expansion. Nevertheless, the prospect of accession remains a strong signal not just to Russia, but towards democracy in general. Even if a fast accession remains unrealistic, it can still be used as a bargaining chip, where countries can refuse to join the Union in exchange for peace and neutrality.

The EU’s strategy seems to consist of a toolkit of solutions all geared towards a prolonged course of war with a slightly optimistic outlook for Ukraine. First signs of war-weariness within the Russian population might even indicate that there is an opportunity for change from within Russia. Nevertheless, the decoupling and isolation of Russia from the EU has already irreversibly progressed, and Brussels keeps promoting its bloc building effort as the main solution to the security situation in Europe.

4. Perspectives from Asia: China, India, and the Indo-Pacific

4.1 China's Gamble with Russian Friendship

China has abstained twice from the UN resolution voting regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, yet it keeps reiterating the importance of peace talks and dialogue.⁶⁹ China's point of view on sovereignty and territorial integrity differs from the Western rules-based order. It emphasizes the "historical web"⁷⁰ between Ukraine and Russia, marking China's favorable position towards Russia. Another reasonable speculation of this emphasis would be the Taiwan issue, a self-controlled island that China claims to be an inalienable part of China. By iterating the existence of the "historical web," China could show its understanding of Russia's motivation for invading Ukraine, meanwhile, indirectly reiterating its own historical right to control Taiwan.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has urged Europe to establish "a balanced, effective and sustainable security mechanism"⁷¹ to solve the Ukraine crisis while calling for an independent European perception of China and its policy. China not only claims the U.S. and NATO have responsibilities for the crisis since their expansion enhances Russia's national insecurity but also believes the U.S. takes advantage of its Indo-Pacific Strategy to "create regional tension and provoke confrontation."⁷² From these statements, it is evident that China attempts to split the U.S. and the EU to widen the space within the Western rules-based order and control the American narrative of international relations.

China has considerable influence in the solution-finding process because it maintains normal trade with Russia and imports crude oil in RMB and Ruble from Russia, which provides breathing space for Russia from the sanctions. Meanwhile, China is highly aware of the risks of working with Russia. Still, China remains a Russian trade partner while

it can avoid secondary sanctions and only provides vague statements regarding Ukraine. Moreover, China's policy toward Russia has shifted from no limit partnership⁷³ to "non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third parties"⁷⁴ (不结盟 bù jié méng、不对抗 bù duì kàng、不针对第三方 bù zhēn duì dì sān fāng),⁷⁵ which offers China more room to maneuver its foreign policy. China attempts to use the war to shift the Western-dominant narrative of the Western rules-based order. In addition, utilizing Russia's instability, lack of support, and current Sino-Russia relation as leverage to challenge and navigate itself within the Western rules-based order while having the capability of bargaining with the West.

4.2 India – Strategic Ambiguity

China and India are the biggest importers of Russian crude oil.⁷⁶ At the same time, India believes energy and food supplies should be guaranteed while promoting peace as a neutral third country. India was involved in resolving the potential nuclear and food supply crises in Ukraine.⁷⁷ At the G20 summit in 2022, India's Prime Minister Modi said, "...we have to find a way to return to the path of ceasefire and diplomacy in Ukraine."⁷⁸ Additionally, India reiterates its support and belief in peace. However, India's military dependency on Russia and its geopolitical location significantly impacts its position in the Ukraine war, reflected upon India's abstention in the UN resolution voting.

There are two major reasons why India has adopted neutrality as its continuous stance for the war in Ukraine. Firstly, Russia has been the largest arms equipment supplier for India for decades.⁷⁹ Reportedly, Russia accounted for 69 percent of India's arms imports between 2012 and 2016;⁸⁰ it fell to 46 percent between 2017 and 2021. However, India still lacks the ability to speed up the diversification of the sources of military equipment to reduce its dependency on Russia. Secondly, India's geopolitical location. In 2020 and 2022, India and China had border conflicts in the Himalayan region, which caused few casualties.⁸¹ In addition, the territorial dispute of Kashmir between India, Pakistan, and China is also a crucial point that

India considers when making its foreign policy. India must balance its relations with China and Russia since Russia could mediate regarding the border conflict between India and China. Therefore, the growing Sino-Russia relations could be concerning for India as indicative of a loss of partial support.⁸² Furthermore, India must consider its policy toward its vicinity of Afghanistan and Central Asia,⁸³ where Russia has influence and the U.S. withdrew from in 2021. However, India also needs the U.S. to balance China's power in the Indo-Pacific region.

