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*Echoes of Conflict: Navigating the Tumultuous Triad of
Russia-Poland-Ukraine Relations in the Theater of
International Diplomacy*

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Abstract

The historical ties between Ukraine, Poland and Russia have been intricate, characterised by alternating periods of cooperation and conflict. As the war in Ukraine continues to escalate, understanding the long-term impacts and consequences that shape the bilateral relations between these two nations is crucial. This essay aims to analyse the potential shifts, consequences, and transformations in Ukrainian-Polish relations due to the war. The focus of the research question is to explore how these dynamics are evolving under the current geopolitical pressures.

Methods

This essay employs a comprehensive literature review and a systematic literature research approach, focusing on scholarly articles and academic publications about Polish-Ukrainian relations and the Russian war on Ukraine published since 2022.

Chapter 1: Introduction



Source: ISW (21:00 GMT, 20 February)

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Figure 1 Russian forces take Avdiivka

The recent tensions between Poland and Ukraine, marked by disputes over grain importers and weapons deliveries, reveal significant cracks in their previously strong alliance. These strains have emerged amidst Poland's internal political dynamics with upcoming parliamentary elections (2024, June, Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia, 2022) promoting nationalistic rhetoric and actions from the ruling law and justice party. This rhetoric has led to decisions that have not only soured the relationship with Ukraine but also undermined Poland's standing in Europe and its ambitions influence the EU's orientation towards the east. Despite Poland's substantial support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, the dispute over grain importers and the cessation of arms deliveries highlight deeper structural challenges in bilateral relations and the complexities of integrating Ukraine into the EU, as discussed in the broader geopolitical implications (Brands, year, p. 35).

Poland is recognized as a "middle power" in Europe and has focused its foreign policy on Europe, the United States, and the East since its transformation in the 1990s. Regardless of the ruling party, successive Polish governments have consistently focused on these three areas.

At the end of last year, Donald Tusk returned to power in Poland, and veteran diplomat Sikorski took charge of Poland's foreign policy again. As a major country in Central and

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Eastern Europe, Poland is one of the staunchest supporters of Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and one of the most active countries in the world opposing Russia. Although the Middle East is not the central focus of Polish foreign policy, the persecution of Polish Jews during World War II and their subsequent migration to Israel after the war have made Polish society highly vigilant against anti-Semitism. However, the humanitarian disaster in Gaza and attacks on Polish citizens there have necessitated a cautious approach to the Israeli-Palestinian issue by Polish foreign policy. As a member of the Western nations, Poland often adopts policies that align or are close to those of its allies, but it also takes a harder or more unique stance on other issues.

As Poland grapples with its internal politics and external relations, its ability to maintain a leadership role in the region and support Ukraine effectively is in question, necessitating a recalibration of its foreign policy to Eastern European countries' influence. (Timothy Snyder, 2010.)

In the dispute over grain and arms deliveries, Poland's government is squandering the chance to shift Europe's centre of gravity to the east, the Poland's present dispute with Ukraine is largely the result of its marginalised position in Europe, compared to other EU countries,(Dodd Welsh, 2024) Its unique support for Ukraine as well as its geographical location as a logistics hub, enhanced Poland's role in the western alliance after Russia's all-out invasion.

1.1 Poland Ukraine Historical Relationship

Author Serhii Ploky has provided a book-length study of the history of Polish-Ukrainian relations in his work, "The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine," published in 2015. This definitive history of Ukraine provides context for its current position between Europe and Russia (Ploky, 2015, p. 45). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, "The vote for Ukraine's independence spelled the end of the Soviet Union..." Poland-Ukraine relations underwent significant changes. From 1991 to 1994, Poland's foreign policy was driven by the desire to improve its international standing through NATO membership. During this period, Poland offered limited support for Ukrainian independence, focusing more on strengthening economic and political cooperation with Ukraine. However, from the mid-1990s, after national elections in both countries, Poland elevated its cooperation with Ukraine to the core of its Eastern Policy, enhancing political, economic, and military collaboration. This period was primarily focused on mitigating adverse Russian influences on its eastern borders

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(Ploky, 2015,P120).

Post-1998, as Poland pursued full integration into the European Union, the relationship between Poland and Ukraine faced challenges due to the EU's hesitance to embrace Ukraine. Since 2000, Poland has taken active steps to improve relations with Ukraine, including supporting Ukraine's candidacy for the EU, implementing a flexible visa policy for Ukrainian nationals, and promoting Ukraine as a priority partner within the European Neighbourhood Policy. Poland's efforts also supported Ukraine's aspiration to "return to Europe," exemplified by the Polish government's support for the Orange Revolution through media coverage and public mobilisation. (Ploky, 2022, p. 157)

These efforts to improve Poland-Ukraine relations did not cease with the Orange Revolution. In the 2000s, both countries commemorated soldiers from World War I and victims of internal conflicts, acknowledging historical grievances and taking steps toward reconciliation. Poland has consistently prioritised Ukraine in its Eastern Policy, linking the management of Ukrainian nationalist aspirations with the improvement of bilateral relations. For instance, in 1997, Polish parties declared support for Ukraine's compensation claims for historical injustices, highlighting a commitment to reconciliation with all neighbouring countries.

The direct engagement of Polish leaders with Ukrainian nationalist practices and the emphasis on reconciliation efforts, such as the famous speeches aimed at fostering reconciliation during the Ukrainian President's official visit to Poland, were well-received by both societies and the international community. The development of friendly relations between Poland and Ukraine has been a source of satisfaction, as it has enabled the realisation of goals such as commemorating the Ukrainian victims of internal conflicts.

Polish Ukrainians have often emphasised their identity as part of the Polish nation and have sought to prove their integral role in building the Polish state. Discussions on minority laws and the status of Polish Ukrainians within the EU expansion context have reinforced the perspective that Polish Ukrainians have been Polish citizens for centuries, underscoring their desire to be recognized primarily within a domestic context rather than an international one. This approach marks a departure from typical cross-border ethnic relations, highlighting a unique path of integration and identity within Poland.

Ukrainians within Poland have reported that despite ongoing efforts, tensions between Poles and Ukrainians have not been fully resolved. The root of these tensions largely stems from differing interpretations of historical events, particularly those during and after World War II,

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which saw Ukrainians subjected to violence and displacement. This historical backdrop has led to Ukrainians in Poland feeling discriminated against, a sentiment deeply embedded in narratives that have historically depicted them as the "eternal enemies" of the Polish people. This antagonism occasionally surfaces in Polish popular culture, including media representations that derogatively stereotype Ukrainians. However, in the wake of recent developments following the conflict in Ukraine, the dynamics between Poles and Ukrainians have seen noteworthy shifts. The Polish public's perceptions of Ukrainians have evolved due to increased personal interactions and a greater understanding of the shared challenges both communities face. Despite historical grievances, the outpouring of support for Ukrainian refugees in Poland has highlighted a significant change in societal attitudes.

Parliamentary debates from the early 2000s, marked by criticism of minority rights legislation by certain political factions, contrast sharply with the current climate of solidarity and support for Ukrainians. The rise of nationalist and populist movements in the mid-2000s, which negatively impacted minority groups in Poland, including Ukrainians, seems to be giving way to a more inclusive and supportive stance in light of recent events. ("Radosław Sikorski w Sejmie: Informacja o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej na 2024 rok," 2024)

The official discourse on Poland-Ukraine relations has markedly evolved. Since the 1990s, efforts to forge a strategic partnership with Ukraine have intensified, particularly in response to the recent conflict. This has led to a widespread societal focus on reconciliation and friendly relations between the two countries, with the solidarity between Polish and Ukrainian peoples during Ukraine's time of need playing a pivotal role. (European People's Party Group, n.d.)The European Union's enlargement and the bilateral discussions within the EU framework have further cemented this relationship, with Poland's support for Ukraine and mutual understanding between the peoples of both nations becoming more pronounced.while historical tensions between Poles and Ukrainians persist, recent events have catalysed a deeper sense of camaraderie and support. This evolving dynamic suggests a complex but hopeful trajectory towards reconciling past grievances and building a unified front based on mutual respect and solidarity.(Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych RP, 2024)

Poland-Russian Relationship

RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

Who controls what in Ukraine?

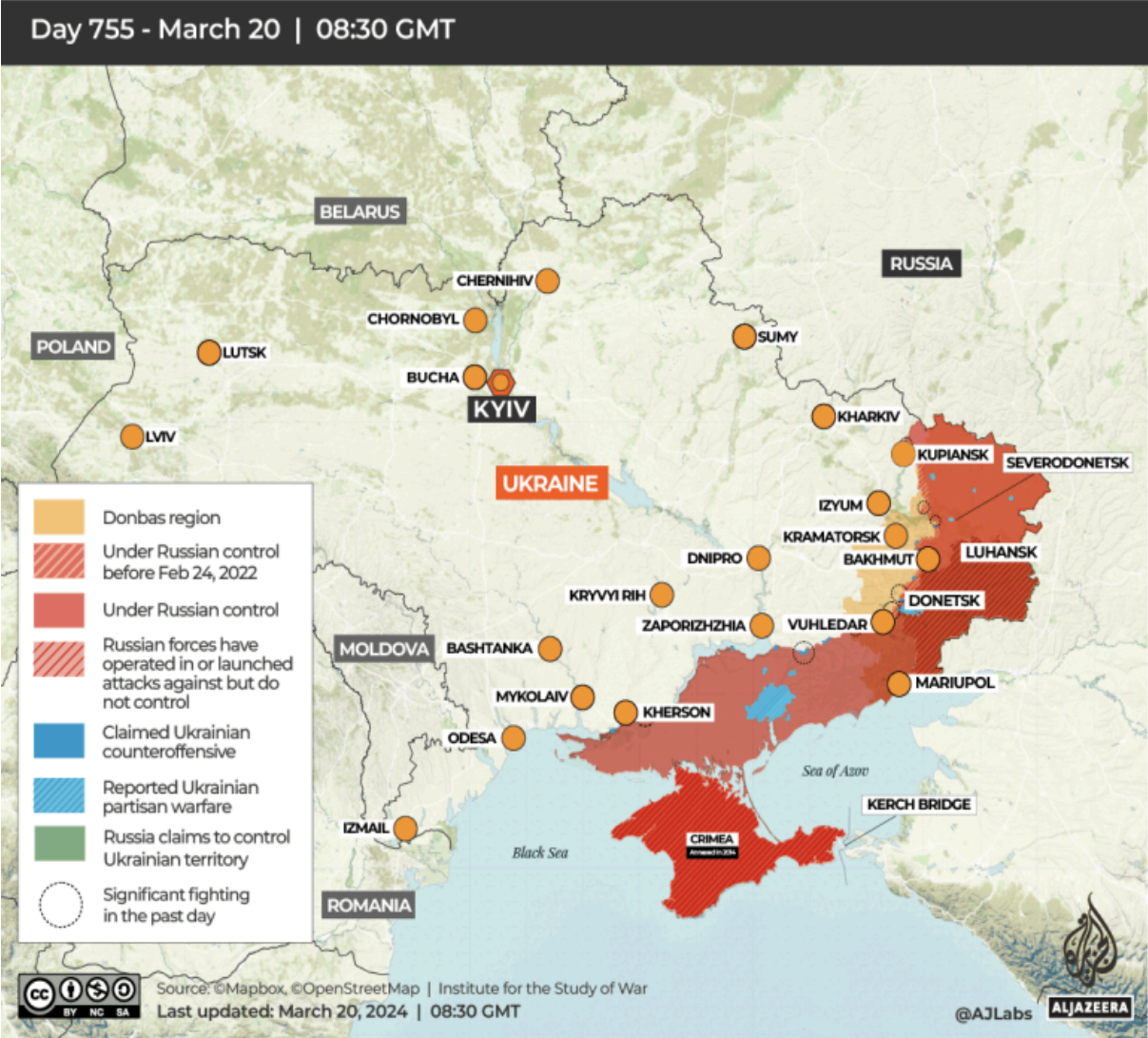


Figure 2 Who controls what in Ukraine

This section started in February 2022, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia dramatically shifted Eastern European geopolitics, further straining Polish-Russian relations and redefining security dynamics. Subsequent sections will explore the post-invasion impacts and adjustments in Poland's foreign policy.

