

Fighting for Freedom: Ukrainian Assessment of the Implications of the Russian Invasion for South Asia

Olexiy Haran & Petro Burkovskiy***

Abstract

Since the 2000s, Russian President Vladimir Putin's policy towards Ukraine was aimed at restoring full control of the nation's political, economic, and security systems. It contradicted Russian legal obligations as Ukraine had given up its nuclear weapons and Russia was among the guarantors of its territorial integrity. Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 resulted in heavy sanctions which Moscow did not foresee, while Kyiv demonstrated better adaptability to the changing war situation and accelerated its EU integration. Russia has been losing its status as a great power and the invasion has cost it dearly. Russian foreign and security policy in South Asia since 2014 is being questioned. The war between Ukraine and Russia created a profound global strategic and economic crisis for the South Asian countries. At the same time, it showed how smaller nations can defend themselves by building networks of close partnerships with other

* Olexiy Haran is a professor of Comparative Politics at the National University of Kyiv Mohyla Academy (UKMA). Since 2002, he has served as Founding Director of the UKMA School for Policy Analysis, and since 2015 as Research Director at the Democratic Initiatives Foundation. He can be reached at haran@ukma.edu.ua

**Petro Burkovskiy is Executive Director at the Democratic Initiatives Foundation, a leading Ukrainian analytical and sociological think tank. Before joining the DIF, he has served at the National Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of Ukraine since 2006, including position of Head of the Center for Advanced Russian Studies (2018-2020). He can be reached at burkovskiy@dif.org.ua

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neighbouring nations. The conflict also proved how manipulations with energy resources and food supplies can constrain such cooperation and how spread of narratives helps the aggressor state to disguise plans to build spheres of influence. Despite some attempts in South Asia to stay neutral between aggressor and its victim, or even to benefit from the war, withdrawal of the Russian troops from Ukraine would be beneficial for South Asian countries.

Keywords: Russian Invasion in Ukraine, International Sanctions, Nuclear Blackmail, Security in South Asia

Introduction

Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, signaled the first full scale interstate war in Europe since World War II. It has created a profound strategic and economic crisis across the world. In the United Nations General Assembly, 141 countries supported the March 2, 2022, resolution on “Aggression against Ukraine,” and 140 countries supported the March 24, 2022, resolution on the “Humanitarian consequences of the aggression against Ukraine.” Only four countries supported Russia: Belarus, North Korea, Syria, and Eritrea. However, India, a non-permanent member of the Security Council (until December 2022), Pakistan, one of the major non-NATO allies (MNNA) of the United States, and Sri Lanka were among those who abstained. Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives, and representatives of the pro-Taliban Afghan government supported the resolutions. Bangladesh abstained from the first resolution but supported the second one.¹

In some cases, given the huge Russian pressure, for example, on its allies in Central Asia, the decision not to vote "against" these resolutions may be interpreted as a sign of disagreement with invasion. The question is what defined the reaction of the countries of South Asia to this war and how Russia’s aggression influenced the region?

We will start with the ideological concepts of Russia’s expansionism, analysis of basic differences between Russia and Ukraine in this war, and proceed in the second part to the geopolitical influences on South Asia. This paper will also analyze various narratives and finally evaluate how it influences arms supplies, issues of energy, economy and food security in the region.

¹ Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina explained the second voting in favour of Russia on humanitarian reasons, https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/hasina-explains-why-bangladesh-refrained-from-unga-vote-on-ukraine-war?fbclid=IwAR1L1UAYRup2DXK5icQUhp7YvP_h7GIJiKjATmkXpmhah4seKxTP67ukKUA.

Ideology of the “Russian World” and Neo-Soviet Imperialism

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan inherited the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal. However, unlike Belarus and Kazakhstan, Ukraine has not only a nuclear arms stockpile, the third largest in the world (more than British, French and Chinese combined together), but also centers on nuclear science in Kyiv and Kharkiv, and an industry capable of producing intercontinental missiles. Despite that, unlike Russia, Ukraine did not see itself as an heir of the “superpower” which needed nuclear weapons to demand respect from former rivals like the US and China. Instead, the Ukrainian post-Soviet society desired to maintain relations with the neighbours and achieve high European standards of living. Nuclear weapons were not relevant means for either of these goals and Ukraine gave them up in exchange for the unique “security assurances”² of its territorial integrity provided by the US, the UK, and Russia, in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum (later France and China also confirmed their allegiance to it).

In 1997, Ukraine and Russia signed the friendship treaty, which established mutual recognition of the state borders. The same year both countries signed separate agreements with NATO: Ukraine-NATO Charter on Distinctive Partnership and Russia-NATO Founding Act.

From the Ukrainian point of view, these three documents concluded a formula of balanced relations in the triangle of non-bloc Ukraine – Russia – the West. However, President Putin since 2000 started deconstruction of the basic principles of relations with Ukraine.

First, he restored the USSR’s anthem, called the dissolution of the USSR “the main geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century” and claimed that

² In the Russian and Ukrainian texts, the wording was “security guarantees” which created some confusion about the meaning of the obligations. Compare the texts here: <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%203007/Part/volume-3007-I-52241.pdf>

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Russians have become a “divided nation.”³ Putin called for the promotion of the “Russian world” (*Russkiy Mir*), a supranational, trans-border community that must have “right to protection” from the Russian state as long as members of this community speak Russian or consider themselves believers of the Russian Orthodox Church, or share favourable views about the Soviet legacy, especially the exclusive role of the USSR/Russia as victors in the World War II.⁴ Anything that questioned the concept of the “Russian world” was called a “Western anti-Russian conspiracy.”

During 2000-2014, the Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan was transformed into the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Putin was dreaming to create on this basis the “Eurasian Union” able to be on an equal footing with the 27-member European Union.⁵ However, this idea never materialized. Moreover, the intra-EAEU trade comprised only 8% of the EAEU countries’ trade, while another 92% went to the outside markets.⁶

Control over Ukraine became crucial for Moscow’s plans. On many occasions, Putin repeated that “Ukrainians and Russians are one people, one ethnos,” and denying even the Soviet legacy of the formal recognition of Ukrainians as a separate nation.⁷ Thus, he has come back to the official

³ “Putin rues Soviet collapse as demise of ‘historical Russia’”, *Reuters*, December 12, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-rues-soviet-collapse-demise-historical-russia-2021-12-12/>

⁴ The role of other nations, included Ukraine which suffered much more than Russia, was neglected by Putin who stated that Russia could win without Ukraine (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B1yiaQ-Z-84>).

