

The Geopolitical Significance of the Ukraine War

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Abstract

This paper attempts to take an overview of the geopolitical significance of the Ukraine War from a realist point of view. How its outcome impacts issues from the power balance between Russia and the Western Bloc, through the prospects of a regional bloc in Central and Eastern Europe, the energy security of Europe, to issues like nuclear proliferation throughout the world, and the risk of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. As we will see, in our world where everything impacts everything else, the significance of the outcome of the war may be more far-reaching than assumed.

Introduction

While public discourse regarding the war in Ukraine has largely been focused on the moral aspects of the issue or broader issues such as the "rules-based international order", relatively little attention is given to the specific geopolitical importance of Ukraine. As we will see, however, the issue seems to have tremendous geopolitical importance, potentially making it the conflict with the greatest geopolitical significance ever since the end of the Cold War. Our paper takes an overview of the geopolitical significance of the conflict, from potential regional consequences of each possible outcome to global ones. The outcome of the war will greatly influence the European security architecture with a major strategic advance either for the Western bloc or Russia, and a major strategic setback for the other, depending on which side wins the war. It will also greatly influence the potential for a viable regional bloc of Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, whether China invades Taiwan or not, may highly depend on the outcome of the Ukraine conflict, and its outcome may greatly influence trends of nuclear proliferation worldwide as well. First, we check the geopolitical significance of Ukraine at a more general level, and also how different scenarios in a broader, long-term sense would impact the region, from one where Russia's demands are fully met, to one where Ukraine's goals are fully achieved. Then we will take a closer look at the most likely direct outcomes of the current stage of the war.

Ukraine as a Cold War fault-line conflict - The Tito-Stalin split as a historical analogy

"Without Ukraine, Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire."-states Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard* (2016).¹ Perhaps this is the most straightforward description of the geopolitical significance of Ukraine. With its pre-war population of 44 million (including the Crimea) as opposed to Russia's 144 million, Ukraine is by far the most populous successor state of the Soviet Union after Russia. Its population is close to double that of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan combined, while its area is larger than France. Thus, whether it is in Russia's team, neutral, or the Western team, it can very well be a game changer in the power balance between Russia and NATO. Besides its sheer size, Ukraine's location also has the utmost strategic importance. If Russia ever wanted to wage an invasion toward Europe, it would have to attack Ukraine first, because an offensive into Poland without taking Ukraine first, would leave the southern flank of such a Russian invasion dangerously vulnerable. An attack on the Baltics would still be possible, but proceeding forward into Poland would not, and without that, would not make much strategic sense. To sum it up, in a strategic sense, as long as Ukraine is not under its control, it would make no sense for Russia to attack any other European country, therefore it most likely would not, and even if global power dynamics would make Russia believe that an attack on Europe is

desirable, they would need to deal with Ukraine first. Which, as the previous year has demonstrated to us, would most likely buy time of several months for Europe to make the necessary arrangements to fend off a Russian invasion. If Ukraine is under Russian control, however, there are several directions in which a Russian attack could happen, and they are also much more dangerous for Europe. First, an immediate attack on Poland would be possible, as Russian troops could line up along Poland's entire eastern boundary. Second, Russia would be directly standing on the borders of Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania as well.

Another important characteristic of the conflict that raises its importance is that it is a fault line war on the geographical boundary of the Western world, represented by NATO, and the Russian world, represented by the CSTO. Wars fought on such great power fault lines are especially important, as their outcome directly marks the advance or withdrawal of one bloc relative to another. This makes the war in Ukraine a very much different conflict compared to Afghanistan or Iraq, which did not have such geopolitical significance (and oddly enough, by installing a government led by Shia political leaders returning from exile in Iran, the geopolitical result of the US invasion of Iraq was arguably Iraq becoming a satellite of Iran). This gives the conflict in Ukraine importance of a whole other level, placing it in league with Cold War fault line conflicts, such as the wars in Korea and Vietnam, arguably making it the most important geopolitical conflict ever since the end of the Cold War, since its result will either be a major strategic geographical advance of the Western alliance system combined with a major strategic setback of the Russian one, or the other way around, a major Russian strategic advance and Western strategic setback in case of a Russian victory.



Perhaps the issue most similar to that of Ukraine during the Cold War was that of Yugoslavia: As with Ukraine, Yugoslavia was also viewed by Moscow as part of its own sphere of interest right after the Second World War, from 1945 up until 1948. However, akin to Ukraine's story in our era, Yugoslavia also broke with Moscow, in that case in

1948. As in the case of Ukraine, Moscow also viewed this step as betrayal, and threatened war on multiple occasions, although in Yugoslavia's case, it never went as far as actually launching an all-out invasion, albeit hundreds of border incidents occurred, resulting in the death of more than twenty Yugoslav border guards.² Thus the possibility of an all-out Soviet invasion didn't seem to be far from reality at the time, but oddly enough, Stalin turned out to be more cautious then, than Putin today, and chose not to attack. Yugoslavia also turned to the United States and the Western Bloc for support and aid, as Ukraine did, and support and aid including military supplies were granted to Yugoslavia as well. Soviet-Yugoslav relations remained outright hostile, and Yugoslav foreign policy was rather pro-Western from 1948 up until 1955, before settling into a position that could truly be called non-aligned. Had Stalin chosen to invade, what seemed to be a very real possibility at certain times during this episode, how that would have impacted the global order, would have most likely been very similar to what happened in 2022. Between the two extremes of either stepping aside letting Moscow simply occupy Yugoslavia or intervening directly thus risking a Third World War, the middle ground would have been not to intervene directly, but to provide Yugoslavia with military supplies, intelligence data, and economic aid to help it withstand the Soviet invasion, the same way as it happened in the current conflict. Thinking about how big an issue such a war in Cold War Europe would have been, and how its outcome would have impacted the later course of the Cold War in case of a Yugoslav and Western victory, or case of a Soviet victory, indicates us retrospectively the significance of the Ukraine conflict today.³

Taking all of Ukraine as the original Russian objective of the war

On 15 August 2023, reacting to a proposal of Ukraine to join NATO in exchange for territorial concessions to Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, called all territory of Ukraine as "highly disputable" and specifically emphasized that Ukraine would need to cede even its capital, Kyiv to Russia in case of such a deal.⁴ While this may seem an ad hoc comment, several previous statements and actions suggest that the real grand vision of Russian geopolitics is taking control of all of Ukraine and that the original objective of the 2022 invasion entailed that objective. A key indicator of how things could have turned out, should Russia have fully achieved its aim, was a pre-written, accidentally prematurely published triumphant article on the Russian government-owned news site, RIA Novosti, which was soon been removed from the site, but has been archived, and the archived version remains available today. The article, published 26 February 2022 was apparently pre-written for the scenario of Russia's forces to have taken the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv by that time. What the article discusses, is not merely Russian annexation of some border regions in the east or south of Ukraine, nor the enforcement of certain Russian security concerns. Instead, it openly discusses the very statehood of Ukraine to be reorganized, and some kind of union or

confederation involving Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine to be established. It discusses such an arrangement as a restoration of “Russian” unity, using a phrasing that is in denial of Belarusians and Ukrainians existing as nations of their own, and discusses them as mere subgroups of Russians, and the independence of these two countries as merely an unfortunate historical accident that needs to be fixed by the unification of the three countries. Thus, the article written with the assumption that Kyiv has already been taken, marks the installation of a pro-Russian puppet government there, and the coercion of all of Ukraine into a Belarusian-Russian-Ukrainian confederation as the natural outcome, either by joining the already existing Union State of Russia and Belarus as a third participant or in some new arrangement.⁵ As RIA Novosti is a site under government control, this suggests that this was the original Russian war aim. If not directly stated, in fact, the actual Russian operations and demands during the first month of the war also implied an aim akin to this: The main objective of Russian operations focused on Kyiv up until the end of March 2022, which would have been an unnecessary waste of resources if the goal was only to take some regions in the east and south of the country. Russian demands for demilitarization of the country and the removal of Volodymyr Zelensky’s government, on the other hand, would have hardly been possible without assuring the survival of a Russian-installed puppet government by the occupation of the entire country, as resistance would have most likely continued in all unoccupied regions of the country, and Russia couldn’t have prevented Ukrainian voters from electing another pro-Western anti-Russian government without a tight grip over the country. Only after the offensive attempting to encircle Kyiv failed by the end of March, did Russia seem to have confined its objectives to regions in the east and south of the country.

