

## The impact of Russia's aggression on reshaping tomorrow's world Ukraine's future scenarios, developments, and options

---

**Assoc. Prof. Iulian CHIFU, Ph.D.\***

\*"Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, Romania

e-mail: [keafuyul@gmail.com](mailto:keafuyul@gmail.com)

### Abstract

---

**Prospective scenarios** (Chifu 2022) are now piling up, on the eve of **Ukraine's announced counter-offensive** to reclaim its territories and create clear strategic advantages in the perspective of any negotiations with Russia (Menon 2023). While **the criteria and indicators** of short and medium-term development are easier to determine, as is the **aspirational goal of Ukraine to gain all its occupied territories** (Wallander 2023), there are numerous **inflection points** that may emerge, just as a number of **game-changers** are looming, elements that would radically change the reality and the course of the known trend. Taking these factors into consideration, we have drafted an updated outline of **Ukraine's potential future developments, scenarios, and options** in the event of a Russian full-scale war of aggression. It is important to note that these developments not only impact Ukraine but also have implications for the post-war global landscape.

---

### Keywords:

prospective scenarios; indicators; inflection points; game changers.

## Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine: Prospective studies. Prospective scenarios

**Prospective studies** (Chifu 2013, 167-186) are a specific type of future studies that implies identifying critical indicators, tipping points, inflection points, and relative certainties to build up scenarios on **short, mid and long term** with **continuity, discontinuity, and black swan possibilities** in order to cover a known possible evolution of a specific event, area, and phenomenon. This methodology aims to avoid strategic surprises and keep decision-makers in line with possible evolutions (Chifu 2014, 174).

The world has evolved from a **bipolar world** during the Cold War to a somewhat **globalized world, interdependent and driven by the market economy**. The 9.11 attack, terrorism in Europe and the West, the Color Revolutions, the Arab Spring, the pandemic, and the emergence of social media as well as other disruptive technologies **brought changes to the international order**, but without a dramatic change (more a transformational change) without establishing **where the transition period leads our world**. Now, Russia's aggressive war of attrition in Ukraine has transformed into a prolonged conflict and poses a significant threat to dramatically alter the landscape.

We maintain our position (Chifu 2022) that the future of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world marks a **dispersion and dissipation of power** as a result of new technologies and the scarce resources required for them, which makes the **leap already identified** from the two superpowers of the Cold War through the uni-multipolarism of the transition era to the **two great power system, none of them being Russia, and numerous regional powers**, with the perspective of a China-US rivalry that could fall into war. But above all, we are contemplating a more democratic world in which niches of power or resources can overnight transform **a state, however small, into a relevant power** in terms of resources or technology (Chifu 2021a; Chifu 2021b, 100-113) it possesses, and which are needed by the whole world.

In the case of Ukraine, the context established the **red lines of the West** related to the transfer of technologies. **Using military means by Russia** in the mid of the 21st century is unacceptable, but, at the same time, the support for the aggressed democratic country, Ukraine in that context, **should not break international law**, and create **escalation patterns**; on the contrary, it should just help Ukraine defend its territory and its citizens. This means **no Western boots on the ground**. This also means that the weapons delivered to Ukraine should be **proportional to the Russian attacks on its territory** and the range of those weapons should not allow Ukraine **to attack targets on the territory of Russia** (so outside its own territory) (U.S. European Command 2023).

This does not mean that the US or any other state **will prevent Ukraine from developing its strategies** with strikes outside its national territory, including in Russia.

Those strategies could also include **targeting weapons, groups of soldiers, railways, or fuel storage** outside of its borders, in an attempt to **break the supply lines of the aggressor**, but this should be done **with its own means**, with special operations forces and Ukrainian weapons, but not those transferred from other sources. Some of those Western weapons deliveries come explicitly with those **limitations**.