⁵ “Russia’s Putin says wants to build ‘Eurasian Union’”, *Reuters*, October 4, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-eurasian-idUSTRE7926ZD20111003>

⁶ See official EAEU statistics: http://www.eurasiancommission.org/ru/act/integr_i_makroec/dep_stat/tradestat/tables/Pages/default.aspx

⁷ “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>. Putin went as far as declaring that it was Lenin which “constructed” Ukraine, perhaps partly because of one of Lenin’s final will: “I declare war to the death on Great *Russian chauvinism*” (*The Militant*, December 19, 2018). And contrary to Putin’s statement, the city of Kyiv/Kyiv principality were at least 500 years older than Moscow.

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ideology of the Russian Empire which recognized only “Little Russians” and denied the public use of the Ukrainian language.

In the economic sphere, Putin said that Ukraine can deepen relations with the EU only after Russia approves them. Otherwise, Russia threatened with a trade war and reduction of energy supplies. The Russian president, meanwhile, developed relations with the key EU countries like Germany, France and Italy, presenting Russia as a “gatekeeper” of the post-Soviet economic space.⁸ Since 2005, Putin has promoted the construction of gas pipelines to the north and south of Ukraine, regardless of their higher cost compared to Ukrainian transit routes.

Russian control over Ukraine lacked submission of its economy through the Customs Union. However, in 2013 Kyiv initiated an association agreement with the EU which included a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), thus opening access for the Ukrainian exports to more attractive and bigger European markets. Moscow in retaliation threatened to impose sanctions on Ukraine.

Under this huge pressure, President Viktor Yanukovich broke his promise to sign an agreement with the EU and, therefore, faced strong mass protests known as *Euromaidan*. Putin decided to help suppress these protests which, contrary to Kremlin’s propaganda, were non-violent for two months. Moscow expected that the authoritarian and isolated Yanukovich would have no choice but to join the economic and security union with Russia.

Dynamics of the War between Ukraine and Russia

The fall of Yanukovich after a failed crackdown on the protests in February 2014 left Putin with few choices. He could recognize the new interim government, headed by close associates of ex-prime minister

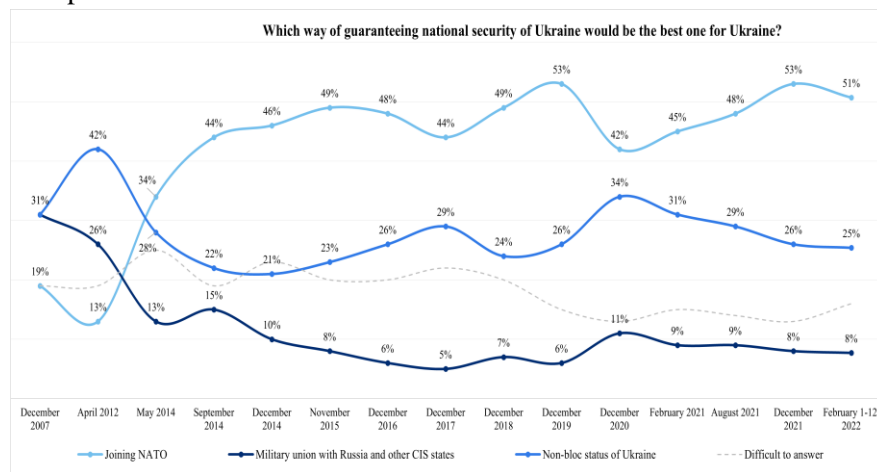
⁸ Jonathan Masters, “Ukraine: Conflict at the crossroads of Europe and Russia,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, October 11, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/background/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>.

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Yulia Tymoshenko, who in 2009 made a compromise agreement with Russia on gas transit until 2019. Another prominent leader, future president Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019) was also a moderate politician, who in 2005 lobbied for a partnership between Ukraine and Russia as a right hand of President Viktor Yushchenko.⁹

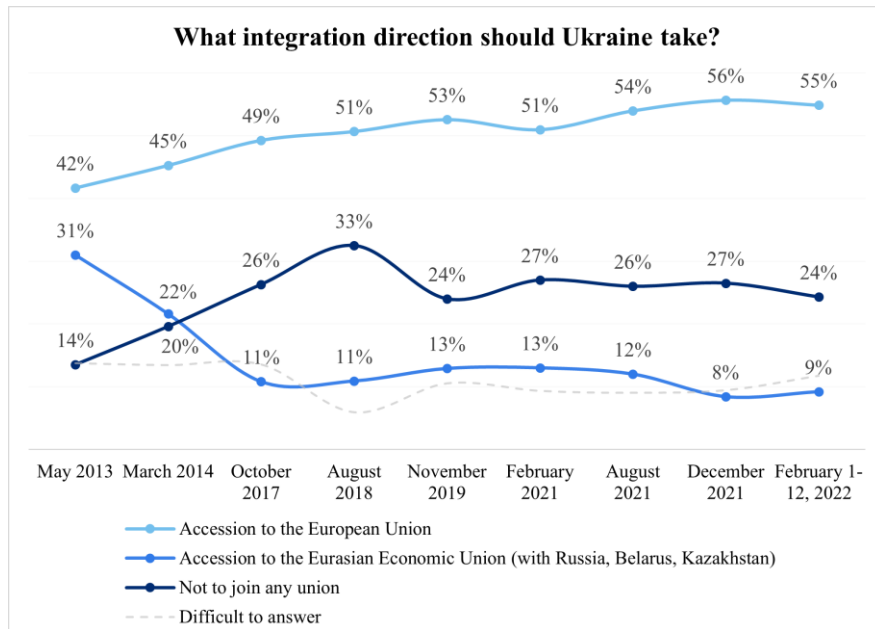
In March 2014, Russia annexed Crimea in violation of both the Budapest Memorandum and the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian Treaty. At that moment, Putin denied the involvement of Russian troops but in 2015, he publicly acknowledged it.¹⁰ It became the first case of annexation in Europe after Hitler and Stalin (neither Kosovo nor Northern Cyprus was the case). Many commentators compared it to the 1938 German Anschluss of Austria and Sudetenland or the 1990 Iraqi occupation of Kuwait.

This was a turning point in the geopolitical attitudes of the Ukrainians: if previously adherents to NATO in non-bloc Ukraine were in minority, now support for NATO skyrocketed and support for union with Russia collapsed.



⁹ Petro Burkovsky, Olexiy Haran, "Ukraine's emerging democracy and the Russian factor", *Russia and Europe: Building Bridges, Digging Trenches*, 2014: 207-229.

¹⁰ "Vladimir Putin: The Russian Federation Sent to Crimea Detachments of Military Intelligence Directorate and Marines to Disarm Ukrainian Military" (in Russian), *Russia Today*, March 15, 2015.



Source: Graphics and data by Democratic Initiatives Foundation

Tables 1 & 2: According to the October 2022 “Rating” Group poll, 86% of Ukrainians were in favour of joining the European Union and 3% against; 83% for joining NATO and 4% against.