The intricate and often tempestuous tableau of Polish-Russian relations has unfurled across centuries, embroidered with conflicts that span wars, occupations, and regional disputes. As the wheel of time has turned across the last two decades, these interactions have soured further, fermenting in a brew of crises stoked by divergent historical interpretations and clashing geopolitical ambitions. Poland, positioned as a strategic conduit for the flow of

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Russian natural gas into the European Union's heartlands, stands as a sentinel at a critical juncture, highlighting its pivotal role amidst the geopolitical chessboard that links Eurasia with the broader expanse of the Middle East.

Dialogue between the United States and Poland regarding the emplacement of a U.S. missile defence system has underscored Poland's strategic import, casting it as a linchpin at the confluence of Eurasian and Middle Eastern geopolitics. The friction extending between Russia and Poland transcends international policy, delving into domestic realms where historical legacies and societal undercurrents have the power to magnify minor incidents into significant diplomatic conflagrations, illustrating a complex ballet of internal and external policy choreography. (Joint Statement on the Strategic Dialogue between the United States and Poland - United States Department of State (2023))

A constant throughline in the narrative of Polish-Russian dynamics is the inescapable presence of Belarus as a pivotal third actor, introducing a multifaceted challenge to national security concerns for nations along the eastern frontier, with Poland at the fore. Belarus, bolstered by considerable military forces, including an elite cadre of Wagner Group soldiers, a substantial Russian military presence, and its own formidable regular forces, emerges as a significant concern. Simultaneously, the Poland-Belarus border has transformed into a crucible for refugee crises, with accusations levied against Belarus for engineering these human flows toward Polish territories, further complicating the geopolitical puzzle.

This tripartite interaction, set against the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, reveals a Belarus seeking sovereignty yet intertwined closely with Russia, a relationship that is both a vestige of historical affiliations and a testament to mutual strategic necessities. As Belarus navigates its quest for autonomy, its disputes with Russia have not markedly detracted from their overarching alliance, underscored by the mutual reliance that has characterised their post-Soviet era relations.

Poland's strategies, aimed at exacerbating Russia's estrangement from the West and thereby diluting Moscow's influence, inadvertently serve to consolidate the Russia-Belarus alliance. This intricate geopolitical dance, weighed down by the considerations of strategic deterrence and the myriad interests at play, showcases the challenging endeavour Poland faces in its quest to sway the course of regional dynamics.

Amidst these grand strategic considerations, Poland's historical ledger with Russia, replete with centuries of grievances, partitions, and a resilient quest for sovereignty, emerges as a

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critical backdrop. The transition towards a private economy and parliamentary democracy post-1989, spurred by policies enacted during Gorbachev's tenure, marks a definitive pivot away from the Soviet model, with Poland's integration into NATO and the EU emblematic of its strategic reorientation.

Furthermore, the fissures of religious and cultural identity that pervade the Polish-Russian narrative add layers of complexity to this relationship. The divergence in religious beliefs, with Poland's adherence to Catholicism contrasted against the Orthodox Christian majority in Russia, and the exploitation of these differences by Western powers during the late 20th century, have contributed significantly to the tensions that define the contemporary Polish-Russian tableau. The saga of Polish-Russian relations, steeped in a rich historical context, underscored by strategic imperatives and complicated by the interplay of cultural and religious identities, presents a multifaceted narrative that continues to evolve in the face of current geopolitical realities.

Chapter 2: Background

2.1 Poland's Strategic Manoeuvring in the Wake of Russian Meddling

Between February 2022 and 2024, Eastern Europe was engulfed in geopolitical turmoil due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which triggered severe sanctions and a humanitarian crisis. Poland emerged as a critical support hub for Ukrainian refugees and a pivotal actor in NATO and the EU's response to the conflict.

The period from February 2022 to 2024 was marked by significant geopolitical tensions and military conflict in Eastern Europe, primarily stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion led to widespread international condemnation and the imposition of severe economic sanctions on Russia by Western countries and their allies. The conflict not only deepened the divide between Russia and Western countries but also triggered a humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, with millions of Ukrainians displaced from their homes.

Poland, sharing a border with Ukraine, found itself in a crucial position during this period. It not only became a major transit and support hub for Ukrainian refugees but also played a significant role in the European Union and NATO's response to the crisis. Poland's strategic manoeuvring during this period included bolstering its own military capabilities, supporting Ukraine with humanitarian and military aid, and advocating for a stronger and more unified response from the international community against Russian aggression.

In the wake of Russia's incursion into Ukraine in February 2022, Poland undertook a multifaceted strategic initiative designed to fortify its security infrastructure, elevate its role within the confines of NATO and the European Union, and extend unequivocal support towards Ukraine. The nation's hospitality towards millions of refugees and its pivotal function as a principal channel for international assistance not only highlighted its humanitarian dedication but also illustrated its strategic insight in strengthening the security apparatus of Eastern Europe against Russian interference. This era highlighted Poland's critical contribution to the equilibrium of regional power dynamics, demonstrating its proficiency in marshalling resources, orchestrating global support, and adopting a resolute posture against belligerence, thereby augmenting the cohesion and resilience of the transatlantic alliance (Nowakowski, J. (2023). "Poland's Strategic Posture in the New European Security Environment." Polish Institute of International Affairs Policy Review, 14(2), pp. 45-62. Polish Institute of International Affairs).

2.2 EU sanctions

Poland's advocacy for sanctions against Russia, support for the Three Seas Initiative, and efforts to decrease Europe's energy dependence on Russia highlight Warsaw's proactive stance in shaping a regional security architecture that seeks to counterbalance Moscow's influence.

The strategic implications of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict have further complicated Poland-Russian relations. Poland's support for Ukraine, both in terms of humanitarian aid and military assistance, stands in stark contrast to Russia's aggressive military actions and political manoeuvring designed to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. Warsaw views the stability and independence of Ukraine as vital to its own national security and to the broader stability of Eastern Europe. Thus, Poland's policies and diplomatic efforts are aimed at isolating Russia internationally while strengthening ties with Western allies and regional partners to ensure a collective response to Russian aggression.

However, the engagement between Poland and Russia is not devoid of complexity. Economic ties, energy dependencies, and regional security issues necessitate a nuanced approach. Poland's push for diversification of energy sources and increased defence capabilities reflects a strategic calculus aimed at reducing vulnerabilities to Russian influence while navigating the broader challenges of European security and cooperation.

As Poland continues to advocate for a robust European and international stance against Russian aggression, the future of Poland-Russian relations remains uncertain. The dynamics of this relationship will significantly impact the security architecture of Eastern Europe and the broader international order. Poland's role as a frontline state in the contestation between Western democratic values and Russian authoritarianism underscores the geopolitical significance of Warsaw's strategies and the enduring complexity of its relationship with Moscow.

Chapter 3: Results and effects

3.1 Poland's Influence on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict and the Global Chessboard

3.1.1 Strategy and Russian Tactical Advances in the Ukraine Conflict

During a pivotal moment on March 7, 2024, U.S. President Joe Biden emphasised America's unwavering support for Ukraine, offering defence weapons without deploying American troops, a stance reflecting a broader strategy to assist Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression while avoiding direct confrontation and the spectre of a nuclear conflict or a third world war.

On the battlefield, Russian forces have demonstrated tactical gains, notably capturing the eastern fortress city of Avdiivka on February 19, 2024, and pushing towards strategic objectives beyond, signalling the war's intensification. This progression underscores the potential expansion of the conflict into significant areas like Kharkiv, further stressing the geopolitical stakes. Concurrently, the predicament of Ukraine appears dire, with significant personnel and material losses reported, further exacerbated by internal challenges and external dependencies. Amidst these developments, Western support for Ukraine has been robust yet complicated by internal politics within supporter nations, notably the U.S. and EU, with significant aid packages announced amidst debates over direct military involvement.

3.1.2 Germany - north stream

Many perceive France and Germany to align with the United States, but this presumption is unfounded. The United States strategically seeks to capitalise on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, perpetuating a state of war to exploit the vulnerabilities of France and Germany, which are enduring escalating economic challenges including rising inflation, energy instability, and economic downturns. Consequently, France and Germany ardently advocated for a prompt cessation of hostilities. In the event of a U.S. triumph, they anticipate leveraging the dividends of Russia's defeat; conversely, should the United States falter, France and Germany endeavour to emancipate themselves from American influence, fostering greater autonomy and fostering renewed diplomatic ties with Russia to ameliorate energy provision. (Hans, 2023)

3.1.3 Iran /North Korea

For these two countries have been long beleaguered by protracted U.S. sanctions, they are

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poised to capitalise on any opportunity to retaliate against the Western world. Central to their strategic calculus is the imperative for a decisive victory against Western powers to assert their influence and secure favourable post-conflict outcomes. Drawing parallels to South Korea's intervention in Vietnam, which precipitated substantial economic assistance from the United States, Iran's extensive collaboration with Russia in Syria underscores their readiness for combat.

North Korea boasts a formidable military force, with Russia bolstering its ranks in response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Should NATO intervene, the absence of air superiority would render the conflict a war of attrition, challenging NATO's ageing troops to withstand sustained engagement.

3.1.4 Japan/South Korea

While these two countries are disinclined to engage in direct conflict with China, endeavoured to embroil the United States in a confrontation with China. Reflective of the Korean War dynamics, a conflict between China and the United States would advantage Japan and South Korea, enabling them to extract benefits from the resultant power vacuum. Although Japan's military demographic skews towards an older cohort, precluding aspirations for hegemony, they remain opportunistic actors on the global stage.

3.1.5 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia harbours aspirations of transcending its regional confines to emerge as a dominant power in the Middle East. Despite its alignment with the United States, this partnership has failed to significantly augment Saudi Arabia's national power, owing to limited U.S. investment in Saudi industry. Consequently, Saudi Arabia looks to China for economic sustenance, anticipating a strategic realignment facilitated by China's mediation, potentially culminating in the normalisation of relations with Iran. As U.S. hegemony diminishes, Saudi Arabia, alongside other OPEC nations, is poised to pivot towards settling transactions in Chinese yuan, symbolising a seismic shift in global economic dynamics.

3.1.6 Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

In its quest for dominance within the heartlands of Central and Eastern Europe, Poland echoes the grandeur of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, aspiring to a renaissance of influence and power. Yet, as the Three Seas Initiative unfurls its sails, charting a course that might divide as much as it unites, Poland's gambit on the European chessboard speaks to a deeper game—a

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reimagining of the global order, where the levers of power and discourse shift in the wind, heralding a new dawn of international alignment and discord alike.