Such aims are not something new in the geopolitical thinking of Post-Soviet Russia. Renowned Russian author and thinker, Alexander Solzhenitsyn argued about the necessity of the re-unification of the three countries, with the inclusion of Kazakhstan as well as a fourth,⁶ and in his 2021 essay, also Vladimir Putin left it somewhat unclear whether he sees merely the inclusion of the Russian-speaking areas of Eastern Ukraine as something acceptable, or the entire statehood and existence of Ukraine as an independent nation altogether, extensively discussing an argument over the historical unity of Belarusians, Russians, and Ukrainians.⁷ While the issue of Kazakhstan was not openly brought up by the Russian government, some members of Putin’s United Russia party did express views questioning Kazakhstan’s statehood since 2020,⁸ and in August 2022, Kazakh authorities cracked down on pro-Russian separatists that seemed to have followed the example of those in Ukraine,⁹ and in an interesting turn of events, during his state visit in Kazakhstan in September 2022, Chinese President Xi Jinping assured his support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Kazakhstan.¹⁰ This shows Kazakhstan was seeking Chinese support against possible Russian expansion in a similar

way, as Ukraine seeks such support from the West, China is open to responding to such calls from Kazakhstan the same way as the US is to such from Ukraine, and as a result, China's influence expanding in Central Asia at the expense of that of Russia in a similar way as the United States does in Eastern Europe. All this suggests, that had the Russian invasion of Ukraine been successful, and the Chinese support for Kazakhstan less firm, Russia's expanding into Kazakhstan may also have been a real possibility. To sum up, questioning the right of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to exist as independent nations has been commonplace in Russian mainstream discourse ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, thus it can be argued that the objective of the unification of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, and possibly Kazakhstan as well, by force if necessary, was not some ad hoc idea in early 2022, but is rather Russia's grand vision in geopolitics.

Had this initial plan succeeded, it would have changed the strategic situation of Eastern Europe, and probably all of Europe on a crucial level. The establishment of a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine confederation would have been the re-establishment of the Soviet Union in a geopolitical sense, with 200 million people, it would have re-unified roughly 70% of the former USSR's population, (and in the case of the inclusion of Kazakhstan as well, 220 million people representing 75% of the population, and 92% of the area of the former Soviet Union) including basically all of its European parts, except for the tiny Baltic states and Moldova, bringing all of Ukraine's resources under Moscow's control. It would have also removed the buffer that Ukraine has been between Russia and Europe, putting strategic pressure unseen since the cold war on the entire eastern boundary of NATO and the EU, with troops of this new, enlarged Russian empire lining up not only along the border of the Baltics, but along the entire eastern border of Poland, and on the borders of Slovakia, Hungary, and Romania as well.

Impacts on Central and Eastern Europe

How the establishment of a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine confederation (especially with the inclusion of Kazakhstan as well) as the outcome on the one extreme, as opposed to the successful accession of Ukraine into the Western alliance on the other, would result in two scenarios different from each other to a game-changing degree for Central and Eastern Europe, can be seen in the map below. As depicted on the map, Ukraine successfully integrating into the Western system would give Central and Eastern Europe a chance to form a regional block that can match Russia, and thus be less dependent on Western Europe, thus having a chance to be a player on its own right on the international arena. If Russian plans for the union of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine (with the possible inclusion of Kazakhstan) succeed however, that would make the CEE region no match to this new Russian empire, and the CEE region would most likely have no other options but to chose between Moscow and Brussels.¹¹

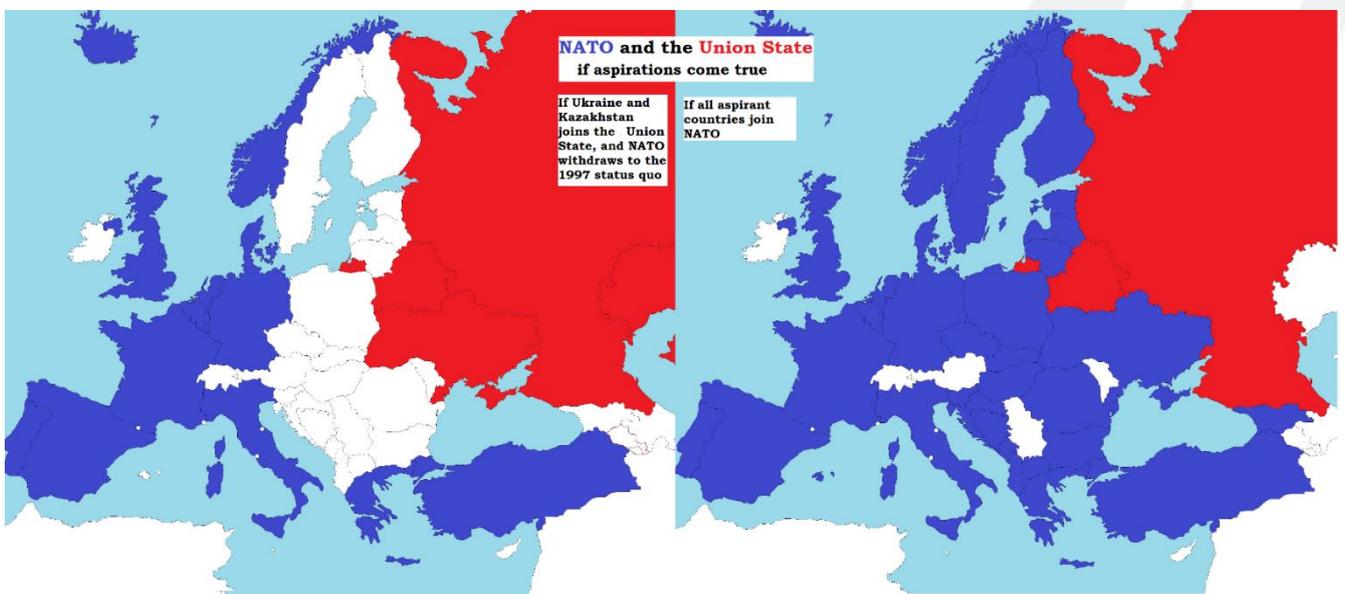


Russia's December 2021 demands on Central and Eastern Europe

To make things worse, Russia's grand vision does not seem to stop here. A memorandum issued by Russia in 2021 demanded NATO to withdraw its military infrastructure to the 1997 status quo.¹² While it doesn't specify whether this would require the withdrawal from NATO of those member states that joined after 1997, or merely their withdrawal from NATO's military infrastructure, possibly akin to France's status between 1966-2009 has been, complying with that demand would have meant a significant breach of the sovereignty of the countries in question nevertheless, with Russia gaining a veto power to a significant extent over their foreign and security policies against their will. This would have applied to all NATO member states that joined the alliance after 1997, namely Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia, no less than fourteen sovereign nations. Russia has been arguing for years, that in 1990, Western leaders have allegedly promised Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not accept former Eastern Bloc members into its ranks. Russia argues this, despite the fact that no written evidence of such a promise exists, Gorbachev, himself explicitly denied such a promise to have ever been made.¹³ The fact however, that Russia has been arguing this for years, suggests that viewing the NATO membership of these fourteen sovereign nations as something illegitimate, and coercing them to leave NATO as the restoration of the natural order of the region, suggests that this demand in the December 2021 memorandum was not an ad hoc idea either, but part of the Russian geopolitical grand vision as well. It is important to point out that this demand for NATO to withdraw its infrastructure to the 1997 status quo is not some kind of Western accusation, but a demand publicly made by the Russian government on the highest level. Should Russia manage not only to establish a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine confederation (with the possible inclusion of Kazakhstan as well) but also succeed in

somehow coercing these fourteen sovereign nations to leave NATO and form a neutral buffer zone, would change the entire European and North Atlantic security architecture. This would be especially disastrous for the CEE region: For Russia dealing with the region is obviously easier if it can do so with each country of the region individually, than if it would have to negotiate with some regional bloc composed of them. (As opposed to the United States, for which a strong CEE bloc would be useful for the very same reason: It would function as a counterbalance to Russian aspirations in the region, and for that matter a counterbalance to German aspirations too.¹⁴) This makes it Russia's geopolitical interest to prevent the formation of any meaningful CEE regional bloc, and the formation of a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine-(Kazakhstan?) confederation combined by the NATO withdrawing to the 1997 status quo with countries of the CEE region ceasing to be members of it, would increase the vulnerability of the region to Russia asserting such geopolitical interests. In such a scenario the status of the countries of the CEE region could be neutrality akin to Cold War Austria and Sweden at best, and borderline satellite status akin to Cold War Finland at worst. While many during the Cold War viewed the status of Finland as a desirable alternative to the status of the Warsaw Pact states, and this is likely true in this comparison, Finland's sovereignty was still limited by the Soviets to a great degree, including the enforcement of pro-Soviet censorship, interference in the formation of government coalitions and Finland's foreign trade relations, as described by the country's former minister of foreign affairs, Alexander Stubb.¹⁵

Thus while Cold War Finland could have truly been a desirable alternative to the status of Warsaw Pact countries, it is hardly a desirable alternative to the status that V4 countries and other CEE nations currently enjoy as members of NATO.



