



HUMANITARIAN DILEMMAS ARISING FROM MAJOR POWER CONFRONTATIONS: WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

 Dr. Zaid Mustafa Alavi^{1*},  Dr. Sana Haider²

¹Department of Political Science, Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Aligarh, India.

²Department of Linguistics Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), Aligarh, India.

*Corresponding Author: zmalvi39@myamu.ac.in

Article Info: - Received : 12 February 2024

Accepted : 25 February 2024

Published : 29 February 2024

Abstract

Prior to the Russian incursion into Ukraine, there existed scant evidence elucidating the contours of a conventional conflict between the regular forces of peer competitors in the contemporary era. Following the total warfare experiences of the twentieth century, the progression of precision-guided munitions and unmanned aerial vehicles presented the prospect of a novel archetype of warfare. In this paradigm, coalitions led by the United States and NATO possessed the capacity to swiftly overpower the regular forces of substantially weaker adversaries, often from a considerable distance, all while endeavouring to minimize collateral harm to civilian populations. The advent of "smart" weaponry propagated the notion that civilian casualties were symptomatic of operational inadequacy. However, the Russian approach to warfare departed significantly from this prevailing paradigm. Russia's strategic calculus appeared to assign a lower priority to the avoidance of civilian casualties, as evidenced by its deliberate utilization of precise munitions to target civilian infrastructure during ruthless and coercive aerial campaigns. This essay posits that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict offers valuable insights into the characteristics of a major power conflict. It underscores the dichotomy between the approaches adopted by Ukraine, reinforced by NATO-supplied armaments and informed by its strategic doctrines, and Russia, which demonstrated a proclivity for assailing civil society. Of particular emphasis is the resultant humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine, where over a quarter of the population has been displaced, and inhabitants in Russian-occupied territories have reported a multitude of instances of war crimes. The essay culminates by contemplating the probability and potential ramifications of Russia's deployment of nuclear weapons in the context of this conflict.

Keywords: *NATO, Humanitarian Laws, Russia, Ukraine, Nuclear Weapons, Warfare.*



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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the occurrence of numerous armed conflicts involving major powers since the culmination of World War II, some historians have characterized

this post-war era as a "long peace," a term initially introduced during the 1980s. This classification primarily hinges on the absence of a global-scale World War III (Gaddis, John Lewis, 1989).

The characterization of such a war is not rooted solely in the extent of territorial conflict, as the dissolution of the European empires has reduced the prospect of hostilities spanning across multiple continents. Instead, the focal point of concern revolves around the peril posed to humanity by the prospect of a confrontation between nations possessing nuclear arsenals. It is this looming possibility, coupled with the collective aspiration to avert such a catastrophic scenario, that underpins the notion of the "long peace."

World War II represented a paradigmatic instance of total warfare, necessitating the full-scale mobilization of all available economic and societal resources among the belligerent nations. This extensive mobilization, in turn, placed their economies and societies in the crosshairs of conflict, designating them as legitimate targets. Even preceding the deployment of atomic bombs by the United States over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the final year of the war bore witness to a disturbing escalation in attacks on civilian populations, characterized by unprecedented levels of destructiveness.

The Allied firebombing campaigns over Dresden in February 1945 and Tokyo in March 1945 stand as grim illustrations of this intensified destructiveness. It is noteworthy that what set apart the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not solely the magnitude of civilian casualties but rather the chilling simplicity with which such devastation was wrought, augmented by the ominous introduction of radioactivity into the equation. Concurrently, the V-2 missile assaults on London, as the inaugural successful long-range guided ballistic missile attacks, served as harbingers of the potential for entire cities, and even entire civilizations, to be expunged expeditiously, efficiently, and from afar, with minimal prospects for defense or shelter.

While during the 1950s, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in strategizing for scenarios where they could emerge victorious in a nuclear conflict, contemplating options such as a preemptive strike or the deployment of low-yield nuclear weapons tailored for the battlefield, the narrative shifted by the mid-1960s. At that juncture, both superpowers came to a sobering realization: any nuclear showdown could result in their mutual annihilation. The concept of a limited nuclear war appeared increasingly implausible. The use of systems designed to emulate conventional munitions, whether they be mortars, mines, depth charges, or gravity bombs, was highly likely to trigger an inexorable escalation of hostilities. It became indisputable that nuclear warfare represented the ultimate nightmare scenario, culminating in the obliteration of both adversaries.

The looming specter of such a catastrophic outcome served as a powerful deterrent against actions that could precipitate such a calamity. The prevailing U.S. strategy revolved around accentuating this peril, conveying to the Soviet Union that it was unequivocally susceptible to irreversible devastation, while acknowledging the corresponding vulnerability of the United States. Specific benchmarks were established to define the parameters of an assured destruction capability, encompassing the imperative to incapacitate 50 percent of industrial capacity and one-third of the population (Freedman, Lawrence, and Jeffrey Michaels, 2019).

It's crucial to clarify that these metrics were not predicated on their necessity for deterrence objectives, nor were they deemed desirable in any sense. Rather, they were quantified with regard to the point at which the addition of further weaponry would yield marginal differences in the overall magnitude of destruction inflicted. The question of whether such calculations would translate into actual targeting policies in the event of a conflict remained a distinct issue. Nevertheless, even when U.S. administrations sought alternatives that offered outcomes less extreme than full-blown Armageddon, they consistently found themselves confronted with options that still appeared notably extensive in scope and scale.

Contemporary policy-makers have at their disposal a spectrum of choices concerning the use of nuclear arsenals; however, the underlying objectives they might fulfill continue to elude precise definition. Within public discourse, there exists an implicit assumption that any conflict between major powers would invariably escalate into comprehensive nuclear conflagration. This presumption has led nuclear-armed nations to take deliberate steps to circumvent even minor confrontations involving conventional forces. In this context, the notion of exploring alternative strategies under such circumstances becomes largely inconsequential, for the primary outcome has been the cultivation of a pervasive apprehension regarding the potential for escalation.

