

# Russia-Ukraine War and beyond [WWIII]: Fixing the Missing – Engaging NATO for Negotiated Political Settlement

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**Abstract:** President Vladimir Putin officially declared Russia's long-feared invasion of Ukraine under 'special military operation to de-militarise and de-Nazify Ukraine' on 24 February 2022. The war has been unleashing a staggering magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, with potentially lasting economic and security challenge that goes beyond the belligerent countries. Seven rounds of peace talks failed, yet no hope of peace in sight, chiefly for it fails to capture the broader picture and nature of the proxies that should have engaged. The conflict's domino effect has been pulling in numerous actors in one way or another. Hence, it could be the tipping point of our shambling global security as NATO and Russia tension soars gravely, echoing WWIII. This paper attempts to unearth and analyse the fundamental underpinning proxy nature of the war from the dissolution of the Warsaw pact, in effect, German unification, entangled to what Russia claims has traded-off to no-NATO expansion towards its flank and hence 'broken promise'. The paper further analyses how the diplomatic and economic sanction against Russia has been crippled to alter the equation in pressuring Russia for roundtable negotiation. Delving into the arguments of the NATO-Russia standoff since post-WWII through the current development, this paper spots a potential middle ground and suggests the proxies' - NATO-Russia engagement as the only way out for lasting negotiated pacified Settlement. The paper employs the Security dilemma perspective.

## **Acronym**

**CIA – Central Intelligence Agency**

**CREA - Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air**

**CSTO - Collective Security Treaty Organization**

**ECU - Eurasian Customs Union**

**EU – European Union**

**IDP – Internally Displaced People**

**NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization, interchangeably used with "alliance."**

**NGOs – Non-Governmental Organisations**

**NPT - Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapon Treaty**

**Quad - Quadrilateral Security Dialogue**

**SCO - Shanghai Cooperation Organization**

**UK - United Kingdom**

**UN – United Nations**

**UNSC – United Nations Security Council**

**US – United States**

## **WWIII – World War Three**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Since the Russian invasion, the situation in Ukraine has been exceptionally awful, and the humanitarian crisis is progressively on the surge. The plight of the humanitarian crisis sparked by the war proved to be the most pronounced of the initial worldwide shockwaves, with a likelihood of the most enduring legacies of the war (World Bank, 10 April 2022). The Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator-Martin Griffiths' account attests that the Ukrainians are paying unprecedented war prices. In the first six weeks only, in its very conservative estimate, about 1,430 civilians have been killed, 121 are children. Significant social institutions, such as hospitals, schools, bridges, and malls, have been reduced to rubbles. Since the invasion kicked off until 5 April 2022, the exponentially rolling exodus of Ukrainians to neighbouring European countries, owing to the crisis, has hit 4.2 million and the figure of IDP fleeing their homes sheltering in makeshift accommodation and metros reached 11.3 million. In this extraordinary short wartime, about a quarter of the Ukrainians have fled their homes for safety. Unfortunately, the figures would keep swelling unless the war paused for negotiated peace (Martin Griffiths, 5 April 2022).

Staggeringly, in this record mass displacement of its kind Europe has seen since WWII, women and children account for about 90% of the Ukrainian victims (The Guardian, 10 April 2022). Disturbing images from a commuter town of Bucha-just 16 miles from Kyiv have triggered a new claim by the Ukrainian government that the Russian warning forces have allegedly committed war crimes for their little interest to be abided by the rule of war- jus in Bello. The beleaguered town – Bucha's mayor, Anatoy Fedoruk, has stated that about 300 residents have been massacred. Whereas Russia has dismissed the unspeakable massacre accusation claiming it was from the 'Ukrainian radicals' stage-managed by Kyiv Government for western media (Nicholson Kate, 5 April 2022). It would be hard to confirm the exact data of rampaging causalities, but

every day is a Ukrainian nightmare. Because the Russian shelling could not spare civilian habitat and social service rendering institutions, President Zelenskyy related the incident to the notorious 1937 Spanish Basque town of Guernica atrocity by Nazi and Italian fascists. In a similar template, some experts started uttering that the Russian forces are operating in the same fashion as the Syrian war attacking non-combatants indiscriminately – believing the warring style adopts the 'Aleppo playbook' (CNN News 5 April 2022).

While the invasion, according to Russian leaders was, to demilitarise and de-nazify the Ukrainian government, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy defied it saying recaptured regions from the Russian forces had survived a treatment that had not even been seen during the Nazi occupation (ibid). Moreover, the World Economic Forum has alerted that war would doubtlessly have a harsh lasting economic impact far beyond the belligerent countries in various areas, given our highly interwoven global life (Katser-Buchkovska, 29 April 2022). The World Bank update (April 2022) estimates that the invasion will collapse Ukraine's economy by 45% in 2022. However, the magnitude of the contraction will depend on the intensity and duration of the war. Likewise, Russia's economy has plunged into a recession projected to contract by 11.2% in the same year. The global and Eurozone economic backlash the crisis could inflict on the western world, primarily owing to the surge in energy prices, should not be underestimated.

Overall, as pinpointed by Martin Griffiths, the magnitude of the war toll has been terribly devastating and yet predicted to create record havoc unless dealt with ceasefire critically. In that perspective, the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy seems to have been striving to do almost everything at his disposal, from reaching the western powers virtually for diplomatic leverage to beseeching military assistance, even to offering a big deal of compromise for peace negotiation for the sake of saving lives. Since the war broke out, president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has addressed 19 powerful world parliaments and four strategic multilateral institutions - UNSC, European Council, NATO and G7. Moreover, it has remotely addressed the Doha Forum and Germany Awards in a bid to drum up instrumental support (CNN News, 5 April 2022). Nonetheless, it all seems to have gone futile to reap instant political leverage for peace.

More importantly, in a good gesture for a peaceful resolution, about seven rounds of Peace talks were held between Ukrainian and Russian leaders that kicked off its initial meet-up at the Belarusian border on 28 March. The first high-level meeting with relative high anticipation for a positive outcome was that of Antalya mediated by Turkish foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, yet to no avail. The Ukrainian government has put neutrality and repudiated any claims for Ukraine to NATO membership in the future, making it more appealing to the Moscow leaders. Nevertheless, it did not seem to have allured the Kremlin leadership, for the war has to do with broader proxies that must have engaged for possible negotiation.

In his peace deal search, President Zelensky - known for his defiance at the Russian onslaught and exceptional ability to mobilise his fellow citizens has recently stated that Ukrainians have shown their dignity by fighting back the Russian army. However, he heralded that dignity could not save lives gesturing to the desperate need for a peaceful resolution of the crisis (Moore, 20 March 2022). Seemingly, worried by the trend of the crisis that put Ukrainian lives at stake and likely disappointed by the NATO's ill-readiness to at least close the skies of Ukraine from the unparalleled Russian forces, Zelensky could not help to rule out giving a peace deal a profound thought while maintaining the patriotic defence of the country. In almost all his diplomatic virtual outreach, the president has regularly focused on the support for closing the Ukrainian skies and bitter economic sanctions for Russia, followed by empowering the Ukrainian arsenal and allied amenities. Notably, in his address to the NATO member countries' parliaments, Zelensky has kept underlining the desperate need to protect the skies.