How much difference there can be for Europe between outcomes that could result from different paths is even more obvious if we compare this one with the scenario to the other extreme with Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO, the two scenarios depicting different futures for the North Atlantic security architecture a world apart.

An additional menacing characteristic regarding the CEE region of this Russian memorandum, and also the whole narrative complaining about NATO enlargement is that Russia never applied to the fourteen CEE NATO member states, but always only to the United States, treating the fourteen countries in question not as partners, but merely as objects of a possible deal with the United States. In the 2021 memorandum demanding NATO to withdraw to the 1997 status quo, Russia demanded negotiations only with the United States, excluding from the proposed deal the fourteen sovereign nations in question, deeming them to be mere clients of any deal possibly made with the United States.¹⁶ Russia never offered a deal regarding the matter directly to these nations in question, only threats if anything, and in those cases, sometimes threats implying nuclear retaliation, should they not obey. Also, regarding the alleged promises for NATO not to expand, the Russian discourse only refers to deals with the United States, but never to deals with these nations. Rightly or not, the failure of Russia reaching out in this matter directly to the fourteen sovereign CEE nations in question, to offer them a deal instead of NATO membership, gives the appearance as if Russia is outright unwilling to view these countries as partners to make a deal with, and is instead only capable of viewing them as mere subjects of great power deals, triggering the worst historical memories in the region regarding Russia's past role.

Russia's problem of overstretching

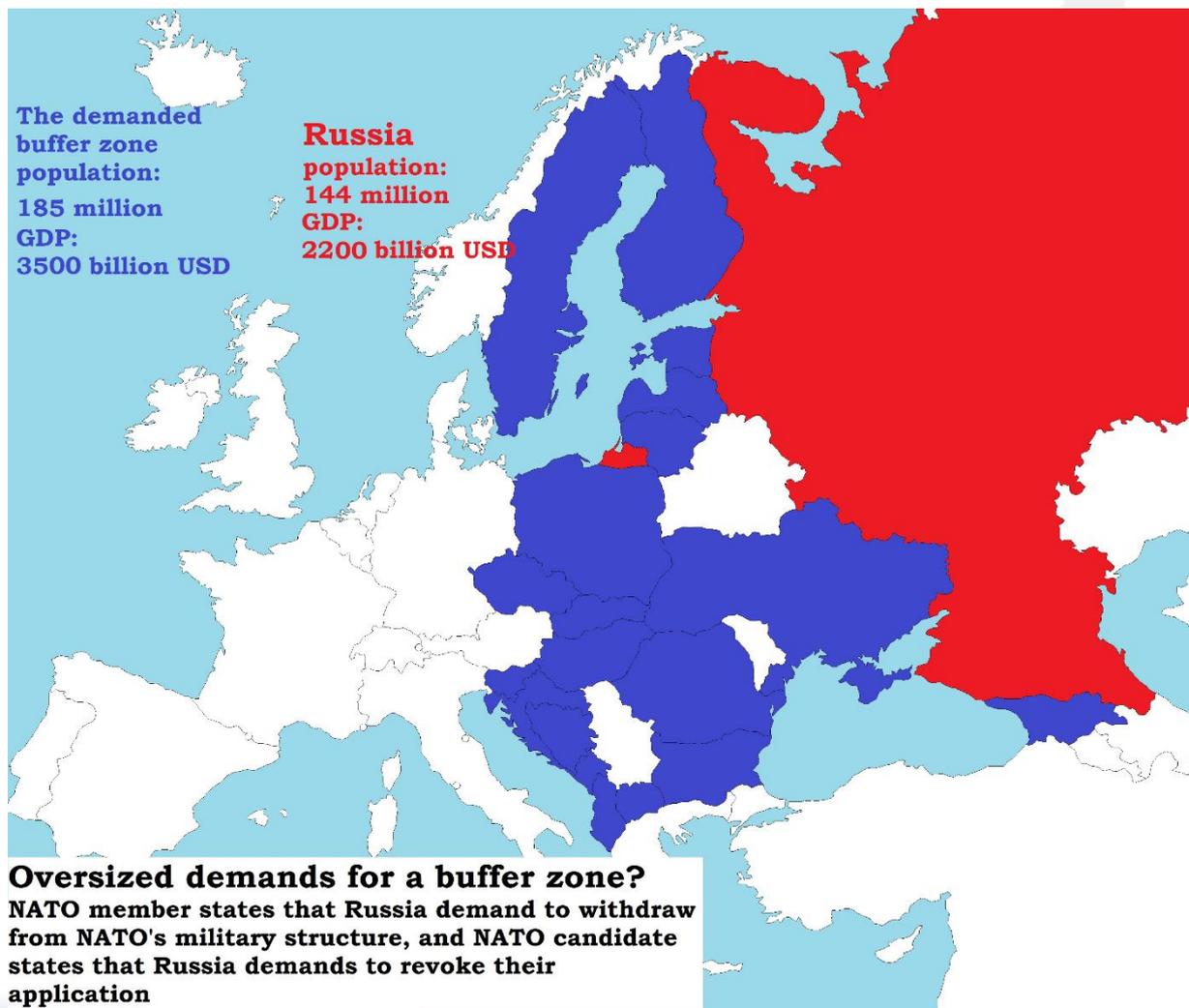
The core of the problem seems to be that Russia is trying to hold together, or rather to reestablish an empire that it no longer has the strength to, clinging to the idea of an oversized exclusive sphere of influence outmatching its actual capabilities and resources. Of course, exclusive zones of influence for great powers are a common phenomenon in history for great powers. However, only the strongest powers had the strength to maintain such, and as soon as they became weaker, such exclusive spheres of influence fell apart. Regarding its share of the global population, global GDP, and these relative to that of its rivals, Russia is significantly weaker today than it was in the heyday of the Soviet Union, and an exclusive zone of influence that the Soviet Union managed to hold together is likely outsized for Russia. What we can see today, is that in fact, exclusive zones of influence today became rare if not absent, thus Russia is craving a privilege that almost no other power has today.

China and India, the emerging giants, lack exclusive security zones, and are unlikely to have such in the future: Pakistan, part of India until 1947, and little more than one-sixth of its population, at the same time bordering India in the densely populated, vulnerable

Punjab heartland, only 600 kilometers from India's capital, thus fulfilling several of those criteria that makes Russia to raise claims to certain countries as part of its security zone, is India's most fierce adversary, moreover a nuclear adversary, thus couldn't be further from a security zone. Sri Lanka in the south has been building close ties with China under the Belt and Road Initiative. While Bangladesh became independent with Indian help in 1971, it also opened towards China after 1975, and now sustains good relations with both countries. Bhutan and Nepal, the Himalayan states played the role of India's buffers against China, but since the fall of the monarchy, even Nepal opened up greatly towards China. Mongolia, viewed by China as part of its own territory until 1949, was a Soviet satellite for decades after the Sino-Soviet split. Vietnam, a long-term Chinese vassal sided with the Soviet Union against China after the Sino-Soviet Split, and started building closer links with the United States and India after the fall of the Soviet Union for the very same reason. Not to mention Taiwan, a de jure Chinese territory which is on the other hand a de facto independent country and a de facto US ally. If we look at the size of the population of Ukraine proportionally to that of Russia, on relative terms, the equivalent of Russia claiming Ukraine as its exclusive zone of influence would be China claiming all of Mainland Southeast Asia as such, which is way far-fetched even compared to China's actual demands on Taiwan and the South China Sea. Therefore, while China has long surpassed Russia in global significance, and India is on the way to doing so in the upcoming decades, none of them has anything even remotely resembling the exclusive zone of influence that Russia vindicates. The closest to this is the US influence in Latin America. This however is not the result of some kind of general international moral consensus, but due to the fact that the US is still the largest economy and strongest military power in the world, thus it is rather the exception, than the norm. Even like this, US influence is no longer as tight as it was during the Cold War, when Latin-American governments turning against the US were routinely ended by CIA military coups, with US-critical regimes ruling not only Cuba, but Nicaragua and Venezuela as well for decades now, and Lula's Brazil also shows assertiveness in its relations with the United States. Thus, the kind of exclusive zone of influence that Russia vindicates is something that hardly any other power has, except for the US in Latin America perhaps, and even that shows signs of loosening up.