### **Key indicators and criteria for the evolution of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine in the short and medium term**

There are **four key conditions, indicators and criteria** that will define the evolution of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine in the short and medium term, which we can place in a **3+1 format** depending on our **current ability to anticipate**:

- **The resilience of Ukraine and the Ukrainians.** The military capacity to resist on the front line, to lead the war effort, and the capacity of the population to sustain that effort in the long term. We have seen that the **morale and the will to fight** for a purpose matter first and foremost. The Ukrainians are defending their territory and their population as they are **fighting their real War of Independence** with the strongest motivation, while Putin has failed to produce a sustainable and credible narrative regarding **why he sent his troops into the Ukrainian territory** (continuing Putin's "Christmas tree" narrative that contains **in the mix Nazis, coup d'etat, defence of the Russians everywhere and countless other past things** about the cradle of the Russian state's birth or ignoring independence of the states and creating narratives of **state-civilizations** that would have oversized and dominant rights in relation to the neighbourhood, doomed to remain in their **sphere of influence**) ([Russian Mission 2023](#)). But equally important is **the effort behind the front** and the capacity to avoid attacks on cities and civilians. As long as the fighters in the first line know their families are safe, they can fight less constrained than in the situation on which they learn daily of **new attacks on apartment blocks, streets, or offices** in towns far behind the front.
- **Western resilience in supporting Ukraine.** It is about public support for the war effort **directly**, through humanitarian aid, export corridors, military aid, and financial-budgetary aid to support the war, but also **indirectly**, through inflation, energy costs, and many other elements of influence. As long as the Western citizens can maintain this commitment, and **the resilience of the West is assured**, there remains a major element of **transforming the traditional defence industry into a war industry** with large-scale production, which all allies must develop in the perspective of this long, large-scale war, but also of a larger deterrence effort that may come shortly after the current war in Ukraine, in the Indo-Pacific ([Ash 2023](#)).
- **Ukraine's ability to absorb the Russian offensive and conduct its own successful counter-offensive.** Of course, Ukraine has demonstrated that it can absorb the spring offensive and the fighting in the front line at Vuhledar

and Bahmut showed **Russia's inability to generate substantial gains** even with huge losses of men and military capabilities. However, the mandatory point remains the forthcoming **Ukrainian counter-offensive** (Menon 2023) which must show penetration capability and **substantial strategic gains** that will break the front in two – South and East – and put solid and credible pressure on Crimea. Only then would there be the preconditions for Russia to wish, demand, and participate in serious negotiations. **A possible stalemate in Ukraine's offensive with limited gains and major losses** would enshrine the stagnation of the front and the inability of the parties to make further territorial gains through combat, with negative effects on the perspectives of the war.

- **Vladimir Putin's ability to maintain the vertical of power.** It is a condition we can anticipate in theory but cannot credibly substantiate for two reasons: **the opacity of Putin's system** and the conformity of the elites and group around him, and above all, the autocratic nature of the regime which **can implode at the slightest and most insignificant trigger** (Kolesnikov 2023). The lack of foresight does not mean that this indicator (+1) should be eliminated, on the contrary, **it can always determine the fate of the war**, at moments that are difficult to predict.

### **Scenarios of the end of a war. From the Western aspirational position to the alternatives on the ground**

**Russia's war of aggression** has, as an aspiration aim, only one endgame for any democratic actor concerned with the rules-based world and the prospects of world realignment:

- **Russia must lose the war and Ukraine must win.** It is a legal and moral solution capable of strengthening the criteria of a **rules-based world**. Any half-measure would set a **precedent** whereby an aggressor state could take over pieces of its neighbours' territory after such a precedent, especially after the famous pleadings in the sphere of the **security-versus-territory** doctrine (Aarts 1999; Adler and Barnett 1998), questionable in the Middle East but **unacceptable in the post-Helsinki Europe**, after the commitment not to change borders by force and to recognise the sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of every CSCE/OSCE and UN member state.
- **Russia must pay.** As countless analyses indicate, the lack of **post-Cold War costs** to Russia as the successor to the treaties of the former USSR has led to a **readiness to resort to war** to solve Russia's problems in international relations and satisfy its excessive levels of ambition. On the other hand, the question of the **costs imposed on Russia** includes payment for launching a war, payment for the reconstruction of Ukraine, individual and collective payment for **war crimes** and crimes against humanity, as well as for the **crime of aggression**, but also conceding guarantees that **Russia will never use the**

