Redefining Global Polarity

14 JANUARY 2025

Ivar Jansen



The ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia stands as one of the defining geopolitical events of our time, reshaping the balance of power in Europe and challenging the global dominance of the West. The conflict has revealed the waning unipolarity that followed the Cold War, giving way to a more intricate and fragmented multipolar world order.

At its heart, the Russia-Ukraine war is more than a regional confrontation; it is a proxy battleground for competing global powers. Russia's so-called "special military operation" has become a larger struggle against perceived Western provocation, while NATO and the European Union have provided extensive military and financial aid to Ukraine and accused Russia of undermining international law. Meanwhile, rising powers like China,

India, and much of the Global South are seemingly leveraging the conflict to bolster their influence, recalibrating global power structures.

Economic Repercussions: Limits of Western Sanctions

The West's economic sanctions against Russia were intended to cripple Moscow's economy. Measures like the European oil import ban—worth over $91.2 billion in blocked exports—have strained Russia but have also inflicted substantial costs on Western nations, particularly in Europe. European energy prices remain highly elevated, with the International Energy Agency reporting that by 2023, energy costs in Europe were double those in the U.S. Additionally, such economic stress has even exposed divisions within the EU. Hungary and Slovakia continue to import millions of barrels of Russian oil despite sanctions.

In the U.S., trade with Russia collapsed, with exports decreasing 22-fold and imports falling 13-fold since 2019. While these actions isolate Russia, they also limit Western access to the Russian market, reducing its relative global trade leverage.

Russia found new partners in the Global South, notably China and India, which have seized the opportunity to secure discounted energy supplies. China, now the largest trading partner for both Russia and Ukraine, is continuously strengthening its influence. India has also deepened its relationship with Moscow, recently setting ambitious bilateral trade targets of $100bn by 2030 and thus benefiting from discounted Russian resources.

Most importantly, this realignment is empowering non-Western nations to reduce reliance on the West. For instance, China, which is keen on advancing its goal to internationalize the yuan, has recently seen Saudi Arabia signalling its willingness to accept yuan for crude oil payments. Such shifts underline the growing economic clout of emerging powers, which are shaping a multipolar world, to the detriment of the Western bloc.

Erosion of Western Soft Power

The Ukraine war has also significantly diminished the West's soft power. For decades, the U.S. and Europe dominated global diplomacy and governance. Today, countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are asserting greater independence, challenging, and sometimes, openly criticizing the Western-led order.

China, as a prime example, has positioned itself as a mediator, proposing peace frameworks that, while criticized in the West, reflect its ambitions to lead on global conflict resolution, a role traditionally taken by Western countries. This is materialized further by its peacemaking role in South Sudan, and its role in the Middle East, among other conflict zones. Similarly, India, which has maintained a neutral stance, is also positioning itself as a peacemaker. Modi recently bolstered ties with Russia, emphasizing their "Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership," while also visiting Ukraine to

advocate for peace. Such actions underscore these nations' growing ability to navigate global crises on their terms rather than aligning with Western policies.

In Africa, too, many nations are using the conflict to redefine their roles in international relations. They have resisted Western pressure to condemn Russia outright, instead advocating for reforms to the global order. BRICS nations, for example, have recently championed a multipolar vision, reducing reliance on the West and asserting their own geopolitical and economic priorities.

This shift highlights the West's declining diplomatic reach. Its growing inability to unify emerging powers behind its response to the war in Ukraine demonstrates a waning capacity to shape global consensus.

Military Limitations and Strategic Shifts

The war in Ukraine has also exposed cracks in the West's military influence. NATO's robust support for Ukraine—including weapons, intelligence, and training—has showcased Western solidarity but also revealed limitations. Despite supplying advanced systems like HIMARS rocket artillery, Patriot missiles, and Leopard 2 tanks, the conflict remains unresolved as of early 2025, raising doubts about the West's ability to achieve decisive outcomes through military means. Ukraine's recent struggles to regain territory in the face of fortified Russian defences have further highlighted these challenges.

Additionally, the war has underscored Europe's dependence on U.S. military resources, as evidenced by Washington's dominant role in financial aid and arms supplies, including its contribution to critical air defence systems. This reliance has reignited debates on greater EU defence autonomy, with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz advocating for a more integrated European defence strategy to counter these perceived threats to Western military dominance.

Meanwhile, adversarial powers like China and Russia have bolstered their military cooperation, conducting joint naval exercises in the Sea of Japan and coordinated patrols in the Arctic. These activities, combined with the recent unveiling of China's hypersonic missile advancements and expansion of its nuclear arsenal, underscore the growing strategic partnership aimed at countering NATO's global dominance. According to the Arms Control Association, as of 2024, the nuclear warheads of Russia, China, and India combined now equal roughly those of all NATO countries. Hence, even militarily, the West faces mounting pressure to recalibrate its strategies in an increasingly multipolar – and less Western-dominated – world.

Toward a Multipolar World

In conclusion, the Russia-Ukraine war has undeniably accelerated the erosion of Western dominance, both economically and diplomatically, revealing the limits of unipolarity. As emerging powers like China, India,

and the Global South assert their influence, the global order is increasingly shifting toward multipolarity. The West's waning capacity to shape international consensus, coupled with increasing military constraints, highlights a transformation that signals the emergence of a new era in international relations – one defined not by Western unipolarity but by a more distributed and dynamic global order. One that necessitates a redefining of policy for the West.

EPIS