For these two reasons, India has an independent foreign policy that allows it to navigate between different major forces. Although India has not abandoned its neutrality regarding Ukraine, India's stance on the war is getting harsher. Modi urged Putin to solve the problem through democracy, diplomacy, and dialogue in September.⁸⁴ Clearly, India values the Western rules-based order by standing with peace and stepping in when there is any possibility to help. However, its national interest governed by geopolitics and the economy are its priority.

4.3 Japan – Western Countries' Biggest Asian Ally

Japan was the only country in Asia that joined the sanctions during the Crimea crisis in 2014. Unsurprisingly, compared to other Asian countries, Japan has taken a harsh stance against Russia since the onset of the war. However, like India, Japan has to balance its relations with the U.S., Russia, and China. Especially since 9 percent of Japan's LNG is imported from Russia,⁸⁵ while China is Japan's largest trading partner.⁸⁶ Yet, Japan also has territorial disputes with Russia and China.

Japan joined the Western-led sanctions and publicly condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁸⁷ Russia was displeased by this development and urged Japan to take the initial step to rebuild bilateral relations.⁸⁸ Compared to the tension between Japan and Russia, relations between China and Japan are promising. In November, China and Japan reached a five-point consensus for their bilateral relations emphasizing stability, development, peace, and prosperity.⁸⁹ As Japan's biggest trading partner

and neighboring country, this development emboldens Japan to continue closely siding with Ukraine.

However, Russia's lack of essential support and the growing military tie between China and Russia might jeopardize Japan's national security since Russia might choose to sacrifice its partial interest with Japan to get more support from China. Given this situation and the invasion of Ukraine, Japan is planning to increase its defense budget and closely stands with the U.S. and the Western rules-based order while maintaining bilateral relations with China and reiterating that Russia should take responsibility for the war.⁹⁰

4.4 South Korea and ASEAN Countries – Swinging Between Different Forces

South Korea passively joined the sanctions imposed on Russia; it keeps a low profile regarding the Ukraine war.⁹¹ South Korea is trying to balance itself between China and the U.S. while considering its military tension with North Korea. Economically,⁹² China is the biggest trading partner to South Korea and the U.S. is the second largest. Additionally, Russia, China, and North Korea have a triangle relationship that has the potential to influence the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. Meanwhile, South Korea stands with the Western rules-based order by cooperating with the U.S. and is sending non-lethal equipment to Ukraine while being cautious about the increasingly closer relations between Russia, China, and North Korea.⁹³

Of the ASEAN member-nations, only Singapore has joined the sanctions while the rest of the countries in the region have taken a vague position toward the war. ASEAN countries called for dialogue and peaceful resolution compliant with international law and the United Nations Charter, similar to how India approached the issue.⁹⁴ On the one hand, some ASEAN countries need Russia's military equipment, such as Vietnam and Laos,⁹⁵ the only two ASEAN countries that abstained from the UN resolution voting in March 2022. On the other hand, China has

been ASEAN's largest trading partner since 2009 and is deeply involved in their economy due to BRI and geographical proximity.⁹⁶ Thus, how China views the war could be crucial for how ASEAN countries take their stances. China's continuously vague stance, so far, has potentially created space for ASEAN to express their concerns about the war in the UN and ASEAN Summits. In November, during the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation with Ukraine,⁹⁷ viewed as a gesture of solidarity towards Ukraine. Additionally, seven out of ten ASEAN countries, voted in favor of the UN resolution in October 2022.

While military and economic dependencies with Russia and China are the major reasons for ASEAN countries to take vague stances on the war, the tide is slowly shifting towards a Western standpoint. Moreover, without a direct military threat like the Sino-Indian border conflict and tension on the Korea Peninsula, ASEAN countries have the potential to shift their stances on the issue.

