**Seven ways Russia’s war on Ukraine has changed the world**

Chatham House experts examine the shifts in geopolitical alliances, security, energy, and supply chains and whether these changes are likely to be long-lasting.

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**Energy and food – fuelling the crisis**

President Vladimir Putin’s decision to launch a full-scale re-invasion of Ukraine one year ago was a global shock which ‘marked an abrupt end to 30 years of globalization and all the international co-operation that made that possible’ with serious implications for countries around the world. Not only has the war threatened the stability of Europe but it has also impacted food and energy security globally including in the Middle East and Africa, creating shock waves in a world barely recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic.

**1. Realignment – shifting alliances**

The realization of a major war breaking out in Europe after almost eight years of a simmering conflict created a political constellation of three different groups of nations: those who sided with Putin’s Russia, those who pledged support to Ukraine, and a group of non-aligned nations resisting involvement and/or hedging their bets.

European Union (EU) states were quick to respond with major sanctions and action against Russia. Despite some fragmentation – for example, on the oil price cap, and Germany’s reluctance to send tanks and other weaponry, the bloc has mainly remained together, against Russian expectations and hopes. ‘The EU has shown resolve and, at times surprising, unity in its response to the war,’ says Pepijn Bergsen, research fellow in the Chatham House Europe programme.

The UK has been keen to stress its ‘special relationship’ with Kyiv with a desire especially by former prime minister Boris Johnson to lead the pack with strong rhetoric and military support. The opportunist move, says Chatham House UK in the World Initiative director John Kampfner, is an obvious promotion of its post-Brexit ‘Global Britain’ credentials.

Elsewhere, there was less solidarity with Ukraine. Putin predictably called in favours of old allies, such as Syria’s Bashar al-Assad and Belarus’s Aliaksandr Lukashenka and entered a closer strategic relationship with Iran.

A week after the invasion, the UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia’s aggression was passed by an overwhelming majority. However, there were 35 abstentions, among them three Commonwealth states – South Africa, Pakistan, and India. In Asia, only a handful of governments stood strongly with Ukraine – Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. The region’s largest rising powers – China, India, and Indonesia – have all refused to take a side.

‘While many in the West hoped that Russia’s invasion would rally nations in the developing world behind the rules-based order, Asia has largely rejected Western framings of the conflict as a battle between might and right. ‘Although they might find Russia an increasingly awkward partner, most Asian nations pragmatically choose to maintain their relationships for a combination of economic, military, and diplomatic reasons.’

Asia has largely rejected Western framings of the conflict as a battle between might and right. The shift has been mirrored across much of Africa too, highlighting that most abstentions (51 per cent) condemning Russia’s invasion at the UN came from African countries, marking a partial resurgence of what was many African nations’ default position in the Cold War.

Iran has taken advantage of both tactical and strategic deals, providing Russia with sanctions busting support and hundreds of attack drones while, in return, Moscow provided surveillance to help Tehran suppress recent domestic protests.

Gap-bridging Turkey has also emerged as a major new diplomatic player – helping broker the grain blockade deal, acting as a humanitarian base for hostage swaps, and hosting (to date, failed) peace talks while simultaneously blocking Finland’s, and particularly Sweden’s, NATO accession for its own security reasons.

**2. Security – redrawing the lines**

 ‘For many of Russia’s neighbours, the Russian invasion of Ukraine confirmed that they had been correct in their analysis of the threat posed by Moscow’s regional ambitions.

Before Russia’s invasion, European states, such as France and Germany, had failed to adapt to new geopolitical realities in the region and Russia’s actions would lead to a dramatic reappraisal of European security posture. Indeed, European countries responded with significant increases in their defence budgets, most notably Germany committing to two per cent of its GDP in Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s recalibrating ‘Zeitenwende’ speech. However, Germany has remained slow to act on key decisions, such as Leopard tanks, often communicating good intent but failing to follow up with real action.