Another issue is the sheer size of Russia's required buffer zone. As Russia's December 2021 memorandum shows, Putin's demands do not stop at Ukraine, but as discussed before, the memorandum demanded NATO to withdraw its military infrastructure to the 1997 status quo, affecting fourteen sovereign nations, Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia. This would obviously apply to Finland as well, which joined NATO since the issue of the memorandum, with Russia trading its threats in case it dared to join, and so did Sweden which is in the process of accession as of

August 2023.¹⁷ Russia also threatened NATO applicant Bosnia-Herzegovina,¹⁸ not to mention Georgia, which also aspires to join NATO, and has part of its territory under Russian occupation. This makes the combined number of states that are currently members of NATO, but subject to Russia's December 2017 memorandum demanding the removal of all NATO military structures from their territories, and NATO aspirant states threatened by Russia in case they dared to join no less than nineteen sovereign nations. The full list includes Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Ukraine itself. This not only makes Russia's buffer zone ambitions a threat to eighteen countries, but as a matter of fact, both their combined population and their combined GDP are larger than that of Russia, with their combined population constituting no less than 185 million people as opposed to Russia's population of 144 million,¹⁹ and their combined GDP constitutes roughly 3500 billion USD as opposed to Russia's GDP of roughly 2200 billion USD.²⁰ Therefore, the buffer zone that Russia demands with veto power over the foreign and security policies of the countries located there, is in fact a group of countries that have both a larger population and a larger GDP than Russia itself, which seems to make it an unrealistically oversized sphere of influence.



In 1970, the heyday of its power, the Soviet Union was the second largest economy in the world right after the United States, with 12,7% of the global GDP, also equal to more than 40% of that of the US, that constituted 31,4% of the global GDP then.²¹ In the same year, with its population of 242 million,²² the Soviet Union was the third most populous country in the world, right after China and India and surpassing the United States, also constituting 6,5% of the global population.²³ As of 2023 however, Russia's GDP ranks only eleventh in the world, with less than 2% of the global GDP, less than one-tenth of that of the United States, and only slightly more than one-tenth of that of China.²⁴ Russia's population of 144 million on the other hand as of 2023 lists only ninth in the global ranking, one-tenth of that of China and India, and less than half of the United States, while representing only 1,8% of the global population, little more than one-fourth of its 1970 share, and by 2038 it is projected to fall to 138 million, a mere 15th in the global ranking, and a mere 1,5% of the global population.²⁵ From a population third in the world, more than that of the United States, to a population ninth in the world and less than half of that of the United States, from an economy second in the world, close to half of that of the United States to one being the eleventh in the world, and less than one-tenth of that of the United States, signals that while being in league with the United States was achievable, being in league with China and the United States, and demanding an exclusive sphere of influence sized to that, no longer seems to be realistic, still this exactly is what Russia aspires and also demands to be recognized by the world.

One of the main factors, if not the main factor why Russia no longer has the strength of the Soviet Union, is that its empire fell apart, and fell apart for a reason. Even if somehow Russia achieved its original war aim of installing a pro-Russian puppet government in Kyiv, reestablishing some kind of confederation of Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, and achieves Western recognition of this, sustaining the rule of a Russian satellite puppet government in Ukraine in the style of the Brezhnev doctrine by force if necessary, even against the will of the local population, such a status quo would hardly be sustainable on the long run. Resistance including guerilla warfare, terrorism, and other forms of armed resistance, would most likely be constant in Ukraine. Even if the world by and large accepts such a status quo, there would always be some Western governments supporting Ukrainian resistance groups. Not to mention the scenario where Muslim majority Kazakhstan is included as well, in which case Russia would have to deal with international Jihadist networks linking up with Kazakh resistance. Russia with the increasingly limited resources we see it has, would most likely be unable to sustain a stable control over the vast empire it aspires to reestablish. The situation would soon become a constant struggle with guerilla organizations, draining Russia's resources.

On the other hand, a Russian victory in Ukraine would most likely fuel these oversized ambitions of Russia for a buffer zone. Was Ukraine or even the former republics of the

Soviet Union proper the only subjects of Russia's such ambitions, one could hope that recognizing Russia's claims over the country could appease it and open the way for peaceful coexistence. As no less than a dozen NATO member states outside that region are subject to Russia's already declared demands in one way or another, this rather suggests that meeting its demands in Ukraine or the near abroad would only fuel Russia's ambitions regarding the rest of its demands.

The risk of further Russian expansion

It could be argued of course, that the poor performance shown on the battlefield in Ukraine, and the instability that the activities of resistance groups in Ukraine would cause would prevent Russia from further expansive measures towards Europe, including from enforcing the demands of the December 2021 memorandum. However, if we look at historical precedents, while flareups of armed resistance to Soviet rule in the Baltics, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany caused significant problems for the Soviet Union, and arguably contributed to its collapse in 1989-1991, this didn't prevent Moscow from pursuing an expansive policy throughout the Cold War. Regarding means, while Russia would not be able to wage a conventional war against NATO, there is another option to try to coerce countries addressed in the December 2021 memorandum to comply: Grey zone warfare. Grey zone warfare is the tactic of actions that aim to undermine the targeted country without crossing the line of open war. The KGB with its wide range of subversion tactics has mastered grey zone warfare, and Russia has continued to do so since the fall of the Soviet Union. This could include subversive actions, covert operations, a wide range of threats, blackmail, and even inciting armed revolts among the ethnic Russian minorities of the Baltic states while denying involvement on the public level. Here it is important to remember, that in the Donbas and even in the Crimea, at the first stages of these conflicts, the operations were conducted by armed groups theoretically independent of Russia, and Russia denied having anything to do with these groups. The Baltic states with their large ethnic Russian minorities (mostly resettled there by the Soviet regime during the Cold War after 1945) are especially vulnerable to such actions, and as such do not count as open warfare, it is uncertain whether NATO would view it as one that Article 5 applies to. Thus, whether NATO would identify such as an external Russian attack, or an internal civil war in the Baltic states, would largely depend on the actual political climate in the United States. While NATO not letting Russia take over Ukraine sends the message to Russia that any such actions against NATO member Baltic states would cross the red line, letting Russia win in Ukraine on the other hand may embolden Russia to take such action, and hope the United States to give in there as well. A key component of grey zone warfare is psychology. Russian threats and blackmail are simply more convincing, if Russia manages to take over Ukraine, and stands right on the current eastern border of NATO and the EU, with the capability to launch an all-out invasion any time. This would

multiply the weight of each and every Russian threat, which considerably increases the likelihood of successfully demoralizing and loosening up the eastern flank of NATO. The perception of whether Russia is capable of an invasion of Europe is a vital psychological element behind grey zone warfare, and taking over Ukraine would boost this psychological factor even if Russia in fact would be neither willing nor capable of launching a conventional invasion against the eastern flank of NATO. The weak point of NATO regarding grey zone warfare is that as it doesn't count as open war, it does not trigger Article 5, the collective security clause of the alliance. Thus, if after a Russian victory in Ukraine, Russia starts a campaign of grey zone warfare against countries subject to its December 2021 memorandum to coerce them to comply, as long as it is not open warfare, they could not necessarily rely on the alliance against it. Support from NATO and its key members, first and foremost the US to fend off the grey zone warfare waged by Russia against these countries would depend on the actual political climate, and such a situation going on for years would bare the risk of seriously undermining the cohesion of NATO's eastern flank.

Whether Russia manages to go through with such plans will also have a major impact on the energy security of Europe. Besides Russia itself, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine also have significant reserves of crude oil and natural gas.²⁶ Thus assuring the sovereignty of these nations also enables Europe to diversify its energy imports, and avoid unilateral dependence from Russia. However, if Russia reestablishes control over the former Soviet Union, this could bring access to the resources of all of these countries under Russian control, thus increasing the dependence on Europe. (While Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are not subjected to Russian arguments in the manner of those that routinely question the right of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to exist as independent nations, their oil and natural gas can only reach Europe via pipelines passing through Georgia, a narrow chokepoint. As the south of Georgia, other possible land routes would have to pass through Russia's close ally, Armenia, or through Iran, which is blocking the way to the Persian Gulf, there seems to be no alternative route to Georgia. As Russia already holds two regions of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia under occupation, and almost marched into the capital of Georgia back in 2008, it would be surprising, if, in case of getting a chance to fulfill its geopolitical aspirations, it wouldn't also take control of this strategic choke point of oil and gas supplies in one way or another.)