Even in the case of so-called "limited" conflicts like the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the toll was staggering, with tens of thousands of American casualties and millions of civilian casualties in the affected regions. Moreover, in the protracted civil conflicts witnessed over the past three decades, spanning from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Syria, the loss of life has frequently been less a consequence of direct military clashes and more a byproduct of the dire consequences of social and economic disintegration, including famine, poverty, and disease.

The wars orchestrated by the United States and its NATO allies in the digital era have ushered in a

distinct paradigm, characterized by a concerted effort to safeguard regular forces from direct harm and a relentless exploitation of their aerial supremacy. The advent of "smart" weaponry has fostered the belief that there is limited justification for widespread casualties and collateral damage in contemporary conflicts. As evidenced by the "drone wars," it has now become feasible to pinpoint exceedingly precise targets, including individual figures.

Nonetheless, it is important to note, as exemplified by Russian actions in Syria, that smart weapons can also be utilized with greater efficiency to target civilian populations. It is crucial to acknowledge that these confrontations have invariably constituted asymmetrical conflicts, pitting formidable military capabilities of great powers against significantly weaker armies and militias.

The prospect of a potential war among the world's great powers, encompassing the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, China, and, until recently, Russia, in a tier above the United Kingdom and France), is fraught with ambiguity. All these nations possess nuclear capabilities. Among the other nuclear-armed states, India possesses the requisite clout to be regarded as a great power, while Pakistan, Israel, and North Korea could wield significant influence in the event of a major conflict. Non-nuclear powers like Germany and other NATO members also hold the potential to play pivotal roles, and countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia could exert substantial influence in any Indo-Pacific theater of war.

There exists a prevailing consensus that a hypothetical third world war would, at the very least, involve the United States and either China or Russia. This assumption is grounded in the idea that if nuclear weapons were excluded from the equation, and the conflict remained confined to conventional forces, it would not naturally escalate to the magnitude of a global war.

The likelihood of a non-nuclear war breaking out between major powers is generally viewed as remote due to the prevailing presumption of rapid and almost automatic escalation once these formidable nations directly confront each other. Numerous compelling reasons underline the imperative to avert another conflict between great powers, with the specter of potential nuclear exchanges ranking prominently among these factors.

While it remains theoretically possible that parties engaged in a major war could devise means to prevent the deployment of nuclear weapons or to restrict their use in some manner, a prudent approach advises against putting this hypothesis to the test. The severe consequences associated with nuclear conflict serve as a potent deterrent, reinforcing the imperative

of exercising caution and restraint in the realm of international relations.

Our contemporary distance from the world wars of the past has understandably constrained our ability to fully comprehend the potential nature of a modern conflict between major powers and the corresponding magnitude of casualties it might entail. An important question arises: Would the prospect of such a war still exert a deterrent effect if there were high confidence that it would not escalate to the use of nuclear weapons?

Analyses projecting the likely loss of life in the event of a resurgence of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula were sufficiently alarming to resonate within the Trump administration, prompting outreach efforts to Kim Jong Un. Simultaneously, the United States was updating its contingency plans for "decapitation strikes" against the North Korean leadership (Hohmann, James, 2020). While the projected loss of life in such a conflict would have surpassed that of recent conflicts, it would not be anomalous when compared to the catastrophic toll of past world wars. This raises pertinent questions: Would a renewed Korean War commence with efforts to contain the violence, as was the case, to some extent, in 1939? And how sustainable would such restraint prove to be?

Moreover, does the disconnection between conventional battles and the specter of nuclear exchanges render escalation less likely in contemporary conflicts? In contrast to the mid-20th century when large-scale air raids over capital cities were commonplace, is it still conceivable to muster the same intensity and fervor among the populace that would make the use of nuclear weapons a plausible consideration in the event of a major war? These inquiries underscore the complexities surrounding modern warfare and the intricate dynamics of deterrence in the absence of nuclear escalation.

The humanitarian ramifications of a nuclear conflict are so staggering that they require minimal explication. While I intend to revisit the nuclear dimension later, my primary focus lies in exploring the potential contours of a war in the absence of nuclear weapons, or at least before the point at which the nuclear threshold is crossed.

I explore two contrasting models of warfare associated with the United States and the Russian Federation, highlighting the significant disparities, particularly in their approaches to deliberately targeting civil society. Subsequently, I delve into an examination of the Russia-Ukraine War, which commenced on February 24, 2022. This conflict represents the most recent instance of a war between major powers, characterized by its intensity and the types of forces involved.

Unlike Russia, Ukraine entered this conflict without possessing all the attributes typically associated with a great power. It lacks a nuclear arsenal, having relinquished the inherited Soviet Union's nuclear weapons in 1994. Furthermore, Ukraine does not engage in the deployment of its armed forces beyond its borders to support clients and allies, in stark contrast to Russia's foreign military involvements. However, Ukraine is waging this war with the support of NATO and, increasingly, with the supply of weaponry from the alliance.

2. DIVERGENT PARADIGMS IN CONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a notable absence of substantial evidence illustrating the dynamics of a conventional war between the regular forces of "peer competitors." In recent times, Western armies, as seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, have prevailed against markedly weaker adversaries in the initial phases of conventional warfare, only to become entangled in protracted insurgencies and civil conflicts. Similarly, Russia has engaged in military campaigns against less potent opponents, including Chechnya in 1994 and again in 1999, Georgia in 2008, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014, and supporting the Syrian government from 2015 onward. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict of September 2020 provided a recent example of a conventional war involving relatively modern equipment. This conflict underscored the growing significance of drones in contemporary tactical strategies, akin to how the 1991 Gulf War reaffirmed the principles initially observed in 1972 during the Vietnam War: precision-guided munitions have revolutionized warfare by facilitating accurate targeting of enemy assets from a distance.