Although central, eastern and Baltic states have been more hawkish on Russia compared to states like Germany and France, they haven’t stopped the EU’s overall response.

In fact, the war has accelerated actions which were ‘unthinkable’ before the war, such as the [fast-tracking of Ukraine’s EU candidate status](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/11/eu-response-war-ukraine) within three months. Similarly, the budget from the European Peace Facility, little used before the war in Ukraine, has been employed five times, [providing €2.5 billion](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/07/22/european-peace-facility-eu-support-to-ukraine-increased-to-2-5-billion/) of cash and hardware for Ukraine’s defences.

Russia’s invasion has also strengthened NATO’s deterrence posture and increased its forward presence in Eastern Europe. Putin has ‘managed the trick of pulling NATO closer than ever before with larger exercises, more readiness, and reinforcement strategies. Finland and Sweden, two countries which have until now shunned NATO membership to avoid antagonizing Russia, are also set to join the alliance in a historic shift.

Crucially, US support for NATO and security in Europe also appears cemented with bipartisan support at home, although this should not be taken for granted following four years of a US president who ‘courted’ Putin. ‘Neglecting European security would not only undermine the security order but would also undermine the broader effort to manage China’s role in the Indo-Pacific, in Europe, and in multilateral institutions.’

China’s intentions in the Indo-Pacific remain a concern for Western allies, especially the US. Although many observers doubt an invasion is imminent, the [CIA recently warned](https://www.reuters.com/world/cia-chief-says-chinas-xi-little-sobered-by-ukraine-war-2023-02-02/) China has plans to take Taiwan by 2027 and the world is now watching closely. [It is speculated](https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-01/did-china-s-xi-jinping-get-played-by-putin-on-ukraine?leadSource=uverify%20wall) that President Xi had been led to believe the Ukraine invasion would be swift and has now distanced himself from Putin in the wake of a protracted war that has attracted a harsh Western backlash.

For a Chinese economy struggling to rebuild post COVID-19, isolation from the West is not something it wants to risk, according to Dr Yu Jie, senior research fellow for China in the Asia-Pacific programme, who says: ‘President Xi and his colleagues have begun to realize that cooperation with Russia comes with substantial limits to avoid undermining China’s own political priorities and longer-term economic interests.’

She says Ukraine’s resilience and the sanctions faced by Russia have provided a ‘live simulation’ of the reaction an invasion of Taiwan could face, and is causing pause in Beijing. ‘Nor is its population willing to give up their reasonable living standard and economic liberty for a conflict that brings long term pain and generational division across the Strait.’

**Drone wars**

One conundrum has been that, despite anticipating a full cyber war, major Russian attacks upon Ukraine infrastructure have largely failed to materialize. Although attacks are still relentless and numerous, Ukraine’s security has been backed with strengthened NATO cyber security coupled with a motivated Ukraine [vigilante ‘cyber army’](https://www.cfr.org/cyber-operations/ukrainian-it-army).

Alongside the changes to Europe’s security architecture, Russia’s illegal invasion has ushered in a new type of information warfare especially the widespread use of open-source intelligence (OSINT).

The war could also be seen as the first long-term, sustained conflict where all the currently available uses for drones are integrated into combined operations on both sides. It’s clear an unpublicized cyber contest between Russian and Ukrainian drone operators is playing out – a kind of cat-and-mouse game of operators and their adversaries struggling for control.’

**3. Nuclear weapons – risks return**

Since the end of the Cold War and the advent of US-Russian arms control, the threat of nuclear weapons has become less salient. However, the past year has seen regular nuclear weapons threats from Russia, some veiled, some on ‘escalation’, and some directly aimed at NATO countries such as the UK. Warnings have also emerged from the West, with US president Joe Biden declaring the risk of a nuclear armageddon to be at its highest level for 60 years, bringing the nuclear issue firmly back to the forefront of discussion. While the threats are not new, there is still a question over their credibility and how the West responds. Nonetheless, the scare tactics have been highly effective. Russian statements like placing Russia’s nuclear forces on a ‘special regime of combat duty’ in February 2022 may be meaningless, but still generate a fearful reaction across the West. US president Joe Biden declared the risk of a nuclear armageddon to be at its highest level for 60 years.