Nevertheless, NATO has unanimously declined the call from Ukraine to close its skies for fear of escalation, which the Kremlin underscored. Nonetheless, the EU and the United States have stood firmly by the Ukrainian government on material and diplomatic support. Although, the question remains if this orchestrated endeavour could alter the political equation and pressure the Russian president for negotiated pacified Settlement of the conflict, ruling out the NATO-Russia complicated underlying issues. Along with the heating rhetoric from US and Russia, the battle in Ukraine is getting vicious, and the economic warfare has not slowed down the war (Berlinger, 27 April 2022). The EU's fallout on abandoning Russia's oil and gas (Rankin 6 April 2022), China-Russia limitless cooperation, and India's denial to deaccelerate the import of energy from Russia created a fracture in the effectiveness of the economic sanctions. Not only the recent doubling of India's exports and EU countries' unreadiness to taper off the gas import, but several other countries have picked up steam in importing Russian oil resulting in a clear pick-up from zero.

NATO's diplomatic endeavour that has been underway (particularly with China and India) to influence Russia to end the war failed to deliver result. The EU- China summit is a major one. To wrap it up, EU and US efforts in tackling the Russian invasion of Ukraine upon arsenal support, diplomatic capitalisation and economic sanctions seem to show no hope in sight, at least in the short term, towards rescuing Ukrainians from the agony of the invasion. NATO would either need to step into the war physically, which would mean nothing less than pressing the red button for WWII, and commonly believed NATO wisely spares it or must seek out other peaceful mechanisms that can lead to a negotiated peaceful settlement by tackling its standoff with Russia. No doubt, Ukraine being under NATO's auspices and the underlying complication of the issue being rooted in the NATO-Russia contentious deal, NATO's engagement for negotiation with

Russia appears the only way to alter the political equation for a result.

President Zelenskyy seems to have made many compromises to win the Russian counterparts for a roundtable discussion. Zelenskyy stated that his government is prepared to discuss a peace deal offer comprising Ukraine's neutral and non-nuclear status with firm security guarantees. The president even hinted at his willingness to reach a compromise over the Donbas region (eastern Ukraine), still under the Russian-backed militants since 2014. Nevertheless, Zelenskyy further suggested that the move must be guaranteed by a third party and put on a referendum (Aljazeera, 24 March 2022). One would ask what more signals would Kyiv flash in appealing Kremlin to roundtable discussion for peaceful political negotiation. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has, at least partly, if not wholly, to do with NATO's expansion, as could be depicted as the core point of the Kremlin's proposal before and after the war. Hence, President Macron's push for NATO involvement in the peace negotiation with Russia makes solid sense.

President Macron, after he visited Moscow and had a five-hour talk with Putin concerning de-escalation Ukraine invasion. Furthermore, he urged on the need for a shift in NATO's outlook, which has been antagonised by other members, claiming the shift should never be made in response to the military intimidation by Kremlin (Wintour 22 February 2022). The hesitation of NATO resonates from the assumption that failing to halt the aggression could encourage other major regional powers to follow suit. However, President Macron, current president European Union, and de facto leader of Europe, does not seem to have failed to sense the context somewhat rationally weighed the pros and cons of the would-be perilous consequences for regional and global peace. President Macron's line of thought emanates from the fact that Russia has attributed the invasion to NATO's expansion of its security belt against what Russia claims to have been promised by the same alliance during the German unification upon the dissolution of the Warsaw pact. The underpinning logic could be grasped from what Russian leaders, time and again, have been echoing, voicing Russian actions in Georgia (in 2008) and Ukraine (since 2014) has partly to do as a counter-response to the violation of the non-expansion agreement by NATO following German unification (Ronald D., 2002; Kenneth N., 2000; David H., 17 April 2014; Vladimir Putin, 18 March 2014; Sergey Lavrov, 11 April 2014). The fact that China and other countries have shared the same Russian narrative urges the need to dwell on the issue and begs at least for the inclusion of NATO in the peace talks for a pragmatic outcome in the Ukraine war and beyond. The Russia-Ukraine war is not between the two neighbouring countries but rather a proxy war between Russia and NATO. Hence, tapping on this bigger picture, this research will try to address the following questions.

## II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the historical standoff between NATO and Russia entangled in the Ukraine crisis and its influence on the Ukraine-Russia crisis Peace deal?
2. How has NATO's reaction— Economic, Diplomatic and Munition provisions trending in its deliverables to influence the war?
3. How vital is NATO-Russia talk on resolving the Ukraine crisis and beyond?

## III. METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED

The research has chosen to adopt both descriptive and normative approaches. While the former will be instrumental in describing both the prevailing situation and the relevant discourses that apply to NATO along with Ukraine and Russia situation, the latter will be used to prescribe what the various political actors could potentially do to bring a pacific settlement to the crisis. The research has systematically reviewed peer-reviewed articles and utilised grey literature such as official websites, regional and global summits, credible news outlets and allied materials made accessible to the author. The paper has employed a multidisciplinary approach, focusing on the Security dilemma perspective.

### *Key terms*

Russia-Ukraine war, Russia-NATO proxy, humanitarian crisis, economic sanction, diplomacy, WWII, Pacified negotiated Settlement,

## IV. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE – THE SECURITY DILEMMA THEORY

The whole point of the Ukraine-Russia war, along with Russia's felt threat of NATO's ever-sprawling trend, crystallises into a security issue. The annoying security threat owing to the expansion of NATO to Russia's backyard has been vocally cautioned since the cold war, from Gorbachev to the sitting president-Vladimir Putin. Moreover, they alleged that NATO had broken the promise after the 'sacrifice made' on the dissolution of the Warsaw pact to unify Germany for NATO membership. The scenario could not be viewed better than through the security dilemma conceptual framework. This paper will put on the theoretical lens of the security dilemma in elucidating the crisis. Security dilemma has been one of the vital theoretical perspectives in political and international relations and has kept its extension covering critical questions on security policies and international relations (Glaser, 1997; Tang, 2009). The framework of the Security dilemma entangled with causes of conflict and its potential to revert early signals for sustainable peace is the brainchild of John Herz, Herbert Butterfield, and Robert Jervis (Butterfield, 1951; Herz, 1999; Jervis, 2017 and 1978).

Arguably, the security dilemma could be seen as a theoretical linchpin of defensive realism for defensive realists believe it results in genuine cooperation among States beyond a fleeting alliance in the face of a common foe (Tang, 2008, Jervis

1978). Whereas, for offensive realists, a security dilemma would inevitably and rationally lead to war (Jervis et al., 2000; Alterman & Mearsheimer, 2001). Moreover, other schools of thought, such as the Neoliberals and Liberals, broadly share an argument that the core functions of international and democratic institutions could and should alleviate security dilemmas (Weinberger, 2003; Doyle, 1983). Constructivists, on their part, adhere to the idea that alleviating security dilemmas is the channel through which reshaping identity can re-yeild in anarchy (Wendt, 1992).

