

# Two Years of Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Ten Lessons to Learn

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On 24 February 2022, the Russia-Ukraine conflict broke out. Now, two years on, it still rages. The war has caused numerous casualties and colossal economic losses and left a far-reaching impact on the geopolitical environment of Europe. So far, it has claimed the lives of about 70,000 Ukrainian soldiers, according to official United States estimates, more than the number of U.S. soldiers who lost their lives during the Vietnam War.

In 2022, Ukraine saw its gross domestic product shrink by around 30%; the country has suffered levels of damage not seen in Europe

since World War II. From the outset of the war, the West has imposed multiple rounds of sanctions on Russia and provided continuous aid to Ukraine. The U.S. has donated the largest amount of military aid to Ukraine, followed by European Union institutions. However, Western aid has not guaranteed a “quick win” for Ukraine: Despite its “EU candidate status,” a significant part of Ukraine’s pre-1991 territory is now controlled by Russia. Now the conflict has entered a stage of positional warfare and attrition warfare. On the second anniversary of this geopolitical conflict, one should look at what lessons we can learn from the perspective of forms of warfare, the international order, and wartime narratives.

1. Forms of warfare and national development may not evolve linearly, and the combination of old and new forms of war adds uncertainties to regional security. Although cyber warfare, information warfare and drones have been widely applied during the war, the West is far from overtaking Russia in high technology the way it expected. Conventional war forms still feature heavily in the conflict. The Western military aid to Ukraine still mainly relies on tanks, anti-tank weapons and third-generation fighter jets, with no significant difference from the World War II model. On a macro level, the Western-centric mindset has taken a hit during the conflict. While claiming themselves to be the most advanced, the Western countries have yet failed to defeat Russia (the so-called “authoritarian country”) in a short period of time.

2. A Cold War mindset is at the root of a hot war, and the pursuit of “absolute security” has led to a security dilemma. The Cold War mindset is one of the root causes of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which in essence is a proxy war waged by Western countries. Thus far, 45 sovereign countries have provided aid to Ukraine. By January 2024, the value of bilateral aid commitments to Ukraine from EU institutions, the U.S., and Germany had reached approximately €84 billion, €68.7 billion, and €22 billion, respectively. This has been so voluminous that U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken even publicly claimed that Ukraine’s defensive war against Russia would be at risk without U.S. aid.

As the world is undergoing profound changes unseen in a century, the conflict may be regarded as an episode during the evolution of the Westphalian system.

3. Ethnic tensions are intertwined with state tensions, and there is a gap between the sovereignty doctrine and a lack of autonomy in reality. Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the West has, recalling its memories of the Cold War and even World War II, described the war as imperial expansion by Russia and regarded it as a battle between “democracy and autocracy.” Nevertheless, the binary democracy-autocracy narrative may not be able to explain the complex ethnic tensions behind the conflict. Moreover, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has exposed the fact that some sovereign countries are incapable and have long been manipulated by major powers, highlighting a rift between nation-states and sovereign states.

4. The à la carte (picking and choosing) diplomatic approach the West takes is based on realist power politics. The West has orchestrated color revolutions against other countries, including Ukraine, in the name of freedom and equality to export its values, only to harm European security in the end. Similar situations are a common sight in the Middle East. Now through the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the West has again turned to geopolitics and major-power games, taking “de-risking” and the “new Cold War” as their diplomatic narrative. It should be noted that the essence of the European countries’ “à la carte” approach is a lack of autonomy and of a comprehensive and stable judgment of international politics. This often leads European countries’ foreign policy to follow trends blindly and drift between two extremes.

5. Despite the importance of wartime narratives, the narratives of Western countries seem untenable. At the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, European countries launched propaganda campaigns from the so-called moral high ground yet failed to persuade the Russian people. The fundamental reasons for this failure boil down to three aspects: narrative, action, and capability. **Firstly**, with Western systems losing their sway, European narratives are neither consistent nor

convincing. **Secondly**, even Western countries themselves are publicly divided with regard to a number of issues such as energy decoupling, economic sanctions, and military aid, leaving them unable to deter other countries. **Thirdly**, the European countries find it hard to pursue self-reliance with respect to defense. Some even argue Europe is more reliant on American security today than it was in 1999, during the Kosovo War. Combined, these factors have contributed to a lack of confidence in European wartime narratives.