In retrospect, while simplifying somewhat, we can discern two contrasting archetypes of warfare. The first harkens back to the era of total war, reminiscent of World War II, which witnessed extensive aerial bombardments of civilian targets and the introduction of nuclear weapons. In this form of conflict, the military objective revolves around the obliteration of civil society, with the aim of eradicating the enemy's resolve and capacity to continue the fight.

In contrast, the second model adheres to a more classical perspective, where the primary goal of military actions is to neutralize the adversary's military capabilities, thereby confining the conflict primarily to engagements between regular armed forces. In this framework, the quality of the eventual political resolution is a reflection of the degree of military triumph achieved.

It's crucial to acknowledge that these are idealized paradigms, and in practice, they may be adapted and

nuanced in response to various factors such as the adversary's strategy, operational conditions, and the broader political context.

For the United States, the second type of warfare, characterized by a focus on eliminating the military capabilities of the adversary, aligns closely with the ideal conventional strategy. In this paradigm, conventional warfare is conducted independently of civil society, with the key determinants of success being the rapidity of decision-making, the quality of technological assets, and the proficiency of tactical manoeuvres. Proponents of this approach have been particularly enthusiastic about operational doctrines centered on outmanoeuvring the enemy in battle, eschewing attritional warfare, minimizing the exchange of firepower, and thus aiming for a conflict where casualties, both military and civilian, can be minimized. This framework gained prominence following the 1991 Gulf War, heralded as the harbinger of the next "revolution in military affairs." Western nations committed their efforts to developing technologies tailored to this approach, incorporating advanced sensors, command networks, and guidance systems capable of achieving pinpoint accuracy over extended distances.

One drawback associated with the aforementioned model was its propensity to foster a perspective of warfare as the exclusive domain of military experts, conducted by armed forces mindful of each other but somewhat detached from the broader political context in which they operated. This created a challenge in terms of harmonizing operational practices with overarching political objectives. In reality, the demarcation between the military and civilian realms often proved less distinct. Even in the case of the 1991 Gulf War and certainly in subsequent U.S. conflicts, it became increasingly evident that military operations, even when employing the most precise weaponry, could not entirely avoid civilian targets. This was particularly true for infrastructure elements supporting the enemy's military endeavors, such as transportation networks, as well as energy and administrative systems.

This dynamic has been especially pronounced when confronting insurgencies. In such contexts, enemy militants frequently blend seamlessly with civilian populations, making it challenging to draw clear distinctions. Efforts to discriminate between combatants and civilians often prove ineffective. Additionally, considerations related to safeguarding one's own forces tend to take precedence over efforts to minimize civilian casualties. In essence, militaries may be more willing to risk civilian lives than those of their own personnel in pursuit of force protection.

The endeavor to reduce humanitarian costs through a determined focus on defeating enemy

combatants has presented narrative challenges when confronted with the inevitable occurrence of non-combatant casualties. These casualties might suggest that the root causes lie in shortcomings related to decision-making, technology, or tactics, rather than recognizing the intrinsic uncertainties associated with conflicts conducted within civilian populations, often referred to as "wars fought among the people."

In contrast, the opposing ideal type of conventional warfare, which involves the direct targeting of civil society, places fewer demands on precision. It entails directing available firepower—such as artillery, rockets, missiles, and aircraft—toward large targets without a stringent requirement for pinpoint accuracy. However, precision can still be advantageous when aiming for strategically significant targets, such as refineries, power stations, railway hubs, government buildings, hospitals, and schools. It appears that the Russians have adopted this ideal type in recent asymmetrical conflicts and in their ongoing conflict with Ukraine.

In the conflicts involving Chechnya aimed at suppressing secessionist movements, Russian tactics were frequently characterized by extreme brutality, culminating in the flattening of the capital, Grozny, through relentless air strikes. Subsequently, in operations commencing in 2015 to support the Syrian government against rebel forces, Russia adopted a multifaceted approach. Not only did Russia provide cover to deflect criticism from the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons and barrel bombs, but it also employed air power to make civilian life as arduous as possible, with the intention of coercing them into leaving conflict zones. This dark side of precision guidance technology underscored a disquieting reality: the very same systems designed to minimize harm to civilians could also be employed effectively to target them.

In places like Aleppo, Russian aircraft deliberately targeted hospitals, often utilizing coordinates provided by the United Nations with the apparent intention of avoiding these structures, further highlighting the troubling implications of such military strategies.

The Russian ideal type of warfare is notably political in nature. It demonstrates a certain indifference toward civilian as well as military casualties while maintaining an uncompromising determination to vanquish its adversaries. Significantly, Russia places substantial effort into crafting narratives around its military operations, endeavoring to establish that the casualties incurred were justified due to the alleged provocations, and that Russia is merely responding to grave provocations. There are instances where President Putin has been widely accused of orchestrating "false flag" operations,

such as the purported terrorist attacks on residential accommodations in September 1999, which served as a pretext for the initiation of the Second Chechen War, launched promptly thereafter.

In the case of Ukraine, following the 2013–2014 EuroMaidan protests and the removal of Viktor Yanukovich, Ukraine's pro-Russian president, Vladimir Putin sought demonstrations of spontaneous support for taking action against the new government in Kyiv. He found this support in Crimea but was more ambivalent in the Donbas region. In the Syrian conflict, there was less need for justification because Russia could assert that it was intervening in support of an established government. While Russia initially portrayed its involvement in Syria as an anti-ISIS operation, it adopted an expansive definition of ISIS to encompass any group opposed to the Assad regime. According to their logic, all these groups were, in essence, indirectly aiding Islamist forces. However, this approach created its own set of challenges in terms of alignment, as Russia's political narratives often established objectives that couldn't be accomplished with the available operational means.