**war as an alternative for its ambitions in international relations** (we have precedents with Japan and Germany after the World War II, but the level of sophistication nowadays increased dramatically and we could find better options for weapons control and double use products and industries in order to grant Russia staying away from any type of aggression for the foreseeable future).

- **The states, companies and consultants who helped Russia circumvent the sanctions must pay.** Western citizens have taken on the multiple costs, revealed above, with the hope that their children and grandchildren will live even in a form of **imperfect democracy**, but at least one in which they have the right to choose. Not to live under an autocrat like Putin telling them **how to live and what to think, say, do**. That is why it is the responsibility of governments to identify the **war profiteers** enriched by war, individuals, companies, or states that are helping to circumvent sanctions and make them pay for this (Spektor 2023). This creates **the moral high ground** needed to demand public support in such confrontations in the future.

Of course, if these are the **goals and aspirational targets**, the evolution of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine can take many forms. **Russia has not yet been defeated**; it possesses a significant population and military reserves that it can deploy in the war effort. Additionally, it has various capabilities, primarily from stockpiles, that are morally outdated but can assist Putin in **sustaining the war in the medium and long term**, thereby avoiding any admission of defeat. However, the fighting is almost entirely taking place on Ukrainian territory, where the destruction is also taking place, so **Russia and Putin can always claim some form of victory**. The alternatives would be:

- **Ukraine's complete victory in the war.** Liberation of the entire territory and claiming victory and independence from Russia with the gun in hand.
- **Strategic victory in the war followed by a negotiation in Ukraine's advantage.** With a **separation of the southern and eastern fronts** and serious pressure on Crimea, the elements of a relevant strategic victory in the war for Ukraine are in place. Any negotiation from this point can be advantageous and auspicious for Kiev.
- **Standstill: the inability of the Ukrainian offensive, loss of Western support/insufficient support.** Fatigue, lack of resources, or sufficient Western capabilities and ammunition may indeed lead to a **de facto freeze in the conflict**, which would effectively turn into a long-term war of attrition, with **Russian/Ukrainian stop-and-go** moments and periodic resumption of offensives, but with modest advantages, and pushing developments towards a **Korean variant** (Haass and Kupchan 2023).
- **The Russian strategic victory (apparently) satisfying** – full conquest of Donbas, significant destruction of the Ukrainian army on the offensive, **full occupation of territories formally annexed by Russia**, and their

Russification. But there would never be peace here, because **there will always be the possibility of renewed conflict**, hence the need for a long-term commitment.

- **Russia's complete victory**, i.e. the achievement of all the original objectives of the invasion: change of power in Kiev, occupation of a large part of the territory, *de facto* or *de jure* seizure of Ukraine – becoming a second Belarus – or the independence of **the landlocked Little Ukraine**. All that remains in this case for its neighbours, whether post-Soviet or NATO member states, would be to ask themselves **who is next?** Sustainable peace is not possible under these circumstances ([Miliband 2023](#)).

### ***Game changers. Prospects for the escalation of the Ukrainian conflict on a global scale***

We have identified **three game changers** that, once they occur in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, would dramatically change both the situation on the ground and the outlook for the world of tomorrow. For sure there are more such possible scenarios, and we will suggest some others, with different levels of relevance. Most importantly, they would pave the way for **the escalation of the conflict globally**, drawing in forces and causing an expansion of the conflict **geographically, of its scope, as well as in strategic stakes**. This is a prospect that the US, NATO and the West as a whole has tried and is working hard to avoid. In this case, the three formulas would be: **the involvement of China in the conflict** ([Fix and Kimmage 2023](#)), **the direct involvement of NATO troops in the fighting in Ukraine** or **the launch of tactical nuclear weapons by Russia**. The three can be tied to each other and determine each other.

