



THE IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AND THE RULE OF LAW. THE RUSSIAN MILITARY AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE*

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Russia's military aggression against Ukraine has significantly impacted both the international security system, by shifting paradigm regarding the conduct of conflicts in the 21st century, and also the rule of law, by undermining liberal principles that form the foundation of the current international relations system. Moreover, the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine, carried out through violation of general legal norms and the principles of international humanitarian law, has generated, and continues to do so, a range of consequences in the system of international law.

The purpose of this research is to underpin key concepts concerning the impact on international security and the rule of law resulting from the proliferation of the Russian Federation's military aggression in Ukraine and the continuation of the war that began in 2022. The main objective of the analysis is to foresee future legal challenges in the context of the transformation of the international security system and the ongoing reform of its legal framework. To this end, the study follows several stages of research: a legal analysis of the criteria for categorizing Russia's actions as military aggression; an examination of how certain elements of the international security system have been affected; and an assessment of the effects of this conflict on the system of international law.

Keywords: *aggression; abusive war; paradigm shift; security challenges.*

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Introduction

War was until the beginning of civilization a decisive factor in the configuration of international relations and global balance of power. Along the time, the armed conflicts shaped frontiers, generated alliances and give birth to theoretical paradigms to explain the international actors' behaviour.

In the 21st century, although the international order seemed to be increasingly guided by solid juridical norms, international cooperation and economic interdependency, the reality check regarding conflicts have proven the resilience of power logic and the use of force in global politics.

The military aggression of Russia, triggered in 2008 in Georgia, continued in 2014 in Crimea and amplified in 2022 by the involvement in full-scale war against Ukraine, marked a inflection point in the international relations among actors and in the manner liberal norms are perceived by them.

The reason for this paradigmatic shift stands not only in the major geopolitical crisis generated in Europe but as well in the direct undermining of basic principles of international law as the respect for states sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-aggression.

This article shows how the international security and the rules-based system are transformed under the pressure of Russian aggression and Russian-Ukrainian ongoing war and by the delivered analysis the study will emphasize the tension among international legal order and power dynamics in times when the law and force coexist in an increasingly fragile balance.

1. The Escalation of Russian Military Actions in Europe and Their Legal Qualification

The progressive intensification of the Russian military aggression in Europe in the late 10 years illustrates a gradual strategy to expand its sphere of influence and to undermine the current international order.

This trajectory of military assertiveness began with the 2008 intervention in Georgia, during which Russian forces deployed tanks into South Ossetia and expelled Georgian troops from Tskhinvali claiming the protection of Russian citizens as justification. Moreover, in February 2014, under the same pretext of safeguarding the Russian-speaking minority, Russia occupied and annexed the Crimean Peninsula. Simultaneously, it launched a hybrid war in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk by supporting and arming separatist militias.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale military invasion of Ukraine, marking the most serious act of military aggression in Europe since the World War II. Despite the absence of a formal declaration of war by either side, the conflict qualifies, under international law, as an international armed conflict (GC-I 1949,



Article 2). This classification obliges both parties to comply with the provisions of international humanitarian law.

The legal foundation for qualifying the Russian Federation's military actions as acts of aggression is grounded in public international law, particularly the following legal instruments:

a) *The Charter of the United Nations (1945)*, which mandates that "All members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat of use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state" (ONU 1945, art. 2(4)). Additionally, Article 51 affirms the right to individual or collective self-defence in the event of an armed attack. Therefore, the use of armed forces by UN Member State against another state, regardless of whether the latter is a UN member, constitutes a direct violation of Article 2(4), and Ukraine is entitled to exercise its right of self-defence under Article 51.

b) *UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (1974)* defines aggression as "the use of armed forces by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations" (UNGA 1974, art. 1). Moreover, the resolution affirms that "the first use of armed force by a State in contravention of the Charter shall constitute prima facie¹ evidence of an act of aggression" (UNGA 1974, art. 2). The resolution further enumerates specific acts that may be classified as aggression, many of which have been committed by the Russian Federation in Ukraine, including: the invasion or attack by armed forces of one state on the territory of another; the bombardment of another state's territory; the blockade of ports or coastlines; the provision of support to armed groups operating against another state; and the dispatch, by or on behalf of a state, of armed bands, irregular forces, or mercenaries engaging in armed force and substantially participating in armed conflict (UNGA 1974, art. 3(a),(b),(c),(g)). Accordingly, under public international law, not only the armed aggression that resulted in the direct Russo-Ukrainian war qualifies as an act of aggression, but so do earlier actions by the Russian Federation – namely, the invasion of Crimea, the support provided to separatist forces in Donbas, and the deployment of foreign mercenaries against Ukraine armed forces. Each of these actions falls within the definition of aggression as set out in the resolution.

