Issue Brief
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# Ukraine-Russia War:

## A prelude to a post-Western international order?

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*This issue brief analyses how the collective action of developed countries in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated just how dominant the so-called "Western" international order is. Instead of a post-Western international order emerging, the developed countries' response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and concerns about China's revisionist track record, reveals how so-called Western international order is adapting to outcompete and be resilient against revisionist states that chose to use military or other means to revise international order in their favor.*

## Back to the Future

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the most violent interstate conflict in the world since the second invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan.[1]

Based on the newsfeed of *The Washington Post* on June 7, 2022, while Russia has made some gains in the eastern part of Donbass and Luhansk, there are signs that Russia has under-reported their casualties.[2] The problem of under-reporting is a serious issue that can affect the understanding of the trajectory of the war.

First, no verification has taken place by third parties such as the United Nations (UN), the International Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontiers or Reuters International Press Agency.[3] On its part, Russia rarely reports its own casualties in any warfare. However, the British intelligence's assessment did put the death toll at 15,000 Russian troops as of May 29, 2022; half of what Ukrainian sources have been claiming though. Second, President Vladimir Putin (hereon Putin) has near absolute control of state media. He has made it illegal to discuss Russia's actions in Ukraine as a "war" or "invasion". This is

despite Putin himself approving the February 24, 2022 invasion against Ukraine.

There is an information war at home.[4] Putin's regime voraciously curates the domestic narrative of the conflict to be one of liberating ethnic Russians from Ukrainian Nazis, defending Russia from Ukraine-based US chemical and biological weapons testing facilities, and preventing the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military alliance. Losing the domestic information war by realizing the reality of Putin's aggression against the Ukraine, the growing number of Russian fatalities and the obvious misinformation about Ukraine and NATO would result in a public backlash against Putin. The sanctions have begun to bite, and the worst is yet to come.[5] Indeed, more and more ordinary Russians will experience direct negative repercussions on their lives due to the misrule of Putin. This will raise inconvenient questions for Putin and his regime if they cannot deflect blame onto the US and its allies.

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To be certain, this is not a Russian war. It was a preventable conflict on both sides in the making for three decades. Somehow though it has turned malignant, with Putin seeing the invasion of Ukraine as a personal mission to reverse the end of the Soviet Union that began on December 26, 1991, which he calls "the greatest geo-political tragedy of the 20th century"[6]

As one Russian interviewed randomly on the street averred: "To Putin, everything is geopolitics. To us, it is how to make ends meet." One major demonstration against Putin in Moscow was cracked down upon in the very first week of the conflict, the collective dissent is palpable.

The preventable war in Ukraine runs counter to the academic debates on "complex interdependence" since the 1970s, based on the original article by Professor Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane in *Foreign Affairs* in 1988. The duo argued that the intense increase in the trade metrics of the world could reduce the anarchical nature of the international system.

Prior to the Russian aggression against Ukraine a month ago, all eyes were on the increasing ascendance of the Indo-Pacific Strategy,[7] the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)[8] and the intensifying US-China strategic competition.[9] Before debating the lower probability of a great war in the West, it would be proper to understand how the international relations community had peered too far into the future, to the degree that Ukraine and the Russian Pan Slavic rift became a blind spot.[10] Ironically, this has happened before. During the dawn of a post-Cold War order, the Balkans erupted into a series of violent clashes after the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991. This culminated into the Balkans war between Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia, and eventually Albania in 1999. It was only after days of intense US and NATO aerial bombardment against Albania's main antagonist Serbia that President Slobodan Milosevic capitulated. It is not surprising then that scholars have neglected the ultimate spoiler: Putin.

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## Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Vision: Misplaced priority or prescient initiative?

As highlighted earlier, prior to the Ukraine-Russia war, the most intense geo-political, geo-economic and geo-civilizational debate was when would China and the US clash?