Beyond its evident humanitarian consequences, this model of warfare also presents problems on strategic grounds. If there is a strategic rationale behind targeting civil society, it typically aims to influence the decision-makers on the opposing side, compelling them to seek ways to end the conflict in order to alleviate the suffering and devastation. However, as with any coercive strategy, it cannot dictate how the target will react. Compliance with the demands may ensue, but alternatively, it could provoke an indignant and resolute resistance. Consequently, this kind of strategy does not eliminate the necessity for ground operations to assert control over disputed territory or to seize control of the enemy's decision-making center. This, in turn, raises questions regarding the synergy between these two efforts. At its core, the dilemma revolves around whether firepower should be directed against targets that degrade civilian life or those that facilitate land operations.

Under President Putin's leadership, Russia has demonstrated a coercive approach, particularly employing energy and economic measures to incentivize compliance with its objectives by other nations. The origins of the Ukrainian crisis in 2013 can be traced back to Putin's exertion of pressure on then-President Yanukovich, compelling him to refrain from signing an association agreement with the European Union. This tactic succeeded initially, but it inadvertently sparked popular discontent in Ukraine, ultimately culminating in the EuroMaidan movement and the subsequent events.

In the cases of Chechnya and Georgia, Putin relied on military pressure to enforce political

settlements. In Syria, Russia pursued a brutal air campaign designed to displace civilians from rebel-held areas, although it did not commit ground troops to this endeavor. Putin's approach, including in the 2014 Ukraine crisis, blended ruthlessness with a calculated limitation of liabilities. Consequently, while the assaults on Grozny or Aleppo may have foreshadowed the attacks on Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut in 2022–2023, they did not constitute full-fledged tests of a comprehensive coercive military strategy.

The Western model of warfare has consistently aimed to minimize the humanitarian toll of military operations. However, this goal has often been compromised by the complexities of interactions with civil society. The expectation that combat could remain far removed from populated areas has proven to be unrealistic, particularly in "wars among the people" where regular forces encounter hostility from segments of the population. Western military campaigns, despite the precision of their weaponry and the skill with which it is employed, have often been associated with humanitarian distress. This has occurred when they have occupied territory where their presence is resisted or when they have taken sides in internal conflicts.

Conversely, the Russian model of warfare has exhibited a relative indifference to humanitarian costs, with instances where it actively pursued them, such as in Syria. Russia has demonstrated a willingness to align itself with one side of a conflict. However, President Putin has also shown a propensity to limit Russia's exposure. For example, in the Syrian Civil War, which stands as one of the deadliest modern conflicts in the region, Russia restricted its involvement to airpower to avoid entanglement in heavy ground fighting. In the case of Ukraine in 2014, the annexation of Crimea involved minimal fighting. The situation in the Donbas region was different, where Russia supported separatist groups, often led by Russians, in their rebellion against the new government in Kyiv.

There will always exist inherent limitations to the extent to which civilians can be shielded from a conflict taking place within their communities, unless, of course, they opt to flee, a common response during wartime outbreaks. Nevertheless, this does not undermine the significance of the distinctions between the two ideal types of warfare, particularly in regard to whether civilians would be deliberately singled out as targets. The Western model, aligned with the principles of the Geneva Conventions, strives to minimize civilian targeting to the greatest extent possible. In contrast, the Russian model, while ostensibly agreeing with these principles in theory, tends to be more ruthless in practice. While those subjected to attacks may not necessarily distinguish between being victims of "collateral damage" or deliberate targeting, the

strategic utilization of firepower to intimidate populations and clear residential areas of hostile inhabitants invariably leads to significantly greater humanitarian distress.

The Russia-Ukraine War that commenced in February 2022 offered a striking illustration of the divergent military strategies employed by the belligerents. This contrast was not solely attributable to the influence of NATO thinking on Ukrainian practices, but rather stemmed from Ukraine's strong incentive to mitigate harm to its own civilian population. In contrast, Russia exhibited a propensity to target civilians, driven not only by military strategy but also by its underlying political objectives.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONFLICT

Moscow's intentions, as signaled in Putin's invasion speech on February 24, 2022, evolved from the purported threat to Russian-language speakers in the Donbas region to a broader goal of "de-Nazifying and demilitarizing" Kyiv. The ultimate aim appeared to be the installation of a puppet government and the effective reincorporation of Ukraine into a concept often referred to as "Greater Russia." Belarus, which was already undergoing a transformation into a client state, was seemingly part of this broader project. Had the war in Ukraine unfolded favorably for Moscow, there was a real possibility that Moldova could have also faced an incursion. Thus, this conflict can be characterized as a clear-cut war of aggression and conquest on Moscow's part.

Russia's initial war strategy was influenced by a delusional and destructive perspective that Ukraine was not a legitimate sovereign state but rather a part of historical Russia, having been taken from Russia in what they considered an illegitimate coup. This distorted viewpoint shaped their approach to the conflict.

Russian forces reportedly attempted to capture or assassinate President Zelensky in Kyiv on the first day of the war. This operation involved a "thunder run" led by paratroopers and agents already in place. Such an action, if successful, would have prevented what many analysts had assumed to be the most viable option for Zelensky: to flee and then establish a government in exile, from where he could organize resistance against the Russian occupation.

Russia's initial effort to capture or assassinate President Zelensky and assert control over Kyiv ultimately failed, allowing Zelensky to continue leading his people from the national capital. Furthermore, it became evident that Russia not only fell short of achieving its initial objectives but also encountered significant challenges on the battlefield.

Ukraine, despite being outgunned by the Russian forces, displayed remarkable resilience and

inflicted heavy casualties on the Russian military. As a result, Moscow had to abandon its initial goals, including the capture of Kyiv, and shift its focus towards seizing the Donbas region. Russia managed to take control of Luhansk by June, but they were unable to capture Donetsk.