In addition to these considerations, the *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* also provides a legal framework for the classification of aggression. It defines the crime of aggression as "the planning, preparation, initiation or execution of an act of aggression" (CPI 1998, art. 8 bis (1))².

¹ "Prima facie" is a legal term used to describe a case that presents sufficient evidence to warrant proceeding to trial or judgement.

² Neither Russia nor Ukraine is a party to the Rome Statute; however, in 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin for the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children - an act classified as a war crime.



In response to the classification of the Russia's military actions as military aggression against Ukraine, several international efforts have been initiated to ensure its accountability.

The United Nations General Assembly has adopted several resolutions condemning the Russian invasion – for instance, Resolution ES-11/1 of March 2022, which called for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine (United Nations Digital Library 2022), and although such resolutions are not legally binding, they are nonetheless reflect the will of the international community.

In March 2023, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to the Russian Federation (International Criminal Court 2023a). At the same time, the Court also opened a broader investigation into President Putin for alleged war crimes against humanity, and potential acts of genocide committed during the conflict in Ukraine. Additionally, the International Court of Justice took up proceedings following Ukraine's application in February 2022, in which it accused Russia of misusing the Genocide Convention as a justification for its invasion. In response, the Court issued a provisional order requiring Russia to immediately suspend its military operations in Ukraine. Moreover, as early as 2022, under the coordination of EUROJUST, a Joint Investigation Team was established, comprising Ukraine and several European countries with the purpose to collect evidence and document international crimes committed in the context of the ongoing war (European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation 2024) and in 2023, the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine was inaugurated (European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation 2023). Also, such initiatives aimed to reclaim Russia's accountability for its aggression and abuses are also reflected in the agreement to establish a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine, in Strasbourg, signed by the President of Ukraine, and the Secretary General of the Council of Europe in June 2025.

2. The Impact of Russian Military Aggression in Ukraine on the International Security System

The war initiated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022, added to its prior acts of military aggression, marked the end of a period of relative stability in post-Cold War Europe and has left a significant less wanted imprint on the international security system.

However, it is obvious that many of the effects currently observed cannot be attributed solely to the actions undertaken by the Russian Federation since 2022, or even to the 2008 incursion into Georgia – the first military aggression against another

sovereign state in post-Soviet era. Rather, these outcomes are largely the result of a broader set of complex, dynamic and often unpredictable developments that have shaped the international environment over the least past two decades. Some of these developments refer to the rapid advancement of emerging technologies whose applications may prove disruptive to global security, or the widespread globalization, which fosters both integration and polarization, or the intensification of geopolitical competition among major powers. Also, the strengthening of multipolar tendencies in the global order, the growing diversification of actors on the international stage and the worsening of transnational crises, increasing economic instability, the hybridisation of conflict, and the exacerbation of social tensions and crises are among these outcomes.

In the following section, based on informed analysis and personal perspective, we will distinguish the effects of the Russian aggression against Ukraine on the international security system, as identified in international law and/or the specialised literature, into the two aforementioned categories: *direct effects* and *catalysed effects*.

The main *direct effects* on the international security system include:

a) *Redefining threats against regional and international security*, in the following respects:

- Russian-Ukrainian war has brought conventional military threats back to the borders of European states;
- Risk of nuclear escalation has increased, particularly in light of Russia's repeated threats to employ nuclear weapons;
- International sanctions against Russia and the associated economic war became more assertive;
- Hybrid warfare, especially through disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks, and the instrumentalization of migration, has gained heightened strategic significance.

b) *The strengthening of the North Atlantic Alliance*, driven by the heightened perception of regional threats posed by the Russian Federation's conventional military actions, as reflected in:

- The membership of Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024), both of which had previously maintained a status of military neutrality;
- The increased military presence of the Euro-Atlantic alliance in Eastern Europe;
- The exponential growth of military investments in military equipment;

c) *The EU's mobilisation to provide financial and political support to Ukraine*, along with the initiation of strategic autonomy plans aimed at bolstering the defence of its Member States, represents another significant direct consequence.