3.1.7 France

From the very first day of the conflict, France and its European Union partners chose to stand firmly alongside Ukraine and its people.(de, 2022)The role of France has emerged as particularly intriguing, with President Macron adopting an increasingly firm stance against Russian advances, potentially escalating the conflict to new heights. Despite these tensions, the prospect of direct Western military intervention remains contentious, reflecting the complex calculus of risk, strategic interests, and the quest for a durable peace.Thus,The likelihood of peace talks seems dim, given the vast gulf between the conflicting parties' demands and conditions, with both sides entrenched in their positions. This impasse underscores the grim reality that without significant shifts in diplomatic stances or a reevaluation of strategic objectives, the conflict may persist, with far-reaching implications for global stability and the international order.

3.1.8 NATO attitude

In the context of NATO's approach and individual European nations' responses to the Ukraine conflict, discussions on military support diverge, emphasising the alliance's cautious stance against escalating the war with Russia. French President EmmanuelMacron's suggestion of ground troop deployment stirred controversy, leading to clarifications that discussions were centred on non-combative support like demining and military training within Ukraine. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, along with leaders from Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia, affirmed their commitment to providing non-lethal aid and support, eschewing the deployment of combat troops to avoid direct confrontation with nuclear-armed Russia. Despite this, individual NATO members continue to supply Ukraine with weapons and ammunition, underlining the alliance's principle of supporting Ukraine's right to self-defence while maintaining a careful balance to not provoke a broader conflict. This delicate diplomatic and military dance reflects the complex interplay of legal, moral, and strategic considerations shaping the West's support for Ukraine amidst ongoing Russian aggression.(SCMP," 2023)

Speaking of the balance between defence capabilities and resource reserves, Poland and Ukraine are indeed performing commendably. Poland is actively advancing its militarization process and has noticeably surpassed the pace of other NATO European member states.

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However, the sustainability of this pace, relying solely on Warsaw's own strength, is a matter to be observed. As for Ukraine, it is now primarily a military camp dependent on external support, with internal cohesion powered by radical nationalism. In such a context, not only has the country's level of militarization far exceeded its own capacity to endure, but immigration and military operations are also undermining its demographic potential and industrial prospects.

3.1.9 Three sea initiative

Ukraine's association with the Three Seas Initiative [The Three Seas Initiative, known also as the Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea Initiative or simply as the Three Seas, is a forum of thirteen states, in the European Union, running along a north–south axis from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic and Black Seas in Central and Eastern Europe.], which focuses on enhancing transport, economic, and digital connectivity across the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic seas, marks a critical step in its integration into Europe. The initiative is seen as a platform for Ukraine to leverage its resources like energy supplies and tech ecosystem, aiming for modern infrastructure and technological advancements. The discussion also touched on the risks, particularly the increased investment risk due to the ongoing conflict, highlighting the need for guarantee funds to encourage private sector reconstruction investments (Walla, 2024).(chojnacki, 2024,01)

In the grand theatre of international politics, Poland emerges as a pivotal protagonist, wielding its influence not as a direct arbiter of the fate ensnaring Russia and Ukraine but as a sentinel of Europe's eastern front and a linchpin within the continent's geopolitical core. Upon its ascension to the European Union in the year of grace 2004, the Republic of Poland, from its ancient capital of Warsaw, issued forth a clarion call, cautioning the European congregation against the spectre of a resurgent Russia, cloaked in the guise of revisionism.

After Poland joined the Three Seas initiative, it ascended as the sovereign of collaboration along Europe's North-South axis, wielding its influence with the finesse of a maestro in the diplomatic overtures towards Germany and Hungary. With a voice resonant and firm, Poland stood in opposition to the Teutonic and Muscovite pact that sought to birth the Nord Stream 2, prophesying it as a harbinger of strife and dependency that would skirt Ukrainian lands, sowing seeds of discord and entangling the continent in a thicket of energy despair. In its early crusade for sanctions against the Russian bear, Poland sought to awaken Germany from its slumber of silence, shaping, in part, the resolve that led to the Scholz government's

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momentous armament gift to Ukraine—a fleet of Leopard 2 tanks.

3.1.10 Hungary

Unto Hungary, Poland cast a wary eye, as Budapest's camaraderie with the Kremlin stood unshaken by the storms of conflict. Amidst the spectre of the Paks II and the shadowy tendrils of the International Investment Bank within Budapest's heart, Poland, risking the sundering of ancient alliances, castigated Hungary's Russophile stance, wielding the might of the American eagle to compel a retreat from the International Investment Bank's embrace.

Yet, for all Poland's manoeuvring and influence, the Gordian knot of the Russia-Ukraine conflict defies simple solutions. The chasm between the combatants—Russia's insistent demand for Kyiv's acquiescence to a bitter loss of sovereignty and Ukraine's unyielding defiance—stands as an impasse unbreached by mediators and unmoved by the spectre of interlopers. In this complex tableau, some might perceive Poland's martial posturing and the grand spectacle of its military parades as harbingers of a tempest yet to come. Yet, beneath the fanfare and the martial vigour lies not the drumbeat of imminent conflict but the solemn duty of guardianship—a bulwark against the tide of strife that seeks to breach its realms. (*A Strategy of Courage: The next Phase of the Russia-Ukraine War*, 2024)

Power distribution

History has demonstrated that pursuing national modernization through a blunt integration into Western-centric globalisation is a dead-end strategy. For Russia to sustain its international position in the long term, its industrial modernization must adhere to different standards. At present, its existing capabilities are likely to maintain its status as a military power in the short term, yet the tension with the West will compel it to make increasingly greater efforts beyond its capacity to sustain resources.

3.2 The refugee crisis

The refugee crisis in Europe took a dramatic turn in late February 2022 following Russia's military incursion into Ukraine. This conflict led to over 6 million Ukrainians seeking refuge across Europe, with another 8 million displaced within Ukraine by the end of May 2022. By 20 March, around a quarter of Ukraine's population had been forced to leave their homes, with a staggering 90% of these refugees being women and children. Ukrainian regulations prevent most men aged between 18 and 60 from exiting the country. By 24 March, over half of Ukraine's children had been displaced, with one in four leaving the country altogether. This

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situation has resulted in the largest refugee crisis Europe has seen since the aftermath of the Second World War, marking it as the first crisis of its magnitude in Europe since the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. Currently, it stands as the fourth largest refugee crisis globally and the most significant of the 21st century, with the fastest rate of refugee displacement seen worldwide.

Following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in late February 2022, a major refugee crisis developed, forcing millions of Ukrainians to flee to neighboring western nations such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Moldova in search of safety. Approximately 3 million people then moved to other countries in Europe. By July 18, 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that, out of 1.6 million Ukrainians seeking asylum or other types of temporary protection, the majority of those applications went to Poland; of them, one million went to Germany; and 540,000 went to the Czech Republic. By September 2022, Human Rights Watch has released alarming reports that residents in Ukraine were being forcibly relocated to Russia. Additionally, the UN Human Rights Office has referenced reliable allegations concerning the forced transfer of unaccompanied minors to the Russian Federation or to areas under Russian occupation. According to estimates from the US Department of State, at least 900,000 Ukrainian citizens were transferred into Russian territory against their will. Since the start of the conflict, almost 4.5 million Ukrainians have made the difficult decision to return home.

Anticipating a potential Russian offensive against Ukraine as early as 15 February, the Polish government prepared for the arrival of up to a million refugees, urging communities to get ready. By 25 July, over 1.2 million Ukrainian refugees were registered in Poland, leading to a significant easing of border formalities to facilitate their entry. Every district in Poland established assembly points offering refugees essential services such as free accommodation, food, and supplies, with substantial support from citizens and organisations. Efforts to assist refugees included launching websites in Ukrainian and preparing legal amendments to simplify their employment, as Ukraine is not an EU member. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, commended Poland's efforts during his visit to the Polish-Ukrainian border on 2 March, highlighting the country's commitment to safe passage for Ukrainians and rejecting allegations of discrimination as Russian propaganda.

The influx has notably impacted Polish cities, with Ukrainians comprising up to 30% of the population in major urban areas by April 2022. The migration has significantly increased the populations of cities like Rzeszów, Warsaw, Kraków, and Gdańsk. Ukrainian refugees are

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granted the right to reside and work in the EU, receiving benefits akin to Polish citizens, including health insurance and free public education. To support integration, Poland established an Aid Fund, financially backed by the European Investment Bank with loans totaling €600 million, administered by Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego to support local governments and public entities aiding Ukrainian migrants.

Ukrainian refugees seek safety in multiple countries

Estimated refugees recorded, February 14 2024

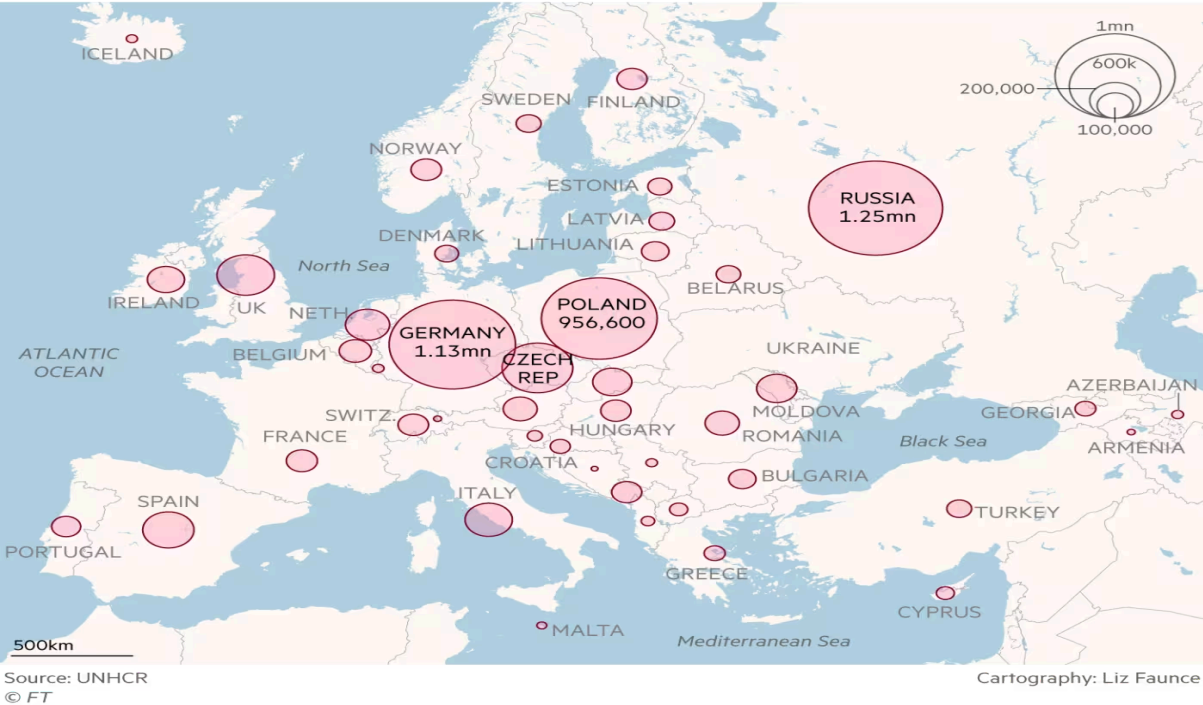


Figure 3 Ukrainian refugees seek safety in multiple countries

In the intricate tapestry of international relations and military strategy that defines the contemporary geopolitical landscape of Eastern Europe, the dynamics between Russia, Belarus, and NATO, particularly in the context of the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, present a complex picture of escalating tensions and strategic manoeuvring. The provision of advanced S400 air defence missile systems to Belarus by Russia and the discussions surrounding the deployment of tactical nuclear weapons within Belarusian territory signify a notable escalation in military posturing. These developments are indicative of Russia's intent to bolster its strategic defence capabilities on its western flank, amidst increasing NATO activities and support for Ukraine.