Putin placed his country’s strategic nuclear weapons on ‘high alert’ at the start of the war perhaps to give him combat readiness status domestically, enabling other senior Russian personnel to order their use. But as the phrase had not been used before, what it exactly means is still, perhaps deliberately, unclear. Many of the threats have been directed at use within Ukraine.

Another new disturbing development in Russia’s wider intimidation strategy has been ‘playing fast and loose’ with the safety of nuclear energy in Ukraine, such as the shelling and attacks around the Zaporizhya plant and fears of a dirty bomb detonated as a ‘false flag’ attack. Putin will be all too aware of the fears this would cause, particularly in Ukraine as the site of the world’s worst nuclear power accident – Chernobyl in 1986.

Dr Lewis argues that if the war is truly about Putin’s ‘imperial legacy project’ and an attempt to bring Ukrainian territory back under his control, then creating an uninhabitable post-nuclear wasteland, would make ‘little strategic sense’. She says the war has also seen a departure in NATO and western allies’ indulging in any ‘tit for tat’ moves that might escalate the conflict.

**4.  Energy and food – fuelling the crisis**

As two major suppliers of both energy, food and fertilizer commodities, Russia’s conflict with Ukraine has caused disruption in supply for both developing and developed countries.

The most fundamental change has been Europe’s shift away from reliance on Russian gas. ‘Europe will never return to meaningful dependency on Russian fossil fuels, even if the war finished tomorrow, trust has been broken between European consumers and what has been their primary supplier.

Europe reacted to the supply disruption in two ways; looking for its gas elsewhere and accelerating the move to renewable energy. Pre-2022, the EU pledged to reduce emissions by 40 per cent and attain 32 per cent renewables. The war has seen those targets raised to 57 per cent and 45 per cent respectively.

If met, it would see an almost [fully decarbonized power sector](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/green-deal/fit-for-55-the-eu-plan-for-a-green-transition/) across the bloc (with the odd nuclear plant still online) by 2030/35. The war has probably brought forward decarbonization by five to ten years, although huge and unparalleled expansion in capacity of offshore wind, solar, and other sources will be needed to meet targets.

The collapse of the supply of piped gas from Russia has forced Germany and many of its neighbours to source energy elsewhere including from Asia, the Middle East, and potentially Africa. ‘These two things – Europe buying up everyone else’s energy and the concern of being over-reliant on China for supply of renewable energy materials – have had knock-on geopolitical implications,’ says Froggatt.

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Suddenly, a number of African states such as Mozambique and Nigeria have found themselves being ‘wooed’ by both West and East. This is a game-changer in the way that Europe in particular is looking at African energy to help in the energy transition.

With China currently producing around 70 per cent of all the world’s solar panels, some nations have already started to restructure their industries to be more self-reliant in renewables production. The US has its protectionist Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) offering large subsidies for domestic production of electrical vehicles and other ‘green’ sectors, and the EU recently announced a revised ‘Green Deal Industrial Plan’ it hopes will rival it.

**Putin’s gamble**

With a history of ‘keeping the gas flowing’ throughout even the Cold War, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and nuclear crisis of the 1980s, Russia banked on Europe losing its nerve. Putin’s efforts to use gas as a weapon have so far failed despite the huge costs of subsidizing expensive alternatives to Gazprom’s supplies. It has made short-term gains through high prices of gas and oil, [taking 28 per cent more revenue](https://www.enerdata.net/publications/daily-energy-news/russian-oil-gas-revenues-increase.html) than before the war. But with Europe’s vast pipelines now standing idle, Russia has to look further afield for new customers to avoid stranded assets and further economic disaster.