Overall, the theoretical model of the security dilemma and its spiral model constitutes the most powerful instrument of war and peace through interaction. It captures the insecurity dynamics that would eventually lead to an outbreak of war (case in point – potential eruption of WWII as continuously alerted by the warring parties) and the upkeep of peace- by reversing the security dilemma. Hence, no doubt the pragmatic concept of security dilemma extends beyond its theoretical consumption towards pragmatic conflict comprehension, as has been deployed to explain cases of WWI, origins of the Cold war, ethnic conflict in USSR, Africa, and Yugoslavia (Snyder, 1985; Jervis, 1985; Copeland, 2013; Jevris, 2001; Kydd, 2018; Collins, 1998; Posen, 1993). Indeed, most importantly, the security dilemma and its broader spiral model have been employed to prescribe sensitive strategic policies for the most pressing challenges in the area of the international political arena. It mainly focuses on prescribing arms race, designing lasting peace to ethnopolitical conflicts, to mention least. So is instrumental in its use in avoiding possible hostility between rising China and the United States as a governing hegemon (Glaser, 2004; Kaufmann, 1996; Christensen, 1999, 2002).

## V. FINDING AND ANALYSIS

### 5.1 NATO-RUSSIA complicated deal and its impact on the Russia-Ukraine war

The long-sustained tension between Russia and Ukraine has finally burst in rebuff of unfathomable active hostility. However, this might be the beginning of the end of Europe's tranquillity since WWII, and maybe the world at large as some nuclear strategists and the former US and Russian officials caution on the growing risk of sliding into a confrontation with a possible nuclear exchange. NATO has already fully involved in backing Ukraine (just minus physical involvement). Zelensky, in his interviews, has kept reiterating the potential escalation of the conflict to WWII. However, then-President Putin has warned that Western involvement would rebuff world War openly speaking and flexing on the country's new generation ICBM missile –dubbed “the son of SATAN. In his intention of dissuading NATO's involvement, President Putin has ordered the country's nuclear weapons to posture on 'special alert' status. It remains explicit that the Russian-Ukraine war that has turned Ukraine into a geopolitical battlefield is primarily an unbalanced proxy war between NATO and Russia. Indeed, many scholars and politicians and even Kremlin officers argue that the furtive

Russian invasion of Ukraine is a direct reaction to NATO's expansion towards the east that has been in its enduring standoff.

Since the Post-Cold War, the US-Russia relationship has always been overshadowed by an ongoing standoff over their history since the end of the cold war entangled with NATO's expansion against the controversial pledge on NATO expansion (Shifrinson, 2014). The debate over NATO's expansion as a threat to Russia's security has always been controversial, even among Western policymakers. Some have heralded their hesitation early since the Cold War. Reading to testimony by a Cold War diplomat George F. Kennan (1997), "it was the most fearful error of American policy in the entire post-cold war era (Kennan, 1997). Several other scholars, experienced military personnel and politicians have even been warning about the severe repercussion of the eastern expansion of NATO as an irritant security factor for Russia. General Jack Galvin - Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, has decades back, heeded the Western world on how the West had won the war but sliding over sustainable peace merely because the West had failed to think enough about Russia. Galvin strongly reiterated he had no tiny doubt about the heinous upshot of how NATO moved. (Galvin, 1997).

Early on, on the Kremlin side, Cold war Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev had utterly cautioned NATO against the way they started treating Russia. In his address to the members of the congress at the first meeting of the bipartisan group that projected to prohibit the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, Gorbachev's speech locked his attention on warning lawmakers on NATO's expansion. In his statement, Gorbachev stated that it would be a historical mistake to expand NATO unless the alliance agreed to hold nuclear weapons and combat troops from new member countries. In his own words, the ex-president whispered, “you cannot humiliate a people without consequences, the whole idea is wrong ... a bad mistake” (Desert News, 16 April 1997, p1).

Critically, the argument gained its heightened traction in 2014 with two prominent articles under the theme of NATO expansion and Russia's insecurity that would extend to Ukraine as the 'taproot' of the current crisis between the giants- US vs Russia (Mearsheimer, 2014). The prime question that arises as a root cause of the conflict crystalises down to one and only one point - what the NATO pledged to the Soviet Union, if any, at the German reunification time. The answer depends on whom you ask. Russia usually blames NATO for its broken promise not to expand eastwards. However, NATO has explicitly declared that no such pledges were ever made to Russia, nor could Russia produce any evidence to back up its claim (NATO, Brussels, July 2014). This controversial issue has usually led to a deepened debate in the significant western literature as to whether NATO has ever promised and broken the promise made to Soviet presidents of the post-cold war, namely President Mikhail Gorbachev Boris Yeltsin, as per Russia's claim (Spohr, 2002; Shifrinson, 2016). Sarotte, in her article on the controversy as

to "broken promise," has detailed what the NATO told Moscow and finally concluded on the bone-of-contention, saying that contrary to what Russians allege, NATO has never formally vowed a deal on freezing its borders to Eastern Europe. However, she has indicated that the informal deal had its stark seed of future problems, referring to the memoirs of James Baker (by then US Secretary of the State), which read as "Almost every achievement [reaching in consenting Russia for unified Germany and beyond] contains within its success the seeds of a future problem" (Sarotte, 2014; p8). She further heeded that the then young KGB officer – current President Vladimir Putin, who witnessed Russia left on the periphery of a post-cold war Europe, had such an overwhelming ire that he would react harshly to that bitterness one day.

Contrary to the prevailing western wisdom that attributes Ukraine crisis entirely to the Russian aggression in its bid to resuscitate the Soviet empire; some scholars, such as John Mearsheimer (a Wendell Harrison distinguished service professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago), counter-argues on the account as wrong, claiming the United States and European allies do share most of the provocative cause for the conflict (Mearsheimer, 2014). Gardner (2013) shares a similar view articulating the furtive Russian military intervention into Crimea as a direct reaction to the uncoordinated "triple expansion" of NATO, the European Union plus American/European defence and political, economic interests, military infrastructure into the so-called Russian 'near abroad. This uncoordinated triple-expansion has been countered by Russian efforts to check NATO and EU enlargement. Moscow has been seeking to build a new Eurasian geostrategic and political-economic alliance after the Soviet collapse. This rebuilding of Russia involved the formation of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), and (SCO), leading to closer Russian Chinese security and defence cooperation since 2005. The preemptive intervention Moscow has taken in Crimea intended to halt the new Euromaidan government in Ukraine while concurrently hoping to hold Kyiv from bolstering its ties with European Union which could eventually lead the country to the NATO club. Kremlin took the move in reaction to its suspicion of the then Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk's tendency to renegotiate, if not scrap entirely - the April 2010 Kharkiv accords implemented by President Putin and Viktor Yanukovich (Nicola Petro, 4 March 2014).

The move of the Kremlin to make its new geopolitical arrangements upon countering EU and NATO enlargement approaching its backyard could be traced to the systematic isolation the country faced by the EU and US right following WWII. Sarotte (2014) cogently argues that Russia was left on the periphery of post-cold war Europe by design. Thus, no surprise that the then NATO supreme allied commander General Jack Galvin's suggestion (1997) on folding NATO into a giant organisation that brings Russia on board, without staking what makes the alliance effective - towards robust and stable Europe, was given deaf ear by NATO. However, Putin

could not help picturing Russia isolated from the western world, which Putin said, "...we often refer it as civilised world" (Rankin, 4 November 2021, The Guardian p5). Essentially, Putin, who once stated he would not see NATO as an enemy rather European family, felt disowned and uttered that he would not want his country "to stand in line with countries that do not matter"- as per Labour defence secretary and NATO's chief from 1999-2003 - George Robertson (Rankin, 4 November 2021, the Guardian p6). Robertson states that Putin had explicitly discussed his need to join NATO and the western European family in his maiden meeting. Robertson's account chimes with what Putin told the late David Frost in a BBC interview (5 March 2000). In the brief interview, Putin stated that he would not rule out joining NATO but only under the condition when Russia's views gain respected treatment and a spirit of equal partnership. Putin further detailed, saying he would not see NATO as an enemy (ibid). Incidentally, President Putin had shown sustained interest in joining NATO until 2000. He recently publicly shared that he asked Bill Clinton during his visit to the Kremlin at the end of his term, yet to no avail (Hains Tim, 22 February 2022). The NATO-Russia logjam that dates to the German unification started to snowball. Russian leaders adamantly opposed NATO's progressive expansion and accused the alliance of stoking tension.