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense's assertions regarding the West's initial ambitions to utilise Russia's aggressive manoeuvres in Ukraine as a means to diplomatically and morally isolate Moscow underscores the deep-seated narrative battles and the fight for the moral high

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ground in international discourse. This strategic narrative, however, faces challenges as the conflict progresses. With Russia's conscription efforts reportedly exceeding 50,000 individuals since the onset of 2024, and the increasing fortification of its military presence in allied Belarus, Moscow demonstrates its readiness to engage in a protracted conflict, underscoring its resolve not to be isolated or diminished on the global stage.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's shift to a more defensive posture in response to these developments, coupled with the realisation among NATO allies that Western aid, while significant, may not suffice to decisively alter the battlefield dynamics, introduces a sobering recalibration of expectations. The complexity of providing sufficient military aid to Ukraine, without provoking further escalation from Russia, poses a delicate balance for NATO countries. The strategic impasse, characterised by the fortified Russian-Belarusian military axis and the steadfast but stretched Ukrainian defence, raises profound questions about the trajectory of this conflict.

Amidst these unfolding dynamics, the spectre of a larger conflagration looms. The potential deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus by Russia marks a significant escalation that could dramatically alter the strategic calculus for NATO and Ukraine. Such moves not only raise the stakes of the conflict but also reintroduce the grim prospect of nuclear brinkmanship into European security considerations. The implications of this escalation are far-reaching, affecting not just the immediate participants in the conflict but also the global community, as the norms and thresholds that have historically restrained the use of nuclear capabilities are tested.

Furthermore, the sustained increase in Russian conscription and military preparedness, alongside the strategic bolstering of its western defences through Belarus, sends a clear signal of Moscow's intention to not only endure the pressures of international sanctions and diplomatic isolation but also to assert its military and strategic autonomy. This stance, coupled with the challenged efficacy of Western aid to Ukraine in reversing the conflict's dynamics, underscores the complexities of contemporary warfare, where conventional military engagements are interwoven with political, economic, and informational strategies.

In this context, the future trajectory of the war in Ukraine, and its potential to spark broader regional or even global conflict, becomes difficult to predict. The interplay of military escalation, strategic alliances, and the precarious balance of power in Eastern Europe set the stage for a conflict that could redefine the contours of international relations and security

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architecture in the 21st century. As the world watches the unfolding events in Ukraine and the responses of NATO, Russia, and Belarus, the enduring hope remains for a resolution that averts further escalation and paves the way for peace and stability in the region. However, the path to such an outcome remains fraught with challenges and uncertainties, as the actors involved navigate the delicate interplay of national interests, security imperatives, and the overarching desire to prevent a descent into a third world war.

Chapter 4: Analysis of the war by different schools of thought toward the war: “Does Russia have the Grand Strategy¹?”

The Russian-Georgian "Five-Day War" of 2008 marked a clear challenge to the United States-led international order through Russia's active use of force abroad. This event accelerated the decline of grand visions such as "the end of history," "hegemonic stabilisation," and "global liberalism" proposed by Western theorists. Key questions remain about Russia's competitive foreign policy behaviour and whether Putin has developed a grand national strategy. These questions continue to spark intense discussions among political circles, academia, think tanks, and the media.(Sputnik News, 2023)

The traditional realist view suggests that post-independence Russia's foreign behaviour is driven by opportunistic motives rather than an overarching strategy. Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul first suggested that "domestic issues are at the centre of all of Putin's agendas," aiming to create a regime unaccountable to the people and independent political actors. Poland echoes this interpretation, arguing that Putin's strategy is simply a way of maintaining power, neither ambitious nor strategic. Some researchers contend that Russia has historically acted in response to short-term opportunities without strategic vision, with Putin seen more as an opportunist than a master strategist. This reactive approach aligns with a common feature of Russian history, which has often responded to external events in a reactive rather than proactive manner.

Some Polish scholars believe that Russia under Putin is developing a grand strategy, but its specific goals are not yet clear.(Garbowski, 2024) Leaders throughout Russia's history have had deliberate, focused, and comprehensive strategic plans that have shaped long-term foreign policy and military buildup. Putin has been equally active in attempting to formulate a long-term strategy for Russia's development, and while these attempts are the result of realpolitik considerations related to his desire to remain in power, they also reflect an intent to form some sort of strategic vision. Scholars of this view dismiss speculation that Putin is "irrational or psychologically unstable" in his foreign policy, arguing that his experience in the KGB forged Putin's personality as a leader capable of executing grand designs. After carefully assessing Putin's directives, state programs, and strategic plans issued over his 20 years in office, especially since the start of his third term in 2012, Andrew Monahan notes that "Russia

¹ Charap, Samuel, et al., Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021), 5.

Navigating the Tumultuous Triad of Russia-Poland-Ukraine Relations in the Theater of international Diplomacy under Putin may have redesigned its internal and external policies" and that "it is almost self-evident that Russia has a grand strategy ".(Polity, 2019)However, he also argued that while the Russian leadership has developed a broad vision and has been successful in realising the goals it has set, "when it comes to a grand strategy, it is still under development."(*Dr. Andrew Monaghan on Putin's Invasion of Ukraine W/ Steve Scully, 2024*)

The third view equates Russia's grand strategy essentially with the official Russian doctrines, concepts and strategies, and defines its specific goals and key principles accordingly. For example, to rebuild a geopolitical unity based on the "Eurasian community," to work to weaken or eliminate competing centres of power in Europe (e.g., NATO and the European Union), and to "reinvigorate support for the former Soviet Union's allies in key pivotal regions, such as Syria and Cuba"; "to become an independent international coalition by building a flexible international coalition." ; "become an independent centre of power and influence by building flexible international alliances"; conduct foreign affairs on the principle of Eurasianism, etc. After integrating these different goals and principles, Persson named Russia's grand strategy "Yalta 2.0," which consists of three pillars: maintaining an undisputed sphere of influence in the post-Soviet region, building global discourse and influence, and constraining and checking U.S. hegemony. Marsh, on the other hand, believes that Russia's grand strategy is "two-pronged": one is to ensure influence over its former Soviet neighbours, and the other is to build strategic alliances with other countries pursuing multipolarity in the world. Hurd suggests that the narrative thread of Russia's grand strategy is clearly the emergence of a militarily capable and strategically relevant exceptional power that ensures complete freedom of independent thought and action, defends and advances its core interests as a Eurasian hegemon, and exercises global influence.

In conclusion, the views discussed capture key aspects of Russia's grand strategy, including its political attributes, foreign policy practices, official documents, and leader traits. However, these analyses are somewhat superficial and isolated, like "blind men feeling the elephant," each correct in its own perspective but limited and often conflicting, making mutual persuasion or denial difficult.

4.1 “Strategy in action” and the making of Grand Strategy

The concept of "Grand Strategy" has been proposed for a long time, but there is no widely recognized standard definition in the academic community. Based on the understanding of its

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principles and laws by many Grand Strategy researchers, there is a consensus on the basic definition of Grand Strategy as follows: Grand Strategy is a theory that describes a country's most important and enduring interests and how to use its resources to defend or promote those interests based on domestic and international conditions.(Charap et al., 2021)

A grand strategy serves the fundamental interests or goals of the State, emphasising the unity of politics over goals. The primary goal is security at the level of survival, including territorial and political security. The second goal is economic strength and prosperity, necessary to support the first. Most countries focus on these two major goals. However, some nations, especially those with advantages in certain areas, seek to influence other countries while avoiding external influence. These few countries engage in power struggles, forming a "club of powerful countries" that sets the rules and order in the international system, aiming to maintain or seek a position of power.(Russian Grand Strategy in the era of global power competition, 2018, p. 65)

Russia is a country with a long tradition of grand strategy, and the quest for a position of power no less than that of any great power is its central goal. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, security and prosperity are undoubtedly the fundamental goals of grand strategy to be pursued by Russia, but the fundamental goals of its grand strategy go beyond that. The international status of a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, the nuclear strategic balance of power with the United States in terms of "mutually assured destruction", and the resource endowment of an intercontinental great power spanning the Eurasian continent have all determined Russia's pursuit of "strong autonomy" at the power-political level.

The grand strategy provides a blueprint or guidance for the country's policies in many areas, and involves the comprehensive development, utilisation, distribution, and integration of all areas of governance and all resources, i.e., the comprehensiveness of forces or means. After taking over the presidency, Putin reversed the internal and external decline of the 1990s and established a relatively centralised and efficient power system that ensures the full and rational use of state resources. In summary, based on the determination of the three basic characteristics of unity, permanence and comprehensiveness, it can be confirmed that Russia in the Putin era did have a grand strategy.

The concept of grand strategy is crucial not only in its definition but also in its creation. According to the "grand plans" school of thought, building a grand strategy involves

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operationalized scientific methods that policymakers use to craft and implement detailed plans, as seen in historical examples like the U.S. NSC-68 program during the early Cold War. However, the "grand principles" school argues that grand strategies are shaped by universal values and theories, deduced from state behaviours and pronouncements, suggesting that grand strategy is more of a state's "mindset" for achieving goals than a rigid plan. Meanwhile, the "grand behaviour" school views grand strategy as evolving through reactive and piecemeal steps, manifested through a state's diplomatic actions, resource exploitation, and military initiatives, often without needing intentional design (Office of the Historian, 2024).

Russia's grand strategy, aligned with the "grand behaviour" school, emphasises strategy formation through practical actions. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has engaged in a series of tactical moves to probe adversaries' reactions, shaping a grand strategy through flexibility and opportunistic responses. Franco describes Putin as a strategic opportunist, adept at leveraging conflicts and tensions with the West to prepare for future competitions. This approach is influenced by Russia's unique "strategic culture," which includes elements such as civilizational identity, historical heritage, and strategic patience, all shaping its pragmatic approach to strategic challenges. Despite ideological shifts across different state formations—from Tsarist Russia to the USSR, and then to the Russian Federation—a consistent "Russian consensus" or style persists in strategic decision-making, underscoring a continuity that transcends political changes ("Russia Today", 2023).

4.2 Objectives, modalities and preponderant forces of Russia's grand strategy

Grand strategy involves at least three types of issues: the shaping of the goals of grand strategy, i.e., the basic knowledge and beliefs about what the international system is, how it works, and the country's place in it; the ways of realising the goals of grand strategy, i.e., an analysis of the main threats and opportunities that the country faces, the most important of which is the identification of friends and enemies and the determination of ways of responding to them; and the selection of the dominant forces for the purposes of grand strategy, i.e. The selection of the superior forces of the grand strategy, that is to say, the selection of the most advantageous forces in accordance with the country's strategic tradition and the development of these forces to make them the most effective means and tools for realising the goals of the grand strategy.