It has found some success. Alongside India, China is now the equal largest importer of Russian oil and has signed a new 30-year gas deal. But the markets have fundamentally changed with new deals, renewables on the rise, and both governments and consumers alike all too aware of the dynamics and fragility of the global supply network. China is now the equal largest importer of Russian oil and has signed a new 30-year gas deal.

**Food supply**

With both Russia and Ukraine being major exporters of agricultural fertilizers, the disruption to global food chains drove up prices to all-time highs, fuelling a cost-of-living crisis in both developed and developing nations.

Additionally, disruption of both harvests and a Russian grain blockade threatened to create a humanitarian catastrophe in developing countries as many – such as 85 per cent of Africa – depend on imported wheat. The World Food Programme (WFP) says the crisis remains at ‘unprecedented proportions’ with ten times the number of people facing famine compared to five years ago.
Global stocks are ‘worryingly low’ adds Environment and Society programme director Professor Tim Benton, with an escalation in the war, further trade restrictions, plus climate change creating future threats. He says: ‘There are significant potentials for disruptive weather ahead, and whilst the cost-of-living squeeze remains, the global situation remains very fragile.’

Konec formuláře

Začátek formuláře

Konec formuláře

**5. Russia the pariah state**

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Putin’s decision for a full, illegal re-invasion of Ukraine was a huge gamble which many Russia analysts say he has already likely lost by pushing the nation back out into the cold and putting the regime under threat. There is no going back after this. The war now is as much about Russia’s regime survival as it is about the survival of Ukraine. While Russia has made short-term gains on inflated gas and energy prices, the sanctions have successfully targeted the heart of the Russian financial system.

In addition, self-sanctioning by thousands of companies, from Apple to McDonald’s, who either ceased or curtailed operating in Russia has effectively added to pressure. This exodus, coupled with a national ‘mobilization’ conscription drive in 2022, has also led to hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens fleeing the country, according to [estimates](https://www.newsweek.com/putin-mobilization-backfires-russians-flee-kazakhstan-georgia-eu-1748771). Observers say it adds to the ‘brain drain’ upon an already ailing economy.

**Russia’s military myth**

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises of the war has been the exposure of Russia’s military weakness. The narrative of a swift targeted ‘special military operation’ run by an effective army has collapsed in the face of major defeats, huge casualties, loss of equipment, munitions shortages, and military blunders.

Seemingly underestimating a well-organized, uber-motivated Ukraine resistance – armed and trained in using the latest Western-supplied military hardware – has also been key. But the swift elimination of the most modern and capable elements of Russia’s land forces isn’t the same as the destruction of Russia’s military overall. Even after the end of the current fighting in Ukraine, Russia’s neighbours will still need to be wary of Moscow’s air and naval power, and its willingness to throw less capable men and material into combat.

**The beginning of the end?**

Reports of mounting casualties have sparked rare demonstrations of dissent across Russia. Some experts predict a consequence of the war will be a collapse of Russia within a year or two. Timothy Ash, associate fellow in the Russia and Eurasia programme, says that while there is a small possibility of positive change with reforming forces emerging, more likely is the disintegration of the Russian federation into many new states.  Others are less confident about any imminent regime collapse. Experience shows mass public protest generally only poses a real threat to an entrenched authoritarian regime if there is division within the elite as well,’ she says.

**6. A new Ukraine – new hopes**

Russia’s brutal assault on Ukraine has taken a heavy toll on its citizens but has also united the country in a way not seen before. Observers have been surprised by the strength of Ukraine’s resistance, resilience, and national cohesion. Despite an [estimated 14 million people displaced](https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine) and with its infrastructure, energy, and transport networks under constant attack, Ukraine has remarkably remained functioning.

One man who has come to personify this unity and defiance is Ukraine’s president Volodymyr Zelenskyy. One year into the largest military assault on Europe since World War Two, his journey from TV comedian to ‘Churchillian’ wartime leader and the ‘revered face of European liberal democracy is extraordinary. Zelenskyy’s refusal of the airlift offered by President Biden early in the war represented a ‘rebirth moment’ for him and for Ukrainian politics. His decision to stand firm and face the horrors of war with his people, despite being headhunted by mercenaries, was hugely significant.

