

Was Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Inevitable?: from Russia' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Due to this ongoing war, the Middle East and Africa are experiencing food shortages, European Union countries are suffering from significant shortages including gas, and the United States is enduring soaring oil prices and inflation. War begins when a country with asymmetric power initiates military intervention to achieve its national interests or political goals. With the war continuing two years longer than expected, international criticism and widespread sanctions have been imposed on Russia, which started the war in defiance of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. Then, the question arises as to why Russia insists on justifying the invasion of Ukraine. Based on the theory of military intervention, this paper examines the rationale that the legitimacy of war with Ukraine from Russia's perspective is indispensable, and it discusses the preconditions and prospects for the end of the war by reviewing from the expansion of military intervention to the condition for Russia-Ukraine peace talks to end the war. This article concludes the basis for judging that this war was inevitable from Russia's point of view, analyzes what Russia wants to achieve through it, and attempts to predict how future peace negotiations will unfold. The discussion emphasizes that Russia is approaching the Ukraine issue entirely from a military security perspective, viewing it within the framework of super-realistic international politics.

Introduction

In November 2021, approximately 175,000 Russian troops gathered at the Ukrainian border. The Russian government insisted that the troop buildup in the Ukrainian region was part of a drill rather than preparation for an invasion. However, the redeployment of Russian forces sparked debate over the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. Western media reported that Russia would invade Ukraine, and the U.S. government warned that it would impose strong economic sanctions if Russia did so. Several experts predicted that an invasion of Ukraine would be difficult because Russia would experience international isolation, which would harm Russia's national interests. Russia already faced economic difficulties due to continued sanctions since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Pathak, 2021). Therefore, for Russia, it was burdensome to escalate conflict with the West over Ukraine. Additionally, the partial withdrawal of Russian troops before the invasion left room for resolving the Ukraine issue diplomatically rather than militarily.

As a result, Vladimir Putin's declaration of a "special military operation" on February 24, 2022, sparked a massive invasion of Ukraine by Russia, proving wrong those experts who believed an invasion was unlikely. Today, with the war continuing two years longer than expected, international criticism and widespread sanctions have been imposed on Russia, which started the war in defiance of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. So why did Russia go so far as to invade Ukraine? Did it do so because of Putin's "dream of rebuilding the Soviet Union" or his "revival of a powerful Russia"? Or did it invade because it misjudged or failed to predict the tough Western response and the resistance of the Ukrainian people? This article reviews the basis for judging that this war was inevitable from Russia's point of view, analyzes what Russia wants to achieve through it, and attempts to predict how future peace negotiations will unfold. The discussion emphasizes that Russia is approaching the Ukraine issue entirely from a military security perspective, viewing it within the framework of super-realistic international politics. From this point

of view, it can be seen that Russia's military action is not an "incorrect" act based on "individual madness" but a calculated strategy designed to maximize its security interests.

Theoretical Framework: Military Intervention

The difficulty in analyzing military intervention lies in how far military intervention is defined. Existing studies on military intervention provide definitions ranging from types of intervention to the degree of intervention. Haass (1994) defines military intervention as the introduction or deployment of new or additional military forces in an area for a special purpose beyond routine training or scheduled actions to support the national interest. Otte and Dorman (1995) emphasize that military intervention is carried out to achieve political goals corresponding to the national interest. They state that military intervention is a plan for the use of limited military force by one country against a weaker country for a temporary period with the goal of altering or maintaining the target country's domestic structure and changing foreign policy. Meanwhile, Sullivan and Koch (2009) define military intervention as the use of force that includes the official deployment of at least 500 regular troops (ground, air, or navy) to achieve political goals through actions against foreign enemies. Pearson and Bauman (1993) state that the political leaders of a country must approve the deployment of troops, and that the deployment of military force must be aimed at achieving immediate political goals through military action or the imminent threat of military action against other actors. Research into Military Intervention by Powerful States (MIPS), similarly defines military intervention as the use of force to achieve immediate political goals through actions against foreign enemies (Sullivan & Koch, 2009). Summarizing the definitions provided by these studies, military intervention is an action that the state actively uses to achieve political goals, and it includes military actions approved by national political leaders, excluding routine military exercises, troop deployment, and disaster relief.

The Expansion of Military Intervention: Why Did Russia Expand Its Military Operations Over the Donbas Conflict?

What Does Ukraine Mean to Russia?