4.2.1 Objectives of Russia's Grand Strategy

In his first significant policy essay, Putin affirmed that "Russia was and will remain a world power," a stance rooted in its unique geopolitical and cultural identity. Around this core, during the second decade of Putin's rule, Russia has embraced important grand strategic concepts like multipolarity and spheres of influence. Since 2019, Putin has emphasised the shift towards a multipolar world where the dominance of the West is receding, advocating for a diverse global system as essential for stability. This perspective is grounded in Russia's strengths—its military prowess and strategic Eurasian location—positioning it well in the global power competition.

Furthermore, Russia's grand strategy involves establishing a sphere of influence across the Eurasian region, which Putin considers crucial for Russia's revival as a major power. This influence aims to secure the national security, economic prosperity, and strategic directions of neighbouring countries while minimising Western interference. By maintaining dominant influence in these areas, Russia seeks to counteract anti-Russian sentiments and promote integration initiatives like the Eurasian economic union, which Putin argues should serve as a dynamic bridge between Europe and the Asia-Pacific rather than as a periphery.

Additionally, Russia pushes for great power coordination to foster a stable global balance, advocating for an international system where major powers play a decisive role in global governance and security issues. This approach mirrors historical systems like those established at Vienna and Yalta, which Russia views as models for lasting peace and stability.

Lastly, Putin champions a unique Russian political civilization that diverges from Western democratic norms, promoting "sovereign democracy" and "controlled democracy." This stance is a response to perceived threats from the West, such as the promotion of democratic norms and "colour revolutions" that Russia views as strategies to encircle and destabilise it. The Kremlin actively promotes its historical and spiritual values, positioning Orthodox Christianity at the core of its state ideology and seeking to propagate this "Russian world" perspective both domestically and internationally. This comprehensive approach underscores Russia's efforts to fortify its global standing and safeguard its unique political and cultural identity.

4.2.2 Implementation modalities to the grand strategy

The newly independent Russian Federation, beset by internal and external difficulties and with the primary goals of consolidating power, restoring the economy, and preserving the

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country's unity, had more than enough to do to determine whether and how to rebuild the country's grand strategy. (Four Myths about Russian Grand Strategy | the Post-Soviet Post | CSIS, 2020) Yeltsin opted for a strategy of "integration into the West", which was to recognize Russia as a "community of democracies" like North America and Europe, to reposition Russia in the international arena as a regional power dominating the CIS, and to diplomatically choose a "one-sidedness" approach to the West. In diplomatic terms, they are choosing to be "one-sided" toward the West.

However, the US and the West repeatedly trumpeted themselves as the victors and Russia as the losers of the Cold War, which allowed the latter to sow the seeds of vengeance from the very beginning. The U.S.-led Group of Seven, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other international financial institutions have demanded that other participants comply with the rules they set, introducing punitive sanctions for political purposes and seriously undermining the efforts of non-Western power centres like Russia to integrate into the system on a level playing field. The U.S. unilaterally announced withdrawal from the ABM Treaty not only destabilised the nuclear arms balance between Russia and the U.S., but also made Russia more vulnerable due to the loss of a credible nuclear deterrent. The U.S. support for the European Union and NATO's "double eastward expansion" into Eastern Europe and even the former Soviet Union is a direct violation of Russia's traditional sphere of influence, which Russia considers to be its legitimate influence in these regions, not the United States.

To sum up, a consensus has been formed in Russia: the United States is taking advantage of Russia's weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union to suppress Russia and deprive it of its rightful place in the international system, and the Yeltsin-era grand strategy of "integration into the West" is not feasible; Russia's perception and understanding of the international system is also fundamentally different from that of the West, which has no intention of treating Russia as a co-model of the new post-Cold War world order, or as an equal partner of the United States. Russia's perception and understanding of the international system is fundamentally different from that of the West, and the latter has no intention of seeing Russia as an equal partner in shaping a new post-Cold War world order. Competition between the two sides in terms of grand strategy is inevitable.

The essence of grand strategy lies not only in the augmentation of one's own power but also in the redistribution of power relative to primary adversaries, thereby influencing global power dynamics. During the Cold War, the focal point of American grand strategy was devising

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tactics to emerge victorious in a total confrontation with its primary rival, the Soviet Union. Conversely, contemporary Russian grand strategy revolves around undermining American hegemony to safeguard its own power status. This can manifest in various forms, such as employing tactics reminiscent of Peter the Great's approach, which involved compelling Great Powers to acknowledge Russia's interests through direct military actions. Alternatively, it may entail adopting a Cold War-esque strategy akin to the post-war Soviet stance, where internal resources were marshalled to counter Western influence and secure the status of a global power. Furthermore, economic warfare, information warfare, and proxy conflicts are also viable methods to pursue this objective.(Zhao Long,2022)

Russia firmly believes that when dealing with a powerful adversary, offence is preferable to a compromising or concessionary approach. This is the grand strategic approach that Russia has always taken when facing its number one rival. An offensive strategy indicates that a country's leaders believe that it is either in a position of strength; or that it anticipates that its adversary is weakening and is able to change the balance of power in a favourable way in the future. The creation of specific goals and key principles of Russian grand strategy suggests that the Kremlin's judgement is the latter. Moscow believes in and welcomes the decline of U.S. influence in the world and seeks to further accelerate it.

2.204, Russia seeks to weaken the United States, but has no desire to supplant the United States as the sole superpower or to compete for the same world power status as the United States.

However, China has been assisting Russia economically during its conflict with Ukraine, despite international sanctions aimed at Moscow.(Atwood, 2024) This support has primarily been through increased purchases of Russian oil and other commodities, which has provided a crucial economic lifeline to Russia. Moreover, China's role as a significant consumer of Russian goods has strengthened the bilateral ties between the two nations, underpinning a strategic partnership that has geopolitical implications, particularly in the context of their shared interests against Western dominance in global affairs.Chinese state media did not carry Putin's cryptic comment at the meeting in Uzbekistan, where the leaders are attending a regional security forum, and quoted Xi as saying only that the two countries would continue to cooperate closely and support each other's defence of their "core interests", without mentioning Ukraine specifically.Russia was the first foreign country Xi visited after assuming power in late 2012, and on Wednesday he addressed Putin as his "dear old friend".(Financial Times, 2018)

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Russia's grand strategy envisions a polycentric order that weakens rather than destroys the West, and in which the United States and the European Union will remain the main players. Nor does Russian military strategy call for a struggle for world military hegemony, with a global military presence, overseas bases, or expeditionary forces. Putin has made it clear that "we do not aspire to global domination or expansion." Russian officials have never expressed an attempt to rebuild the Soviet Union, and there is no mention of imperialist ambitions or the use of military power to control neighbouring countries or export that country's model to other countries. In Putin's words, "Whoever does not lament the collapse of the Soviet Union has no conscience; whoever wants to rebuild the Soviet Union in the same way as it was has no brains." In short, in the grand strategic competition with the United States, Russia has opted for a traditional offensive strategy, but has not resorted to direct military rivalry or all-round strategic confrontation, but rather to different approaches depending on different areas and different topics. It has countered forcefully when its rivals have crossed Russia's red line, restrained them on other issues, and made good use of them in areas of mutual interest. This is the fundamental reason why the strategic competition between the two sides will continue to be intense, but will not lead to a repeat of the cold war.

4.2.3 Superior forces for realising grand strategy

Grand strategy is the way for great powers to win, and the military is naturally an important instrument of their concern. In the view of the Western states, military force is only one of the necessary tools of grand strategy, along with economic, financial, institutional, and value-based instruments. But in Russia's view, force and its use have always been the most important, if not the only, superior force of grand strategy. As a great power rising on the basis of territorial expansion, the ability to maintain the security of the territory of a united multinational state directly determines Russia's international status. Successive Russian leaders have therefore had an extraordinary taste for the use of force. Tsar Alexander III expressed this vividly, "Russia has only two faithful allies, the army and its navy."

During the Kosovo crisis in 1999, (NATO, 2022) Russian troops made a lightning airborne landing in Pristina. The actual military value of the operation was low, but the symbolic significance was immense, announcing the end of Russia's international image of being subservient to the West. The return of a great power acting independently to the international political arena is typified by the courage to initiate the use of force in international relations, which, after Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, has become a customary and well-utilised

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instrument of domestic and foreign policy. With his determination, the second war in Chechnya did not come to an end as it did during the Yeltsin era, but was ultimately a success at the cost of enormous sacrifices. The crackdown on the oligarchs also demonstrates Putin's forceful mindset: no matter how high the cost, compromise and tolerance are not possible until the intended results are achieved. Oligarchs who try to interfere in politics either have their political lives completely destroyed or surrender politically.

The Russian-Georgian Five-Day War of 2008 exposed the weaknesses of Russia's conventional armed forces, but the strategic goal was achieved, and NATO no longer seriously considered the possibility of Georgian and Ukrainian accession.(Dickinson, 2021) 2014 saw the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution, and Russia's rapid military intervention, which resulted in a major strategic victory. military intervention in the aftermath of Ukraine's "Maidan Revolution" in 2014 and achieved significant strategic victories: seizing Crimea, taking control of the Black Sea Fleet base in Sevastopol, and galvanising the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine.The military operation in support of the Assad regime in Syria in 2015, the deployment of troops to Kazakhstan to help the Kazakh authorities quell the unrest in 2022, and the special military operation of 2022 also exemplify the skilful use of force in pursuit of a political objective, i.e., ensuring that military operations are concluded through military victories. military victories to ensure a dominant, if not decisive, political voice at the end of the military campaign.

During the same period, the United States has also used force frequently in the Middle East and Afghanistan. In contrast, Putin has a more thorough understanding of the relationship between force and politics, and never abuses force for the sake of vanity and so-called national honour; geographically, he gives priority attention to the Eurasian region, which is in his sphere of influence, and never uses force outside the Eurasian continent. These two features ensure a rapid, focused application of military force at relatively low cost and with relatively maximum benefit.

4.3 Resisting NATO's Eastward Expansion: the Top Priority of Current Russian Grand Strategy

Grand strategy involves managing numerous interrelated goals, focusing on how to effectively deploy superior forces and resources to achieve these objectives. This process includes prioritising goals, scientifically assessing implementation outcomes and cost-benefits, and making timely adjustments to align the strategy's means and ends.

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Distinguishing between key, important, and secondary objectives across various fields and stages is crucial to a strategy's success or failure. Strategists must adapt priorities and sequences in response to changing circumstances, identify strategic focal points and directions, and decide on the allocation of critical resources, such as financial and military assets, whether to focus on land or sea, border areas or the nation's core.

During Putin's 20 years in power, there have been numerous major issues in Russia's foreign policy and strategy. In the realm of global strategic stability, issues include anti-missile defence and nuclear non-proliferation; in international security, there are challenges such as counter-terrorism, mediation of regional conflicts, and maintaining regional stability; in the field of international economic integration, challenges like sanctions and counter-sanctions, trade wars, and competition for control over oil prices are prominent. Regarding regime stability, Russia faces challenges like countering "democratic penetration" by the West, dealing with "colour revolutions," and addressing defamation of Russia's historical status. The emphasis on combating NATO's eastward expansion stands out among these goals and tasks as the centralised manifestation of Russia's grand strategy at present, due to a combination of factors.(Liang, 2024, pp. 110-130)

4.3.1 Geopolitical nature of resistance to NATO's eastward expansion

While Russia's strategic borders have receded, NATO has expanded eastward, pushing the West's strategic frontier significantly towards Russia. On the surface, NATO's expansion hasn't physically infringed upon Russian territory, but it aims to institutionalise Russia's geopolitical losses in a manner reminiscent of the post-World War I settlements. This perceived encroachment is why Russia vehemently opposes NATO's eastward expansion. The use of force to resist this expansion represents Russia's strategic response to its post-Cold War geopolitical setbacks.