Before Zelenskyy, Ukrainian domestic politics was highly contentious, with low public trust in political figures many of whom faced corruption allegations. The power of Zelenskyy, despite being from a Russian-speaking part of Ukraine, is that in 2019 he garnered support across different regions and generations around change, fighting corruption and bringing peace. This marked a change from the ethnic identity divides which had previously defined Ukrainian elections and saw Zelenskyy become the manifestation of a new modern Ukraine where values and a turn towards Europe mattered more than language and local identity. Even at times of war, he stresses commitment to tackling corruption and strengthening the rule of law in Ukraine.

Playing to Putin’s fears, Ukraine’s heroic resistance anchors it with the EU and NATO. Although the issue of future NATO membership for Ukraine is often diplomatically kicked down the road, Europe reached out in a gesture of solidarity with a decision to grant Kyiv EU candidate status, making full membership a possibility (with conditions) within a few years.

**What does victory look like for Ukraine?**

Any future president would be expected to deliver a new Ukraine which is a member of both NATO and the EU, and strive to build a safe and successful country. So how would that be reached? Most agree that any ceasefire without Russia’s agreement to pull out of occupied territories will simply not be tolerated by Ukraine, which aims to militarily defeat Russian forces on its territory. Restoring territorial integrity, delivering justice for war crimes, and making the Kremlin pay for destruction, all constitute key elements of a Ukraine victory and are the foundation for renewed European security architecture.

**7. International law – ripping up the rulebook**

Russia’s re-invasion of Ukraine [breached the UN Charter](https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/02/ukraine-debunking-russias-legal-justifications) and fundamental international law. As a UN Security Council member entrusted to maintain international peace and security, there was a sense of déjà vu with the US-led invasion of Iraq, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014. But as observers have pointed out, the rule of law quickly swung into action. The dizzying speed of coordinated global sanctions on an unprecedented scale catalysed a domino effect of mass corporate exits from Russia. In February 2022, the UN Security Council tabled a resolution, deploring Russia’s actions in Ukraine and calling for withdrawal of its troops – only to be blocked by a Russian veto. Any Security Council attempt to refer Russia to the International Criminal Court (ICC) would likely face a similar fate.

Even in times of war, [rules apply](https://www.icrc.org/en/rules-of-war), including international humanitarian law or the law of war. Potential war crimes were reported. The ICC received the largest ever [state party referral](https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/2022-04/State-Party-Referral.pdf) to open an investigation. The International Court of Justice demanded Russia ‘immediately suspend the military operations’ in Ukraine. Russia’s expulsion from the Council of Europe after 26 years of membership was unprecedented.

It means Russia is no longer bound by the standards in the European Convention on Human Rights. Russian citizens will no longer be able to rely on their Convention rights nor have redress to the European Convention on Human Rights for new cases. Russia is also reported to be starting the process of withdrawing from other Council of Europe treaties.

**Seeking justice and peace**

Peace negotiations, by nature, invariably involve some compromise but there is a real risk in leaving Ukraine’s sovereignty insecure and Russia ‘sitting on the edge and threatening to regroup’ says Bronwen Maddox. ‘While there is a value to keeping open basic channels to the Russian leadership, it is too early to explore such possibilities with Putin, when that could leave Russia in an ambiguous and still dangerous position.’

In a more positive vein, others point out that despite the colossal tests of multilateralism and the rule of law, nations are still demonstrating they can come together. International negotiations are underway to reach agreement on crucial global issues such as plastics and biodiversity. The UN Security Council (by and large) continues to operate and the [General Assembly](https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1116982) has found innovative ways to tackle Security Council vetoes. As Russia’s war on Ukraine rages on, only time will tell whether that will be enough.