#### **China's involvement in the conflict ([Jones 2023](#))**

At present, China provides **formal, declarative, political, economic, financial, and technological non-lethal support to Russia**. Dual-use and non-sanctions goods can mean support for Russia but **without Beijing taking on the costs of war** or providing a **steady supply line of weapons to Putin's Russia**. Yet, this may change, first through **covert arms transfers** and with the ambiguity of a credible denial of this direct involvement in the supply of lethal weapons, possibly by assuming the **transfer through intermediaries** of just components rather than easily identifiable Chinese weapons on the ground. But developments may even move towards **an open, publicly assumed transfer or full-scale supply line of lethal weapons to Russia**, which would bring a radical change in the situation on the ground ([Kurtz-Phelan 2023](#)). This does not mean that **Russia could automatically win the war**, but the delivery of lethal weapons by China is both a relevant turning point and a **possible game changer in the war**.

## Western involvement, NATO, US, Coalition of the Willing in Ukraine

As we presented above, NATO, the US, and the West as a whole have placed their support for Ukraine in the key of **limiting direct intervention** or the **presence of its troops on the ground** – with the exception of mercenaries on their own account and, perhaps, trainers on specific missions on the ground. However, the prospect of a Ukrainian defeat or Chinese involvement in the conflict, or even worse, Russia's use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, may also **push it beyond this limit**, to avoid **the prospect of pushing the confrontation to NATO borders**. The West's explicit military involvement, in whatever form, of its own troops in Ukraine turns Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine into **the battle of the next century on Ukrainian soil**. The stake is raised significantly and **the defeat of Ukraine is assumed to be an important loss, but doubled by the defeat of the West** and the rules-based world order in front of revisionism, neo-imperialism and the world's autocracies. China's involvement in the conflict would directly transform the battle in Ukraine into the key **confrontation of systems, democracy versus autocracy** and the right of states to freely choose their system of government, i.e. it would permanently alter state sovereignty and territorial integrity as a principle in the absence of Western intervention in support of Ukraine ([Kausikan 2023](#)). **The perspective of abandoning Ukraine is conceptually unacceptable.**

### Russia's use of nuclear weapons in war

This would be the most significant game changer in the state of international relations since the Second World War. **Russia's use of nuclear weapons** is an implicit admission of the conventional defeat of Ukraine, but also a **complete exit of Russia from the world system**, with major costs of real isolation from all states of the world. We would no longer be talking about the autocracy versus democracy rivalry, but about **an actor in the system, moreover, a permanent member of the Security Council, that has completely escaped all logic and control**. China, India and the states of the Global South would find it very difficult to support Russia in any way, its **expulsion from the Security Council and complete isolation** would be matched only by the effort to rescue Ukraine, which would receive all the support it needs, including the presence of NATO troops directly on the ground, **to liquidate the consequences of such a hit** and to obtain the liberation of its territory.

There could also be some **other significant changes**. To give just an example, a new front between Russia and the Global West somewhere else, from the territory of the Baltic states or in the post-Soviet space or in remote areas like, why not, Sudan. That would mean **a continuous escalation of the war Russia-West**, in geographic terms, at once.

All of these elements would directly affect the **developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world**. But also the forms of conflict management, the structure and security framework or even the **survival and cohesion formulas** of some states, primarily **Russia and Ukraine**. Moreover, they would primarily influence the rules, or lack of any rules, by which the international relations of states will evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Mazarr 2023). In this context, **the classical discussions of unipolarism, Sino-American bipolarism or multipolarism** claimed by Russia and China would be meaningless, as would the **temptation to come back and claim again spheres of influence** and move to new types of power games of the big players.