Incidentally, a sensible question one would possibly ask, the NATO-Russia standoff has always been there since the German unification, and why would Russia opt to counterthrust now? There seem to be two reasons why the Kremlin took this long to actively react to NATO moves that finally fiercely proxied in Ukraine. Primarily, Russia had its internal affairs to settle and regain its reacting might. Of course, the closeness of the expansion touched Russia's flank that pinched its core security threat. Lord Robertson and Sir Richard Dearlove (former MI6) highlighted that Putin's worldview has evolved in his couple of decades of unabated rule of Russia (Rankin, 4 November 2022, the Guardian). However, it was not Putin's metamorphosis in his worldview that changed. Instead, retrospective insight would reflect a different assumption, in that Putin, who yearned for the alliance, never felt the threat till he realised the same NATO that barred Russia for obvious reasons could not stop eastward expansion to the Baltic and, of course, had not anchored firmly on the grip of power to counter the expansion, for Russia had internal issues to address. Glancing back at near history, one can recall that stabilising the domestic political homeostasis of Russia took decades under Putin's unabated presidency (including his shadow power under Medvedev. It is worth noting that in the 1990s, Russia was in its decade of political and intellectual ferment, with views splitting from pro-Western liberalism through realist statism to ethnic nationalist revanchism (Clunan, 2012). Straddling with its internal stabilisation and revival, the protean and unorganised Russia was out of time but, most importantly, lacked leaders who could clearly define Russian counterpart for Security decision-making, leaving the US to operate with no

counterthrust (Talbot, 2007). In the 20 years of unbroken leadership, the Ex-KGB Putin seems to have a not relaxed dwelling on limiting the sprawling of NATO, which has long since been watching over the expansion as a security threat for Russia. Following the orange revolution in Ukraine, Putin accused the West of funding pro-democracy NGOs, which triggered his grave suspicion of NATO. Putin's insecurity was further compounded by NATO's appetite that ended in expansion eastwards and to central Europe to include Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Estonia in 2004 Croatia and Albania in 2009. Nevertheless, Georgia and Ukraine's promise for membership in 2008 dismayed the Kremlin office (Rankin, 4 November 2021).

### The Enlargement of NATO, 1949–2018



Fig.1 source: Hahn M. Gordon (2019): Peace platform for theory and practice (2 May 2022)

With the first round of expansion in 1999, when NATO sprawled to embrace Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Russia had kept an eye on the inclusion. However, it was still straddling with its internal affairs, too weak to respond. However, with the NATO's further wave of enlargement [in 2004] to include countries such as Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania and Slovenia, the poked bear of the Kremlin started to bitterly complain about the expansion. In short, the Russians were always unhappy about the expansion closing their borders but had not felt threatened that bad. None of the newly recruited countries was among the tiny Baltic countries that share Russian borders. For instance, in the NATO's bombing campaign (1995) against Bosnian Serbs, the then president of Russian President Boris Yeltsin said, "This is the first sign of what could happen when NATO comes right up to the Russian Federation's borders.... The flame of war could burst out across the whole of Europe." (Mearsheimer, 2014; p3).

Nevertheless, the final straw that seems to have broken Russia's patience on what they allegedly think was a broken promise of NATO was the event of the 2008 Bucharest summit, when the alliance considered Ukraine and Georgia. However, the move was not without a signal of hesitation, even from within the alliance. Some of the NATO members, such as France and Germany, feared the antagonisation of

Russia, whereas the US under the George W. Bush administration strongly supported the inclusion. The fallout of the alliance on the endorsement finally ended up in a compromise not to pursue the formal membership but boldly stated endorsing the aspiration of the nominated countries, boldly stating Georgia and Ukraine will become members of NATO (ibid). The Kremlin did not even acknowledge the halfway outcome of the alliance as a compromise and started flashing a beam of yellow light. Russian deputy foreign minister Alexander Grushko warned how huge a strategic mistake the move would have and further uttered cautioning the serious pan-European security consequences. In the same tone, Putin kept maintaining that admitting these two countries to NATO would directly threaten Russia. This has alluded to in one of the Russian newspapers that featured what Putin spoke to Bush. In the newspaper article, Putin has explicitly hinted that if Ukraine got accepted to NATO, it would cease to exist (cited in Rankin, 4 November 2022).

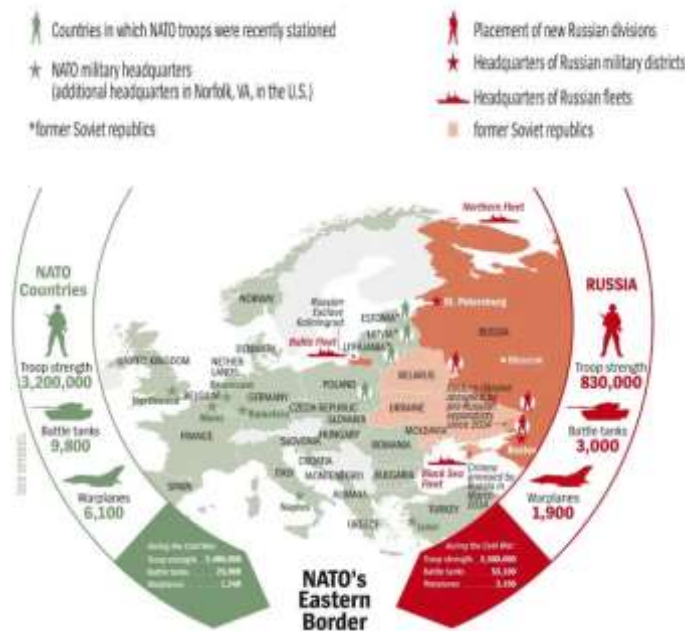


Fig.2. source: Hahn M. Gordon (2019). Peace platform for theory and practice (2 May 2022)

Interestingly, against all these signals resonating from the Kremlin leaders, there seems to be a misconception on the issue. Some US diplomats would argue that NATO's expansion would not be the cause of aggression and hardly heeded the tipping point of the ever-expanding NATO. For instance, Michael McFaul was heard saying that working for eight years for Barack Obama's office as an American Ambassador to Russia, he never heard any Russian elite complaining about NATO's enlargement (Michael McFaul, 2014). Nonetheless, contrary to the viewpoint, the ever-sprawling of NATO towards the east since 1991 has always remained a significant irritant of Russia's relations with the western world. Its leaders might not have to share their point on the issue at the bilateral ambassadorial level, yet the

warning of the Kremlin on a broader platform has never abated since the cold war. President Putin's furious 2007 speech at the annual Munich Security Conference shocked the audience in its finest audibility (Munich Security Conference, 10 February 2017). In effect, Russia's annexation of Crimea on concerns about NATO's expansion followed (Office of the President of Russia, 18 March 2014; cited at Marten Kimberly, 2017). In September 2014 Kremlin office announced that it started to make some amendments to its Military doctrine partly due to NATO's enlargement (Mikhail Popov, September 2014). Ultimately the deployment of NATO troops to Poland, which Putin called "a root change in the sphere of strategic stability", signalled nothing less than a redlight to the Western alliance (Marten, 2017).