In April 2014, Russia extended its intervention to Donbas, first by special forces and then by moving its regular armed forces.¹¹ On April 17, 2014, Putin made his first statement about Ukraine as a failed state and his desire to see the emergence of ‘Novorossiya’ (New Russia), a new state comprising the east and south of Ukraine.¹² The Western sanctions against Russia regarding Crimea’s annexation remained quite symbolic, and only

¹¹ “Could you imagine China attacking Vietnam because it signed Transpacific Partnership in October 2015?” rhetorically asked one British scholar. See, Olexiy Haran, “Ukrainian-Russian Conflict and Its Implications for Northeast Asia”, *International Journal of Korean Unification Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2015: 134-135.

¹² “Pryamaya Liniya S. Vladimirom Putynym”, April 17, 2014, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/20796/work>.

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after Russian forces shot down a Malaysian Airlines plane over Donbas (July 17, 2014), the sectoral sanctions were introduced.

Even under the war-time situation, Kyiv conducted presidential elections (May 2014), and President Petro Poroshenko succeeded in engaging in peace talks with Putin while ordering defence against Russian troops in Donbas (June 2014 - February 2015).

Two Minsk agreements, signed respectively on September 5, 2014, and February 12, 2015, between Ukraine, Russia and OSCE due to mediation of Germany and France, concluded mixed results.¹³ On the one hand, Ukraine formally agreed to introduce the “special status” for “certain areas of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions” (CADLR); while two-thirds of the Donbas region remained under full Ukrainian control. It meant that CADLR would become a place of permanent Russian military presence disguised as “people’s militia.”

On the other hand, Putin formally had to accept the territorial integrity of Ukraine. Also, he had to accept the reality that Ukraine would establish a free trade area with the EU and move to a visa-free regime, while Russia would remain under sanctions until the full implementation of the Minsk agreements.

Still, Russian leadership continued to view Ukraine as a soft target, especially after 2019, when presidential and early parliamentary elections brought to power Volodymyr Zelensky, ex-comedian without any prior political or international-affairs experience. Moreover, Putin considered invasion of Ukraine as the best opportunity to demonstrate and prove his strength domestically and internationally.¹⁴ Additionally, he wanted to use

¹³ “Package of Measures for the Implementation of the Minsk Agreements”, <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/b/140221.pdf>

¹⁴ Ivan Gomza, “The War in Ukraine: Putin's inevitable invasion”, *Journal of democracy*, 2022, Vol.33 (3): 23-30.

a new attack on Ukraine to divide and weaken NATO as an alliance that restricted the Russian influence in Europe.¹⁵

The Western responses to Russian aggressions in Georgia, Syria, and Ukrainian Crimea, Donbas, and the Azov Sea were slow and limited. Until February 24, 2022, the West refrained from tougher sanctions and arms supply to Ukraine, and relied on reaching a compromise with Putin. But the Russian full-scale invasion started the third phase of the war.¹⁶ Despite concentrating on the best troops and equipment, Russia not only failed with the planned blitzkrieg but suffered three serious defeats in the battles for Kyiv, the northern Black Sea area, and in the Kharkiv region.

Moscow found itself under heavy economic and financial sanctions which it did not foresee. After six months of the war, Russian authorities had to call for the first mass mobilization in the last 80 years and ask Iran and North Korea for military equipment. Unable to check the advances of the Ukrainian army, Putin made a decision to annex territories occupied by the end of September 2022, and openly threatened Ukraine and its allies with some kind of nuclear attack.

In essence, since 2014, Ukraine has demonstrated better adaptability to the changing nature of the war than Russia. Contrary to Russian expectations, the *Ukrainian political nation* consolidated all Ukrainian citizens around the concept of independence and integration to Europe irrespective of their ethnicity, language and belief. It made clear all the bluffs of the Kremlin propaganda about “ethnic nationalism,” “Russophobia,” and “necessity of denazification.” The vivid example is President Volodymyr Zelensky himself, ethnic Jew and a Russian speaker, who mastered fluent Ukrainian only after being elected. Before his election, he naively

¹⁵ Petro Burkovskiy, “Russia puts transatlantic unity and security in Europe to the test”, *Ukraine Verstehen*, January 24, 2022, <https://libmod.de/en/burkovskiy-european-security-russia/>.

¹⁶ Putin openly recognized that it was Russia which cancelled Minsk agreements. See, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/news/2022/02/22/7134452/>

believed in compromises with Putin to stop the conflict but after the brutal invasion, he became the symbol of resistance.

Impact of the Ukrainian-Russian War on South Asia

Regional Security and Cooperation:

Before February 24, 2022, the South Asian governments looked at Russia as one of the key global players able to compete with the US, China, and the EU. In the sphere of international security, Russia participated in the global efforts against transnational terrorist networks (2001-2003). At the same time, Moscow challenged US interventions in Iraq (2003), Libya (2011) and Syria (2013-2021), by diplomatic means¹⁷ and provided direct military support to the embattled regime of Bashar Al-Assad (2015-2022). Russia intensively supported its image of a global player by advocating non-Western multilateral platforms for international cooperation such as BRICS and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

In South Asia, Russia considered India as a heavyweight player, the biggest economy, and a market for the Russian exports, foremost military hardware, and supplier of cheap Information Technology and pharmaceutical products. Since 2002, Putin personally promoted the idea of India becoming a permanent member of the UN Security Council,¹⁸ although no specific steps were taken by it.¹⁹ At the same time, Russia was cautious about a too close alliance with India to counterbalance China because it needed Beijing as a crucial, global ally against American influence. However, Indian observers expressed confidence that New

¹⁷ “Putin speaks out against unilateral intervention”, *Reuters*, September 26, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-putin-idUSBRE88P0XZ20120926>

¹⁸ “Delhi Declaration on Further Consolidation of Strategic Partnership between the Republic of India and the Russian Federation,” New Delhi, December 4, 2002, <https://mea.gov.in/other.htm?dtl/20058/president+putins+visit+to+india+decembe#2>

¹⁹ “Putin backs India's UN seat bid”, *BBC*, December 4, 2004, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4069453.stm

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Delhi has strong levers with Russia to prevent its rapprochement with China or Pakistan at the expense of India's strategic interests.²⁰

Some observers believe that "India, now courted by all sides, is the clear beneficiary of Russia's war."²¹ However, while China and the US have the same share in India's trade, it is impossible to transform India without American investments and technologies. India needs the US support to counterbalance China in maritime security issues.²²

India, the only South Asian state, joined the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (14 countries) launched by the US President Joe Biden in May 2022 (an initiative criticized by China). The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework would "outweigh" in both population and GDP -- the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (with China but without India). On July 14, 2022, the heads of government of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US created the "I2U2" Group to cooperate in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security.