Ukraine is one of 15 countries that withdrew from the former Soviet Union. From Russia's perspective, these former Soviet countries are under its control or must be brought back under its control. However, the reality is different. The three Baltic countries have already joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU) and are completely separated from the Russian bloc, followed by Ukraine and Georgia. The problem is that Ukraine, which has a large territory (the largest in Europe except for Russia), holds an important geopolitical position, as it borders Russia in the east and the EU/NATO countries in the west (Lawrence, 2022). Moreover, as Ukraine is located along the shores of the Black and Azov seas, it holds significant military and strategic importance. Depending on which side Ukraine aligns with - east or west - the balance of power between Western liberal democracies and Russian authoritarian forces could shift completely. Thus, Russia cannot allow Ukraine to remain free. After Ukraine's Euromaidan incident in 2014 which resulted in 103 protesters being killed by pro-Putin government forces around the city's Independence Square, Russia annexed Crimea in a surprise move, making the Black Sea Fleet entirely Russia's. It also abandoned the Donbas conflict, led by pro-Russian rebels, in eastern Ukraine (Harding and Mamo, 2024).

Non-Compliance with the Donbas Conflict and the Minsk Agreement

Significantly, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not primarily aimed at the Donbas conflict. The Donbas conflict arose when pro-Russian rebels declared the independence of Ukraine's Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk

People's Republic (LPR) and engaged in battle with Ukraine's government forces in 2014 (De Waal, 2018). Contrary to Russia's surprise annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia did not "officially" intervene in the Donbas conflict, even though it is true that Russian weapons and mercenaries were deployed to the Donbas region. In 2015, Russia signed the Minsk Agreement 1 with Germany, France, and Ukraine, agreeing to leave the Donbas region as an autonomous region within Ukraine. Russia's handling of the Donbas conflict in this way can have two effects. First, if the Minsk Agreement is implemented the self-governing Donbas region could serve as a platform for Russia to intervene indirectly in Ukrainian domestic politics by voicing pro-Russian and anti-European opinions. Second, if the Minsk Agreement is not implemented, as is currently the case, it leaves room for Russia to justify a military attack on Ukraine. In this sense, the Donbas conflict is a clever long-term strategy for Russia.

Unfortunately, the Minsk Agreement has not been enacted. The rebels insisted that the disarmament of Ukrainian forces take place first, but they prioritized ensuring their self-governing status. As a result, the Donbas conflict shows no signs of being resolved even after eight years. Over time, the Ukrainian government's strong counteroffensive has gradually put the Donbas rebels on the defensive. From the Russian military's perspective, two options were considered : (1) limiting the Donbas conflict or (2) expanding the scope of military operations to encompass the entire country of Ukraine (Nitoiu, 2024). While projecting military power in a limited area would have been an easier option for the Russian military, Russia ultimately chose the latter strategy.

Was NATO's 'Expand Eastward' the Reason for Russia's Decision to Go to All-Out War in Ukraine?

The question remains why did Russia decide on a full-scale invasion of Ukraine? Regarding this, Russian military leadership a feeling of intoxication with Russia's military victories (Russia-Georgia War, intervention in Syria's civil war), Vladimir Putin's superego, or an underestimation of the Ukrainian military might have contributed. Strictly speaking, however, Russia has its own basis for judging that the Ukraine issue is not limited to the Donbas conflict (Allison, 2023). Key figures in the current Putin administration, mainly from military and intelligence agencies, view the world from a military and strategic perspective. They judge the Ukraine issue under a larger military and strategic map of the Russia-West confrontation or Russia-NATO confrontation. This raises the issue of NATO's eastward movement. Russia has been raising concerns about this eastward movement since NATO's first and second expansions in 1999 and 2004 (Mearsheimer, 2014). As a former Soviet Union member, Russia strongly opposed NATO's Open Door Policy in 2008, which discussed the possibility of Ukraine and Georgia joining the alliance. As seen in a letter from Russia to NATO and the United States in December 2021 (Royce, 2024), Russia clearly considers Ukraine's potential accession to NATO a serious issue. The question we must ask is why NATO's eastward movement (the possibility of Ukraine's accession to NATO) triggered Russia's military action in 2022.

Is Ukraine a de Facto NATO Member?