James Stavridis, former US Naval Chief, at one point the Dean of The Fletcher School argued, it would be "*2034*", a date based on his fictional yet realist account with Elliot Ackerman.[11] A *New York Times*' best seller published in March 2021, the book remains popular fodder for those who believe that a direct military confrontation between the US and China is all but inevitable. This is similar to the causal narrative of "Thucydides Trap",[12] but runs opposite to the "The Kindleberger Trap,"[13] where the great powers are supposed to produce the largest amount of global public goods but often failed to do so. But at the very least they don't necessarily go for each other's jugular. This is a manifestation of the dysfunctionality of the great powers.

The year 2046 marks the 100th century of the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and is three years before Beijing's 2050 target of becoming a developed country. This trajectory led Washington D.C. and the European Union (EU) to believe that the Indo-Pacific region would be the site of the biggest geo-political conflict. The growing interest in the context of FOIP is further marked by the accreditation of 96 countries to the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta, Indonesia — a prequel to what was to come.[14]

Concrete manifestations of the world's attention to the Indo-Pacific region included the G-7 releasing their version of "Build Back Better," in July 2021,[15] coupled with the EU's attempt to engage ASEAN through the EU-ASEAN Global Gateway Initiative worth 80 billion euros between 2021-2027.

Indeed, the UK successfully broke the moratorium on ASEAN's much prized Dialogue Partnership, imposed since 1999, to be the 12 Dialogue Partner of ASEAN.[16]

In this context, Putin's actions too were assessed with regard to China – considering that he met his Chinese counterpart 39 times. Their last meeting was on February 4, 2022, where Putin was reported by the *New York Times* to have let the proverbial cat out of the bag that an invasion was imminent.[17] But the military campaign was assured by Putin would be short and swift.[18]

**Popular Academic Debate**

To all matters and purposes, one of the earliest predictions of the seemingly inevitable war between China and the US came from Ross Munro and Richard Bernstein in 1987, in their book, "*The Coming Conflict With China*." Michael Pilsbury then came on board to set the discourse going in 2013 with his sensationally popular book "*The Hundred Year Marathon*."

> ***Whether President Xi was being misled by Putin or he and his Politburo of seven had underestimated Russia's military modernization over the past 20 years, China is now more astute that it cannot allow itself to be enmeshed with the Russo-US and European war.***

In retrospect, this was three years prior to former President Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton in 2016; nearly seven years before Trump himself was defeated by President Joe Biden on November 20, 2020. The latter took up the FOIP with even more vigor by approving the sale of eight nuclear powered submarines under the rubric of the AUKUS trilateral alliance (Australia, the UK, and the US). This further led to the 2022 Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), and India's naval entrenchment in the Nicobar Island, which lies at the mouth of the north of the Straits of Malacca.

Matthew Pottinger, the former bureau chief of the New York Times, was among the hardline advisors against China if the Trump Administration. Joining him was Peter Navarro, though less credible, but nonetheless a Professor of Economics at University of California in San Diego and author of "*Death by China*".

Others such as Bruno Masner, the former Foreign Minister of Portugal, also took a long leave when he stepped down to write glowingly of "*The Dawn of Eurasia*," highlighting the benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in augmenting the two-way trade between EU and China.

Still others such as Kishore Mahbubani's books, "*Has the West Lost It?*", published in 2019,[19] followed by "*Has China Won?*" in 2020,[20] became the trope of all those who believe in the narrative of historian Arnold Toynbee over the last century — that the West will fall. Not surprisingly, despite calling himself a student of the philosophy of history, Mahbubani's fawning of Toynbee's work became the central thesis of his book to ostensibly "warn the West,"[21] where Mahbubani had no problem in over-inflating the prospect of China being the top dog on selective metrics in international relations, such as being bigger than US on the Purchasing Power Index in 2018.