Since Moscow considered Islamabad as an American ally and a strategic partner of China, it provided the most advanced weapons to India. Moreover, as argued by Pakistani scholars, the primacy of India and Russia's investment in India is incomparable to what Pakistan could offer.²³ On the other hand, Russia could not match the financial resources

²⁰ Rajorshi Roy, "Russia's Growing Outreach to Pakistan: Should India be Concerned?" *South Asian Voices*, June 29, 2021, <https://southasianvoices.org/russias-growing-outreach-to-pakistan-should-india-be-concerned/>

²¹ Derek Grossman, "Modi's Multipolar Moment Has Arrived", *Foreign Policy*, June 6, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/06/modi-india-russia-ukraine-war-china-us-geopolitics-multipolar-quad/>

²² "India's Response to Russia's War in Ukraine", *Crisis Group*, July 5, 2022, Podcast transcript, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india/indias-response-russias-war-ukraine>

²³ Brig Feroz Hassan Khan, "Russia-Pakistan Strategic Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Air University Press, January 15, 2021 <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Jan/15/2002565539/-1/-1/1/KHAN.PDF>

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and technical assistance provided to Pakistan by China and even more so, the West.²⁴

After 2014, Russia looked for ways to increase its political influence, support its defence industry and diversify contracts for the energy sector after these two critical pillars of Russian power suffered from western sanctions. It was the major argument behind Russian decisions to lift its weapons sales embargo on Pakistan by ignoring India's objections and to propose commercial projects for the construction of a gas pipeline and gas-fired power plant in southern Pakistan. In 2016, Russia for the first time conducted joint exercises with Pakistan. At the same time, Russia insisted that its security and military cooperation with Pakistan is limited to counterterrorism and stabilization of Afghanistan.²⁵

All other South Asian nations, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka were viewed by Moscow from the same perspective of the great powers' competition. From the Russian point of view, such nations can only be the client states. Moscow unilaterally changed its obligations before the smaller South Asian nations. In 2021, the Russian government unilaterally changed duties on grain imports and failed to deliver contracted volumes to Bangladesh forcing Dhaka to look for alternate suppliers, including Ukraine.²⁶ Although in 2020, Russia's sovereign

²⁴ Claudia Chia, Zheng Haiqi, "Russia-Pakistan Economic Relations: Energy Partnership and the China Factor", October 6, 2021. In 2021 Pakistani exports to the US was about 20 per cent of total exports, the EU - 28 per cent and the UK - 8 per cent while to China below 10 percent and to Russia one percent! (<https://southasianvoices.org/the-ukraine-crisis-can-pakistan-truly-follow-no-camp-politics/>).

²⁵ Masahiro Kurita, "Pakistan-Russia Relations: Developments and Limitations", *NIDS Commentary*, No. 85, April 4, 2019, <http://www.nids.mod.go.jp/english/publication/commentary/pdf/commentary085e.pdf>

²⁶ "Bangladesh to turn to Ukraine for wheat as Russia plans to raise export tax", *Reuters*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/bangladesh-wheat-idUSL4N2JR05X>

wealth fund promised to supply 25 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Nepal,²⁷ it provided only 5,000 doses by the end of November 2021.²⁸

Another tool of Russian policy in South Asia was the use of economic preferences and personal diplomacy. For instance, Russian relations with Sri Lanka intensified under President Maithripala Sirisena (2015-2019), who studied in the USSR in the 1980s and shared anti-western views similar to Putin's. In Bangladesh, Russia proposed extensive loans for arms purchases, construction of the nuclear power plant²⁹ and expertise in the exploration of natural gas. In the case of Maldives, in 2020-2021, Russia tried to capitalize on its growing share as a source of tourists for the pandemic-hit country's tourism industry.³⁰

The most complex issue was Russia's attitude towards the war in Afghanistan (2001-2022). Between 2001–2011, Putin favoured cooperation with the NATO's ISAF mission. Russia benefited politically and economically from the presence of NATO troops in Afghanistan. Moscow's role in maintaining the Afghan Air Force helicopter fleet and facilitating the Northern Distribution Network and NATO's Strategic Airlift Interim Solution was welcomed and appreciated by NATO.³¹

However, in 2011-2014 Russian policy towards Afghanistan changed due to the deterioration of relations with the US and NATO. At first, the US and the EU turned on Putin for suppression of political opposition and

²⁷ "Russia to supply 25 million COVID-19 vaccine doses to Nepal", *Reuters*, September 29, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-vaccine-russia-nep-idINKBN26K15R>

²⁸ "Two visits bolster Russia - Sri Lanka defence cooperation", *Daily News*, November 26, 2021, <https://www.dailynews.lk/2021/11/26/features/265690/two-visits-bolster-russia-sri-lanka-defence-cooperation>

²⁹ "Russia grants Bangladesh \$1 billion loan for weapons: Putin", *Reuters*, January 15, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-bangladesh-idUSBRE90E0HM20130115>

³⁰ Maldives tourism updates, <https://tourism.gov.mv/dms/document/003d1e4bf7036886bd9f1b1d2571dd10.pdf>

³¹ NATO-Russia Council Joint Statement, November 20, 2010, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_68871.htm

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authoritarian tendencies, and he responded by accusing the West of promoting “regime change” in Russia. At that moment, the Russian leader decided to develop separate channels of communication with the Afghan government and the Taliban leaders.³² After the seizure of Crimea and subsequent western sanctions in 2014, Putin tried to enforce the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as an alternate of security in Central Asia and a bulwark against American “unilateralism and interventions.”

This policy seemed to work when the US-backed Ashraf Ghani government collapsed (Afghanistan had the status of MNNA of the US) after the withdrawal of NATO’s troops and subsequent Taliban offensive. Putin drew a conclusion that the West was weak and would not respond strongly to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. That was his miscalculation. Because of defeats in Ukraine, Russia now has lesser resources in Central Asia, and no CSTO allies supported (even symbolically) Russia in this war (with the exception of Belarus’ dictator Lukashenka).

Thus, we argue that Russian aggression against Ukraine had a transformative impact on the old and new security paradigms in South Asia. First of all, Russia could not defend its position at the UN Security Council against aggression. Putin showed that he understood multipolarity not as a balance of power and emergence of global overlapping coalitions, but as a division of the world to the exclusive spheres of influence of a few major nuclear powers. In essence, such an attitude negates the regulatory power of international law in other key areas like global trade, technological cooperation, and efforts to tackle climate change.