Ukraine directed its limited counteroffensives near Kharkiv, the country's second-largest city, as part of its efforts to resist the Russian advance and protect key strategic areas. As Ukraine's success in defensive operations became evident and Russian forces faced increasing resistance, Western states escalated their military assistance to Ukraine. They provided high-quality, modern weaponry, with the exception of aircraft, effectively narrowing the gap in military capabilities. The equipment deliveries initially included drones, antitank weapons, and air-defense systems. However, over time, Ukraine also received artillery and armored vehicles.

In June 2022, NATO member states commenced the delivery of more advanced weapon systems, particularly artillery systems capable of highly accurate long-range fire. In stark contrast to Russia's approach to warfare, which involved using firepower to pummel enemy defenses and target residential buildings and infrastructure, Ukraine, aligning more closely with Western military practices, directed its firepower at ammunition depots and command posts to undermine Russian capabilities.

As Ukraine shifted its focus toward the port city of Kherson, which had been captured by Russian forces early in the conflict, it concentrated on obstructing key bridges. These actions aimed to deny Russia both supply routes and potential escape routes.

Due to these significant differences in the conduct of the war, the conflict in Ukraine has increasingly taken on the characteristics of a major power confrontation. Some Western analysts have labeled it a "proxy war." (Brands, Hal., 2022). This description aligns with Russian propaganda, which portrays the conflict as a defensive and existential struggle against NATO, characterizing Ukraine as a mere puppet used by the Western alliance. However, the term "proxy war" can be misleading, as it implies that Ukraine is fighting to advance a broader Western agenda rather than its own primary objective, which is to preserve its sovereignty and survive as an independent nation.

The conduct of conventional warfare in Ukraine highlighted the significance of various factors that can influence military effectiveness. These include logistics, which determine the ability to supply and sustain troops, and chains of command, which impact decision-making and coordination among military units. Terrain, including the presence of rivers, has played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of both offensive and defensive operations.

Furthermore, Russia's nuclear status has had a constraining effect on how far NATO countries have been willing to go in their direct support for Ukraine. There is a recognition that provoking Russia excessively could carry the risk of broader conflict or escalation involving nuclear weapons. This factor has influenced the extent and nature of support provided to Ukraine by NATO member states and has also been a consideration for Russia in terms of its actions and potential responses against NATO countries supporting Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine has resulted in a severe humanitarian catastrophe. After six months of conflict, approximately ten million Ukrainians, which amounts to one-quarter of the country's population, were displaced. Out of these, more than six million fled the country altogether. Numerous cities, particularly Mariupol and Kharkiv, as well as many towns and villages, suffered extensive damage from Russian military actions.

In areas occupied by Russian forces, there have been numerous reports of human rights abuses, including torture, imprisonment, and murder of individuals suspected of opposing Russian forces. Additionally, there have been cases of looting, sexual abuse, and widespread violence and destruction (Ukraine: Executions, 2022). Russia, in areas it intended to hold for the long term, enforced changes in education, currency, and language, replacing Ukrainian with Russian. Alongside these actions, Russia conducted a vigorous propaganda campaign in an attempt to portray specific atrocities against Ukrainians as self-inflicted. While this campaign largely failed to sway opinions in the West, it has had an impact on popular attitudes in Russia, thereby limiting concerns about Russia's conduct among the general population.

In a broader sense, the conflict evolved into what could be considered a genocidal war, not in the traditional sense of attempting to exterminate an entire people, but meeting the criteria outlined in the 1948 Genocide Convention: "to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group." (United Nations, 1951). Russia did not conceal this intent, denying the existence of a distinct Ukrainian identity and, when given the opportunity, acting upon this denial.

When humanitarian organizations attempted to organize relief convoys to evacuate civilians from besieged cities, most notably Mariupol, which came to symbolize Ukraine's resistance and resilience, Russia obstructed these efforts. Russian forces played cat-and-mouse with the convoys and subjected them to shelling, forcing them to retreat back into the besieged city.

In response to the extensive reports of war crimes, with over seventy thousand cases reported to Ukrainian authorities, Ukraine appointed a special prosecutor who pledged to thoroughly investigate and prosecute as many cases as the evidence supported. As of February 2023, local courts in Ukraine had convicted twenty-five Russians of war crimes (Sly, Liz, 2023).

Simultaneously, the United Nations Human Rights Council established an Independent International Commission of Inquiry to support the international investigation into Russia's alleged crimes. These investigations occurred in the context of Russia's initiation of an imperialist war against a neighboring sovereign state. While Moscow may have attempted to claim that specific attacks were false flags, the consistent pattern of Russian behavior made these claims increasingly implausible and unconvincing.

In terms of causing harm to Ukraine, the Russian campaign has been tragically successful. Russia's actions have led to the destruction of Ukrainian infrastructure and a staggering estimated contraction of the Ukrainian economy by 45 percent in 2022 (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, Russia's military operations have resulted in the death or injury of tens of thousands of Ukrainian civilians, the displacement of millions more, and significant military casualties on both sides.

However, Russia's attempt to eliminate Ukraine as a sovereign nation with a strong identity has completely backfired. Russia's attacks on civilian life have not yielded any military advantages. Despite the destruction and devastation, Ukraine defended its cities and towns with resilience. The Russian claim that it was "liberating" the Donbas region became absurd, especially considering that the areas most culturally aligned with Russia suffered the most damage.

After late September, when Putin asserted that Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, in addition to Crimea, were now permanently part of Russia, this supposed "prize" had been left devastated and depopulated. Those who remained, particularly those who had not lived in the separatist enclaves, harbored strong resentment and animosity toward Russia.

If Russia's intention in its war effort was to coerce Ukraine, it can be considered a failure. Rather than prompting calls for surrender, Russian brutality served to reinforce the determination of Ukrainians to continue the fight. Opinion polls conducted in Ukraine have indicated that the nation is no longer divided by regions or language but united in the belief that victory against the occupiers is not only possible but necessary. The asymmetry of motivation clearly favors Ukraine.