Some point out that since Ukraine is a disputed region, NATO membership was impossible anyway, and therefore opposition to Ukraine's NATO membership is merely an excuse for the Russian side (Green et al, 2022). Upon closer inspection, however, Ukraine signed a partnership agreement with NATO in 2006. While Ukraine has not yet gained NATO membership, it was recognized as an "Enhanced Opportunities Partner (EOP)," in 2020, signifying an in-depth bilateral relationship with NATO (Bloomberg, 2022). The problem was that after the annexation of Crimea, military cooperation between Ukraine and NATO expanded significantly at the level of NATO partner countries. First, NATO and Ukraine have conducted large-scale military exercises annually since 2015, with some exercises taking place on Ukrainian territory and in its territorial waters (Zandee and Dijkman, 2023). This means that NATO troops would enter Ukraine, and Russia cannot help but be wary of this perceived incursion.

Second, the U.S. and NATO provided Ukraine with military equipment. U.S. exports of weapons to Ukraine began in 2017 during the Trump administration, and increased in 2018, with the active provision of high-performance weapons such as the Javelin missile, (Kosstutschenko, 2024). U.S. support for Ukraine in 2021 alone amounted to about \$450 million. Meanwhile, Ukraine imported dozens of Turkish-made unmanned attack drones, "Bayraktar TB2, "which caused significant damage to the Donbas rebels (Magid, 2024). Third, Western military advisers and instructors, including those from the U.S., have trained Ukrainian troops at the Yavoriv base near the Polish border. This base is also where Ukrainian troops and NATO allies conduct joint military exercises. Fourth, Ukraine has grown closer to the United States since the Biden administration's inauguration, and in 2021, the two countries agreed to deepen strategic defense cooperation. In addition, there were reports that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was trying to persuade the U.S. to establish military bases in Ukraine.

What does this mean? John Mearsheimer, an American political scientist at the University of Chicago, evaluates that Ukraine was not a legal NATO member, but was essentially a de facto NATO member (Mearsheimer, 2019). As a result, the Ukrainian military became better trained and more effectively armed than it was in 2014. In addition, combat experience accumulated from continuous fighting in the eastern Donbas region, making Ukraine's military qualitatively different from the time of the 2014 annexation of Crimea. Therefore, from Russia's point of view, the Russian military's advantage over Ukraine's military was eroding over time. Russia decided that if the Ukraine problem could not be solved diplomatically, it had to be solved militarily, and it had to be done sooner rather than later.

Russia's Position: A Provoked War

In 2020, situations that could lead to a more acute sense of crisis for Russia began to unfold in Ukraine. There were three major geopolitical issues, the first being the Donbas problem. Ukraine attempted to resolve the Donbas conflict militarily based on its improved military power. In particular, attacks using Turkish-made drones were a threat to the Donbas rebels and inflicted significant damage. Eventually, Russia realized that the Minsk Agreement was unlikely to be implemented and that it was becoming increasingly difficult for the rebels to hold out against Ukrainian forces without Russian support.

The second geopolitical issue was Crimea. Ukraine and NATO began to raise the Crimea issue again in 2020, which had been forcibly annexed by Russia. Previously, Ukraine was focused more on resolving the Donbas conflict than on Crimea. However, in 2021, President Zelenskyy took aggressive diplomatic steps toward returning Crimea to Ukraine, such as holding a "Crimea Platform" aimed at securing international support for the return of Crimea (Euronews, 2024). A more serious challenge came from NATO. On September 4, 2020, as part of a NATO exercise, a U.S. B-52 bomber entered Ukrainian airspace for the first time in history and flew along the Crimea border (Ponomarenko, 2020). In June 2021, a British destroyer, the HMS Defender, crossed into Russian-claimed waters near Crimea, causing both sides to fire warning shots. Considering the strategic military importance of Crimea to Russia, this renewed focus on Crimea by Ukraine or NATO posed a serious challenge to Russia, which was trying to make the annexation of Crimea *a fait accompli*. Russia believes that it must act now to resolve the Crimea issue before Ukraine, backed by NATO and armed with more powerful weapons, becomes stronger or joins NATO. Russia feels it is better to force Ukraine to give up Crimea now, rather than later.

Finally, there is the possibility of Ukraine's nuclear armament. Russia is wary of Ukraine developing nuclear weapons or placing a nuclear weapon targeting Russia within its territory. Nuclear weapons are at the heart of Russia's military superiority, so Ukraine's nuclear armament could create significant threat to Russia's strategic position. Russia cannot overlook the possibility of Ukraine developing nuclear weapons, given that Ukraine has atomic laboratories with experimental reactors and nuclear power plants capable of extracting raw materials for nuclear weapons. Furthermore, on February 20, 2022, just four days before Russia's invasion, President Zelensky made a remarkable statement, "We will reconsider our previous decision to give up nuclear weapons unless security guarantees are provided for Ukraine" (Roth, and Sauer, 2024). Putin then ordered a special military operation, arguing that Ukraine's pursuit of nuclear armament was unacceptable. Ultimately Russia recognized the future risks if a democratized Ukraine were

incorporated into the West, armed better militarily, and achieved NATO membership. In this context, Russia did not limit its military operations to the Donbas region but implemented them across Ukraine.