Second, after threats towards NATO, Russia attacked nuclear-free Ukraine claiming it prevented NATO’s aggression and fought a “proxy

³² Ben Dubow, “Careful What You Wish For: Russia and Afghanistan,” *Center for European Policy Analysis*, August 13, 2021, <https://cepa.org/article/careful-what-you-wish-for-russia-and-afghanistan/>

war” with NATO on the Ukrainian territory. It created a precedence for any major or nuclear power to intimidate or attack smaller neighbours under the pretext of winning a better position against a rival major power. In the context of South Asia, it puts in danger small nations which, for instance, would like to benefit from relations with the US, India and China, or India and Pakistan simultaneously.

Additionally, never ever nuclear power plants were seized by foreign powers. Russians occupied the largest nuclear power plant (NPP) in Europe in Zaporizhzhia, put military munition there, declared that they were mined and pressurized Ukrainian NPP operators.³³ Thus, Moscow used nuclear blackmail, and the International Atomic Energy Agency appeared to be weak to prevent such a development.³⁴ It could have led to a nuclear accident and radioactive contamination of the region, further aggravating the global food crisis.

Third, Russia tried to re-introduce tactics of genocide as a legitimate method of crushing civil and military resistance. Europe is facing a huge humanitarian crisis as every third Ukrainian had to leave their home (6 million refugees in Europe and 6 million IDPs). Russian occupiers conduct forced mobilization into the army, deportations to Russia (including children), filtration camps, killings of civilians, torture and bombardment: the Ukrainian city of Mariupol (ironically mostly Russian-speaking) followed the fate of Aleppo and Chechen’s capital Grozny.³⁵ It is not surprising given the history of the Russian empire’s and/or Soviet deportations of Muslim Crimean Tatars and North Caucasians, and Buddhist Kalmyks as well as the 1933 famine against Ukrainians,

³³ “Russia threatens to blow up Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant”, *EU political report*, <https://www.eupoliticalreport.eu/russia-threatens-to-blow-up-zaporizhzhya-nuclear-power-plant/>

³⁴ “UN nuclear chief: Ukraine nuclear plant is ‘out of control’”, *AP News*, August 3, 2022.

³⁵ Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine, UN Human Rights Council, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iicuhr-ukraine/index> ; Omar Ashur, “How Putin’s army fights like Islamic State in Ukraine”, *The Middle East Eye*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/how-putins-army-fights-islamic-state-group-ukraine>

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artificially created by the colonial Soviet empire which killed an estimated six million Ukrainians. It is not surprising as the rate of mobilization to the Russian army is much higher in the underdeveloped Muslim North Caucasus or Buddhist Tuva and Buryatia than in the European part of Russia, and hence higher is the death toll. The Russian army contracts convicted criminals in exchange for amnesty. There is an ideological background for genocide: on the official *kremlin.ru* website and there are calls for “de-Ukrainization of Ukraine.”³⁶

Taking all of this into consideration, one can conclude that it was the Russian arrogance and war crimes that made smaller South Asian nations back Ukraine’s position at the UN General Assembly denouncing aggression.³⁷

However, all three South Asian countries (India, Pakistan and Nepal) which are the members of the UN Human Rights Council were among 12 countries that abstained during the vote on May 12, 2022, for the “Resolution on the Deteriorating Human Rights Situation in Ukraine Stemming from the Russian Aggression.” Yet, the resolution was passed with 33 countries in favour, and only China and Eritrea against.

The UN General Assembly resolution on the suspension of Russia from UN Human Rights Council on April 7, received a two-thirds majority of those voting, minus abstentions, in the 193-member Assembly, with 93 nations voting in favour and 24 against. Fifty-eight abstained including all South Asian states.

³⁶ “A Kremlin paper justifies erasing the Ukrainian identity, as Russia is accused of war crimes”, *CBC news*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/kremlin-editorial-ukraine-identity-1.6407921>

³⁷ “Bhutan, Nepal and Maldives discuss South Asia’s Responses to Ukraine Crisis”, *Business Bhutan*, June 8, 2022, <https://businessbhutan.bt/bhutan-nepal-and-maldives-discuss-south-asias-responses-to-ukraine-crisis/> ; Gaurav Bhattara, Manish Jung Pulami, “Mapping Nepal’s Foreign Policy Behaviour towards Great Power Politics: A Study of Nepal’s Foreign Policy Response to the Russia-Ukraine Crisis,” *Nepal Public Policy Review*, Vol. 2, 2022: 147-179.

Competition of Narratives and Soft Power

Logically, South Asian countries that fought for independence and are democracies (though with problems) should support Ukraine's struggle against the Russian colonialism, terrorism, and direct foreign aggression. As to India, it is "less about neutrality than about support for Russia against Western discourses. In fact, this narrative goes as far as justifying the invasion of Ukraine."³⁸ The Soviet Empire and its policy towards the Third World are romanticized, Soviet crimes are ignored, and the perception is that only Russia cares about the Global South.

New Delhi is becoming more and more concerned about Russia's adventurous behaviour. India for the first time on August 24, 2022, voted against Russia during a "procedural vote" at the United Nations Security Council on Ukraine to invite Ukrainian President Zelensky to address a meeting through a video teleconference. China abstained from it.³⁹

On many occasions Putin presented Russia as a "victim" and "target" of the West's aggression to divert attention from Soviet/Russian foreign adventures that carried distinctive features of condemned "Western Imperialism." The brightest example is the Soviet invasion of 'neutral' Afghanistan (1979-1989) which resulted in 1,000,000 deaths of civilians and caused decades of civil wars, foreign invasions, spread of terrorism, and drug-trafficking. It is remarkable how the USSR used the same anti-American rhetoric to justify the war in Afghanistan and labeled Afghan resistance as "terrorists" and "foreign mercenaries," and how such practices were copied during the invasion of Ukraine.⁴⁰

³⁸ "Indian Debates on the War in Ukraine: All Roads Lead to a Consensus", *Institut Montaigne*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/analysis/indian-debates-war-ukraine-all-roads-lead-consensus>

³⁹ www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/for-first-time-india-votes-against-russia-during-procedural-vote-at-uns-sec-on-ukraine-101661443406241-amp.html

⁴⁰ "Russia's war in Ukraine: lessons from Afghanistan", *Le News*, March 23, 2022, <https://lenews.ch/2022/03/21/russias-war-in-ukraine-lessons-from-afghanistan/>

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Russia continued to benefit from permanent conflicts in Afghanistan, retaining its military presence in Central Asia, specifically in Tajikistan, receiving billions of dollars for logistics services and fuel sales to the US-led coalition (2001-2015). Domestically, while recognizing the Taliban as a terrorist organization and criminally prosecuting citizens affiliated with it, Russian authorities intensified cooperation with the Taliban when it took control over the country.⁴¹ Making agreements with the group officially denounced as a terrorist organization puts Russia in a position of superior power that can violate these arrangements, if they do not bring an expected outcome and frame such decisions as “counterterrorist measures.” Such a policy towards Afghanistan allows Russia to intervene in the country anytime and support any warring faction, increasing instability in the region and uncertainty for neighbouring countries.