## References

Aarts, Paul. 1999. "The Middle East: a region without regionalism or the end of exceptionalism." *Third World Quarterly* 20 (5): 911-925.

Adler, Emanuel, and Michael N. Barnett. 1998. *Security Communities*. Cambridge University Press.

Ash, Timothy Garton. 2023. "Postimperial Empire. How the War in Ukraine Is Transforming Europe, Foreign Affairs May/June 2023." *Foreign Affairs* 102, no.3. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/europe-war-russia-postimperial-empire>.

Chifu, Iulian. 2013. „Analiză prospectivă. Experiența internațională și o abordare românească.” *Revista Română de Studii de Intelligence*, no.10: 167-186.

—. 2014. *Prospectives on Ukraine Crisis. Scenarios for a mid-long term evolution*. București: Editura Institutului de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale al Academiei Române.

—. 2021a. „Securitate tehnologică. Un nou domeniul de strictă actualitate a securității viitorului.” *Infoșfera*, no.2: 13-22.

—. 2021b. „Când tehnologia și social media întâlnesc Covid-19. Relativizarea adevărului și soarta social media.” *Romanian Intelligence Studies Review*, nr. 25: 100-113.

—. 2022. *Studii prospective și metodologii alternative. Eșafodajul de securitate în secolul 21*. Vol. 3, *Reconfigurarea securității și relațiilor internaționale în secolul XXI*. București: RAO.

Fix, Liana, and Michael Kimmage. 2023. "How China Could Save Putin's War in Ukraine. The Logic—and Consequences—of Chinese Military Support for Russia." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/how-china-could-save-putins-war-ukraine>.

Haass, Richard, and Charles Kupchan. 2023. "The West Needs a New Strategy in Ukraine, A Plan for Getting From the Battlefield to the Negotiating Table." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/russia-richard-haass-west-battlefield-negotiations>.

Jones, Seth G. 2023. "America's Looming Munitions Crisis. How to Fill the Missile Gap." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/americas-looming-munitions-crisis>.

Kausikan, Bilahari. 2023. "Navigating the New Age of Great-Power Competition.Statecraft in the Shadow of the U.S.-Chinese Rivalry." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/china-great-power-competition-russia-guide>.

**Kolesnikov, Andrei.** 2023. "Putin's Second Front. The War in Ukraine Has Become a Battle for the Russian Psyche." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russian-federation/putins-second-front>.

**Kurtz-Phelan, Dan.** 2023. "How to Avoid a Great-Power War. A Conversation With General Mark Milley." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/podcasts/how-to-avoid-great-power-war-mark-milley>.

**Mazarr, Michael J.** 2023. "Why America Still Needs Europe. The False Promise of an "Asia First" Approach." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/why-america-still-needs-europe>.

**Menon, Rajan.** 2023. "Ukraine's Best Chance. A Successful Offensive Could End the War With Russia." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/ukraines-best-chance>.

**Miliband, David.** 2023. "The World Beyond Ukraine. The Survival of the West and the Demands of the Rest." *Foreign Affairs* 102, no.3. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/world-beyond-ukraine-russia-west>.

**Russian Mission.** 2023. "The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation." <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/concept-foreign-policy-russian-federation>.

**Spektor, Matias.** 2023. "In Defense of the Fence Sitters. What the West Gets Wrong About Hedging." *Foreign Affairs* 102, no.3. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/world/global-south-defense-fence-sitters>.

**U.S. European Command.** 2023. "Statement of General Christopher G.Cavoli (Unclassified)." <https://www.eucom.mil/document/42351/gen-christopher-g-cavoli-2023-posture-statement-to-the-hasc>.

**Wallander, Celeste A.** 2023. "Opening statement, Office of the Secretary of Defense, before the 118-th Congress Committee of Armed Services," <https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/04.26.23%20Wallander%20Statement.pdf>.