The Russian Eurasia movement, targeting all of Europe

Russian aspirations, however, may not even stop at that point: The influential Eurasia Movement, popular among Russia's ruling elite, headed by Aleksandr Dugin aims to draw all continental Europe out from the existing alliance with the United States, (With the exception of the British Isles) and propose the formation of a bloc consisting of

Russia's restored empire (itself controlling virtually all of the former Soviet Union of course) and continental Europe, dominated by a Moscow-Berlin axis.²⁷²⁸²⁹ While the United States views China as its systemic challenger, and Russia as a power not capable to act as such, the formation of such an Eurasian bloc would be sufficient to challenge the United States on a systemic level. As it is easier for both Berlin and Moscow to deal with countries of Central and Eastern Europe on a one-on-one basis, as opposed to dealing with a strong regional bloc, this would enable them to concert their actions to prevent the formation of a CEE bloc, as well as to prevent CEE countries from reaching out to other major powers to limit Russian and German influence, thus such a scenario would be disastrous for the CEE region. As Dugin's concept also aims to include four regions that are currently part of China, namely Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Tibet as a security zone against China,³⁰ in the long run, it represents a threat not only to the West but to China as well. Establishing the Belarus-Russia-Ukraine, or Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia-Ukraine confederation by force, then making NATO withdraw to the 1997 status quo by grey zone warfare, thus turning the CEE region into a neutral buffer zone for Russia, and meanwhile monopolizing European access to crude oil and natural gas resources of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Ukraine could very well be the first stage of a long march not to stop until the Eurasia concept of Dugin comes true. Should a Belarus-Kazakhstan-Russia-Ukraine confederation and the CEE region as a neutral buffer zone come true, the establishment of Dugin's Eurasian Union would become only a matter of persuading France and Germany. The Eurasian concept is of course officially merely a theoretical concept and is far beyond the declared aims of Russia's actual foreign policy. However, as it is discussed among Russia's elite, Russia's declared aims would remove all geopolitical obstacles from launching the Eurasia plan as a future prospect.



Causality between Russian expansionism and NATO enlargement - Which came first: the chicken or the egg?

Of course, the question is whether this Russian grand vision of reestablishing direct control over most of the former Soviet Union reverting newly gained independence of the successor states, while

coercing former Warsaw Pact countries to accept a status of neutrality reverting their Western integration has been merely a reaction to the enlargement of NATO, and Ukrainian nationalist aspirations. Regarding this question, it seems however that the bulk of Russia's argument justifying the war is factually untrue, and that Russian expansionist tendencies since the end of the Cold War already started before those Russian grievances were said to have taken place:

Regarding the Russian claim that Gorbachev got a verbal promise for NATO not to accept former Eastern Bloc members into its ranks, it was not only Gorbachev explicitly denying such promise to have ever been given,³¹ but Russia also didn't request such an agreement either from former Warsaw Pact members states at the dissolution of the bloc in 1991, or from the successor states of the Soviet Union at the dissolution of the union later the same year, and moreover, in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act Russia agreed that all European states are free to choose their means of security and follow the principles of the Helsinki Final Act that guaranteed the freedom of all states to join any international organization that they wish for, without requesting any exceptions for Ukraine or other former Soviet member states.³²³³

Regarding Russian claims that the four regions of eastern and southern Ukraine unilaterally annexed by Russia in September 2022, Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk, and Zaporizhzhia are ethnic Russian lands, that have been given to Ukraine at the formation of the Soviet Union only due to some kind of altruistic administrative error, facts also suggest otherwise: According to the first Soviet census of 1926, the number of ethnic Ukrainians living in Russia (numbering 7 873 000) than Russians in Ukraine (numbering 2 677 000), with the Kuban region between Ukraine and the Caucasus representing a significant Ukrainian-majority region assigned to Russia within the new Soviet administration. Thus numbers suggest the right opposite of the Russian narrative: The Soviet administrative delimitation between Russia and Ukraine favored in fact Russia, assigning ethnic Ukrainian regions of far larger population to Russia, than the other way around.³⁴ This situation only changed to the contrary by the end of the Cold War due to Soviet-era forced Russification of ethnic Ukrainians of the Kuban region of Russia, Soviet-era Russification in Ukraine itself, death of millions of Ukrainians in Stalin's artificial famine of the Holodomor, and Soviet-era mass resettlement of ethnic Russians into Ukraine. While ethnic Russians made up merely 9,2% of Ukraine's population in 1926,³⁵ this ratio increased to 22,1% by 1989³⁶ and still stood at 17,2% in 2001.³⁷ A large portion of ethnic Ukrainians in Eastern Ukraine switched to Russian as their main language only after the artificial famine of 1932-33 due to Soviet policies encouraging the use of Russian instead of native languages in Soviet republics outside Russia as well. This segment of the population preserved their Ukrainian ethnic identity on the other hand. ³⁸ At the same time, on the other side of the border, the ethnic Ukrainian rural population of the Kuban region, massive and counting millions of people in 1926, all but

disappeared by 1989 amidst the forced Russification policies of the Soviet Union. Even like this, ethnic Russians were 58% of the population in Crimea, 39% of the Luhansk Oblast, 38% of the Donetsk Oblast, 25% of the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, and 14% of Kherson Oblast according to the 2001 Ukrainian census.³⁹ So while the Russian argument labeling these regions as ethnic Russian may have some legitimacy regarding the Crimea, the two oblasts constituting the Donbas can rather be called ethnically mixed, and the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions with a solid Ukrainian majority, albeit with significant Russian minorities.

Regarding what people living in the given regions think, we do have the results of referendums and elections in hand. When Ukraine broke off from the Soviet Union, an independence referendum was conducted under the supervision of Soviet authorities, thus undisputed by Russia at the time. The share of the votes favoring an independent Ukraine as opposed to staying in the Soviet Union was 90,66% in the Zaporizhzhia Region, 90,13% in the Kherson Region, 83,9% in the Donetsk Region, 83,86% in the Luhansk Region, and 54,19% even in the Crimea.⁴⁰ The Southern and Eastern parts of Ukraine did vote for presidential candidates and political parties favoring close relations with Russia from the 1990s till 2014, however aspiring for close relations with Russia does not equal wishing to be annexed by Russia, the issue of being annexed by Russia was not yet on the table then, moreover, the agenda of Viktor Yanukovich, the last pro-Russian president of Ukraine also included association agreement with the European Union, and who voted his party voted a package containing this as well. As soon as Yanukovich backed off from the association agreement with the EU, and Russia took the Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, making annexation by Russia a real issue, the support of pro-Russian parties collapsed in Southern and Eastern Ukraine. The last Ukrainian presidential election before the all-out Russian invasion of 2022 occurred in 2019. As the second round occurred between Volodymyr Zelensky, and an even more pro-Western and nationalist candidate, Petro Poroshenko, to get information about the support of pro-Russian political forces, we have to take a look at the first round. In this, out of Ukraine's oblasts, pro-Russian candidate Yuri Boiko only received a plurality of the votes in two, the unoccupied parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. However, even out of these two, on the unoccupied parts of the Donetsk oblast, Zelensky and the even more nationalist and pro-Western candidate, Poroshenko got a combined share of the votes larger than that of Boiko, and even in the Luhansk oblast, the share of Bioko's votes was merely 43,96%, both data suggesting that the population of the unoccupied parts of the Donbas was roughly equally split between Russia-sympathizers and Ukrainian loyalists. In the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts on the other hand, the share of the votes of Boiko was merely 15,69% and 18,79% respectively, showing an overwhelming Ukrainian loyalist majority in these two regions that were also unilaterally annexed by Russia in September 2022.⁴¹ It is also a telltale sign that between the Russian takeover in parts of

the Donbas in 2014, and the all-out invasion of 2022, about one and a half million people fled the Russian-controlled areas, fleeing to government-controlled Ukraine. The fact that they opted to escape to Ukrainian-controlled areas suggests that they were Ukrainian loyalists, as opting for Russia or a third country would have been the rational choice for pro-Russian refugees.⁴² The population of the area that was actually controlled by the Russian separatist statelets, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics before the 2022 all-out invasion was 3,6 million.⁴³ This makes the number of people who actually fled from the post-2014 Russian takeover to Ukrainian-controlled areas equivalent to more than 40% of this population, strongly suggesting that the Russian takeover wasn't as overwhelmingly welcomed by the local population as the Russian narrative depicts it.

Frozen conflicts as Russia's means to retain control over unwilling post-Soviet nations?