In December 2014, Putin celebrated the annexation of Crimea as reigniting Russia’s glorious Christian past, describing the occupied region as Russia’s “Temple Mount,” the name of the contested holy site in Jerusalem. Manifestation of Christian superiority over all religions helped Putin to establish partnership with the same-minded US President Donald Trump.⁴²

It appeared that practices of intimidation and humiliation of the people of non-Russian ethnicity and non-Christian religion were also used by the Russian military servicemen against South Asian nationals, namely Sri Lanka’s medical students and legal migrant workers in the Ukrainian occupied territories.⁴³ Racism, declaration of religious superiority and

⁴¹ “Afghan Taliban sign deal for Russian oil products, gas and wheat”, *Reuters*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/exclusive-afghan-taliban-sign-deal-russian-oil-products-gas-wheat-2022-09-27/>

⁴² Abby Day, “Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump’s great success in exploiting the rise of nationalist Christianity”, *The Conversation*, March 20, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/vladimir-putin-and-donald-trumps-great-success-in-exploiting-the-rise-of-nationalist-christianity-92963>

⁴³ “Sri Lankans describe abuse as Russian captives in Ukraine”, *Al Jazeera*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/9/25/sri-lankans-describe-abuse-as-russian-captives-in-ukraine>

justification of terror against non-Russians do not conform to the declared policy of multipolarity and fair world order. On the contrary, Putin is using this concept to disguise his intention to build alliances with other authoritarian and fundamentalist political leaders in Asia who want to build their own regional spheres of influence.

Russian propaganda in South Asia works in many local languages. It uses diverse communication channels, including different messengers, and exploits incredible fakes, like WhatsApp messages in Malayalam language on how previously Ukraine “invaded” and repressed Chechnya, and now Kadyrov, Putin’s accomplice and Chechnya’s dictator, is fighting together with the Russian army seeking revenge in Ukraine.⁴⁴

Finally, Russia openly justified the invasion of Ukraine in the name of restoring Russia’s imperial legacy and reinvented imperialism as a tool to reshape the post-Cold War order in Europe and in Eurasia.⁴⁵ After three months of war with Ukraine, Putin praised the first Russian Emperor, Peter the Great, for his policy of “return and consolidation” of what was claimed as Russian lands. Moscow’s attacks against “liberal market economy” and “free trade” which are interpreted as tools of “western control” are aimed at covering non-transparent arrangements between states that control the production of the critical resources like oil or grains about pricing and division of the markets in the developing countries. It is followed by an open demonstration of might in the form of joint military drills. Thus, the other countries in the region are presented with a grim choice: either become client states of the axis of fundamentalist nuclear powers and get preferential economic conditions or face growing economic and security risks.

⁴⁴ Olexiy Haran, “Russian lies in India: Ukraine’s ‘invasion’ in Chechnya”, *Ukrainska Pravda*, March 26, 2022, <https://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/haran/623f4c952c9aa/>

⁴⁵ Marlene Laruelle, “Imperializing Russia: Empire by Default or Design?” *PONARS policy memo*, August 22, 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/imperializing-russia-empire-by-default-or-design/>

Arms supply

Russian diplomatic and economic successes depended on the state of the art of the Russian defence industry, energy sector, and its international clout. After seven months of hostilities, all these Russian credentials have come under question.

First and foremost, the war revealed critical weaknesses of the Russian army, the quality of weapons, and the defence industry which will have an impact on the arms race in South Asia. Because of huge losses, there are significant risks that Moscow will not deliver key projects like the supply of S-400 air defense systems, Sukhoi fighter jets and Mi-17 transport helicopters.⁴⁶

Furthermore, it appeared that the best pieces of the Russian military hardware depend on supplies of microchips and other electronic components produced by G7 and EU countries. After Russia fell under severe western sanctions, it had to rely on the clandestine Chinese export of these items.⁴⁷ Thus, China will have a chance to impede improvement of the Indian armed forces. It may take up to two decades to phase out India's dependence on the Russian hardware.⁴⁸ In case of switching to American, or Israeli, or French weapon systems, it could require recalibration of India's relations with Iran and reduction of import of Russian oil and coal.

⁴⁶ "India, world's biggest buyer of Russian arms, looks to diversify suppliers", *Reuters*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-worlds-biggest-buyer-russian-arms-looks-diversify-suppliers-2022-05-18/>

⁴⁷ "Chinese Firms Are Selling Russia Goods Its Military Needs to Keep Fighting in Ukraine", *Wall Street Journal*, July 15, 2022, https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinese-firms-are-selling-russia-goods-its-military-needs-to-keep-fighting-in-ukraine-11657877403?fbclid=IwAR2WtBcgPeL_KAkpIouaQTG4s7_uLRdYPV4vP1RpoDJ3n-BcntsMBS1bfKU

⁴⁸ "India is cutting back its reliance on Russian arms", *Economist*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2022/04/14/india-is-cutting-back-its-reliance-on-russian-arms>

Meanwhile, successes of the Ukrainian army highlighted weaknesses of the Russian products and strengths of certain Ukrainian, Western and Turkish weapons. For instance, the combination of Turkish Bayraktar UAV surveillance and Ukrainian anti-ship missiles R-360 Neptune, resulted in the sinking of the Russian flagship cruiser “Moskva.” Ukrainian medium range anti-tank guided missile system “Stuhna-P” demonstrated high efficiency against all types of Russian tanks, including T-90 imported by India, and even hovering assault helicopters Ka-52. As a result, import of the Ukrainian ASMs and ATGMs can contribute to strengthening coast defence forces and infantry troops of the countries in the Middle East and South Asia against rivals who relied on Soviet (Iran, Syria) or Russian (India, Myanmar) military hardware.

Given India’s role in counterbalancing China, the West tried to involve, and did not quarrel with India over the Russian-Ukrainian war.⁴⁹ Before Russian defeats in August-September, Indian experts even believed that the West would close its eyes over deals with Moscow because of its strategic importance,⁵⁰ However, after the Russian army defeats, Indian officials acknowledged that Russian actions have been hurting Indian security.⁵¹ New Delhi is also aware of the benefits of developing strategic ties with the EU and the US against China’s assertiveness. For instance, Swedish defence company *Saab* announced it will open production of its Carl-Gustaf M4 weapons system in India by 2024.⁵² Thus, it is likely that the western governments will enhance cooperation with India as a more reliable, predictable, and stronger counterbalance to China in the long-

⁴⁹ “Committed to making India-U.S. ties among closest on earth: Biden tells Modi”, *The Hindu*, May 24, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/committed-to-making-india-us-ties-among-closest-on-earth-biden-tells-modi/article65456141.ece>

⁵⁰ “India’s Response to Russia’s War in Ukraine”, *Crisis Group*, July 5, 2022, Podcast transcript, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/india/indias-response-russias-war-ukraine>.

