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# The Longer-Term Impact of the Ukraine Conflict and the Growing Importance of the Civil Side of War

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## **The Longer-Term Impact of the Ukraine Conflict and the Growing Importance of the Civil Side of War**

### **Anthony H. Cordesman**

The Ukraine conflict is already providing a wide range of lessons about the role of modern military forces in modern war, but it is also providing equally important lessons about the future of the civil side of war. Barring some massive political changes in Russia, the conflict is a warning that the civil side of war is becoming far more dangerous. Furthermore, it is yet another example that the kind of civil conflicts and crises that have emerged from the Iran-Iraq War, the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, and the wars the U.S. and its allies have fought against extremists in Iraq and Afghanistan are now the rule and not the exception.

It is also clear that even if the war can end in some kind of compromise, settlement, or ceasefire – but any decisive end to the fighting now seems uncertain – it is likely to be an important catalyst in shaping a lasting civil confrontation between Russia and NATO, the EU, and the United States.

The war will almost certainly ensure that Russia is as much of a strategic focus for the U.S. as China, and U.S. and European competition with Russia will remain far closer to confrontation than was likely to occur before the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. The war is also likely to push Russia to align itself more closely and visibly to China, and it may encourage Russia to find political and economic ways to exploit every tension and opportunity in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – as well as seek new bases and opportunities to win military influence.

### **The Civil Impacts of the Ukraine War**

The Ukraine War has become a grinding war of military attrition that has led to massive U.S. and European military support of Ukraine. This, however, is only part of the story. The war has also evolved into a major political and economic conflict between the West and Russia which may ultimately have far more impact on global stability and on U.S. and European strategy than the actual fighting.

The fighting seems to have become constrained to eastern Ukraine, and it has become a military struggle over control of the Donbass and global shipping. At the same time, it has led to steadily escalating Russian attacks on the entire civil economy and civil population of Ukraine, and it has led Russian efforts to effectively convert the industrial heartland of Ukraine into parts of Russia at both the political and economic levels. In response, NATO, the EU, and the U.S. have gone far beyond providing military aid to the Ukraine. They are waging a steadily escalating “war of sanctions” against Russia, while Russia has responded by trying to find its own ways to put political and economic pressure on Europe and use a combination of force and political pressure to wage an economic war against Ukrainian grain exports and maritime trade.

The end result is the civil side of the war now extends far beyond the areas shown in **Map One** where military conflict and strikes on Ukrainian cities occurred during the first phases of the war. The war has now reshaped international energy costs on a global basis, helped create massive global food shortages, seriously damaged the entire Russian economy, and helped trigger a massive increase in the rate of inflation on a global level.

*Map One: British Ministry of Defense Map of the Military Side of the Ukraine War*



The full military impact remains unclear. Finland and Sweden have applied to join NATO, and NATO has collectively reacted by planning major increases in its military capabilities, but there are no clear plans as of yet that has shown what NATO's 30 – and possibly 32 in the near future – nations will actually do over time, how they will reshape and modernize their warfighting capabilities, how well they will improve their readiness and interoperability, and how they will redefine their capability to strike Russia and provide extended deterrence.

In contrast, the EU has already shown that it may not be the ideal forum for collective military action – particularly compared to NATO – but it can be an effective forum for conducting economic and political warfare, can cooperate closely with the U.S., and one that can escalate at a political and economic level with far less risk than using military force directly against Russia.

At the same time, a steadily growing body of direct video and satellite imagery shows that Russia has steadily escalated its use of modern military weapons against Ukrainian civil targets and in ways that have a massive impact on its economy and population. The Russian response to urban warfare has become a siege fought with modern missiles and artillery that have been fired against a steadily broadening range of civil targets, destroying much of the economy, infrastructure, civil facilities, and housing in eastern Ukraine.

The end result has also been to create the equivalent of civilian hostages, political prisons, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Only a tiny portion of these Russia attacks qualify for what are formally defined as “war crimes,” but the net effect – as was the case in World War II – is the equivalent of strategic bombing of civil targets with far more lethality and capability to focus on the most critical political and economic targets.

The fighting now includes independent political and economic warfare and new patterns of military action which directly impact the civil population and reduce the “laws of war” to something approaching hollow gestures. They warn that the nuclear dimension – and mutual assured destruction – are only one aspect of a revolution in military affairs that can do massive damage to the civil population and economy.

Russia has provided a series of tangible demonstrations that warn that modern precision-strike conventionally armed missiles, cyber warfare capabilities, intelligence analysis of civil systems and targets, and a wide range of other evolving military strike capabilities can do immense potential damage to local and regional civil targets and capabilities.

Unlike weapons of mass destruction, these advanced forms of non-nuclear strike can be used in combination with political and economic weapons, and they can be used with considerable flexibility and far less risk than the nuclear weapons that provide some degree of mutual assured destruction. If anything, Russia and NATO’s mutual possession of nuclear weapons tends to deter their use by either side, while creating a situation where both sides can now use a wide range of conventionally armed weapons and new technologies to escalate their level of civils conflict.