If we take a look at the chronological order of events, we can see that post-Soviet Russia's first offensive actions already took place years before NATO enlargement has been decided, suggesting that such ambitions to retain as much Russian control in the post-Soviet space as possible, by force if necessary, dismissing the sovereignty of these newly independent nations was already present: While as late as 1994, the Clinton Administration still opposed NATO accession,⁴⁴ by that time, Russia already conducted questionable military actions in several former Soviet republics: It intervened in the Georgian civil war of 1991-1993, that led to the deposing and outright death of the country's pro-Western leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, replacing him with former minister of foreign affairs of the Soviet Union, Eudard Shevardnadze as the leader of the country, and the establishment of the Russian-backed breakaway polities of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, despite the fact that at the time only 17,8% of the population of Abkhazia was ethnic Abkhaz, while 45,7% was ethnic Georgian. (Since the Russian-backed Abkhaz takeover, the population of Abkhazia reduced by no less than 54,3% between the censuses of 1989 and 2011, mainly due to ethnic cleansing against ethnic Georgians, who were the plurality before the conflict.)⁴⁵ In Moldova, Russian intervention led to the formation of the Russian-backed separatist polity of Transnistria with the Transnistrian War of 1990-1992, while Russia also supported Armenia in taking over Nagorno-Karabakh by military force in the war of 1991-1994. All this happened before 1994, despite the fact that as late as 1994, the Clinton administration still opposed NATO enlargement in order to assure good relations with Russia.⁴⁶ These conflicts practically lead to the establishment of the unrecognized, separatist polities of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, (Thus creating not one, but four Kosovo-like statelets by military invasion years before NATO's broadly criticized Kosovo intervention) with frozen conflicts linked to each of them, that haven't been solved up until now. Russia was also poisoned with dioxin by the pro-Western candidate, Viktor

Yushchenko and meddled in the Ukrainian presidential election of 2004 before the Ukrainian color revolution of the same year, and before anyone would have brought up the idea of a Ukrainian NATO accession.⁴⁷⁴⁸ The 2014 Maidan protests were also a reaction to Russia pressuring the pro-Russian president of Ukraine, Viktor Yushchenko to back off from an association agreement with the European Union, that was part of his agenda up until that point, and without which he may not have had the public support he had up until then.⁴⁹ After the disestablishment of the Soviet Union in 1991, different successor states of it took a different course in their foreign policies: While Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan teamed up with Russia, joining its new military block, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, while Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova known as the GUAM group chose a more pro-Western course. As we can see however, Russia has meddled in the affairs of all four GUAM nations well before the idea of Ukrainian NATO accession came up, and in most cases before 1994, at a time when even the United States opposed NATO enlargement. By 2022 all four GUAM nations had frozen conflicts on their soil, with Russian-backed, and in most cases de facto Russian-controlled separatist statelets within their borders. While the Crimea and Donbas conflicts in Ukraine only started in 2014, the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh all became frozen conflicts in 1992-1994. Three decades have passed since, but they still not have been solved up until today. Had Russia been the benevolent guardian of stability in the former Soviet space that it depicts itself, three decades should have been more than enough to start peace processes, and end these frozen conflicts with peace deals, had that been Russia's aim. The fact that not even one of them was solved not even after three decades suggests otherwise: The continuation of these frozen conflicts serves the best interest of Russia, as they enable it to control chunks of the territories of the pro-Western GUAM nations, giving it a great degree de facto control over their foreign and security policies, threatening them with all-out war should they attempt to restore their sovereignty on their territories (as it happened with Georgia in 2008), scare away investors from them by sustaining the instability that frozen conflicts mean, and even an excuse to meddle in their internal affairs to a certain degree. This makes it at least suspicious that Russia may be deliberately sustaining these foreign conflicts, in order to retain partial control over the unwilling, pro-Western GUAM nations, making Russia a long-term destabilizing force for the GUAM group instead of a stabilizing one. As the Donbas conflict occurred when the frozen conflicts of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, and Nagorno-Karabakh have been ongoing in this manner unresolved for two decades, raises questions regarding Russian allegations blaming Ukraine for the dysfunction of the Minsk agreements in 2014-2022. As sustaining frozen conflicts on the territories of the three other GUAM nations played very well into Russia's hands throughout the previous two decades, it would have been surprising if Russia had been eager to resolve one on the territory of the fourth GUAM nation. An explanation that Russia aimed to simply play

out the very same scenario against Ukraine that proved to be so useful in the case of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova throughout the previous two decades, seems to be much more coherent. While Russia (with a centuries-long track record of oppressive policies towards its minorities, including genocide and mass deportations, and forced resettlement, as well as the recent not-so-humane crackdown against its own separatists in Chechnya) justified these military interventions by the poor treatment of ethnic minorities in the four GUAM nations, it is a somewhat suspicious coincident, that Russia only found the treatment of minorities concerning enough justifying such action in the Western-leaning GUAM countries (but in that case each and every one of them) but never in Soviet successor states opted to join Russia's post-Soviet military block, the CSTO, where Russia somehow always found the treatment of minorities satisfying. And also, in the case of each GUAM nation, Russia was alerted by the treatment of minorities always right at the time when the foreign policy of the given country took a pro-Western turn. While some argue that the enlargement of NATO resulted in bringing tensions in the region to breaking point, these Russian actions against the GUAM nations suggest that the alternative to Western integration for these countries is Russia's backing of separatist movements by military intervention on their territories, and sometimes even meddling into their internal affairs, such as Russian involvement in the deposition of pro-Western Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia in the Georgian Civil War of 1991-1993 and the dioxin poisoning of pro-Western Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko in 2004. Such a status would be very far from the prosperous neutrality that Cold War Austria and Sweden enjoyed, and without that very Western support to the



GUAM nations that Russia now cites as *casus belli*, could have very well resulted in them gradually sliding into a Russian satellite status akin to that of Belarus. All this suggests, that with the exception of the three Baltic states, Russian efforts to re-establish control over the former

Soviet republics, and undermine their newly achieved sovereignty have been going on ever since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, albeit with an exponentially escalating intensity, starting with interventions in Georgia and Moldova in the early 1990s, and with the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the first Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2014, and then the all-out invasion of Ukraine in 2022 being major stages of this exponential trend of escalation.

How the current war may end?

Having discussed Ukraine's geopolitical significance on a broader level, the most likely direct outcomes of the current war at the current state of the conflict seem to be less extreme but still pose major threats to European and global stability. As of July 2023, the two most likely options for the war to end are the following: If a Ukrainian counteroffensive manages to break through in the south, and reach the Sea of Azov, this would cut the Russian land bridge to the Crimea, and supply lines running through it. Combined with a demolition of the Kerch bridge, this would cut off Crimea from Russian supplies, except for supplies by sea, likely making Crimea unholdable for Russia for a few months. In our former paper, we anticipated that this would make a deal of Ukraine recognizing the Russian annexation of Crimea in exchange for Russia pulling out from the rest of the country, and approving its NATO membership, as such a deal would be the lesser of two evils for both Russia and Ukraine: For Russia, the Crimea has greater strategic and psychological importance, than the rest of the Ukrainian territories it holds, thus losing it may be a greater loss, than pulling out from the rest of Ukraine and approving its NATO membership in exchange for being allowed to keep the Crimea. For Ukraine on the other hand, having Russia pull out from the rest of its territory, and approving its NATO membership may be worth the price of giving the Crimea up.⁵⁰ Such a strategic bargain would be the path to a peace deal virtually identical to the peace plan that Henry Kissinger proposed in his analysis published in *The Spectator* in December 2022.⁵¹ In other words, what we anticipate is that if Ukraine manages to break through Russian lines, reach the Sea of Azov, and also demolish the Kerch bridge, cutting the Crimea from Russian supplies, would incentivize both Russia and Ukraine to seek a peace agreement along the lines of Kissinger's proposal. In our previous paper, we got to a conclusion that for the former separatist parts of the Donbas, which constituted the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics between 2014 and 2022, a solution could be a multiple-year long transitional UN administration before its full re-integration into Ukraine, assuring both the return of ethnic Ukrainian refugees and the safety of the ethnic Russian population in the region. This would follow the example of the United Nations Transitional Administration for Eastern Slavonia, Baranja, and Western Sirmium (UNTAES) that administered formerly Serb-held areas of eastern Croatia from 1996 to 1998. Ad the region would de jure be part of NATO member Ukraine in this transitional period already, NATO's security umbrella would be a guarantee against Russia

interrupting the process. Subsequently, the assurance of cultural and language use rights of ethnic Russians and equally that all other ethnic minorities in Ukraine (Bulgarians, Greeks, Hungarians, Poles, Romanians) could create an environment enabling the peaceful re-integration of the territory to Ukraine.⁵² Regarding the Crimea, a softer version of conceding it to Russia could be to make it a de jure independent country, as the "Republic of Crimea" with full international recognition, but at the same time also a third member of the Russia-Belarus Union State. As the Russia-Belarus Union State is a close economic and military union (with Russia even storing nuclear weapons in Belarus) this would mean conceding the Crimea to Russia de facto, without rewarding Russia for its aggression de jure.