The Zero Sum option: In order to modify its unfavourable political-geographical borders, Russia will have to revive its historical tradition of creating and consolidating a buffer zone against NATO. Buffer zones are neutral in theory, but in practice they are often a zero-sum option. A buffer zone state is either a buffer for Russia against NATO or for NATO against Russia, and it is difficult to be a buffer for both sides at the same time. In the classic expression from international relations, "geopolitics abhors a power vacuum." While competing for relative influence over these countries, Russia and NATO also strive to

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influence the direction of their national development and prevent them from following each other's development trajectory. Most of NATO's members are also EU countries, and Russia's development model is not very attractive in comparison. Russia is very concerned about the possibility of competing or alternative development models in Eurasia. Russia has used economic sanctions, energy threats, and political pressure to prevent countries from signing Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) agreements with the EU. However, with the exception of Armenia, all have been unsuccessful, and Moscow has had to accept the deepening economic ties between Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine and the EU.

Unlike membership in the EU, which is merely "heterogeneous" in terms of the path and direction of development, NATO membership is a complete geopolitical betrayal of Russia - its already centrifugal neighbours have finally chosen to side with the rival powers and are willing to act as the latter's tools against Russia. NATO membership is a complete geopolitical betrayal of Russia - its neighbours, already centrifugal, have finally chosen to side with the rival powers and are willing to serve as the latter's tools against Russia. In response, Russia has intensified its military pressure on the three countries, supporting their separatist regimes and preparing to use force if necessary.

In the evolution of the international order, the political arrangements in some special situations are not the result of the real power game of the big powers. Once there is a change in the situation, such an arrangement is bound to arouse dissatisfaction, and when there is dissatisfaction, there will be resistance. The United Kingdom and the United States have made the same counterattack in the face of similar challenges in history. Before the end of the Second World War, based on the contributions made during the war and the actual combat situation, Britain and the United States and the Soviet Union divided the sphere of influence in Eastern Europe by way of a secret agreement. Because this system was too favourable to the Soviet Union, Britain and the United States did not really agree with it. After the end of the war, the pro-Soviet political system in Eastern Europe was fully established, and Britain and the United States were extremely worried that this would threaten the "political freedom" of Western Europe, and quickly took the counter-attack of the Cold War and containment. Is this not another form of counteraction to NATO's eastward expansion? Both are buffer zone countries joining the other side, both claiming that such a move would not threaten the other side, but both taking firm countermeasures because of the strategic concerns of the other side. Russia now is not fundamentally different from post-World War II Britain and the United States in terms of thinking and reacting to grand strategy, but only in terms of what each is

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concerned about, what it focuses on, and what it takes to do so.

4.3.2 Security imperatives against NATO's eastward expansion

Insecurity is Russia's instinctive response in a long historical context. In the first and second rounds of NATO's eastward expansion, Russia did not strongly oppose, or even acquiesced in, NATO's expansion, and Vladimir Putin proposed joining NATO in 2000. Russia's forbearance, like the Treaty of Brest, was a realistic choice based on its position of strength, not a misunderstanding of the nature of NATO or indifference to its expansion. As a product of the confrontation between the two camps during the Cold War, no matter how the "concept" and "strategy" of NATO change, its nature as a power agent of the United States in Europe and a springboard for the United States military force will not change. The West has repeatedly promised that NATO's eastward expansion will not directly threaten Russia's security. But the Russian strategic community is convinced that NATO's eastward expansion under U.S. leadership is a slow militaristic expansion - like Nazi Germany's encirclement of the Soviet Union in 1941 - that seeks to occupy all the territory on the road to Moscow.

Some scholars argue that NATO's expansion is not a concern for Russia. "Military planners know that NATO enlargement does not pose a threat to Russia's security," and that new NATO members would instead weaken the alliance's military coherence and strength. According to McFaul, President Medvedev is willing to let the issue fade from the discussion in order to advance cooperation with the United States in other areas. This view still views Russia with the mindset of a Cold War victor without understanding what the latter's real concerns are. More than a month before the start of the special military operation, Russia's proposal to the West for a solution to the Ukrainian problem explicitly demanded that NATO should withdraw the military infrastructure deployed around Russia after its eastward expansion to the pre-1997 period. It is clear that regardless of NATO's promises, Moscow believes only in what they actually see and in their judgement based on historical experience. France and Germany are both land powers, much closer to Russia in terms of geopolitical attributes. The leaders of both countries foresaw early on that Putin would interpret Ukraine's entry into NATO as a declaration of war against Russia and that NATO's eastward expansion would end in disaster.

Realist scholars, such as Mearsheimer, have also made it clear that Russia's tough counterattacks against NATO's eastward expansion are far from provocations and tests of the West, but rather are instinctive actions of a great power that has regained some of its power,

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and are understandable and enduring responses to real security threats.

4.3.3 Security imperatives against NATO's eastward expansion

When Putin was elected president for a third term in 2012, his approval rating was 63.6 percent, nearly 8 percent lower than in his previous campaign. This might be high in the West but is considered low in Eurasian countries where ratings often exceed 80 percent. Putin, visibly moved by his victory, anticipated not only the power but the prestige of the presidency. After fifteen years in power, Russia's governance system was solidified, and economic transformation was challenging. The 2014 annexation of Crimea marked a turning point, with Putin's popularity soaring from 65% to over 80%. However, his approval plummeted to 44% in 2019 after proposing a raise in the retirement age. The 2022 military operation against Ukraine saw his support surge to 83%, the highest since 2017. Experts believe the Kremlin now relies on foreign policy successes, traditional Russian values, and Putin's image as a strong leader for regime stability, rather than economic performance.

Russia's grand strategy evolved over time, with resistance to NATO's eastward expansion fostering a patriotic domestic mindset. The success of aggressive foreign policies gave the ruling elite a psychological boost, reinforcing their belief that they were in tune with national identity and aspirations. Authorities began marketing their foreign policy achievements to the public, using these successes to boost domestic support and highlight Russia's great power status through events like the Winter Olympics and World Cup. The emphasis on the historical narrative of World War II, particularly the "resistance to aggression and defense of the motherland," is a clear political move to align with contemporary strategic goals.

Since then, Russia's foreign and domestic affairs have become more closely intertwined than ever before. On the one hand, the successful implementation of forceful resistance to NATO's eastward expansion, both in Georgia and Ukraine, has been widely welcomed at home and has become the leader's main means of demonstrating political success. On the other hand, the weaker Russia's economy becomes as a result of the severe economic sanctions imposed by the West, the more the authorities are inclined to fuel the engines of nationalism and to pursue a tougher anti-Western, and especially anti-NATO, foreign and security policy, which distracts the population's attention from the problems of people's livelihoods. Resistance to NATO's eastward expansion has gained a broad domestic consensus and risen to the top of Russia's foreign policy priorities, firmly occupying the centre and even regular primacy of Russia's political and strategic agenda. The Western strategic community has correctly deduced that in

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the absence of dramatic changes in internal and external conditions, no new changes in Russia's internal strategic consensus should be expected in the short term; that Putin's successor can only be a more sincere nationalist than he is; and that whoever becomes the new master of the Kremlin will want to keep Ukraine within Russia's sphere of influence. Russia's resistance to NATO's eastward expansion is no longer a quest for momentary gains and losses, but a long-term strategic task; the confrontation between the two sides will continue not only in Ukraine, but in other potential NATO candidates as well. (Russian Grand Strategy in the Era of Great Power Competition, 2023)

4.3.4 The significance of combating NATO's eastward expansion for the implementation of the grand strategy

Resisting NATO's eastward expansion has different levels of importance for the Russian-American grand strategy. Take the Ukrainian issue as an example. The United States is the world's leading military power, and the fundamental goal of its grand strategy is to ensure that competition always takes place in areas in which the United States has a clear advantage, such as the economy, information, the rule of law, the global banking system, and advanced technology; it can move in and out of the matter of Ukraine's membership in NATO, and it will not go to direct war with Russia for the sake of Ukraine's territorial integrity. Russia, on the other hand, if the fight against NATO's eastward expansion fails at this critical point in Ukraine, it will mean that Kiev will forever be out of Russia's sphere of influence. This would be a major setback for Russia's grand strategy, with unimaginable ripple effects. In order to achieve a real victory in this struggle, Russia is willing and must pay a significant price and sacrifice.

Victory over Kiev could also provide Russia with the opportunity to reap enormous geopolitical gains. The focus of domestic public opinion and international attention makes Ukraine a policy touchstone for Russia's relations with the West. Unless there is a victory or an understanding, it will be difficult for the two sides to normalise their dealings in other areas. Moscow is determined to take on the West here, not only to stop the U.S.-led expansion of NATO into countries within Russia's sphere of influence, but also to push the West.

A victory against NATO's eastward expansion would mean that Russia has successfully challenged the post-Cold War international order based largely on Western rules, reversing the trend of American dominance and the rise of Western-style globalism like no other achievement. Moscow may also hope that such a victory will deal an important blow to the

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United States, which is slipping away from unipolar hegemony, and bring broader prospects for a new international system and view of the international order on which Russia's grand strategy has pinned high hopes, accelerating the realisation of emerging multipolarity. The success of the fight against NATO's eastward expansion by force will also prove that geopolitical and military "hard power" is still the best "argument" in the modern world to express the country's political claims, and Russia will be more confident to use the traditional advantage of military power as the main tool of grand strategy.

4.4 Resisting NATO's Eastward Expansion: the Top Priority of Current Russian Grand Strategy

There are many forms of grand strategy, each of which can take on more complex variations in practice. Take offensive strategy as an example, the "symmetric strategy" of "tit for tat" and "an eye for an eye" is common among rivals with roughly equal strengths; countries with a large gap in strength but with outstanding advantages in certain aspects will choose the "asymmetric strategy" of "building on one's strengths and overcoming one's weaknesses". Countries with a large power gap but with an outstanding advantage in a certain area will choose the "asymmetric strategy" of "promoting one's own strengths and overcoming the enemy's weaknesses". After World War II, the Soviet Union adopted a "symmetrical strategy" in the face of NATO and the Marshall Plan, and formed the Warsaw Pact Organization and the Economic and Social Council. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was much weaker than its rivals militarily and economically, and had to rely heavily on its military as a comparative advantage, adopting an "asymmetric strategy".

At the Munich Security Conference in March 2007, Vladimir Putin publicly criticised "the unacceptable expansion of NATO as part of the U.S. strategy to expand its military and political zone of influence to the detriment of Russian interests". This statement became the starting point for Russia's offensive foreign policy after the end of the Cold War. Upon his return Putin appointed his close friend Serdyukov as Minister of Defense, who initiated structural changes in the modernization of the Russian military, and the course of forceful confrontation of NATO's eastward expansion was set. In 2018 Putin announced that the Russian military possessed 3.7 times as many modernised weapons as it did at the beginning of the rearmament process, and that Russia would launch a new round of the national armament program focusing on high-precision equipment.

The Russian military's organisational structure has also been radically reorganised, with

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rapidly mobilising battalion-tactical groups as the basic combat units and brigades as the key combat units at the theatre level; a higher level of sustained combat readiness has replaced mass mobilisation; and the annual Command Military Exercise (CMO) has been dramatically expanded to involve virtually all of the military districts. This round of military reforms has destroyed the old army, left over from the Soviet era, which was large in number but poorly equipped and inefficient, and created a new, modernised, combat-ready and well-funded army, which gives Moscow the greatest strength to resist NATO's eastward expansion by force.