The prior *effects* of Russian aggression but that have been *catalysed* by the actual international context may be identified as follows:



a) *The substantial increase in global military spending*, which reached \$2.718 trillion in 2024, marking a 37% rise between 2015 and 2024. The countries with the most significant increases in military expenditures in 2024 were the United States, China, Russia, Germany, and India, collectively accounting for approximately 60% of global spending. At the same time, total military expenditures in Europe rose by 17%, reaching \$693 billion³ (SIPRI 2025, 1);

b) *The acceleration of global order fragmentation*, whereby the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has further deteriorated East-West relations and intensified the global polarisation between the Global North and the Global South, thereby complicating the architecture of international security;

c) *The weakening of the United Nations*, resulting from its inability to adopt firm positions in condemning the military aggression against Ukraine, most resolutions addressing this issue have been obstructed by Russia's⁴ exercise of its veto power. For example, in September 2022, Russia blocked a UN Security Council resolution condemning the illegal annexation of the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. But not only Russia was in this case, as in February 2025, the United States voted against a UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Russian aggression and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Likewise, China has maintained ambiguous positions, often abstaining from votes explicitly condemning the Russian Federation, while supporting resolutions that promote peaceful solutions without attributing blame to either party.

3. The Effects of the Russian-Ukrainian War on the International Legal Order

The Russian-Ukrainian war, which began in 2022, has had a tremendous impact on the norms and practices of international law, prompting discussions and potential changes across several areas. The following are some of the key aspects that have been affected or have sparked debate:

a) *International legitimacy of territorial annexations* in light of the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territories. Although the international community has overwhelmingly rejected these actions, it has emphasized the importance of respecting the right to self-determination, according to which any territorial changes

³ Malta is the only country that did not increase its military spending.

⁴ In September 2022, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning the illegal annexation of the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. In February 2025, for example, the United States voted against a UN General Assembly resolution that condemned Russian aggression and called for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukraine. Likewise, China has maintained ambiguous positions, often abstaining from votes explicitly condemning the Russian Federation, while supporting resolutions that promote peaceful solutions without attributing blame to either party.



must consider the will of the population within the territory and must refrain from the use of force against territorial integrity. Thus, UN Resolution 68/267 of March 2014, which declared the Crimean referendum illegal and reaffirmed Ukraine's international borders, clearly states that the annexation of Crimea is unlawful. Similarly, during 2022-2023, the UN adopted resolutions condemning Russia's annexation of four other Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. Furthermore, these UN resolutions are consistent with the 1978 Vienna Convention on Succession of States, which does not recognize territorial transfers executed by force or under the threat of force.

b) Legitimacy of the use of armed force and the right to self-defence of states. Ukraine invoked the right to self-defence as stipulated in Article 51 of the UN Charter, and the international community supported this right by providing military assistance. This underscored the importance of backing states facing military aggression. Moreover, the Russian-Ukrainian war reignited debates concerning the legitimacy of humanitarian intervention and military support in the context of aggression, as well as the limits of such actions.

c) Triggering collective responses by the international community to penalize the Russian military aggression has materialized primarily through economic sanctions⁵, especially pronounced from the European Union and the United States. Russia was also excluded or suspended from various international organizations⁶. Nevertheless, these collective responses have raised questions regarding the effectiveness and legality of unilateral or collective sanctions under international law.

d) Re-evaluation of international legal mechanisms for the protection of civilians and the implementation of human rights during conflict, as well as states' responsibilities regarding migration, has occurred due to the refugee crisis generated in Europe and the abuses committed during the conflict. This has highlighted the need for stricter adherence to and enforcement of international humanitarian law norms, including those concerning the protection of refugees, civilians, and civilian infrastructure.

