

# NATO's big gamble in Ukraine has failed

*Nothing has gone right for the US and NATO since the initial phase of the war. Attempts to isolate Russia have failed. European economies have been stung badly by the war while others saved themselves and Russia by purchasing discounted Russian crude. Even the war theatre in Ukraine isn't looking the way NATO envisioned it*

ZORAWAR DAULET SINGH | JUNE 03, 2023 / 07:39 AM IST



The Russian military seems to be ahead of NATO on at least the following capabilities – air defence, electronic warfare, artillery/counter artillery, and hypersonic missiles.

Fifteen months into the biggest land war in Eurasia since the Second World War, the tables have turned. US and NATO began with a confidence that a proxy war was the only way to roll back Russian influence in Europe. It was aimed to cut Russia down to size and snuff out the incipient multipolar order.

On paper it was an ingenious, if diabolical, strategy. Ukrainian blood and NATO weapons would be more than a match for Russia. At the very least, western policymakers surmised, Russia would be bogged down in another protracted 'Afghanistan' or 'Vietnam'

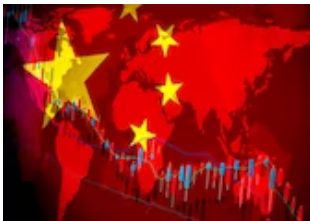
for years, while America would swoop across the world as a rejuvenated superpower.

The opposite has occurred. On every front in this proxy war – it is more apt to classify the conflict as a limited great power war – US goals have fallen short.

## The US's Weak Hand

The international community has stayed scrupulously away from lining up behind the West. **Other than its loyal** G-6 states in tow, Washington has witnessed a resounding rejection of NATO's plan to demonise and contain Russia.

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The Global South has instead discovered an opportunity to advance their own interests and embrace a multipolar world order where weaker states can henceforth bargain for better deals with the major players. India's foreign policy exemplifies this trend that can today be seen in South America, Africa, Middle East and even in parts of East Asia.

Great power geopolitical alignments have also shifted adversely. China – the swing power for the West – has barely budged its position. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine war, Washington has attempted to imagine cleavages between Moscow

and Beijing that it could exploit for a new western rapprochement with China.

Senior US policymakers, including the President, along with a flurry of European leaders have attempted to court the Xi Jinping regime in an attempt to nudge China away from Russia. But to little avail. The Chinese seem unwilling to jeopardise their partnership with Russia. With their own potential flashpoint right under their nose in Taiwan, Beijing fears a similar fate for itself in the future.

## Unanticipated Economic Blowback

The real trump card in Western hands has always been the economy: the legacy dominance of the US dollar, control over international supply chains, and the ability to arbitrarily impose collective sanctions and isolate a country. These are unique leverages that no other great power can claim to possess as of today. This is where the US truly felt it had the upper hand. It could not only destabilise Russia, perhaps even fatally, but also rewrite a new chapter on globalisation.

Yet shockingly again, and despite dramatically severing European energy and industrial linkages with Russia, the blowback to the West has been more severe than the intended impact on the Russian economy. European economies are reeling from inflation and the spectre of de-industrialisation, fueled by a supply side energy and commodity crisis caused by western sanctions.

Industrial **giants like Germany** have slumped into a recession. Economists can no longer deny just how critical the Russian commodity and energy link as well as market access was for European prosperity and industrial vitality.

## How Russia Escaped, India Too

But how did Russia escape its own economic strangulation? Very simply, the non-western world did not commit hara-kiri. China and India along with several other developing economies quickly replaced western markets, providing not only a lifeline to Russian exports but also drew unusual growth benefits of their own from discounted crude oil.

Flushed with revenues, Moscow has been able to procure industrial components, machinery and consumer goods necessary for its basic economic stability. Trade with China is estimated to touch \$200 billion in 2023, emulating a role played by Germany in the past.

As a consequence, Russia defied the double-digit recession forecast for it in 2022 by only contracting by 2.1 percent. Even the IMF projects positive GDP growth for the Russian economy in 2023 and 2024.

## **The War Theatre: Advantage Russia**

Finally, it is in the war theatre itself where events have unfolded calling into question the entire geopolitical gamble of the West. After the initial phase when Russia received a rude shock about the full extent of NATO's penetration and the systematic buildup of the Ukrainian armed forces since 2014, Moscow shifted to a **strategy of attrition**.

This meant occupying territory – usually the primary objective of a war – became less important (other than of course the ethnic-Russian dominated Donbass and Crimea) than degrading and destroying the NATO-built force inside Ukraine.

Classical war of manoeuvre with large tanks battles in vast open fields or direct assaults on entrenched Ukrainian positions – scenarios that NATO expected and trained the Ukrainian military for and for which it invested in major defence lines around the Donbass – were replaced by gruelling and bloody struggles for strategic cities and gateway towns.

**Russia has prevailed** in all these major urban battles that will help it secure eastern Ukraine. At the same time, Russia has used its offensive firepower to freely strike at military, logistic, high value infrastructure, and command and control targets across Ukraine including in Kyiv. Russia adapted to fight an intelligent and relatively low casualty war of its choosing and not the one NATO had planned to bog it down in.

## **Ukraine-NATO: Outmanned, Underprepared**

A few themes are now increasingly clear. The bulk of the Ukrainian military force has been largely destroyed in the past 12 months of the war. The replacement units being inducted after the most recent round of NATO training in the UK and elsewhere cannot restore those massive losses.

The industrial capacity to wage a big and long war has been severely impaired, not just in Ukraine but in NATO. NATO countries have already sent over \$70-80 billion worth of military equipment, with the lion's share coming from the US. The real constraint now is western production capacity because NATO planners never anticipated a war with a peer competitor that might exceed a few weeks of intense combat.

To get a sense of the gap – Russia fires artillery rounds in an afternoon in Ukraine equivalent to at least two months of US production. NATO weapons systems that were fielded to alter the course of the war have come up short. The Russian military seems to be ahead of NATO on at least the following capabilities – air defence, electronic warfare, artillery/counter artillery, and hypersonic missiles.

The much-touted Ukrainian counter-offensive is likely to run into the famous monsoon season before it clashes with any Russian formations. What might follow after that is another gasp of NATO-fueled fighting before Russia inflicts its own counter-offensive.

The blowback in Ukraine is real and the most significant geopolitical trend of the past year.

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