4.4.1 Russia NATO:Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Strategic Response to NATO's Eastward Expansion

NATO's expansion eastward is considered by international law as a diplomatic and political manoeuvre rather than a direct infringement on Russia's territorial sovereignty. In response, Russian military doctrine has innovated by adopting what the West terms "hybrid warfare" or "grey zone conflicts." Scholars like Mary Kaldor and Lawrence Freedman suggest that this modern form of conflict blurs the lines between war and peace, involving a spectrum of tactics from information warfare to the use of proxy forces and covert operations.(NATO, 2024)

The Kremlin posits that Russia's strategic competition with the West operates on multiple, simultaneous levels without any off-limits areas or forms of deterrence deemed unacceptable. This comprehensive approach means that during a security crisis, a humanitarian emergency, or when facing an international backlash, Russia can deploy quick reaction forces, including airborne and special operations units, to swiftly and decisively influence outcomes in the region, ranging from covert operations to full-scale military engagements.

Hybrid warfare's core principle, as demonstrated in the Russo-Georgian War, the annexation of Crimea, and military interventions in Ukraine, is to prepare and execute military actions covertly, catching adversaries off-guard and securing strategic advantages before significant external interventions can occur. This strategy, as argued by scholars, represents a shift in Russian military tactics favouring flexibility and surprise over traditional military force, aligning with a broader strategic framework designed to enhance Russia's influence under the radar of conventional international responses.

The essence of "asymmetric strategy" is the use of sufficiently reasonable force to pursue relatively limited strategic gains at a controlled risk and at a lower cost in terms of resources than the adversary, i.e., the most cost-effective way to achieve the desired objective. The

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special military operation against Ukraine also began as a well-prepared "hybrid war" centred on a surprise attack on Kiev to replace the Zelensky regime. But after Crimea's entry into Russia, Ukraine and the West were well prepared for it, and the Russians' surprise attack, scheduled to be completed in four days, had to be transformed into a conventional war across the entire contact area. As both sides continue to increase their military commitment, the conflict is increasingly evolving into a protracted war of attrition, which is not in line with the essence of "asymmetric strategy," which is to "economically and efficiently achieve a limited number of desired objectives. On the basis of the basic principle of "balance of ends and means" in the implementation of grand strategy, the following judgments can be made about the prospects for the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict.

In terms of comparative military power, Russia has the upper hand in this conflict and will not retreat from the demarcation line that existed before the February 24, 2022 start of military operations. There are only two possibilities for a Russian defeat: either NATO sends troops in and the Russian-Ukrainian conflict turns into a full-scale, protracted war between the two sides, in which NATO would undoubtedly be ultimately victorious. Such a scenario is basically not going to happen. Both sides are on high alert for this, and Russia has repeatedly issued a new type of nuclear deterrent of limited nuclear war to completely dissuade Western adventurers. The second is that NATO provides sufficient and sustained military assistance and Russia gets bogged down in wars like Vietnam and Afghanistan. In this outcome Ukraine certainly cannot join NATO, and Russia cannot get out of it, continuously consuming manpower, financial resources, energy and strategic centre of gravity. Such a protracted and costly conflict would raise Russia's military costs to unacceptable levels, consume strategic resources at levels far exceeding its ability to draw on them, and ultimately harm its domestic economic development and the living standards of its people, leading to an unrecoverable strategic overdraft.

For Russia, the key is how much to win in this conflict, how to win it, and what price to pay for it. A military victory means that Russia will have to achieve at least two tasks: the occupation of the four administrative districts of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporozhye, and Kherson, which have been granted accession; and the replacement of the ultra-anti-Russian central regime in Kiev. The above territories, together with Crimea, amount to 23% of the territory of Ukraine. Judging by the comparison of the military power of the two sides, keeping the conquered territories or even conquering more territories is not impossible for the Russian army. However, in the light of the current military process, adherence to this goal is

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likely to push the limits of the "asymmetric strategy" and result in a "crushing victory" like the Soviet-Finnish War of 1940. This naturally leads to an inescapable strategic question: Is such a victory worth it? In the Soviet Union of Stalin's time, a "crushing victory" was bearable. But in Russia now, battlefield losses, material depletion, exhaustion of public opinion, terrorist attacks, mutinies on the front line and other inevitable negative factors and consequences of war, constantly challenging the domestic cornerstone of the special military operation, "tragic victory" triggered by the cascade effect is likely to be a direct impact on the stability of the regime of Vladimir Putin. Without jeopardising the country's basic economic functioning and major political agenda, such as Putin's re-election campaign in 2024, Russia will continue to adopt an "asymmetric strategy" and seek new objectives in Ukraine with limited strength and at affordable costs.

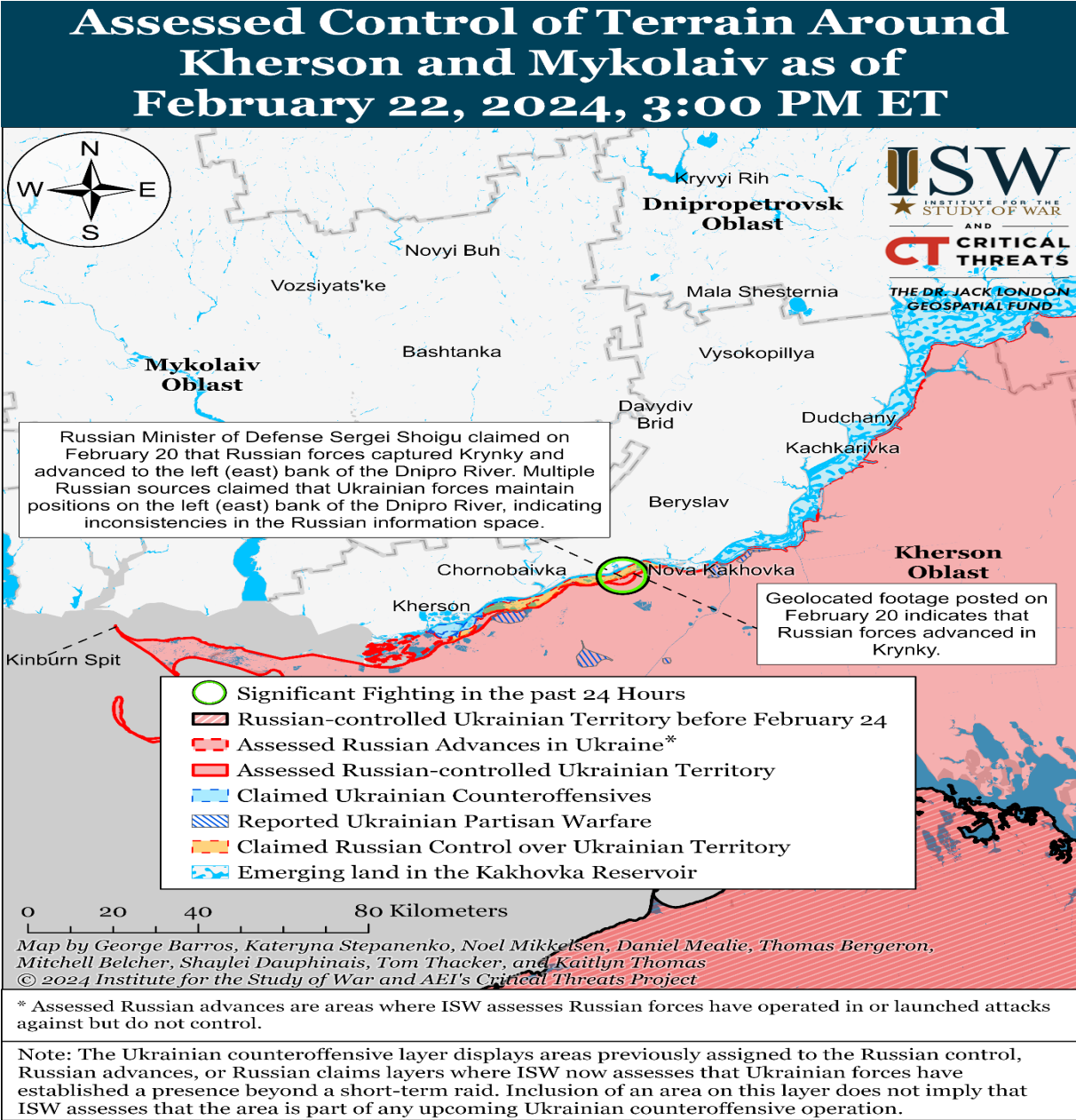


Figure 4 Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv

4.5 Strengthening Alliances and Prioritising Security: Sikorski's Vision for Poland's Foreign Policy

In 2024, April, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski ², Presented Poland's foreign policy at the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish parliament reviewed Poland's foreign policy over the past 8 years, analysed the current international and European situation, and outlined the priorities of Poland's foreign policy.

Sikorski emphasised that the primary goal of foreign policy is to ensure national security, that

² He previously served as the Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Tusk government from 2007 to 2014.

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is, the certainty of survival and development. He identified four urgent tasks facing Polish foreign policy. First is ensuring Poland's security, primarily through a transatlantic alliance led by the United States, developing Poland's own defence resources, and obtaining deterrence capabilities. Second is achieving a "strong Poland in a strong European Union," supporting the EU to become a geopolitical entity with strong political, economic, and military projection capabilities, and ending Poland's history as a "cheap labour provider." Third, actively taking responsibility in the international community, not only benefiting from international cooperation but also being prepared to meet global challenges. Fourth, rebuilding a professional and depoliticized foreign ministry and restoring its statutory role as the centre of Polish foreign policy formulation. In addition to these tasks, Sikorski analysed Poland's foreign policy priorities, which are primarily focused on Europe.

Sikorski's few comments on China mentioned that China is a major power and an important economic partner for Poland. However, in the face of Russia's war against Ukraine, security issues take precedence. He also mentioned that "China and Poland are both victims of colonialism and imposed treaties, hoping China understands Poland's opposition to Putin's modern colonialism," and stated that "actions taken by China to stop Russia will be recognized by Central and Eastern European countries." Regarding the US-China relationship, Sikorski described the competition as "natural" but should be "peaceful." Poland does not wish to choose sides between its trade partner with good relations (China) and its most important security guarantor (the United States). He also emphasised that the EU's handling of relations with China should follow the "three principles": cooperate when possible, compete when necessary, and confront when needed. The so-called "three principles" are completely consistent with the principles for handling relations with China passed by the European People's Party in the European Parliament in 2021.

Regarding Ukraine, Sikorski viewed the substantial resources Poland has invested in humanitarian aid and accepting refugees since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict as part of shaping Poland's "responsible" image in the international community. He pointed out that Polish businesses should play a role in Ukraine's reconstruction and economic recovery. Addressing disputes over agricultural products between Poland and Ukraine, he also stated that while supporting Ukraine's integration into Europe, he would take into account the interests of Polish entities under pressure, such as small farms or transportation companies.