⁵ The economic sanctions imposed on the Russian federation include financial measures (disconnection from the SWIFT international payment system, freezing of foreign assets, transaction restrictions); trade sanctions (embargoes and export bans, import bans); individual sanctions targeting oligarchs, government officials, and associates of Russian leaders, involving asset freezes and travel bans; technological and industrial restrictions, including export controls on components and equipment, as well as prohibitions on cooperation in sectors such as aerospace and nuclear energy. Additionally, thousands of Western companies have withdrawn from Russia (for example, McDonald's, BP, Shell, Ikea, and Apple).

⁶ Russia was excluded from political-economic bodies (Council of Europe, UN Human Rights Council, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, G8, World Tourism Organization, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) and sports organizations such as FIFA, UEFA, and the International Paralympic Committee (International Paralympic Committee 2024).



e) *Use of drones and other advanced technologies in military actions between the Russian and Ukrainian Armed Forces* has underscored the necessity of regulating such technologies in accordance with the principles of international humanitarian law.

f) *Necessity for organizational reform of the UN, particularly the Security Council*, has become apparent due the limitations exposed by Russia's exercise of its veto power concerning issues related to the conflict in Ukraine. Such reform is seen as necessary to ensure more effective enforcement of international law.

By engaging in military actions against Ukraine, as well as previously against Georgia, Russia *has violated several key principles of international law*, examples of which include:

a) *The principle of the inviolability of borders and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states*, as established in the Helsinki Final Act (OSCE 1975, sections III, VI);

b) *The principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the non-use of force*, reaffirmed in the Paris Charter for a New Europe (C.S.C.E. 1990). Russia's invasion of Ukraine constitutes a direct breach of the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity, which are fundamental pillars of international law also established by the UN Charter. This has reopened discussions on the importance of respecting these principles and has prompted a re-evaluation of the mechanisms for enforcing international law in cases of similar aggression;

c) *The principles of international humanitarian law*:

- *Humanity*⁷ (UN-HC 1899, Preamble) which governs the treatment of civilians, particularly vulnerable groups (including children, women, the elderly, and the sick), prisoners of war, medical personnel, religious workers, and humanitarian aid staff is further codified in Common Article 3 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and reiterated in the Preamble of Additional Protocol I;

- *Proportionality*, a principle which holds that "... an attack is prohibited if it may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated" (ONU-GC-PA-I 1977, art. 51(5)(b));

- *Distinction* between combatants and civilians, and between military and civilian objects, as regulated by Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions of 1977, which mandates that "To ensure respect and protection for the civilian population and civilian objects, parties to the conflict must at all times distinguish between the civilian population and combatants..." (ONU-GC-PA-I 1977, art. 48, 51, 52);

⁷ The Preamble of the 1899 Hague Convention II reflects the Martens Clause, a cornerstone of the laws of armed conflict.



- *Military necessity*, although not explicitly defined as a principle in international law, can be inferred from Article 52 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, which limits “military objectives to those objects that by their nature, location, purpose, or use effectively contribute to military action” (ONU-GC-PA-I 1977, art. 52(2)). This principle is also recognized in the San Remo Manual on International Law Applicable to Armed Conflicts at Sea published on June 12, 1994.

Russia’s breaches of these principles, manifested in various ways, constitute war crimes. Indeed, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict has been marked by numerous allegations of war crimes, including indiscriminate attacks against civilians, use of prohibited weapons, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. Such violations have been examined in prior studies (AtanasIU 2022), (AtanasIU 2022) (AtanasIU 2023) and have intensified efforts to legally document and investigate these acts, including by the International Criminal Court.

4. Future Legal Challenges in the Context of the Transformation of the International Security System and the Reform of its Legal Framework

Russia’s use of its veto power, along with the ambiguous positions adopted by China and, more recently, the United States, has obstructed the adoption of decisive resolutions by the United Nations Security Council regarding the war in Ukraine. These developments reflect not only the prevailing geopolitical tensions but also the persistent difficulties in reaching international consensus on condemning the Russian military aggression and affirming Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, such ambiguous stances may also be interpreted as calculated diplomatic strategies through which the United States may seek to broker peace from a mediator’s standpoint⁸, while China may be signaling its preference for economic pre-eminence over political dominance within the global order.