4.5 Intermediaries in the Solution-Finding Process: Role and Challenges of the Indo-Pacific Region

India, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN countries stand with the Western rules-based order by publicly calling for a peaceful resolution in accordance with international law and the United Nations Charter, and the majority of them voted in favor of UN resolutions. Compared to the Crimea crisis in 2014, most of them took harsher positions this time. Notably, India and ASEAN countries' stances on the Ukraine war are changing, which could be a positive sign that Asian countries have more intention to participate in resolving the war as intermediaries.

The most challenging obstacle for Asian countries to have clearer positions regarding the Ukraine war lies in relations with China, Russia, or North Korea in energy supply, economic and military relations and military tension. Additionally, their national economic resilience and strength are also crucial since most of them are still developing their economy, which might often be dependent on their trading and investment partners in

terms of growth and stability. As the largest trading partner for many Asian countries, China's stance on the Ukraine war has great influence. Moreover, the territorial disputes with China, the military tension on the Korean Peninsula and the different narratives between the Western version and the Chinese/Russian version of the global rules-based order complicate the situation. Therefore, Asian countries have to navigate between their national interests and different narratives and then find a middle ground regarding their public stances on the Ukraine war. For now, the middle ground they take is vague and neutral.

China has not provided aggressive help to Russia so far, demonstrating a possible space for not only maneuvering but also for Asian countries to potentially mediate the war as intermediaries. The urgent question here for Asian countries is China's decisive impact in the region and its friction with the West. In other words, how to incentivize China to shift its relation and policy toward Russia and North Korea while maintaining the Western rules-based order could be the key to resolving the war. The other way around is how the West could incentivize Asian countries to be more actively involved in mediating the war or take harsher stances on Russia and challenge China's narrative of the rules-based order. To what extent is the West willing to sacrifice its interests to offer incentives related to building the economy, standing with certain countries when there is a territorial dispute or providing military equipment to replace their dependence on Russia?

Asian countries in the Indo-Pacific region could be the key to mediating the war as relatively neutral blocs and with economic or geopolitical benefits for the West, China, and Russia simultaneously. Based on the gradually changing trend, Asian countries are tilting to the West. The West should grasp this opportunity to boost its cooperation and relations with Asian countries on the premise of Asian countries' national interests. In that case, we might see a significant change in how Asian countries participate in the war-resolving process which might have the potential to influence China's position.

5. Conclusion

It is not only on the battlefields in Ukraine that a solution to the war seems perplexing. The war keeps revealing geopolitical affiliations and tensions all around the globe, challenging previous power relationships and the Western rules-based international order. The biggest existential crisis is probably witnessed by the United Nations, questioning its core capabilities of security and peacekeeping. With the UN's rules-based order on the decline, other players have begun aligning their strategies or forming new power blocs. An increasingly global and intertwined geopolitical landscape offers breeding ground for a multifaceted bloc building system. Economic, strategic, and military dependencies in Asia can shape the balance of power and might lead to unexpected alliances apart from the traditional narrative of East vs. West. Even NATO has reached a crossroad where it must decide whether it wants to cede American influence in favor of a more Eurocentric alliance. China on the other end still needs to find its role in this bloc building process, balancing between a Sino-Russian bloc and partial neutrality to avoid deteriorating its economic relations with the West.

Given the difference in proposed solutions towards the war in Ukraine, much can be concluded about the medium- and long-term geopolitical ambitions of the diverse actors involved. The war in Ukraine is not a proxy war, nor is it simply a war between Russia and Ukraine. The conflict is heavily shaping the role of third parties in foreign conflict scenarios. If the Western strategy of sanctions and military support is fruitful, the Indo-Pacific reaction will surely be influenced to deviate from its neutrality. On the other hand, the established neutrality may present an opportunity for peace negotiations that avoid facing a gridlocked geopolitical environment.

However, all these possible solutions have one thing in common. The international community does not expect the war to end anytime soon,⁹⁸ and Ukraine could find itself in a dangerous position between the power struggle of new emerging blocs.

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