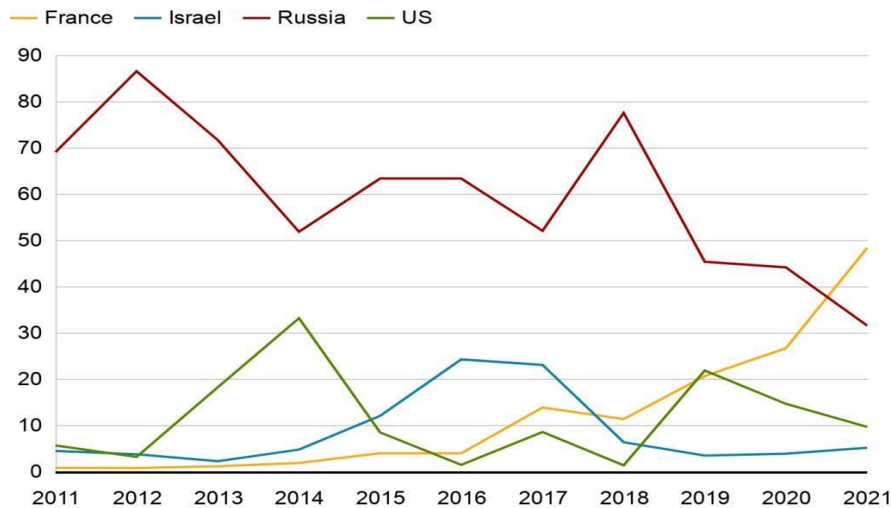
⁵¹ “Analysis: India sharpens stand on Ukraine war but business as usual with Russia”, *Reuters*, September 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-sharpens-stand-ukraine-war-business-usual-with-russia-2022-09-28/>

⁵² “Defence manufacturer Saab to set up new facility in India, make weapons systems”, *Reuters*, Sept. 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/defence-manufacturer-saab-produce-carl-gustaf-m4-weapons-system-india-2022-09-27/>

term future. In 2021, France overran Russia as the main supplier of weapons to India.

Russia's share of India's arms imports has dropped

% share of annual imports



Source: SIPRI import/export data

BBC

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-61274042>

Pakistan's stance towards the Russian invasion attracted more critical calls from the West. Envoys of 22 countries urged Islamabad to support a resolution in the United Nations General Assembly condemning the Russian aggression.⁵³ This came after Prime Minister Imran Khan did not delay his visit to Moscow despite the imminent threat of war.⁵⁴ This Western action received wide-spread criticism in Pakistan.

⁵³ "Islamabad-based diplomats call on Pakistan to condemn Russia", *Reuters*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/islamabad-based-diplomats-call-pakistan-condemn-russia-2022-03-01/>

⁵⁴ See also his interview after ouster "Imran Khan: Pakistan's future is tied up with Russia", *DW*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/imran-khan-pakistans-future-is-tied-up-with-russia/av-62333847>

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At the same time, on April 2, 2022, Pakistan's Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa at the Islamabad Security Dialogue in 2022, stressed that "despite legitimate security concerns of Russia, its aggression against a smaller country cannot be condoned." He underlined "excellent defence and economic relationships" with Ukraine while relations with Russia were "cold" for a long time. As "half of Ukraine is destroyed," Pakistan sent humanitarian assistance to Ukraine via Pakistan Air Force planes.⁵⁵

Pakistan can consider defence cooperation with Ukraine without disturbing China's interests and prevent India's accession to exclusive favours from the West. Such diplomacy may take a cue from Turkey's efforts. Istanbul supplies drones to Ukraine, keeps the Straits closed for the Russian fleet but remains a key energy and economic partner of Russia and China despite western sanctions. The coalition government led by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif proposed to convert the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) into a trilateral project involving Turkey.⁵⁶ Thus, Pakistan may propose Turkey to act as a mediator in transfer of tanks T-80UD, since battle tanks are among Ukraine's top priority demands. Also, in response to timely military aid, Kyiv will be open to extending military cooperation with Islamabad.

To sum it up, the war between Ukraine and Russia revealed how smaller or seemingly weaker nations can defend themselves from the aggression of a greater power. It is important to build and rely on a network of close partnerships and coalitions with other small and medium states. Domestic production of defensive weapons like ATGMs, ASMs, MANPADs, short-to medium range air defense systems, and reconnaissance and assault UAVs is a must for survival. Finally, it must be remembered that external aid from an allied greater power will come only after a defending nation is

⁵⁵ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2350697/russian-invasion-of-ukraine-cant-be-condoned-coas>

⁵⁶ Syed Fazl-e-Haider, "Will the China-Pakistan Corridor Get a Boost with a New Government in Islamabad?" *China Brief*, Vol. 22, Issue 13, July 15, 2022, <https://jamestown.org/program/will-the-china-pakistan-corridor-get-a-boost-with-a-new-government-in-islamabad/>

capable of breaking the aggressor's initial plans, like it happened in Ukraine.

Economic cooperation and competition

Before February 24, 2022, Russia had been among the major global suppliers of oil,⁵⁷ natural gas⁵⁸ and energy coal.⁵⁹ In addition to that Russia remains an important exporter of several mineral resources like cobalt, vanadium, gold and tungsten which are critical for steelmaking and electronics. After the US⁶⁰ and the EU⁶¹ imposed sanctions on the financial sector, Moscow tried to find new markets in China and South Asia. Although Russian companies increased their shares in the Indian imports of oil and coal due to enormous price discounts,⁶² they met serious obstacles due to domestic oil extraction issues,⁶³ global recession worries and limited logistics capacities.⁶⁴

Russian energy companies face dire consequences with the exit of the major oilfield service companies like Halliburton, Schlumberger and Baker Hughes, as well as energy majors like BP, Shell, and ExxonMobil,

⁵⁷ "Oil Market and Russian Supply", *International Energy Agency*, <https://www.iea.org/reports/russian-supplies-to-global-energy-markets/oil-market-and-russian-supply-2>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ "Factbox: How much coal does Europe get from Russia?" *Reuters*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/how-much-coal-does-europe-get-russia-2022-04-05/>

⁶⁰ "U.S. says Russia oil price cap should reflect historical prices, curb Putin profit", *Reuters*, September 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-says-russia-price-cap-should-risk-premium-out-oil-market-2022-09-09/>