In November 2007, President Vladimir Putin withdrew Russia from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), signed in 1990, which imposed limits on the deployment of heavy military equipment across Europe (NATO Association of Canada 2025). Although currently inactive, the treaty’s framework, including its definitions, provisions, procedures, and categories for arms limitation, could serve as a model for designing a comprehensive ceasefire agreement in Ukraine. This could include robust mechanisms for post-conflict monitoring and verification (Simonet 2025).

With regard to the international prosecution of Russian leadership for alleged crimes of aggression or war crimes, the situation is complicated by Russia’s failure to ratify the Rome Statute and its non-recognition of the jurisdiction of the International

⁸ “Path to Peace” resolution put forward by the U.S. and adopted by the Security Council in February 2025.



Criminal Court. In response, a coalition of 44 states, primarily European nations such as the Netherlands, Poland, the Baltic states, France, Germany, and Ukraine, that have not aligned with the Russian military actions have taken the initiative to establish a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression as an ad hoc body intended to hold Russian leaders accountable for acts of aggression (Council of Europe 2025).

The initiation of military aggression by the Russian Federation in February 2022, and its continuation in the form of an intensified conventional armed conflict on Ukrainian territory, combined with aggressive non-conventional actions not only against Ukraine, triggered a corresponding response by Ukraine in 2024-2025, in the form of a “large-scale ground counteroffensive into Russian territory along its northern border” (Biggerstaff 2024). This counteroffensive has raised an unprecedented issues regarding Ukraine’s compliance with international law, namely, whether Ukraine, as the indisputable victim of an ongoing armed attack by Russia, may lawfully launch an incursion into the aggressor’s territory in self-defence, without violating the principle of proportionality.

Further juridical problems can also be triggered if certain NATO countries do not comply with the fact that Ukraine is not a Member State, hence article 5 of Washington Treaty is not applicable. Therefore, in order to respect the international law the military support must be voluntary-based for NATO’s Member States and limited to material and know-how support in terms of money, munition, training and information, but not active participation with troops in combat actions. Also, the supporters must assure themselves that the equipment and munition is not used to commit war crimes.

Of course, the most acute challenge is the legality of the chosen path to peace and inhere we speak about means to conjure Russia to end the war without the prejudice of international law principles and norms and the Ukraine rights inherited in its status of recognized country by the international community.

Conclusions

The Russian aggression against Ukraine particularly as manifested in the Russian-Ukrainian war, triggered and intensified a series of developments within the global security environment, amid a backdrop of dynamic, complex, and uncertain transformations. Among the most notable consequence are the global increase in military expenditures, the acceleration of the fragmentation of the international order though increased polarisation, and a profound reassessment of the international security architecture established under the auspices of the United Nations.

In the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the international security system has come under heightened pressure not only from revisionist states but also from



status quo-oriented states dissatisfied with the weakening of the UN Security Council, whose mechanisms of cooperation and conflict prevention have proven only partially effective in the face of Russia's decisive use of its veto power. Thus, Russia's aggression represents a critical inflection point that calls into question multiple aspects of the current international security system and underscores the urgent need for a more coherent and effective implementation of existing international norms. Likewise, it has sparked broader debates concerning the necessity of structural and procedural reforms in global security institutions to better address such crises in the future.

The initiation and conduct of this war have profoundly influenced established norms, practices, and jurisprudence within the international legal system, particularly with respect to the protection of human rights, the application of international humanitarian law, and the emerging need to develop new legal frameworks that address the hybrid nature of contemporary conflicts. Among areas generating significant legal debate and highlighting the need for regulatory adaptation are: breaches of sovereignty and territorial integrity, war crimes and the issue of international criminal accountability, the use of force and the right to self-defence, the imposition of economic sanctions and collective responses in support of parties to the conflict, the protection of civilians and the safeguarding of human rights, the regulation of emerging weapons systems and technologies, and the evolving role of international organisations in managing modern armed conflicts.

In the future, beyond the ongoing peace negotiations facilitated by the United States, a key challenge remains the pursuit of legal accountability for Russia's crime of aggression against Ukraine, as well as for acts already classified as war crimes, such as the forced deportation of Ukrainian children. Equally important is the development of investigative tools for addressing future allegations of similar violations of public international law, whether committed by the Russian Federation or by Ukraine.

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