Conversely, on the Russian side, there is evidence of low morale. The Russian military's actions

against the Ukrainian population may partly be a result of incessant anti-Ukrainian propaganda, but it also reflects poor discipline. For example, valuable space on military vehicles has been occupied by looted goods, indicating a lack of order and focus within the Russian ranks.

Russia's war effort has also proven to be counterproductive in the sense that it convinced Western countries that they could not allow Russia to achieve victory. This realization led Western nations to provide Ukraine not only with defensive weapons but also the heavier equipment necessary for counterattacks aimed at pushing Russian forces out of occupied territory. The shocking revelations about Russian war crimes, especially after Russia abandoned territory near Kyiv, further solidified Western resolve and intensified pressure to supply Ukraine with even more advanced and effective weaponry.

One argument for caution in Ukraine's counter-offensive is the concern that if it succeeds too well, it might push a desperate Putin to authorize the use of nuclear weapons, possibly starting with a small-yield weapon against troop concentrations. However, it's important to note that Putin's initial decision to invade Ukraine was already a highly unwise move, and we cannot entirely rule out the possibility of him making even more irrational decisions, such as initiating a nuclear conflict.

Nevertheless, it would be unusual to shift from a limited "special military operation" to a full-scale war and then suddenly escalate the conflict to an entirely new level of catastrophe by using nuclear weapons. Russia has already intensified its efforts after setbacks in September 2022 through a partial mobilization of around three hundred thousand troops and by intensifying its attacks on Ukraine's critical infrastructure using conventional missiles and drones, without resorting to nuclear weapons. It remains unclear what military problem employing nuclear weapons would solve.

Furthermore, Russia has consistently signaled from the beginning of the war that it would not escalate to a full-scale war involving NATO, which could potentially lead to nuclear conflict, unless NATO forces were directly engaged in combat against Russia. When launching the war on February 24, 2022, Putin said: I would now like to say something very important for those who may be tempted to interfere in these developments from the outside. No matter who tries to stand in our way or all the more so create threats for our country and our people, they must know that Russia will respond immediately, and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history (Fisher, Max, 2022).

NATO has heeded this warning and has restrained its commitments accordingly. This was the

case even when Kyiv was urging NATO to establish a "no-fly zone" to prevent Russian aircraft from conducting bombings in Ukrainian cities.

Some have used NATO's restriction on direct military involvement to encourage Ukraine to consider territorial concessions and focus its defenses on areas of utmost importance, despite its success in repelling the initial Russian offensive. However, Ukraine was unlikely to make such concessions. Therefore, if Western nations believe that it would be detrimental to European security if Russia gains from its war against Ukraine, particularly due to the brutality of its methods, and if these Western nations are not willing to commit troops directly to the conflict, they are obligated to continue supporting Ukraine with weapons and financial assistance.

When a country, even one possessing nuclear weapons, wages war against an entire people, the choice to support the victimized nation may be challenging, but ultimately, it aligns with principles of defending sovereignty and human rights.

4. DIFFERING PERSPECTIVES ON UKRAINE'S IDENTITY

One interesting aspect of the Russia-Ukraine conflict is the differing perspectives on Ukraine's national identity. While Ukraine views itself as a distinct nation with its own language, culture, and history, Russia has often propagated the notion that Ukraine is an integral part of the broader Russian identity. This clash of narratives has played a significant role in the conflict's ideological dimension, with Ukraine asserting its sovereignty and Russia attempting to undermine it.

One of the main challenges for humanitarian actors in the Russia-Ukraine conflict is to provide assistance and protection to the affected populations without being perceived as taking sides or legitimizing one or the other party's claims. This is especially difficult given the polarized and politicized nature of the conflict, where humanitarian aid can be seen as a tool of influence or interference by either side (Merino, Daniel, 2022).

For example, in the annexed Crimea, humanitarian organizations face legal and administrative barriers to operate, as they are required to register under Russian law and abide by its regulations. This can be seen as a tacit recognition of Russia's sovereignty over the peninsula, which is disputed by Ukraine and most of the international community. Moreover, humanitarian access to Crimea is restricted by both sides, as Ukraine imposes sanctions and travel restrictions on the territory, while Russia controls the entry points and monitors the movement of people and goods (Wikipedia, 2023).

In the eastern Donbas region, where a protracted armed conflict between Ukrainian forces and Russian-backed separatists has been raging since 2014, humanitarian actors also face dilemmas of neutrality and impartiality. On one hand, they have to negotiate access and security guarantees with the de facto authorities of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DPR and LPR), which are not recognized by Ukraine or the international community. On the other hand, they have to comply with Ukrainian legislation and regulations, which impose restrictions on the delivery of humanitarian aid across the contact line that separates the government-controlled areas from the non-government-controlled areas (BBC News, 2022).

Furthermore, humanitarian actors have to deal with the risk of being instrumentalized or manipulated by either side for political or military purposes. For instance, Russia has used humanitarian convoys as a means of delivering supplies and reinforcements to the separatists, while also portraying itself as a benevolent actor concerned with the plight of the civilian population (Ray, Michael, 2023). Ukraine has accused Russia of using humanitarian aid as a cover for its aggression and interference, while also claiming that it is fulfilling its obligations to provide assistance and protection to its citizens in the conflict-affected areas.

These dilemmas pose ethical and operational challenges for humanitarian actors, who have to balance their principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence with their pragmatic considerations of access, security, funding, and coordination. They also have to navigate the complex and dynamic political and legal environment of the conflict, where different actors have different interpretations and expectations of their roles and responsibilities.

5. ECONOMIC IMPACT AND RESILIENCE

Despite the immense economic challenges posed by the conflict, Ukraine has shown remarkable resilience. The country has managed to maintain its economic stability to some extent and has even pursued ambitious economic reforms amid the turmoil. International financial support has been crucial in helping Ukraine navigate the economic fallout of the war.