In this context, none of the above scholars gave much attention to the Pan Slavic problem, the root cause of World War I that lent themselves to World War II, and the Cold War. President Truman, as early as 1947, was willing to support the Greeks against anyone anti-Communist. Vincent Bevin, author of the "*The Jakarta Method*", wrote that "Stalin had actually asked the Communists in Greece to stand down but the Communists in Greece refused his order".[22] This led to President Truman giving a joint address to the Congress in 1947, whereupon the Pentagon's budget in relation to the American GDP was increased by an eye-popping 300 percent[23] — a record that had not been surpassed to this day.

In this sense, all the scholars above either never truly understood the power and stamina of the Western civilization, or, misread the Peloponnesian War altogether with 16 sets of conflicts, as in the case of Graham Allison.

To be sure, Charles Tilly has long warned "War Makes State, State Makes War."[24] Embedded into this logic is another dimension that emerged under President Trump: Project Clean Network.

Not only was the US capable of refining their war-making capabilities, but they imposed on their allies and keen business partners to clean up their own supply chain from any components that may be vulnerable to intellectual theft. This was especially the case with Huawei and ZTE, two business entities that seemed inseparable from the Chinese state, which kept growing economically until the Coronavirus put a stop to this linear growth.

That said, the likes of other scholars such as Amitav Archarya, Brahma Chellaney, Parag Khanna, have always believed that the US' deep and entrenched addiction to wars — which they attributed more to the preponderance of the military industrial complex over a sober and proper assessment of where the US priorities should be — precludes US, EU and

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NATO from ever knowing how to handle China. They did not believe that the West could keep up with all forms of wars, leading to the cyclical internal weakening and decay of the West.

While the West's internal infrastructure may be weak, the West controls the financial institutions, international media and has ample sources of open intelligence, all of which, when aggregated, can still lead the West to make mistakes but also correct them such as in Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran. The West is also not beyond what Stephen Krasner called "organised hypocrisy", making it just as deft at double and triple dealings.[25]

For example, the EU, US and China had to lift the sanctions on Iran so that an additional one million barrels of oil could be released. Just as Putin is calling for Syrian fighters to clear the streets of Ukraine in urban warfare, there is nothing to prevent the West from doing the same. While there are said to be 28,000 mercenaries in Libya after ten years of

conflict, there are 35,000 mercenaries from various parts of the world and MENA in Ukraine, all within less than a month. The 80,000 Ukrainians who moved to the West have also returned.

## China's Geopolitical Awareness Was High but Misguided

China was clearly aware of the possibility of a conflict with the US too. President Trump's foreign policy on China was the only one that could gain bipartisan consensus, as seen by the US' transatlantic tie with NATO and the EU.

More importantly, US-China strategic cooperation was hindered by concerns in several areas, including but not exclusive to: (1) trade, (critical) technology supply chain, (2) human rights abuses in Tibet and Xinjiang, (3) tensions over Taiwan that can spill over into a war proper, and (4) theater preponderance of the US as a resident power without any peer competitors in the South and East China Sea.

> ***China's sustainable economic growth in its current model produces a vested interest in keeping most of the current so-called Western international system intact. On the other hand, there is little doubt as to China's intentions to revise the regional order to suit its security imperatives.***

But the list goes on: (5) cash-starved countries seemingly on one side, backing China's BRI, as far away as Latin America and Africa, with the US and the rest of its partners in G-7 clawing back their influence with 'Build Back Better'; (6) tendentious, though, ultimately strategic lip service paid to ASEAN Centrality; and (7) tactical importance placed on "the confluence of the two seas," that stretches from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, with the latter being the preferred option of open or convert US allies in actuality.