Russia does not seem to allow Ukraine to slide into, not only to NATO but even to European Union is feared to be a stalking horse for NATO. Unless based on a solid mutual agreement on the Security framework reached between NATO and Russia, the simple clubbing of Ukraine to a western European family would not be less than an irritant. In such a volatile context, the EU chief has suggested a fast-track application of Ukraine for the EU membership amidst the devastating war that pleads negotiation rather than provocation. The move can only add fuel to the heinous conflict. As a matter of fact, joining the bloc is such an arduous and painstaking process that roughly takes about a decade. For instance, Poland made its formal request in 1994 and was finally admitted in 2004. The precedence of fast-tracking is not that new. The applying country could swiftly adjust its political, judiciary and economic system in line with the bloc, complying with the EU's common law and the 80,000 paged rules and regulations on a gamut of themes. Case in point, Finland and Sweden took just a few years, whereas Albania, Bosnia and Serbia have still been waiting for years, making it hardly possible for the EU to move to Ukraine. As per the account of a senior EU official, Ukraine's application would take the European Commission as long as 18 months to evaluate the application before being shared with the 27 member countries for their unanimous approval (Bilefsky, 1 March 2022). The calls from President Zelensky's fast-track for the EU membership have even failed to convince some countries such as France, Germany, Netherlands, and Spain. France's president stated that despite his deep wish to send a strong signal to Ukraine, he did not believe in the open accession procedure when a country is at war. The move made towards fast-track against all odds of the long and winding road of the membership process would only be symbolic. However, it might jeopardise the potential negotiation between Ukraine or NATO, and Russia would potentially need to sit to end the destructive war.

### *5.2 NATO Economic and Diplomatic Trap for Russia and its Deliverables*

In response to the Ukrainian call, the EU and US, under the umbrella of NATO, have swiftly reacted with economic and diplomatic sanctions on Russia while flooding Ukraine with

weaponry. In no time, the alliance has instantly stepped-up, sinking Ukrainian soil with munitions right from the start of the war to tackle Russian aggression and put what they call severe economic sanctions on Russia. Nonetheless, they could not forgo funding the Russian forces in fold against the severe sanctions, for an obvious logic of their dependency and unwillingness to stand the energy crisis. This paradox can easily be shown by the fact that the Ukrainian government has been pledged the support of 1billion Euro from NATO countries against the 35 billion Russian government harvested from the same source from the energy supplies trading with the EU since the start of the war (Rankin 6 April 2022). Moreover, there has always been a fallout on the EU summits on the sharp cut-off trading of energy with Russia, given that some member countries such as Germany and Italy endure a deeply rooted dependency on the Russian arteries of energy supply, making the scenario of blockage of trade in a short time even more hopeless. It is worth mentioning that about 42% of Europe's gas import flows from Russia (Cornelius. H. et al., 24 February 2022). Hence, the undeniable painful economic backlash it could potentially create in Europe amidst their grappling status with the spectre of surging inflation elucidates the harsh underpinning reality of their decision. Not to mention, the Chinese-Russian business vocally denounced any potential sanction on Russian business. India's accelerating Russian oil import ignoring US severe pressure against the acceleration on uptake of energy from Russia, has been another major loophole for the sanction. The country's Foreign Minister, S. Jaishankar, clearly slammed it as a double standard given that the western world kept importing. In fact, India had got a tantalising offer from Russia at its cheapest price – literally the exact price before the war began when the rest of the world was grappling with the price on a sharp rise since the invasion. These two giant countries, along with others such as Hungary, which is willing to buy it even in Russian currency - ruble and other new destinations for the market would doubtlessly help Russia circumvent the sanctions to a degree, and what has been called impactful sanction might not result in quick result at least to the Ukrainians spending nightmare of the modern days. In reality, Russia's profit from gas and oil has spiked to Euro 63 billion since the invasion, and the EU made 71% of the imports [worth approximately 44 billion Euro] (CREA, 2022). The Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) study shows Russia has doubled its fortune from the import in 2022 compared to the same two months of last year. In short, despite the heavy spiral sanctions on the Kremlin, the very fact that the same power that administered sanctions is funding the war upon injecting tremendous cash flow at about nearly a billion a day and their unreadiness to curtail the war effort in Ukraine severely, topped up to the alternative export channel Russia has spared with China and India and other destinations, makes the so-called impactful sanction impact-less at least to swiftly strip off Kremlin resource for war to bear instant result in combatting the invasion as assumed. Ironically, following the ultimatum it delivered last month for unfriendly countries to pay in Russian currency, effective

from 1 April 2022, the Russian energy giant Gazprom has cut off the gas supply to Poland and Bulgaria, piped via Yamal and Turkstream pipelines, respectively, and the European commissioner described it as "blackmail".



Fig 3. Russian gas supply routes to Europe. Photo: hromadske (2019)

The final attempt made by the western power to overcome Russia's aggression in the war glanced at gaining China's influence which ended in an absolute and apparent zero-sum diplomatic game. The least profiled 23<sup>rd</sup> EU-China summit (held on 1 April 2022) aimed to pressure China to influence the Kremlin office for peaceful negotiation but futilely. The Chinese showed no interest in talking about the Ukraine crisis to the extent the EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell dubbed the summit 'deaf dialogue'. Principally, China's signals on the issue are not even sublime, rather quite decipherable even for a novice politician. China – the country that portrays the Russian president as a victim of NATO expansion and never admitted the war as an invasion but shares the Kremlin narrative as a special operation to de-militarise the Ukrainian government could not be expected to stand more fatal for the intended EU result (Bloomberg News, 6 April 2022). Since the invasion, Beijing has struggled to maintain a façade of neutrality by distancing itself from the Ukraine war and its geopolitical proxy to safeguard itself from any potential western economic sanctions. It is worthy restating; Beijing has been vocal in defining its relationship with Russia tagging it as a 'limitless partnership' when Beijing hosted President Putin in the Winter Olympics. The partnership and cooperation, dubbed a partnership with unique character, vowed to remain intact in thin and thick, backing each other in Ukraine and Taiwan against western intervention (Tony Munroe, Humerya Pamuk and Andrew Osborn, Reuters, 4 February 2022; Euractive, 4 February 2022), could not afford to inflict any negative influence against own political chemistry and strategic bandwagon.