The economic impact of the war in Ukraine has been severe, but not catastrophic. According to the World Bank, Ukraine's real GDP contracted by 30% in 2022, but is expected to recover by 0.5% in 2023 and 7% in 2024 (World Bank, 2023). The inflation rate, which peaked at 50% in 2022, has declined to 15% in 2023 and is projected to reach single digits by 2024. The current account deficit, which widened to 12% of GDP in 2022, has narrowed to 6% in 2023 and is forecast to

stabilize at 4% in 2024. The fiscal deficit, which soared to 25% of GDP in 2022 due to war-related spending and revenue losses, has been reduced to 15% in 2023 and is planned to be brought down to 10% in 2024.

These macroeconomic indicators reflect the resilience of the Ukrainian economy and the determination of the authorities to implement sound policies and reforms despite the ongoing conflict. With the support of the international community, Ukraine has embarked on a comprehensive reform agenda that aims to restore fiscal, external, price and financial stability; enhance governance and strengthen institutions; and support economic recovery and long-term growth. Some of the key reforms include:

- Banking sector reform: The authorities have resolved and recapitalized banks, strengthened supervision and regulation, and reduced the role of oligarchs and vested interests in the financial system.
- Social safety net reform: The authorities have restructured the social assistance system by reducing broad subsidies and targeting resources to the poor. This has increased the share of transfers going to the poorest one-fifth of the population from 37% in 2019 to 50% in 2023.
- Health system reform: The authorities have shifted the focus of health care delivery from outdated hospitals to primary care providers, increased public financing for health services, and reduced out-of-pocket spending by patients.
- Energy sector reform: The authorities have liberalized energy prices, improved energy efficiency, diversified energy sources, and reduced dependence on Russian gas imports.
- Public administration reform: The authorities have streamlined the public sector, improved public service delivery, increased transparency and accountability, and strengthened anti-corruption measures¹.

These reforms have helped Ukraine cope with the economic challenges posed by the war and have laid the foundation for a more prosperous and stable future. However, much more needs to be done to consolidate the gains achieved so far and to address the remaining vulnerabilities and risks. The IMF has approved a new four-year Extended Fund Facility (EFF) for Ukraine totaling \$15.6 billion as part of an overall support package from the international community that includes bilateral and multilateral donors. The EFF-supported program aims to anchor policies that sustain fiscal, external, price and financial stability and support economic recovery, while enhancing governance and strengthening institutions

to promote long-term growth in the context of post-war reconstruction and Ukraine's path to EU accession.

6. ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society has played a pivotal role in Ukraine's response to the conflict. Grassroots movements, volunteer organizations, and ordinary citizens have stepped up to provide humanitarian aid, support for internally displaced people, and assistance to the armed forces. This surge in civic engagement reflects the determination of Ukrainians to defend their nation and mitigate the humanitarian consequences of the war.

According to a survey conducted by Chatham House, a majority of Ukrainian civil society organizations (CSOs) have been involved in relief and reconstruction activities since the outbreak of the war. These include delivering food, water, medicine, clothing, and shelter to the affected population; providing legal, psychological, and social services to the displaced and traumatized; raising funds and awareness for the humanitarian crisis; monitoring human rights violations and documenting war crimes; advocating for peace and dialogue; and supporting democratic reforms and anti-corruption measures.

The CSOs have also played a vital role in supporting the Ukrainian military, which was ill-prepared and under-equipped to face the Russian invasion. Volunteers have donated money, equipment, vehicles, and supplies to the army; trained and advised soldiers on medical, tactical, and logistical issues; and organized morale-boosting events and campaigns for the troops. Some CSOs have even formed their own paramilitary units or joined existing ones to fight alongside the regular forces.

The involvement of civil society in the war effort has not only helped Ukraine cope with the emergency situation, but also strengthened its social capital and civic culture. The war has mobilized millions of Ukrainians to participate in public affairs, express their opinions, demand accountability from their leaders, and cooperate with each other across regional, linguistic, and ethnic divides. The war has also fostered a sense of national identity and solidarity among Ukrainians, who have shown remarkable resilience and determination in defending their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

However, civil society also faces many challenges and risks in the post-war context. These include:

- The lack of a clear framework for cooperation between the state and civil society in recovery planning and implementation. Many CSOs feel that they are not adequately consulted or involved by the authorities in designing and delivering recovery programs. They also report

difficulties in accessing information, funding, and resources from the government.

- The potential backlash from vested interests and spoilers who may seek to undermine or reverse the reforms that civil society has advocated for. These include oligarchs, corrupt officials, pro-Russian forces, and radical groups who may use violence, intimidation, propaganda, or legal pressure to silence or discredit civil society actors.
- The fatigue and burnout of civil society activists who have been working under immense stress and danger for a prolonged period. Many CSOs report that they face difficulties in retaining staff, volunteers, and donors due to exhaustion, trauma, or frustration. They also face challenges in adapting to the changing needs and expectations of their beneficiaries and constituencies.
- The competition and fragmentation of civil society due to diverging agendas, interests, and ideologies. Some CSOs may prioritize humanitarian relief over political reform, or vice versa. Some may advocate for dialogue and reconciliation with Russia, while others may call for continued resistance and isolation. Some may align themselves with specific political parties or factions, while others may remain independent or critical. These differences may create tensions or conflicts among civil society actors that could hamper their effectiveness and credibility.

These challenges require civil society to adopt a strategic approach that balances its roles as a service provider, watchdog, advocate, mediator, educator, and innovator. Civil society also needs to build strong partnerships with other stakeholders, such as the government, international donors, business sector, media, academia, religious groups, and local communities.

7. INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY

The Russia-Ukraine War has sparked a significant level of international solidarity. Western countries, in particular, have rallied behind Ukraine, providing military assistance, sanctions against Russia, and diplomatic support. This international response underscores the broader implications of the conflict for global security and the commitment of many nations to upholding the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

International solidarity is a key factor in the resolution of the Russia-Ukraine War. Western countries, in particular, have rallied behind Ukraine, providing military assistance, sanctions against Russia,

and diplomatic support. This international response underscores the broader implications of the conflict for global security and the commitment of many nations to upholding the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Some examples of the international solidarity with Ukraine are:

- *Military assistance:* According to a report by the House of Commons Library, Western countries have provided more than \$77 billion worth of military aid to Ukraine since 2014, including weapons, equipment, training, and intelligence. The US is the largest donor, followed by the UK, Germany, France, and Canada. The EU has also coordinated a military assistance mission to train 30,000 Ukrainian soldiers by the end of 2023.
- *Sanctions against Russia:* Western countries have imposed a range of economic sanctions on Russia to pressure it to end its aggression and respect the Minsk agreements. These sanctions include restrictions on access to financial markets, trade bans on certain sectors (such as energy and defense), asset freezes and travel bans on individuals and entities involved in the conflict, and suspension of cooperation in various fields. According to the BBC, these sanctions have cost Russia about \$350 billion in lost revenues and foreign reserves since 2014.
- *Diplomatic support:* Western countries have expressed their strong political support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as their condemnation of Russia's actions. They have also engaged in diplomatic efforts to facilitate dialogue and negotiations between the parties, as well as to provide humanitarian assistance and monitor human rights violations. The US, the UK, France, and Germany are part of the Normandy format, a group that mediates between Ukraine and Russia. The EU has also established a special representative for the Ukraine crisis and has supported various initiatives to promote peace and stability in the region.

8. IMPACT ON GEOPOLITICS

The conflict has had a profound impact on the geopolitics of Eastern Europe. It has led to a re-evaluation of security dynamics in the region, with NATO countries bolstering their Eastern flank to deter potential Russian aggression. Additionally, the war has strained Russia's relations with the West and fueled discussions about the future of NATO and European security architecture.

The conflict has had a profound impact on the geopolitics of Eastern Europe. It has led to a re-evaluation of security dynamics in the region, with NATO countries bolstering their Eastern flank to deter potential Russian aggression. Additionally, the war has strained Russia's relations with the West and fueled discussions about the future of NATO and European security architecture.

Some of the main geopolitical implications of the conflict are:

- *The strengthening of NATO's Eastern flank:* NATO has deployed parts of its response force to its eastern flank, as Russia's invasion of Ukraine extends Moscow's military power to the borders of several of the alliance's member states. It is the first time the treaty's response force has been used for collective security. NATO has also increased its military presence in the eastern part of the Alliance by establishing multinational battlegroups in Bulgaria, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia. They have also sent more ships, planes and troops to NATO's eastern flank, from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. These actions demonstrate Allies' resolve and readiness to defend Alliance territory and populations.
- *The deterioration of Russia-West relations:* The war in Ukraine has brought relations between Russia and the West to their lowest point since the end of the Cold War. The West has imposed a range of economic sanctions on Russia to pressure it to end its aggression and respect the Minsk agreements. These sanctions include restrictions on access to financial markets, trade bans on certain sectors (such as energy and defense), asset freezes and travel bans on individuals and entities involved in the conflict, and suspension of cooperation in various fields. According to the BBC, these sanctions have cost Russia about \$350 billion in lost revenues and foreign reserves since 2014. The war has also increased political tensions and reduced trust between Russia and the West, making dialogue and cooperation on other issues more difficult.
- *The debate on European security architecture:* The war in Ukraine has raised questions about the adequacy and effectiveness of the existing European security architecture, which is based on the principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, peaceful settlement of disputes, respect for human rights, and cooperation among states. Some argue that this architecture has failed to prevent or resolve conflicts in Europe, such as those in Georgia, Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Ukraine. They call for a

new security order that would address the root causes of instability and insecurity in the region, such as diverging interests, values, and perceptions among states. Others contend that the existing architecture is still valid and relevant, but needs to be strengthened and implemented more consistently. They advocate for more dialogue and confidence-building measures among states, as well as more support for democratic reforms and civil society in countries affected by conflicts.

9. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the discussion has revolved around the humanitarian challenges posed by great power conflict, with a particular focus on the Russia-Ukraine War as a contemporary example. The discourse touched upon the contrasting models of conventional warfare employed by major powers, highlighting the divergent approaches of the United States and Russia, especially regarding the deliberate targeting of civil society. The Russia-Ukraine War has revealed the complexities of modern warfare, where conventional forces of major powers engage in conflict with devastating consequences for civilians. While the Western model aimed to limit humanitarian costs through precision and restraint, the Russian model displayed a ruthless willingness to target civilian infrastructure and populations. This stark contrast in military strategies has had significant humanitarian implications. The course of the war in Ukraine demonstrated the importance of logistics, chains of command, and terrain in determining military effectiveness. Russia's nuclear status also played a role in limiting NATO's direct support for Ukraine. The conflict evolved into a humanitarian disaster, displacing millions and causing widespread suffering, with Russia's conduct raising concerns of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Despite the challenges and suffering endured by Ukraine, the war has not achieved Russia's intended goals of conquest and subjugation. It has instead galvanized Ukrainian resilience and garnered significant Western support. While the conflict remains ongoing, the discussion underscores the importance of upholding principles of sovereignty and human rights in the face of great power aggression. In the absence of a comprehensive resolution to the conflict, the international community, particularly Western nations, faces the ethical and strategic imperative to continue supporting Ukraine, both militarily and financially, to mitigate the humanitarian impact and defend the principles of sovereignty and human dignity.

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Cite this article as: Dr. Zaid Mustafa Alavi and Dr. Sana Haider., (2024). Humanitarian Dilemmas Arising from Major Power Confrontations: With Special Focus on Russia-Ukraine Conflict. *International Journal of Emerging Knowledge Studies*. 3(2), pp. 100-112.