⁶¹ "Russia's war on Ukraine: EU adopts sixth package of sanctions against Russia", *EU Commission*, June 3, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_2802

⁶² "Ukraine crisis: Russian oil and gas turn to Asia", *BBC News*, October 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60783874>

⁶³ "Russian crude is more reliant on India and China, but signs of a peak", *Reuters*, August 9, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/russian-crude-is-more-reliant-india-china-signs-peak-russell-2022-08-09/>

⁶⁴ "India's Russian thermal coal imports set to fall for first time in 4 months", *Reuters*, September 24, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/india/indias-russian-thermal-coal-imports-set-fall-first-time-4-months-2022-09-22/>

which brought expertise, technologies, and investments to explore, exploit and recover oil and gas fields. As a result, the long-term prospect for maintaining the current high production of oil and gas is estimated as weak, while plans to increase LNG capacities are abandoned.⁶⁵ If Chinese companies replace western as investors and partners, they will have the upper hand in ordering directions and volumes of exports to non-Chinese markets.⁶⁶ This could mean growing indirect Chinese control over the Gazprom drilling operations in Bangladesh and potential Russian oil supplies to Sri Lanka. Shortage of LNG facilities and lack of investments to build new LNG terminals seriously complicate Russian plans to export liquefied gas to Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

The second biggest issue is Ukrainian and Russian production and exports of grains, oilseeds and fertilizers which have an enormous impact on global food security.⁶⁷ In South Asia, Pakistan and Bangladesh were top markets for Ukrainian wheat. In the case of Pakistan, Ukraine and Russia covered more than 70% of wheat imports.⁶⁸ In 2020, during wheat shortages in Pakistan, Kyiv was the main supplier of wheat.⁶⁹ Pakistan imported a large share of Ukrainian rapeseed, and India was the biggest importer of Ukrainian sunflower oil.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ “Russia’s Long-Term Oil Growth at Risk From Service Firms’ Pullback”, *Bloomberg*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-21/russia-long-term-oil-growth-at-risk-from-service-firms-pullback?leadSource=verify%20wall>

⁶⁶ “Russian oil and gas: headed for long-term decline?” *Financial Times*, June 7, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/9dd4df75-48ee-4dcd-aaf5-0ecb05eaade4>

⁶⁷ “The importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for global agricultural markets and the risks associated with the war in Ukraine,” *FAO*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.fao.org/3/cb9013en/cb9013en.pdf>

⁶⁸ “Will the grain deal between Russia and Ukraine reduce global hunger?” *The Economist*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/07/28/will-the-grain-deal-between-russia-and-ukraine-reduce-global-hunger>

⁶⁹ “Ukraine, Russia war: implications for Pakistan,” *The Tribune*, July 5 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2364775/ukraine-russia-war-implications-for-pakistan>

⁷⁰ “Ukraine’s food exports by the numbers,” *WEF*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/07/ukraine-s-food-exports-by-the-numbers/>

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On the other hand, for years since 2014, Russia has been an unpredictable supplier worried about the volatility of its own domestic market⁷¹ introducing grain export quotas and trade restrictions or even exerting market power on trade partners.⁷² Since food and fertilizers were exempted from the western sanctions, Russian trading companies were able to expand their presence in the global market amid soaring prices. Particularly, due to the blockade of the Ukrainian sea ports and considerable price discounts, the Russian exporters increased their share in the Indian sunflower oil market⁷³ and in the Bangladesh wheat market⁷⁴ at the expense of other competitors. Russia will try to take over the Ukrainian share of wheat import to Pakistan.

Due to military failures in the northern part of the Black Sea and international pressure, Russia agreed to unblock several Ukrainian ports for grains export in an agreement mediated by the UN and Turkey. India, the largest world importer of food oil, was set to resume the import of sunflower oil from Ukraine. If the international community would like to secure food supplies, it should demand stopping bombardments and withdrawal of Russian troops.

In any scenario of war, except the use of nuclear weapons, energy resources and food supplies remain Russian non-military instruments of influence. However, their efficiency is limited by western sanctions. In this situation, Russia would try to act through China and India trying to win their support with the help of cheap fossil fuels and staple foods.

⁷¹ “Russia to introduce export tariff on grain,” *Financial Times*, December 22, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/b36755f8-89db-11e4-8daa-00144feabdc0>

⁷² Kerstin Marit Uhl, Oleksandr Perekhozhuk and Thomas Glauben, “Russian Market Power in International Wheat Exports: Evidence from a Residual Demand Elasticity Analysis,” *Journal of Agricultural & Food Industrial Organization*, Vol. 17, Issue 2, cited from <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/jafio-2016-0026/html>

⁷³ “India's August sunflower oil imports up 89.6%,” *The Hindu*, Sept. 13, 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Industry/indias-august-sunflower-oil-imports-up-896/article65886908.ece>

⁷⁴ “Bangladesh tries to secure wheat from Russia as India stops exports-sources,” *Reuters*, June 22, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/bangladesh-tries-secure-wheat-russia-india-stops-exports-sources-2022-06-22/>

Moreover, Moscow would seek alliances with the Gulf monarchies to counterbalance sanctions with agreements about the reduction of oil output to keep high prices and break plans of price caps for Russian oil and gas. Thus, most Asian countries are likely to suffer from growing expenditures and pressure from their bigger neighbours, unless they find opportunities to make regional and trans-regional coalitions to avoid the decline of sovereignty and domestic security.

Conclusion

The Russian aggression against Ukraine is a modern example of a colonial war when the leadership of post-Soviet Russia failed to restore its political, economic, and security attractiveness and become a center of gravity for the neighbouring nations. The course of war demonstrated how the improvement of civil society, diversification of economic ties, careful implementation of modern security and defence standards, and openness to diverse foreign partnerships have made Ukraine capable of repulsing the invading forces. Since Putin pursues his objectives with the help of nuclear threats, resources blackmail, and a fundamentalist worldview, there is a danger that his behaviour can become a model for others. Russian destabilization in Eurasia, including South Asia, includes conflicts over different interpretations of the acceptable balance of military capabilities, to which Russia would like to contribute with the help of arms trading and technology transfers; disagreements over trade regimes and access to critical resources, in which it can take part due to huge oil and gas deposits and negotiations within OPEC+ oil cartel; controversies over interpretations of “western” and “national” interests and soft power, in which it is willing to frame potential adversaries as “terrorists” or “failed states under foreign control.”

In this context, Ukraine is capable of sharing experiences on how Russian influence can be confronted and contained before it results in critical deterioration of national security and regional stability. Moreover, Ukraine has got necessary resources to invest in partnerships with

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interested South Asian nations to enhance the predictable security environment and contribute to economic development. ■

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