### 5.3 Flooding Ukraine with Military arsenal and the limits of gunfire for negotiable peace

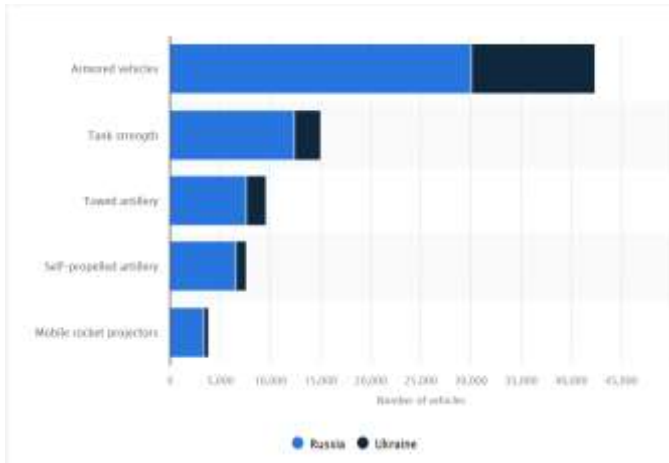
The former US Secretary of Defence and CIA director and Chief of Staff under Barack Obama and Chief of Staff under Bill Clinton, Leon Panetta, has lucidly argued that the Ukraine

war is a proxy war between US and Russia. That is to imply US-led NATO versus Russia. The former officer further uttered 'doubling ourselves', to mean arming Ukrainians to the teeth with necessary military equipment and even insisted on the need to chip in and fight against Russian for a quick result in political leverage (Damon A. (19 March 2022, Defend Democracy Press). While the latter, [partaking in the war], has been categorically ruled out by the NATO for fears of escalation, Military equipment on its own, despite the heroic national altruism of Ukrainians, would not seem plausible to prove any battle triumph to surrender the mighty highly armed Russian forces. Since the start of the war, in the mission of arming Ukrainians, NATO has started sinking Ukraine soil with arms. As a leading player in the NATO alliance, US president Joe Biden has recently approved additional weapons worth \$1 billion for Ukraine, topping up to the 2.5 billion priced weapon handed to Ukraine in 2014. Still, the arms grant to Ukraine keeps snowballing with the recent Joe Biden call for the US Congress to approve a \$33 billion war chest to Ukraine and similar surging pledges from the West (Hunnicut and Holland, 29 April 2022, Euro news). However, Russia being one of the top weaponry hubs bolstered by enough weapons imported from Europe, mainly Germany and France, in the time of Russia's build-up time for the invasion, it seems to have further anchored its arsenal posture in a relatively unshakeable stance and hence pile stocking arsenal in Ukraine, though is categorically imperative to support them defend the invasion, would not alter the equation but only sustain the ravaging war. According to Brussels correspondent Barnes, Huggler and Penna (22 April 2022), Germany and France alone had shipped military equipment worth €273 million, comprising rockets, bombs, missiles, and guns, against the EU-wide embargo on arms to Russia. The weaponry capability Russia could access from its reliable allies and the daily 1 billion cash flowing from NATO members to Russia for the energies they could not afford to boycott would keep feeding the Kremlin war machine and jeopardises NATO's limitless arm supply to Ukraine as a leveraging fulcrum. The following statistical data would give us a gist of the arms discrepancy between David and Goliath.

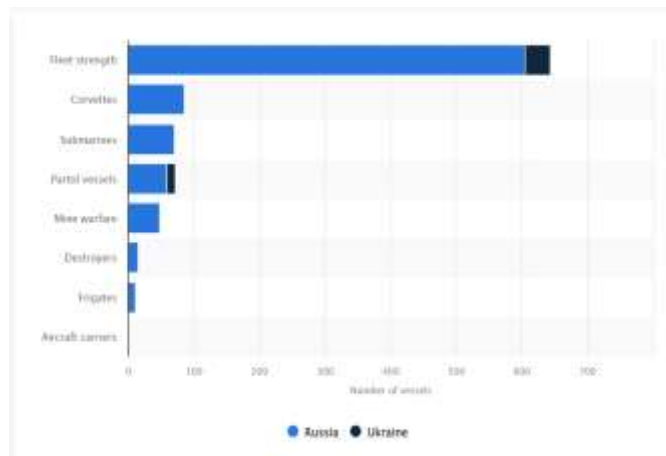
### *Comparison of military vehicles of Russia and Ukraine by type in 2022*

Statista, as a reputed institution, accounts for one of the most credible and up-to-date statistical data. The institution, with over 200 experts covering more than 160 countries and 80,000+ topics, has tried to compare the military capacities of Russia against Ukraine. The bar graphs down here depict the gap in weaponry between the two countries in question.



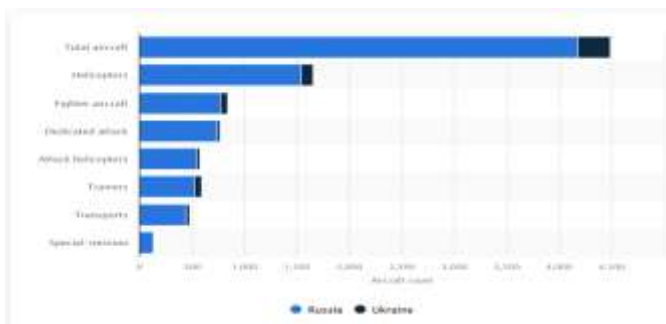


Comparison of naval forces of Russia and Ukraine as of 2022, by type



Russia's military equipment out-shadows that of Ukrainians literally in every aspect. The military vehicles, Tanks, towed artillery, self-propelled artillery, and mobile rocket projectors of Russians outnumber Ukrainians by wide-range margins. Furthermore, as the second bar-graph above (bargraph.2) depicts, in the current year, 2022, the Russian Federation fleet strength accounts for 605 vessels, outstripping that of Ukrainian naval capacity by almost 16 times.

Comparison of air forces of Russia and Ukraine by type in 2022



Graph.3 depicts a similar trend of unparalleled outnumbering of Russia in the airpower of one of the globally renowned aircraft manufacturing hubs -Ukraine, which has failed to

promise to secure Ukrainian skies. No wonder to hear President Zelenskyy beseeching NATO to close the Ukrainian skies from Russian aircraft shelling. The Ukrainian airpower deeps 13 times smaller than its counterpart -Russia, with only about 70 aircraft against 772 Russian aircraft.

Candidly, while the unabated NATO military equipment supply since the inception of the war had its super outcome for Ukrainians to resist the unparalleled power of Russians, it is the zealous bravery of the intrinsically mobilised Ukrainians that counted much. Nevertheless, the question remains crystal clear – how far this war could keep ablaze before it ruins the country and maybe even split it into two as that of Germany before the fall of the Berlin wall, given the new trend of a breakaway of the Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk) recognised by Russia and the occupation of the strategic city of Mariupol and other adjacent towns by Russian forces.

Talking to New York Times, Former American Ambassador to NATO, Lieutenant-general Douglas Lute, told the New York Times, "On NATO territory, we should be the Pakistan", in his bid to create a stockpile of material support in Poland and ensure continuous supply-chain to Ukraine in the same fashion Pakistan supplied Taliban in Afghanistan to halt USSR (cited in Damon, 2022, p5). However, wouldn't the world abhor to see the Afghanistan version of Ukraine? The NATO unabated weapon supply could even potentially end in a direct NATO-Russia confrontation to an all-out war of WWII. Sergey Lavrov has explicitly stated that any cargo heading into Ukrainian territory would be a fair game and legit for attack (Damon, 2022, p9). This shows that the fine line buffering NATO and Russia from direct confrontation could break anytime and potentially erupt into full-scale global war. It is imperative to restate that World wars have kicked off over more minor conflicts, and the NATO and Russia proxy war over Ukraine should not be underestimated. The risk of WWII is too significant to ignore.