If the Ukrainian counterattack fails, however, the most likely outcome seems to be a frozen conflict along the present line of control. The fact that in the last twelve months, Russia hasn't achieved any gains except for the town of Bakhmut shows that it has run out of offensive capabilities, and if the Ukrainian counterattack fails, that will tell the same about Ukraine, thus in this case, an armistice along the existing line of control becomes the most rational next step. This would be an agreement very much different than one along the lines of Kissinger's proposals. First and foremost, the case of Ukraine successfully cutting off Crimea from Russian supplies would incentivize both sides to formally recognize a deal along Kissinger's proposal as a peace treaty, as it would be better for both of them than the alternative, in this case, both sides would be incentivized to recognize the armistice only as a temporary arrangement: While in the

former case, the prospect of Ukraine capturing the Crimea may be an incentive to offer something in exchange, and for Ukraine, achieving everything else may be an incentive to give up the Crimea in exchange, in this case, there would be no incentive for Russia to formally give up the further territorial claims it has beyond the line of control in the form of the four regions it unilaterally annexed in 2022, and there would be no incentive for Ukraine either to formally recognize any territorial loss. Moreover, as it is one of NATO's most basic principles not to accept into its ranks any country with an ongoing conflict on its territory, an armistice and frozen conflict along the present line of control would also make it impossible for Ukraine to join NATO.



The two possible outcomes would mean two very different paths for the future of the region. The first one, a peace deal along with Kissinger's proposal would not only be a limited victory for Ukraine but could also bring stability to the region: It would mean a clear, stable, settled border recognized by both sides between Russia and Ukraine as well as between Russia and NATO. Such an agreement and Ukraine's NATO membership would not only deter Russia from attacking Ukraine again, but as Kissinger puts it, also assure Russia from Ukraine trying to take back the Crimea, therefore in an odd way, not only guarantee Ukraine's security but in a certain sense a guarantee for Russia as well.⁵³ Providing a stable peace would make Ukraine safe for Western investors, and would also make it in the best interest of the United States to make this new, strategically located

NATO member a well-functioning country, thus boosting prospects of its recovery from the war, especially given its significant industrial potential and natural resources that would offer significant. A settled border would, in the long run, even open the way for the normalization of relations between Russia and NATO as well.

A frozen conflict, on the other hand, would mean a very different situation: Regarding the economy, it would prevent a powerful recovery for Ukraine's economy, as the constant threat of renewed Russian attacks would scare most investors away. Ukraine, however, is so badly damaged that without a western sponsored recovery, it is likely to become a failed state. This would mean a failed state of 30-40 million inhabitants at the border of the EU, something that Europe cannot afford, as such a failed state would become a hotbed for terrorism, organized crime, also represent a permanent refugee problem, and with its weakness constantly tempt Russia to resume its aggression. To make this worse, a frozen conflict would leave the possibility open for the conflict to flare up at any time. A lasting peace with a frozen conflict would only be possible if Ukraine would get Western security guarantees, however, NATO membership with a frozen conflict on its territory would not be possible for Ukraine. The gravest danger of such an outcome of the war would be that it would leave the possibility of future flare-ups open: For Ukraine, Russia holding large areas of its territory under occupation without a peace settlement and international recognition would represent a permanent casus belli to resume the conflict any time it sees a chance to push out Russia from its territory. For Russia, incentives for resuming the conflict as soon as it sees it feasible would be at least as strong as for Ukraine: First, as it doesn't control all the territories it theoretically annexed during the autumn of 2022, in its reading the situation would be Ukraine holding sovereign Russian territory under occupation. Second, as the plan leaked by RIA Novosty, and the theoretical background represented by the works of Russian thinkers such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Alexander Dugin suggests, reestablishing the union of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus is a long-term grand vision of Russian geopolitics. Therefore, Russia making another attempt on Kyiv itself, to forcibly enthrone a Russian satellite puppet government there as soon as Ukraine appears to be weak enough to make this feasible, could very well be in the cards, if the conflict ends in a frozen stalemate, opening again the way of Russia taking over all of Ukraine, and proceed further with its demands of NATO having to withdraw to the 1997 status quo, and possibly to Eurasianism as well on the long run. Such a situation would also be a Catch-22 for NATO regarding how to support Ukraine in the future: To deter Russia from resuming the conflict while Ukraine is not part of NATO, Ukraine would need to be made one of the strongest military powers in Europe if not the World. Should that happen, however, would likely embolden Ukraine itself to resume the conflict to reclaim its territories under Russian occupation. The only way on the other hand to prevent Ukraine from doing so would be to keep its military capabilities limited, which however,

without Ukraine being a member of NATO would embolden Russia to resume the conflict. Such an unsettled conflict would also prevent the normalization of relations between NATO and Russia for the foreseeable future. Therefore, while a settlement akin to Kissinger's proposal would not only mean a limited Ukrainian and Western victory, but by and large peace and stability as well, a frozen conflict along the current line of control would mean an extremely dangerous situation with Ukraine as a potential failed state, a high risk of unpredictable flareups of the conflict in the future, and even making the normalization of the relations between NATO and Russia impossible for the foreseeable future, and on the long run keeping the option of Russia's aspirations regarding all of Ukraine and possibly even Eastern Europe.

Possible impact on nuclear proliferation and the Taiwan issue

A further aspect of the conflict is nuclear proliferation. The United States has granted so far much less weaponry to Ukraine than what it could easily afford, and the consensus among analysts is that it does so out of the fear of escalation, nuclear escalation to be more precise. It is true that as of 14 July 2023, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is not going well. It is also true, that the US has already provided Ukraine with a hundred F-16 fighters jets, hundreds of M1-Abrams main battle tanks instead of the 31 it did (with it having 3700 M1-Abrams tanks in storage that it doesn't use) ATACMS precision missiles, Reaper drones, cluster ammunition. by the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive in June, the picture may be significantly different. Thus if the Ukrainian counterattack becomes a fiasco because of the lack of equipment that the US could have easily provided, but it did not, because of the fear of escalation, this would de facto mean that the United States' restraint from enabling one of its allies from pushing out forces of a hostile power from its territory out of fear of said hostile power using nuclear weapons in a conflict waged outside its internationally recognized borders. This would mean the end of one of the de facto conventions for nuclear conduct. This assumes nuclear powers ever since then restrained from using nuclear weapons in wars waged outside their internationally recognized borders, even in cases where not using them meant defeat, while using them would have possibly meant victory, and keep nuclear weapons only for defensive purposes. This taboo was set during the Korean War when US General Douglas MacArthur considered using nuclear weapons against China and North Korea, but President Truman removed him from his post, although China was not a nuclear power then, and even the Soviet Union was still at an early stage of its nuclear program, such a move could have most likely won the war for the US. The precedent was set, and all nuclear powers around the world followed: The US again restrained from using nuclear weapons in the Vietnam War, despite losing the conflict. China also refrained from using nuclear weapons against Vietnam in its short war of 1979, despite being defeated as well. The Soviet Union restrained from using nuclear weapons in Afghanistan, also despite being defeated. Russia didn't use nuclear weapons in the

Chechen wars, even though these were fought within its internationally recognized borders, and it was defeated during the first Chechen war. Israel didn't use nuclear weapons in its South Lebanon offensive in 2006, despite its advance being stopped by Hezbollah. Russia threatening explicitly or implicitly to use nuclear weapons against Ukraine in case Ukraine would push out Russian troops from its sovereign territory would mean the end of this taboo. If the US refrains from providing Ukraine with the necessary equipment because of such fears, all powers in the world will know it, even if the US doesn't admit it in public. The results would be twofold: First, other rivals of the US, such as China, North Korea, or Iran would know this, and may attempt to use the precedent in expansive wars as well: North Korea against South Korea, China against Taiwan, and possibly against its Southeast Asian rivals, such as Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam, or even against Japan, while Iran (if it manages to eventually develop a nuclear arsenal) in its proxy conflicts with Saudi Arabia and Turkey in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. Second, seeing such a fate of Ukraine, abandoned by the US because of such a reason, may trigger the nuclear proliferation of other allies of the US, as from this point on, only countries possessing the nuclear deterrence themselves would be safe from the aggression of nuclear powers nearby them: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan against China, Saudi Arabia as soon as Iran manages to do so, and last but not least, learning from the fate of Ukraine, those European countries who fear Russia the most: Poland and the countries of Scandinavia, while Turkey could be dragged into the picture by both Russia and Iran. This would effectively mean a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation, that could then spread beyond these initial candidates. We could end up in a world, where the precondition for even being a regional middle power would be to have a nuclear deterrent. This, combined with nuclear blackmail becoming a norm by aggressors in wars waged outside their internationally recognized borders would make the world a much more dangerous place. By backing off from supporting Ukraine to push out Russian forces from its territory, the US could have ended up exactly with what it wanted to avoid: A much higher risk of a nuclear conflict occurring sometime somewhere in the world.