Regarding the United States and the transatlantic alliance, Sikorski identified two pillars of achieving Poland's security and development: the transatlantic alliance and European

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integration, considering them complementary. Poland's good relations with the US have enhanced Poland's status in Europe, and Poland's activities in the EU and good relations with neighbouring countries make it a more attractive partner for US allies and investors. He considered that, between these two pillars, the characteristic of Polish foreign policy is not being tough on some and servile to others, but creatively confident. Sikorski called good relations with the US "crucial for Poland's security" and said he would deepen Polish-American military cooperation, with US forces continuing to be stationed in Poland. Poland's cooperation with the US will also be reflected in economics, energy, and technological innovation.

Poland will hold the presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2025. Regarding the EU, the Polish foreign minister expressed support for reforms to enhance its strength and international competitiveness. Sikorski mentioned reforming the EU's voting system to allow all countries to influence EU affairs. Regarding EU reform, Sikorski also said Poland would support the proposal to set up the EU as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

Regarding the new European Commission to be produced by the European Parliament elections, Sikorski hoped its structure would better address challenges, including defence policy, EU enlargement, and immigration issues. According to Sikorski's statement, Poland will prioritise strengthening the transatlantic community during its EU Council presidency and coordinate on three issues: assisting Ukraine, enhancing regional security, and sanctioning Russia and Belarus.

The current government's priority in European policy is to persuade the EU to continue supporting Ukraine and to include Ukraine in a broad "European-Atlantic" framework as Poland's strategic goal. Poland will also support the establishment of a European rapid response force.

Chapter 5: Future expectation and Conclusion

5.1 Future expectation

In April 2024, April ,After two years of conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the situation along the front lines remains deadlocked. There are increasing calls for a diplomatic resolution, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has refused to consider territorial concessions or engage in direct negotiations with Russia. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin's reliability in honouring any potential agreements is questionable. Additionally, war fatigue among the United States and other NATO allies is hindering their efforts to sustain military and economic support for Ukraine. Although 2024 may not usher in peace for Ukraine, it could be pivotal for international cooperation on unlocking the stalemate. (The Shanghai Institute of International Studies, 2024)

In the shadowed tableau of the New Year, the Russia-Ukraine conflict unfolded with a renewed ferocity, as both nations launched extensive air strikes deep into each other's territories, casting a pall over an already tense relationship. This escalation, marked by significant destruction and loss of life, suggests a pivotal shift in the strategic dynamics of the conflict. The year 2024, hence, could very well emerge as the critical juncture, or the "decisive period," in this prolonged engagement.

The onslaught commenced in late 2023, heralded by Ukraine's missile strikes on the Crimean city of Feodosia on December 26, which led to a devastating explosion at the port and damaged the Russian landing ship "Novocherkassk." This act precipitated a spiral of retribution, with Russia executing retaliatory attacks across Ukrainian cities, including Kyiv and Odessa, culminating in hundreds of casualties. The reciprocal strikes extended into the dawn of 2024, with both sides exploiting the vulnerabilities of the other, revealing a strategic intent to dominate the skies and, by extension, the narrative of the war.

Russia's strategic bombings targeted Ukrainian military infrastructure and historic edifices, diverging from the prior focus on energy facilities. This shift aimed to cripple Ukraine's military production capabilities, particularly the enterprises involved in missile, drone, and weapon maintenance. The targeted attacks on Lviv's Shukhevych Memorial Museum and Lviv Polytechnic Institute underscored a retaliatory gesture towards Ukraine's endeavour to "erase Soviet memory," reflecting a deeper historical antagonism.

In this extensive exchange, Russia showcased a variety of domestically produced weapons,

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circumventing the constrictions imposed by Western sanctions. Among the arsenal were "Geranium" drones, Kh-series cruise missiles, and the formidable Kh-101 long-range cruise missiles, capable of evading Ukrainian air defences through sophisticated countermeasures. This not only demonstrated Russia's aerial superiority but also highlighted the limitations of Ukrainian defences, reliant on ground-to-ground missiles and the S300 air defence system.

The protracted engagement underscores a critical facet of modern warfare where sanctions and international restrictions falter against the indomitable spirit of innovation and adaptation. Russia's aggressive push to dominate the battlefield narratives in early 2024, through massive attacks and strategic bombings, was a calculated move to assert control and showcase its military prowess to the West at a time when global attention and alliances are ever-shifting.

5.2 Conclusion

Russia's special military operation against Ukraine is an inevitable consequence of the struggle for influence amongst the great powers. The accelerated changes in the international landscape is another important practice of Russia's grand strategic priority of counteracting NATO's eastward expansion by force. Based on this core conclusion, a more nuanced interpretation of the operation can be made. Summarising the above analysis, we can draw the following conclusions:

First, considering the three fundamental characteristics of unity, durability, and comprehensiveness, it is evident that Russia under Putin possesses a grand strategy. The primary aim of this strategy is to foster global multipolarity, negotiate spheres of influence with other major powers, and ensure coordination among them, while preserving Russia's unique political civilization and restoring its status as a world-class power. The strategy is implemented by diminishing U.S. hegemony through proactive offensive tactics, with military force being a crucial component. Second, because of its geopolitical nature, absolute necessity in national security, irreplaceable value in domestic politics, great significance for the overall realisation of the grand strategy, and high dependence on the military as a dominant force, the fight against NATO's eastward expansion stands out among many other goals and tasks as the top priority of Russia's current grand strategy. As the direction of the re-selection or change of track, the strategy will naturally have a new priority. Akin to the U.S. strategy of "containment" of the Soviet Union, there are different priorities at different times, such as the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, the Space Race and so on. Thirdly, the fundamental if not fatal flaw in Russia's grand strategy is the risk of full-scale conflict the West. In order to

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minimise such a risk, an "asymmetric strategy" has been adopted to counter the use of force in NATO's eastward expansion. Since the beginning of 2008, Russia has successfully implemented a series of foreign military operations, which have had a politically motivating effect. But purely military victories are strategically likely to mean that the means determine the ends, or even destroy the ends and the strategy itself. The realisation of grand strategy is a chain of events. The achievement of each goal means a step closer to the achievement of the ultimate goal of the grand strategy, and vice versa. If victory in only one dimension or on one issue fails to comprehensively and positively enhance the realisation of the fundamental goals of the grand strategy, or even drags down the implementation of the grand strategy, then victory equals defeat, and the greater the victory, the closer it is to the ultimate failure of the grand strategy. After the change of special military operations from "hybrid warfare" to conventional warfare, "asymmetric strategy" is approaching its limits. From the basic principle of "balance of goals and means" in the implementation of grand strategy, political rather than military victory is the most realistic and reasonable end of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which leaves room for the continuation of the implementation of Russia's resistance to NATO's eastward expansion, and is a relatively optimal solution in the sense of grand strategy.

The creation and implementation of Russia's grand strategy in the Putin era is a major event with lasting historical impact rarely seen in international relations in the 21st century. In the face of U.S. hegemony, Russia's use of force to break the international political narrative shaped by the West, especially the U.S., after the Cold War is of great significance in promoting the accelerated transformation of the international landscape into a multipolar era, and the process of its implementation as well as its successes and failures have a greater research value for academics to reopen the discussion of the use of force in international politics, which requires sustained attention.

In spite of receiving extensive backing from the United States and other NATO members, Ukraine's efforts to repel Russian forces and reclaim lost territory have thus far proven ineffective. Similarly, despite Russia's initial advancements, they have not achieved significant progress in capturing additional territory.(Global Perspectives on Ending the Russia-Ukraine War, 2024)

In response, Ukraine, too, leveraged its indigenous military assets, targeting Russia's softer points with precision. The use of domestically produced "Vilkha" rocket launchers and strategic attacks on Crimea elucidated a resolute defence strategy, emphasising Ukraine's

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determination to persevere amidst dwindling Western support and showcasing a readiness to counteract with equal ferocity.

The onset of 2024 in the Russia-Ukraine saga reveals not just a continuation of hostilities but a transition into a more decisive phase of the conflict. Amidst this escalation, both nations have adapted to the rhythms of war, showcasing resilience and strategic acumen. As the conflict nears its two-year mark, the actions and reactions of both sides have set the stage for what may very well define the next chapters of Eastern European geopolitics, hinting at a protracted struggle that continues to draw the international community's gaze. The conflict in Ukraine transcends a mere clash between two nations, highlighting the West's ambition and scheming to reshape the world order. In Putin's view, Ukraine and Belarus are integral to Russia's national security and core interests, and no mishap is permissible. This conflict has become a crucial battle for Russia to defend its territorial integrity and national dignity.

Regarding the Ukraine crisis, Poland's existing policy of supporting Ukraine against Russia will not weaken. Poland and Russia have historically irreconcilable national animosities, and any softening of the government's stance towards Russia could be interpreted as "treason," affecting its governing legitimacy. Based on this, Poland's fundamental stance on the Ukraine crisis will not change. However, Poland prime minister Donald Franciszek Tusk is not satisfied with the current government's "contradictory" actions of providing a large amount of weapons to Ukraine and then banning Ukrainian grain imports and suspending weapon supplies, believing Poland needs a tough and pragmatic policy to both support Ukraine and ensure Poland's interests are not compromised.

The failure of the Minsk agreements has tarnished the peace mechanism for resolving the Ukraine issue, and Poland is likely to shift towards actively promoting a common European defence, a long-term issue with uncertain outcomes.

In March, 2024, between French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk in Berlin showcased a concerted effort to display unity despite ongoing disagreements on how to best support Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia. This gathering was particularly significant as it included Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who expressed strong views on the need for practical support for Ukraine beyond mere rhetoric, criticising Macron's previous statements and calling for "less talk and more ammo" (Dodd & Welsh, 2024b).

Polish Prime Minister Tusk's dissatisfaction with the contradictory actions of the current

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government, which include both substantial military support for Ukraine and restrictive measures like the banning of Ukrainian grain imports and suspension of weapon supplies, underscores a broader tension within Poland's policy approach. Tusk believes that Poland needs a tough and pragmatic policy to both support Ukraine and ensure Poland's own interests are not compromised. The failed Minsk agreements, originally intended to stabilise the region, have instead left a vacuum, pushing Poland to consider a more active role in promoting a common European defence. This shift signals a potentially significant realignment in Poland's foreign policy, aiming to enhance its role and influence within the EU, particularly in matters of security and defence (Dodd & Welsh, 2024b).

Russia and Ukraine may enter a "decisive period" in 2024. This conflict has been approaching two years, and both sides have gradually adapted to the war. Russia has gradually shifted to a wartime system, all economic indicators have rebounded, the military industry to supply the front line, the follow-up of the source of troops also continued to replenish. Ukraine, despite the unfavourable situation, but the country does not accept the negotiations, insists on continuing to fight the majority of the public. Zelensky said that the future in the front line to promote the difficult situation, "Crimea and the Black Sea will become the focus of the attack". (Stanislav Pribylov, 2023)

In conclusion, the intricate and evolving dynamics between Russia, Poland, and Ukraine underscore the complexities of modern international relations and the far-reaching impacts of regional conflicts. The ongoing war has not only strained the historical ties and cooperation between Poland and Ukraine but also placed Poland at a critical juncture in its foreign policy and internal political landscape. As Poland grapples with these challenges, its responses highlight the delicate balance between national interests, regional leadership, and solidarity with Ukraine. The conflict's repercussions extend beyond immediate military and political spheres, influencing Poland's role within the European Union and its broader geopolitical strategy. Ultimately, the triad of Russia-Poland-Ukraine relations illustrates the persistent tensions and the urgent need for diplomatic strategies that address both historical grievances and future aspirations for peace and stability in Eastern Europe.

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