6. The phenomenon of “industrial hollowing-out” damages the foundations for defense; “decoupling” and “de-risking” pose more threats to peace and stability. A successful wartime narrative involves both capability and morality. However, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has underlined the vulnerability of Europe’s defenses, which means it lacks the foundation on which it could build “strategic autonomy.” In reality, the European defense industry has long been unable to keep up. European firms do not have the supply to match the wartime demand, and it will be hard to rebuild industry through a single war. Even smaller orders have been going abroad, to places like the U.S. and even South Korea. In order to enhance strategic autonomy, Europe has attempted to decouple from Russia in terms of energy, but the results have been minimal: Europe’s imports of natural gas from Russia have increased at higher prices, making an energy transformation even more difficult. To rebuild its military industry, Europe must achieve energy autonomy and have complete industrial chains. For now, Europe still has a long way to go.

7. The expansion of a military and political alliance may bring risks to regional security. The expansion of NATO is the immediate external factor behind the Russia-Ukraine conflict. In an article in *The New York Times*, George F. Kennan stated that “expanding NATO would be most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold-War era” and such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic tendencies in Russian opinion. Similar views were echoed by Former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and political scientist John Mearsheimer. After

the Cold War, NATO has undergone five rounds of eastward expansion. With Russia excluded from its collective defense, European security has de facto been divided. As the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) failed to fulfil its functions, Russia's security was not safeguarded, resulting in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. One can conclude that as a military alliance, NATO could only maintain its internal peace, but has brought about adverse impacts on the overall security of the European continent.

8. The global strategic imbalance which emerged after the Cold War is a crucial reason why the Russia-Ukraine conflict is still going on today. Globally, the U.S. became the only superpower in the world; regionally, most European countries joined NATO, and the balance in Europe was broken following the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict should be regarded as a consequence of a global and regional strategic political imbalance. Active efforts should be made to rectify such an imbalance. To do so, developing countries should work together to make a contribution to building a new global balance.

9. The binary thinking and double standards practiced by some countries are worth attention. Western countries have repeatedly violated the principle of national sovereignty of the United Nations Charter over the past few decades, but when it comes to Russia, they accused it of doing the same thing in turn. At the end of the past century, NATO neglected the security needs of Russia in multiple conflicts although they had reached an agreement on the Partnership for Peace program. In the face of security threats, Europe always demonizes its opponents, but rarely reflects on the consequences of its own deeds. Now European countries may be starting to re-examine regional and global security, as the Munich Security Report 2024 released in February focuses on lose-lose dynamics. Still, the binary thinking pattern continues in the report.

10. Countries throughout the world should promote the building of a community with a shared future for humankind, which represents the fundamental path to long-lasting peace. The Russia-Ukraine conflict

is a multi-lose situation for Russia, Ukraine and Europe. International politics should discard the Cold War mindset where “a single country’s security comes first” and instead pursue the vision of building a community with a shared future. To resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict, countries should revive the Helsinki Spirit of 1975, recognize that security is indivisible, and create a comprehensive and integrated regional security framework.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has not ended. In the past two years, the conflict has caused numerous civilian casualties in Ukraine. A survey by the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) has shown that most Europeans support Ukraine in the war but only 10 percent of the respondents believe the country will win; and most Europeans deem it necessary to end the conflict with a “compromise settlement.” Europe is at a crossroads: How can it cope with the grave security challenges posed by the (potential) collapse of Ukraine and the return of Donald Trump? In the short term, enhancing defense autonomy is a top priority on the agenda; in the long run, Europe should change its thinking pattern and look for a suitable ultimate solution to the conflict.