While many in the United States criticize US policies regarding the war as taking away US resources from confronting China, seen by many as the main adversary of the US, the conflict may impact the Sino-US rivalry in a very different way: China could very well see the US response to the war as an indicator what it could expect from the US in case of a conflict between China and a third country in the Asia-Pacific: If the US backs Ukraine enough so that it successfully fends off the Russian invasion, China may very well see this as an indicator that the United States would behave accordingly in case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan or Vietnam or the Philippines in relation to the South China Sea conflict, and thus deter China from doing so, while if the United States leaves Ukraine without help for Russia to take over, China may very well draw the conclusion, that the

US may behave similarly in case of Chinese action in the Asia-Pacific, and thus embolden China to attempt to invade Taiwan, or possibly even Vietnam and the Philippines. Therefore, helping Ukraine enough to defend itself against Ukraine may very well be the best way to deter China from using force in the Asia-Pacific, while letting Russia win in Ukraine may very well encourage China to do so more than anything else.

Conclusion

As we could see from the directions of Russian operations in February and March 2022, aiming at the capital Kyiv, and the prematurely published victory article on the Russian government-owned news site, RIA, the original Russian objective was not merely taking some regions along the border, but to take all of Ukraine, and create a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine confederation. From a geopolitical perspective, such a move would have been equivalent to re-establishing the Soviet Union. That would have changed the European security architecture at a fundamental level. To make things more complicated, in December 2021 Russia publicly issued a memorandum demanding NATO to withdraw to the status quo of 1997. This would require no less than fourteen NATO member states to effectively withdraw from NATO, implicitly granting Russia veto power over their foreign and security policies, seriously limiting their sovereignty. This memorandum raises concerns that even if Russia would be allowed to take all of Ukraine, it may not be sufficient to appease it, as it may very well proceed further with its demands of NATO to withdraw to the 1997 status quo. While an open attack on NATO to achieve such an aim, so-called grey zone warfare, hostile actions aimed to undermine the stability of the targeted country without crossing the limits of open war could be a realistic possibility. While not a formal Russian policy, as a trend popular among Russia's ruling elite Eurasianism raises the possibility of Russia not even stopping there: Eurasianism aims to convince continental Europe (without the British Isles) to break the alliance with the United States and form a union with Russia instead, with a Moscow-Berlin axis at its core. Should coercing the CEE nations to leave NATO be successful, would remove the obstacle to trying to implement the Eurasia plan.

At the present stage, the conflict may end with either of two outcomes: A frozen conflict along the current line of control, or in case of a successful Ukrainian breakthrough, a deal by and large along the lines of Kissinger's proposal: Russia retaining the Crimea, but Ukraine restoring its sovereignty in the rest of the country and joining NATO. Out of these two, the first one bares the risk of unpredictable flare-ups in the future. Russia's further aspirations of reestablishing a union with Belarus and Ukraine, and pushing NATO back to the 1997 status quo especially raise concerns of future flare-ups, as an unsettled outcome may tempt Russia to proceed further trying to achieve these aims as soon as an opportunity seems to rise.

An additional alarming consequence of the Russian success in Ukraine could be a chain reaction in nuclear proliferation. The United States and its allies provided significantly less weaponry (especially regarding the quality) than they would be capable of, mainly due to the fear of escalation. As in the war, Russia's conventional arsenal turned out to be significantly weaker than most assumed, such escalation could only be possible with Russia's nuclear weapons. Therefore, if Russia wins the war due to Ukraine lacking weapons that the United States and its allies would have been capable to provide, but chose not to do so out of the fear of escalation, this would imply Russia winning by nuclear blackmail war what it would have been deemed to lose with its conventional arsenal. The Korean War of 1950-53 set restraints by nuclear powers from using nuclear weapons or nuclear threats in wars waged outside their borders as one of the most basic unwritten rules of international relations ever since then. By winning the war using the nuclear card to deter the United States from providing Ukraine sufficient help, Russia would breach this global consensus of seven decades. This would likely a chain reaction of nuclear proliferation of both countries with expansive agendas, and countries fearing the former, as well as encouraging nuclear powers to invade their neighbors, all this significantly increase the risk of nuclear conflict in the long run.

The outcome of the conflict may also significantly influence developments in the Asia-Pacific, as China can view the US strategy regarding the Ukraine war as an indicator of how the US would deal with a Chinese invasion of Taiwan. Thus, the more the US helps Ukraine in fending off the Russian invasion, the more it deters China from attempting an invasion of Taiwan while giving in to Russia would encourage China to an invasion of Taiwan.

Regarding Russia's expansive aspirations, such as coercing Ukraine into a confederation with Russia and Belarus, or coercing the CEE countries to withdraw from NATO, we found that the Russian argument of grievances that allegedly forced Russia to do so is mainly untrue: Gorbachev himself denied any promise ever to have been made for NATO not to accept former Eastern Bloc countries into its ranks, Russia acknowledged the contrary by signing the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, and Russia already started meddling into the affairs of newly independent former Soviet republics well before the first wave of NATO expansion was even decided.

A major issue with Russia's aspirations such as the demands on Ukraine or NATO withdrawing to the 1997 status quo is that they constitute demands for such an extensive exclusive zone of influence, that appears to be oversized relative to Russia's existing capabilities. Neither China, nor India, the two emerging giants of Asia have similar exclusive zones of influence, and with governments opposing the US in power in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, and with the electoral victory of Lula, to a certain extent even in Brazil as well, the Latin-America sphere of influence of the United States is showing signs of advanced erosion. Moreover, Russia's global rank in GDP and

population, two fundamentals of great power status, is both far beyond that of the United States and China, and almost equally far beyond what the Soviet Union had during the cold war. On the other hand, if we combine the population and GDP of NATO member states that Russia demands to leave the alliance, and states that are aspiring to membership, it turns out that this group of countries has both a larger combined GDP and a larger combined population than Russia itself. This suggests that even if Russia would manage to achieve its demands, it may lack sufficient resources to sustain the new status quo.

Regarding Russia itself, the aspiration for an oversized exclusive sphere of influence may be a very dangerous paradox. Overstretching, spending resources on pursuing something that these resources are insufficient for, can be self-harming, and if pursued far enough, self-harming to a fatal level. Russian history serves us examples of disaster caused by overstretching: One such emblematic example is 1917, when Russia's society and economy, despite dynamically growing in the pre-war years, especially since Stolypin's reforms, imploded after three years of war effort in the first world war, leading to the deposition of the monarchy, a civil war that claimed more lives and lasted more years than the world war itself, and eventually totalitarian Bolshevik rule. Another emblematic example is the 1980s, when the Soviet planned economy couldn't stand the arms race with the United States, especially after the announcement of Regan's Strategic Defense Initiative, and was further burdened by the unwinnable war in Afghanistan, all this had led to the implosion of the Soviet Union. It seems that time Russia's history becomes captive to a certain inner logic that spirals into overstretching beyond breaking point, culminating in an implosion. In our case, Russian demands and narratives in Russian geopolitical discourse regarding the necessity of taking those parts of lands theoretically annexed by Russia last September, but not controlled by it, then a Belarus-Russia-Ukraine-(Kazakhstan) confederation as a possible next stage, then pushing back NATO to the 1997 status quo as a desired next one, not to mention Eurasianism raise the possibility that a frozen conflict along the present line of control may not be the end, but rather the beginning of such a spiral, where even if Russia does not implode at the stage it already achieved, it will not stop pursuing the next one, till it reaches one where it does implode. The fact that this returning spiral of overstretching of Russian history is in the end self-destructive does not mean that it cannot pose a threat and cause great destruction in the outside world before it plays out, as it can take years of expansive wars till that point. Russia's inability to push further on the front combined with internal developments such as Prigozhin's coup attempt and Putin's subsequent purge among the generals of the Russian military suggests that Russia may be balancing on the edge of this old abyss again.

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- ³ All maps in the paper are own work of the author, using free blank maps from <https://freeblankmaps.wordpress.com/>
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