Russia's Goals

Prior to the latest military operation, Putin took up the cause of protecting the people of Donbas but also aimed at demilitarizing and neutralizing Ukraine (Matveeva, 2022). This means that the operation is not limited to resolving the Donbas conflict, but is also aimed at solving the broader "Ukraine problem."

Destruction of Military Infrastructure

First, Russia is not only trying to make Ukraine give up its potential membership in NATO, but it is also trying to nullify many of the advantages Ukraine has enjoyed as a NATO beneficiary. In this sense, "demilitarization" was set as the goal. For instance, Germany, a defeated country after World War I, or Japan, a defeated country of World War II, were forced to demilitarize. Therefore, demilitarizing Ukraine inevitably requires combat operations across Ukraine (Gessen, 2022). As a result, Russia launched attacks on three fronts: northern, eastern, and southern Ukraine. Through this, Russia intends to block any military threats from Ukraine, whether from Ukraine itself or with NATO support. What matters here is the destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure. Therefore, Russia has targeted Ukrainian military infrastructure, such as military headquarters, ammunition storage, military oil storage, and military bases. According to Russian announcements, about 80 such facilities have been destroyed. The destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure is seen as a necessary step to force Ukraine's "demilitarization," which is what Russia meant when it stated that "phase one" of the operation was almost over. In particular, with the possibility of Ukraine's nuclear armament in mind, Russia bombed the nuclear research center in Kharkiv and seized control of the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants (Roecker, 2023).

Destruction Of Private Infrastructure: Devastation of Cities, Refugeeization of Residents

In addition, Russia has surrounded major cities such as Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol and destroyed civilian infrastructure. It has cut off power, water, and heating facilities and destroyed urban infrastructure and broadcasting towers. Notably, the port of Mariupol in the southern Donbas region has been devastated by continuous bombardment. The bombing of the city has increased civilian casualties and caused millions of Ukrainian refugees.

The provision of a "humanitarian corridor" by Russia accelerates the refugeeization of Ukrainian city residents (The Guardian, 2022). Currently, about 4 million refugees have left Ukraine and entered the EU, including Poland. The refugee status of Ukraine's people will ultimately result in a reduction of Ukraine's population which has already decreased by 10 million since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. If the population decreases further by 5 to 10 million, Ukraine will be reduced to a small- to medium-sized country. Additionally, if the war forces more Ukrainian refugees into the EU, the EU could face economic and political difficulties. In this sense, the devastation of Ukraine and the refugee crisis may be part of Russia's hidden goals.

Control Of the Donbas Region and Southern Ukraine

The Russian military will attempt to fully control the Donbas region through this military operation. This is significant because, before the war, Russian rebels controlled only about one-third of the Donbas region. Russia has declared that it has entered the second phase of its military operation aiming for future territorial annexation or independence of the Donbas region. According to a Russian military general, the goal of the second phase of Russia's invasion of Ukraine is to achieve complete control of the entire eastern Donbas and southern regions. According to the Sputnik news

agency on April 22, 2022, Rustam Minnekayev, deputy commander of Russia's Central Military District, said in an annual meeting with the Union of Munitions and Contractors that "The mission has already begun since the second phase of the special operation." "Special operation" is a term referring to the Russian military's war in Ukraine (Washington Post, 2022). He said, "One of the tasks for the Russian military in the second phase of the special military operation (Ukraine) that began two days ago is to secure complete control over Ukraine's Donbas region and southern region." His remarks refer to securing the coastline of the Sea of Azov, which connects Crimea and Donbas, to ensure Crimea's safety.

The Condition for Russia-Ukraine Peace Talks to End the War

Despite the Ukrainian government and people's desperate efforts against the Russian military, and the Ukrainian military's better-than-expected performance, Ukraine has been unable to avoid the destruction of military and civilian facilities, civilian casualties, and widespread displacement. Despite the Ukrainian military's propaganda and extensive Western support, the Ukrainian military has been unable to fully drive Russian forces out of its territory. Meanwhile, Russia has continued bombing Ukraine, even during ceasefire negotiations. Therefore, in a broad sense, peace negotiations are likely to proceed on terms that favor Russia's demands.