And, finally, (8) tethering the tension-filled Indo-Pacific to legally binding trade pacts such as Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP); (9) tagging the RCEP further to the Comprehensive Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP), a high-quality, free trade agreement, stronger and bigger than the RCEP. The FOIP, RCEP and CPTPP areas combined are populated by the growth of the largest middle classes of consumers; and (10) not losing sight of the Theatre Ballistic Defence in the form of Terminal High Altitude Defense Area (THAAD)

Tempered with cooperation over how to jointly combat the rise of temperature beyond 1.5 degree Celsius per the legally enforceable Paris Peace Accord which drew no opposition from any quarter by 2050, China assumed that a quick conversion to 40 per cent of electric vehicles could help it save itself and the global climate from collapsing. The problem is cobalt, a critical component of the lithium batteries that can be extracted in Argentina and Chile and the Andes mountains lie in the Pacific, where the US continues to reign.

Whether President Xi was being misled by Putin or he and his Politburo of seven had underestimated Russia's military modernization over the past 20 years, China is now more astute that it cannot allow itself to be enmeshed with the Russo-US and European war. Importantly, 59 percent of the world

trade remains predominantly conducted in US dollars, with China's Renminbi at 4 percent.

## The Shocking Outlier

As this is written on June 11, 2022, the world is focused on nearly four months of Putin's invasion of Ukraine. When this article is published, only a few of the Ukrainian cities locked in sight by President Vladimir Putin, would have fallen too. This is on part due to his nostalgic hubris that just as the Soviet Union can steam roll over Hungary in 1956, force the US to withdraw its missiles in Cuba in 1962 from Turkey, and watch in glee as the US struggled mightily over the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, he (Putin) can do it once more.

In 1991, Russia's economy recovered through shock therapy as advised by Yegor Gaidar and Jeffrey Sachs. The US is not averse to the same. If anything, Carmen Reinhardt and Kenneth Rogoff both explained that the financial crisis had been the mainstay of capitalism. Indeed, the reason why Stalin asked the Greek communists to stand down was to allow capitalism to take hold first, so that the income chasm to come would make communism the supreme doctrine all over the world.

To be sure, in all of Putin's 22-year rule, all the biographers who sifted through his speeches, such as Marsha Gessen, Catherine Delton, John Barker and Susan Glasser, found Putin referring to Stalin in positive terms thrice, and a simple notation of Lenin only once.

## The War in Ukraine: Violence Unleashed

The current phantasm of violence in Ukraine, where civilian facilities are regularly bombed, is not in any way different from Putin's signature style of war based on what he learned from his days in 1970-80s as a lowly KGB Officer.

Fiona Hill and John Brennan, the latter being the former Director of CIA, explained that much of the KGB's form of training involves a heavy degree of using "lies, deceit, poison, massive bombardment" of cities, such as what Putin did in Chechnya in 2001; Georgia in 2008; and his intervention in the Syrian conflict in the summer of 2015.Of all the surviving institutions of the Soviet Union, it was the KGB that successfully transitioned to FSB and the domestic intelligence unit, the GRU.

Since Ukraine, especially Kviv, was expected to fall within days, the current impasse must be gnawing on Putin. Thus, he has had to resort to using hypersonic weapons on March 20 to mark a shift in strategy. What is evident is that this war carries all the echoes of the past, especially World War I and II, even various incidents in Cold War by way of proxy wars launched by the West or Soviet Union. In this sense, any talks of a post-Western international system cannot be helpful, as it fails to address the current order which includes FOIP, Build Back Better and the European ASEAN Gateway Initiative, in addition to the EU's own Indo-Pacific Policy Framework.

If a post-Western international system is emerging, why would most of the world suddenly show an enormous interest in the SWIFT banking system comprised of 11,000 banks? Truly, enormous institutional powers remain in the West. John Lewis Gaddis was agog that Switzerland decided to drop its total secrecy rule on the Russian oligarchs —a policy that Switzerland never even deigned to drop throughout the Cold War.

Rather than the Russian invasion of Ukraine marking a post-Western international system emerging, we have seen the US and its allies coalesce to maximize their comparative advantage to push back against Putin's attempt to reshape the current international order.