Noam Chomsky, the prolific author, and professor of linguistics as well as a radical activist, in his interview at the left-wing magazine current affairs (hosted by Nathan Robinson), accused the United States of its willingness to fight till the last Ukrainian, as stated by retiring US diplomat Chas Freeman, and suggested for an agreed-upon accord to slam the brakes on the ever-escalating US-Russia tension on the issue. The liberals seem upset about his anti-war stance and so sad to read the dominant tone of the responses to his speech trending on social media full of ire and dismissive to the extent that some dubbed him Putin's puppet. His humane stance is arguably correct. As much as the heroism Ukrainians showed in defending their land from the invasion of the mighty Russians remains phenomenal, a prolonged war that can obliterate the country would not be in Ukraine's interest. US might opt to keep Russia in a low-grade war in Eastern Ukraine while intensifying its economic sanctions to hobble Russia in the same way it did in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, the overall scenario, given the resetting geopolitical landscape

makes relatively hard and inadvisable to serve any good when possible pacified negotiation could still have been endeavoured. Ukraine will undoubtedly suffer far more, and eastern Ukraine might split as an autonomous piece of land which would be a historic loss.

## VI. WAY FORWARD STARK - TO BE OR NOT TO BE - DIPLOMATIC (MACRONIAN) ENGAGEMENT OR WWII

In short, in the interest of Ukraine and global peace, the step instigated by President Macron (Macronian diplomacy) and supported by Germany's president on engaging in constructive diplomatic talks with Kremlin to hunt for any mutually agreeable détente appears the wise way out of the crisis with potentially fatal repercussion. The UN secretary's visit to Russia and Ukraine to seek to ease the humanitarian crisis in the war region and possible negotiated Settlement for the war complements that of the President Macron and Chancellor Olaf Scholz [of Germany] hunt for possible politically negotiated Settlement.

It is to be recalled that, in the discussion of any potential peace deal suggested to be struck between Ukraine and Russia, NATO members showed a sign of strategic splits from their very ranks. President Emmanuel Macron, who suggested the need to approach Putin for a peace talk, appears exceptionally responsible for a ceasefire and halting any potential war escalation. German president Scholz shares the same view as President Macron. He cautioned NATO leaders at the NATO summit to remain cautious against any moves, including abandoning the NATO-Russia founding Act, as nixing that agreement would completely shut the door on Moscow, leading to the removal of the troops' deployment between the two sides. Contrarily, other NATO members have a different opinion about the push to negotiate with the Kremlin, suggested by Paris and Berlin, from being sceptical about Putin's seriousness in engaging in an acceptable peace deal to its counter-productiveness and possibly playing it in Putin's hand (Nardelli A., Nienaber M., and Adghirni S., 29 March 2022). This fallout on the issue would lead us to investigate what would it potentially take for NATO to sit on a roundtable with Russia for possible negotiated peace détente? As wartime diplomacy fluctuates based on the developments on the battlefield, the possibility of negotiations would swing on the perceived pros and cons in real-time, yet comprehension of the Russian mindset on the issue of NATO expansion and their security warranty could give a clue on the issue.

### *6.1 How far could potentially Russia compromise in NATO-Russia talks?*

In attempting to end the war with massive havoc, it is imperative to keep Russia out of any possible excuses for its assault, but what could hint what it takes to engage so. The Kremlin leaders' accounts on a range of times in the past would broadly indicate a lot of what they could potentially offer, albeit the dynamics of the issue. The great point the

Kremlin officers seem to bother with the expansion of NATO that eventually resulted in the proxy war could be attributed to their national security threat. Kremlin would never afford to see this strategic neighbour as NATO's bastion. The point was communicated by senior Russian delegate Sergei Ryabkov (Deputy Foreign Minister) during Geneva's security talk with the US. The diplomat boldly underlined that Moscow would accept nothing less than a watertight US guarantee precluding NATO expansion to Ukraine to avoid what he hinted otherwise - the possibility of Ukraine invasion (Euro news, 19 January 2022). This beseeches the desperate need for NATO-Russia engagement towards tackling the Ukrainian case and any potential crisis entangled with NATO sprawl.

It is evident that the War in Ukraine seems to be resetting the European security landscape as the countries such as Sweden and Finland, with longstanding military neutrality, rushed to join NATO, yet without NATO-Russia constructive engagement and negotiation, that would only be hatch another Ukrainian crisis. The Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has promptly cautioned against the intent saying Russia would be forced to rebalance the situation with military and political consequences. Correspondingly, the deputy chairman of Russia's Security Council, Dmitry Medvedev, announced that if the two countries joined the alliance, Russia would send nuclear weapons to the Baltics (Kaplan, 26 April 2022). Macron had an exact point on the fact when he voiced the need to acknowledge the Russian security threat, in his verbatim "There is no security for Europeans if there is no security for Russia", and he cogently opposed the errors of the past pertaining to spheres of influence (Wintour 22 February 2022). Thus, negotiated Settlement on this case would stretch beyond Ukraine's case to serve regional, if not global, peace interests.

Back to the point, let us delve a step deeper, quarrying what they would potentially Kremlin offer for the negotiated Settlement? In fact, per some Kremlin elites' accounts, from Gorbachev to the current leadership, have had the same tone in that Russia does not even seem worried about the enlargement of the NATO as an irritating factor, but what comes along with the expansion package – military or weaponry infrastructure. If not, NATO's inclusion towards the east to include countries that have evolved in their costly democratic reforms seems out of the question. Reflecting on 1994, Russian analyst Andrei Kurtnov's early prediction in 1996, the Baltics would end up in consideration for the NATO club (Kortunov, 1996). This notion of sparing NATO expansion without any potential threat associated with military infrastructure and deployment of an army could be substantiated by a series of Kremlin officers' accounts. For instance, President Gorbachev has once back echoed the expansion of NATO eastwards without holding back nuclear weapons, and combatant troops from the new members joining the alliance would be a historic mistake.

Moreover, as late as 2002, President Putin stated that the enlargement to enshrine the Baltics was 'no tragedy' as far as

no new military infrastructural component entailed (Marcus, 2002). In a similar remark, even more accommodating, the Russian Defence Minister did not see NATO expansion as a security threat as long as its technicality could be ironed out through negotiation (Talbot's interview, 2015). Gorbachev's military doctrine adopted in November 1993 was framed as, for an era when all-round cooperation and partnership are taking over, it cites alliance's expansion as a source of 'foreign military threat'- ranked as the ninth military threat in the event of nuclear proliferation and harm to Russians in a foreign land and only if new military infrastructure built to deter the national military security (Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation, 1993). Similar remarks stating not the expansion of the alliance per se but the infrastructure accompanying it has alluded to in Vitaly Churkin's (Belgian Ambassador and de facto representative to the Kremlin office to NATO) accounts (Zagorski cited in Marten K. 2018).