Ukraine's Neutral Nationalization Plan

For now, Russia has proposed a plan to neutralize Ukraine. This plan is expected to include a ban on Ukraine's membership in any military alliance, the presence of foreign troops in Ukraine's territories, the establishment of foreign military bases, and the deployment of foreign weapons. In other words, Ukraine must abandon its pursuit of NATO membership, cease military cooperation with NATO, and remove the weapons it has received. Ukraine's status as a non-nuclear state must also be maintained, meaning it is prohibited from developing or deploying nuclear weapons. The plan to neutralize Ukraine is ultimately aimed at preventing Ukraine from posing any military threat to Russia (Surnacheva, 2024).

In exchange for accepting the neutralization plan, Ukraine intends to sign an international security treaty to ensure its safety. This is a natural concern for Ukraine, as existing neutral countries such as Finland and Austria have been promised security guarantees by the United States and the Soviet Union, or by the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and France, respectively. Security for Ukraine would be guaranteed by multiple countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Turkey, and Israel. Ukraine seeks a security guarantee treaty that presupposes automatic intervention by these countries in the event of a security threat. However, the more countries involved and the more explicit the provisions for enforcement, the more difficult it will be to reach an agreement on such a treaty.

Resolving the territories of Crimea and Donbas

Finally, Russia will try to mediate the territorial issue. Above all, it will attempt to secure Ukraine's approval of Crimea's permanent status as part of Russia. In the Donbas region, however, Russia will not return to the level of the Minsk Agreement. Before the invasion began, Russia had already approved the independence of the Donbas region, declaring that it had no intention of returning the region to Ukraine ([Kazdobina](#), et al, 2004). Russia is currently focused on gaining complete control of the Donbas region with the goal of the "liberation" of the region as part of the second phase of its military operation. Thus, it is highly likely that the Donbas region will fall to Russia if Russia consolidates its military power there.

Additional Territorial Demands

Russia's demands for Ukrainian territory could extend beyond Crimea and the Donbas region. A realistic plan that Russia could pursue involves demanding territory south of the Dnieper River, known as "Novorossiia" (Tavberidze, 2004). In fact, Russian military propaganda in this region is noticeable. Russia currently occupies territory from Mariupol to the Black Sea, and from Crimea to Donbas. Thus, Russia has nearly complete control of the Sea of Azov. Future military developments and the intensity of Ukraine's resistance may determine whether Russia will claim the entire region or only the coastal belt along the Sea of Azov. On the other hand, it is also possible that Russia may demand a demilitarized zone on the right side of the Dnieper River in the name of ensuring the safety of Donbas and Crimea and preventing future military conflicts between Ukraine and Russia.

Conclusion

Russia has undertaken preemptive military maneuvers at both regional and global levels to shift the current international order in its favor and to oppose the expansion of U.S. forces and U.S. military intervention. When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Western media debated how to offer Russia a way out, discussing strategies to "save Putin's face." This was part of a broader effort to placate a country dissatisfied with the rising power dynamics and to prevent further escalation by continuing the conflict. However, Russia has demonstrated its full intention to use any available means, including military intervention, to regain the glory of the Soviet Union and change the international order. Accordingly, the negotiation process for peace will be challenging. From the outset, it has not been conducted in a way that adjusts the mutual interests of both parties through compromise. Of course, Russia's demands are harsh and unacceptable to Ukraine. Therefore, Ukraine will continue to make every diplomatic and military effort to avoid falling into Russia's hands. However, it is more likely that Ukraine will gradually accept Russia's demands gradually. Discussions have already begun regarding Ukraine giving up its pursuit of NATO membership, accepting a conditional neutralization plan, and compromising on the Donbas region. Of course, by maneuvering the situation as much as possible, Ukraine is trying to ensure that negotiations proceed in its favor, at least partially, rather than being completely in Russia's favor.

Russian military's sacrifices are far greater than expected, but this will not compel Putin to revise his military intervention plan. Russia's approach is to fulfill its objectives regardless of the human cost. Of course, the situation could change if the war drags on and Russia's financial capacity to continue the conflict is severely impacted by Western economic sanctions. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, it appears that we are returning to a realist international order that has no choice but to acknowledge the actions of powerful countries that achieve their goals through military and physical violence. The consequences of the Ukraine crisis will not be limited to Russia and Ukraine, and are expected to persist for a long time.

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