Those that have abstained from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote such as India and China should not be seen as equivalent to supportive of Putin's position or a post-Western international system.[26] India sees abstaining from criticizing Russia through the lens of its bilateral challenges with China, its reliance on over USD 2 billion in military arms and parts from Russia and energy needed to maintain its developing economy growth.

China's position is nuanced. Beijing sees its position on Russia through the lens of its strategic competition with the US and its reliance on the rules-based order for sustainable economic growth and access to global markets. Siding with Putin as Hu Wei, vice-chairman of the Public Policy Research Centre of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council writes, would be detrimental to China's long-term interests and "cutting off from Putin and giving up neutrality will help build China's international image and ease its relations with the US and the West."[27]

On the other hand, there is little doubt as to China's intentions to revise its regional order to suit China's security imperatives and as Tsinghua University's Yan Xue Tong writes: "China will work hard to shape an ideological environment conducive to its rise and counter Western values. For example, the United States defines democracy and freedom from the perspective of electoral politics and personal expression, while China defines democracy and freedom from the perspective of social security and economic development. Washington should accept these differences of opinion instead of trying to impose its own views on others."[28]

Notwithstanding these dissatisfactions, China's sustainable economic growth in its current model requires access to the global economy, financial system, sea lines of communication and consumers. It has a vested interest in keeping most of the current so-called Western international system intact, but it is interested in reshaping it in targeted areas such as definitions of human rights, development and democracy.

## Ukraine-Russia War as a prelude to a post-Western international order?

The collective action of developed countries in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated just how dominant the so-called "Western" international order is. US-E.U. cooperation on financial and other sanctions on Russia were not resisted by Canada, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Singapore and other participating states. Quite the contrary, these countries have been on the forefront of sanctions as they understand clearly that if Putin were successful in his efforts to use force to dismantle the sovereign state of Ukraine, then other revisionist powers such as China and Iran may do the same.

Emerging countries have mostly been silent on Russia's invasion of Ukraine for several reasons. Some see Russia's actions as justified (China and North Korea), others are dependent on Russian energy, fertilizers and resources (Hungary and Brazil), and still others feel they have no stakes in the conflict itself (much of Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands).

In reality, the food and energy shortages, higher energy prices and inflation are all related to the conflict and how the current Western dominated system has pervasive influence throughout the world. To illustrate, supply chains, trade agreements, energy grids, technologies, shipping lanes and even airspace has been established by Western countries.

Pre-invasion, initiatives such as the Supply Chain Resilience Initiative, FOIP, the US Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, the Japan-EU Economic Partnership Agreement and CPTPP among other Western-led agreements were already shaping the

new dynamics of our international order. At the same time, minilateral cooperation such as the Quad and AUKUS were also shaping how we think about public good provision, deterrence and competition in areas of AI, quantum computing, cyberspace and security and the digital economy. The winner of this standards competition between China and the US and its partners will define the rules of the digital economy, AI, cyberspace and the role of government in economies and our lives.

In short, there was a clear bipolar competition between China and the US-led collective West. Post-invasion, Russia will be a much weaker partner for China as it is isolated diplomatically, economically and in terms of its comparative advantage such as energy and agriculture. This will leave China with one less partner to overturn the so-called Western led order.

Rather than an end to the Western-led order, Russia's blatant aggression has also pushed allies and friends of the US closer. Putin's war on Ukraine has galvanized the EU, NATO, the US and its partners to bring together their societies, economies, technology and energy.

This focus is not limited to Moscow but includes China's efforts to dismantle the largely supported US-led security architecture in the Indo-Pacific region. Concerns include a forced re-unification of Taiwan with the Mainland, assertive behavior in the South and East China Seas and what such actions would mean for sea lines of communication and supply chains, and how to ensure global commerce remains stable, resilient and functioning.

Instead of a post-Western international order emerging, the developed countries' response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and concerns about China's revisionist track record, reveals how the so-called Western international order is adapting to outcompete and be resilient against revisionist states that chose to use military or other means to revise international order in their favor.

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## Endnotes


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