The dominant tone of the Kremlin leaders and what is alluded to in their Military doctrine seem to detest a Military deployment infrastructure that is perceived as an acute security threat to Russia. However, amidst this delicate time, witnessing some eastern European NATO member countries, such as Poland, greenlighting the US to host nuclear warheads on their soil could further complicate the situation. In an interview with the Sunday edition of Die Welt (Germany newspaper), deputy Prime Minister Jarosław Kaczyński has openly spoken greenlighting the United States hosting nuclear warheads on its soil (King, 4 April 2022). In effect, the ardent ally of Putin, President Alexander Lukashenko, sent a strong message that if the US or NATO transferred any nuclear weapons to Poland or Lithuania, his government would turn to Putin to return the nuclear weapons once there before 1994 (Brabander, 27 April 2022). Most critically, the incident would not only have a far-reaching impact in complicating the possible pacified negotiated Settlement but also wholly underestimates the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapon Treaty signed (NPT) signed in 1968 by the US, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and China. This scenario heeds how revolutionary the Ukraine war could be in dismantling such a fundamental treaty and might leave the world in the blink of a highly plausible nuclear confrontation of WWIII. Some security experts believe the global existential conflict [WWIII] has already begun, whereas others agree it is just a matter of time till it ignites the sparks (Hynes, 6 March 2022). In Boris Johnson's press conference in Poland, Daria Kaleniuk (Ukrainian journalist) broke down in tears accusing Boris Johnson of not implementing a no-fly zone to combat Russian jets killing civilians. She upbraided the Prime Minister for fearing engaging in the war claiming WWIII had already started. Irrespective of the saga on whether the WWII has already caught fire or not, the globe could already feel the heat. With the invasion ranging across Ukraine compounded by hostilities ramping between the Western allies and Moscow, the risk of blowing WWIII has never been greater. Moreover, unfortunately, thanks to the race in the sophistication of nuclear warheads since 1945, the world has

ample weapons in store to wipe it, and thus, the consequences on the entire world could not be graver.

Against the backdrop, one can easily sniff how insecure the flammability in our polarised and restless world is to ablaze any ignited fire from the proxy in question. The world is more divided and rising in polarisation than ever before. Fundamentally, the perilous Russia-Ukraine crisis has already precipitated in significant policy shift on the WWII defeated Axis power Germany and Japan, marching from their pacifistic precedence, rushing to re-arm their military sector heavily. Moreover, the new security pact [that shocked US and allies] signed between China and Solomon Island refracting the Indo-pacific geopolitics. The loose NATO version of the Asia - Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which comprises Australia, Japan, the US, and India) intended to contain China's rise in the Indo-Pacific is showing regional fracture and dented trust, as India remains on the fence in the Russian-Ukraine war and keeps folding its energy import from Russia which has driven a wedge within the Quad. Regarding the last point, there has not been a full-blown rupture in US-India relations following the failed mission of the US-India 2+2 Ministerial meeting that cautioned India not to import energy, yet the air is not clean. The US has already started firing back at India with an accusation of its human rights and democracy flaws and appears to consider South Korea as an alternative to India as the newly elected Conservative South Korean president Yoo Suk-yeol has already signalled willingness to join.

Even the other regions of the world could not be in a better position to catch flame from any potential spark of the proxy war. Briefly covering some more huge tensions, the dispute in the South China Sea and China's sweeping claim of sovereignty antagonised by claimants the Philippines, Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, Vietnam and Taiwan, China-Taiwan chronic yet recently on-motion tension can be considered. Likewise, the China-India standoff, the Korean Peninsula deadlock and India-Pakistan tension heed how flammable the Indo-pacific region stands - the determinant battlefield if any World War bursts. While the above shed light on the Indo-pacific geopolitical chasm, the numerous unrests across the Middle East and Wars in Africa could top up to mind us how shakeable the ground is for potential WWIII drums likely to engage nuclear warheads.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The strategic heinous Russia-Ukraine war has trended into an unprecedented humanitarian crisis resulting in humanitarian havoc with a mind-boggling toll of fatality and displacement of a quarter of Ukrainians yet swelling exponentially. An African proverb has it – in a fight between two elephants, it is the grass that suffers most! Ukraine is bleeding in between the giants' proxy war. As much as the Ukrainians' patriotism defending their homeland, the battlefield has obliterated Ukraine. Most importantly, the war has shown stark signals of its escalation to all-out war to WWIII; Kremlin flexing and openly stating it would use nuclear weapons could mean a

matter of global existential threat. The Western powers' massive weaponry and humanitarian support have remarkable input in bolstering Ukrainian defence. Nevertheless, ammunition assistance on its own would not alter the battlefield instantly, creating a stalemate equation for a ripe peace deal. Paradoxically, NATO members have kept supporting both warring actors by loading a handout of Military support to Ukraine and funding Russia in folds through the Energy import they fail to boycott, crippling the expected Russian economic sanctions intended slow down the invasion. Russia could easily spare China and India, among others, to sustain its economy and endure the war. The diplomatic endeavour attempted by NATO to influence the giants, mainly China and India, stalled. This hints nothing less than for NATO to buy President Macron's good intent to strive for potentially agreeable peaceful negotiation. He has a point when he said, "there is no security for Europeans if there is no security for Russia".

While empowering Zelensky to reach an accord with Putin is highly recommended, the need to tackle the broader underpinning cause of the invasion remains crystal clear – NATO enlargement as a security threat to Russia. The historical standoff between NATO and Russia following the unification of Germany to join the alliance at the cost of the dissolution of the Warsaw pact could reveal it all. Russia argues NATO broke its promise of non-expansionism to the eastern flank, whereas NATO slams it, stating no such formal deal was ever made. While, hard to prove the substance of the deal, the memoirs of James Baker (US Secretary of the State at the time in question) hint enough to tell the bone-of-contention that stated every achievement made to consent Russia for the Unification of Germany by NATO contains a poisonous seed for future problems. It is high time to detox this poison. Many other high-profile personalities have whistle-blown on the repercussion of NATO's expansionism with no security guarantee offered to Russia's irritating threat. Against all the pessimistic moves toward the escalation of the war, a peaceful negotiated settlement's optimism rests in addressing these long-anticipated problems.

In his solemn wish to resolve the bloodshed that put Ukrainian life at stake, President Zelensky has signalled a peace offer supposedly appealing. Within the package of the offer, he underlined the need for a third-party security guarantor from further possible aggression. However, as much as Ukraine, it is worth reminding that Russia claims the war for its security guarantee. This brings us to Russia's proposal [seeking a legal guarantee from NATO] handed to the US as a de-facto NATO leader to defuse the crisis over Ukraine (Roth, 17 December 2021). The Russian demand for the contentious security guarantee includes banning Ukraine from joining NATO, the limit of deployment of NATO troops and weapons to NATO's eastern flank, and the withdrawal of NATO forces to their 1997 station – the point before expansion. While dealing with the proposal would not be linear, rather complex enough to be accepted by Western capitals, especially with the last point, which would mean the withdrawal of NATO from the Balkan

countries, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Poland, sitting for negotiation to guarantee Russia security could potentially unfold a middle ground. The assumption is based on the fact discussed above those Russian leaders would not mind NATO's expansion but the military infrastructure package and army deployment. The Kremlin may even further compromise the military infrastructure as far as its technicality is briefed to prevent Russia from any potential national threat, as Russia's defence minister has hinted in his Talbot interview in 2015.

Thus, the only way out of the chugging monstrous crisis would be for both parties to let their ego go and engage in peaceful means of settling the issue. Breaking down the complex equation, applying the Cuban-Missile-Style compromise could potentially be instrumental in that NATO agrees to negotiate in offering a watertight security guarantee to Russia and Russia, in turn, oaths to forgo Ukraine invasion and avoid other potential scenarios in the interest of regional and global peace.

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