### **A War that Ends All Civil Peace?**

The growing civil impact of the war also show that it is becoming steadily harder to terminate a conflict in ways that can create a lasting peace. It now seems all too possible that Ukraine will not regain its territory in the east, will not get the levels of aid it needs to quickly rebuild, will face continuing threats from Russia in the east that will limit its ability to recreate an industrialized area, and will face major problems in terms of maritime trade. It also seems all too probable that any peace or ceasefire will leave a legacy of anger and hatred that will take a decade or more to end, and acute political tension will be the norm between Russia and most of Europe, as well as between Ukrainians and Russians.

An end to fighting will not end its economic and civil human impacts. Ukraine has already lost a massive amount of its economic and urban base, its infrastructure, and its functioning local and regional government. Ukrainian officials have talked about \$500 billion to recover and rebuild, but such numbers are guesstimates at best, and they assume that the war will end with a meaningful and stable political and economic peace that grants Ukraine at least the territory it had when the conflict started and allows its economy to function on a basis similar to its prewar level.

Moreover, the continuing level of political tension between Russia and NATO/EU/United States will limit U.S. and European trade, investment, technological and cultural exchange as long as Russia has its present regime. It seems more than possible that Russia will either not be able to rebuild its past levels of energy trade, and its broader economic links to Europe and the West, and it will choose to turn to China and other states in Asia and Africa.

Both NATO and Russia also seem likely to be involved in major military build-ups for half a decade or more that will raise their military spending by several percentage points of GDP and that will have an additional impact on their economies while creating a massive arms race that will greatly expand their capability to threaten the other side’s population and economy. The net effect of the Ukraine War may be to rush hypersonic and other advanced strike weapons forward, create real-world cyber and space weapons, and create the equivalent of conventional *Strategic Integrated Operating Plans* or SIOPs. Such contingency plans will involve different levels of

escalation but be enabled by the continuing ability of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear forces to create far more damaging levels of mutual assured destruction.

The Ukraine War may also block serious efforts to modernize and strengthen any form of nuclear or conventional arms control. It may push Putin into deploying all of the advanced nuclear weapons systems he has publicized, lead the U.S. to create low-yield nuclear cruise missiles and other theater systems, and lead Britain and France to restructure their nuclear force structures to focus on Russia.

### **From Ukraine to China and the World**

None of these developments can be decoupled from the focus that the U.S., European states, and their strategic partners in Asia were placing on China before Russia invaded Ukraine. It is all too possible that one outcome of the Ukraine War may be to push Russia steadily closer to China at a time when U.S. strategy is still focusing as much on China as the reemergence of Russia.

In practice, great power “competition” is becoming great power “confrontation.” Moreover, China has the economic and military resources to compete directly with the United States, and to challenge other Asian powers in military terms as well as the U.S. and Europe’s ability to project power in Asia.

China is already challenging the U.S. – and strategic partners like Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. At a minimum, it will react to the Ukraine War by developing every capability it can to counter any U.S. attempt to the kind of political and economic warfare against China that it is now using against Russia. China also, however, may now see Russia as a potential partner whose weak economy, declining technology base, and alienation from Europe make it far more dependent on China.

More generally, the Ukraine War – and the longer-term U.S., NATO, EU, and Russian reactions to it – will affect the plans and actions of North Korea, Pakistan and India, Iran and the Arab states, Turkey, and other major regional military powers like Israel and Egypt. The de facto confrontation between Russia and the U.S. and Europe is almost certain to play out as much in the third world as in Europe, and in terms of both arms transfers, security assistance, military bases, economic investment, trade agreements, and diplomatic and political support. This will be especially true if any increase takes place in combined or coordinated Russian and Chinese action.

At one level, as the decisive role of drones in the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan has already shown how selective advances in military technology can radically change political and economic outcomes. At another level, the U.S.-led “war of sanctions” against Iran and other states has shown that the civil side of warfare can affect superpower roles in dealing with minor powers, and Chinese investment activities in states with key ports and strategic exports has shown that there is no practical distinction in some cases between acquiring military bases and economic control or influence.

These aspects of the “spillover” of the Ukraine War will also occur in a vulnerable global environment. At least in the near-term, the combined impact of Covid-19, climate change, global inflation, population pressure, and an almost endless list of sectarian, ethnic, and tribal tensions – coupled to the ambitions of many leaders and failed governance – offer opportunity after opportunity to Russia and China.

## **The Real Nature of “Globalism”**

There is no way as yet to determine how many of these patterns will emerge and in what form. It is, however, dangerous for the U.S., NATO, the EU, and America’s broader range of strategic partners to focus on the military dimensions of the Ukraine War and to fail focusing on its evolving civil and political patterns and the near certainty of enduring confrontation with at least Russia, and with some combination of Russia and China.

The Ukraine War is not the primary cause of these trends, but it is very likely to be a major catalyst in making them worse. It also seems all too likely that the optimism that shaped the approach to globalism was based more on comforting illustrations than reality.