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Núcleo de Desenho do IDN - Paulo Jorge Pereira

PROPRIEDADE, DESIGN GRÁFICO E EDIÇÃO

Instituto da Defesa Nacional

ISSN 2182-5327

Depósito Legal 340906/12

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A European War

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The longer Russia's war against Ukraine has lasted, the more important it has become to the security of all of Europe. Ukraine is not a member of the EU or NATO (yet), but nevertheless the EU's and NATO's defensive perimeter is not the border between Poland and Ukraine or between Romania and Moldova; it is the front between Ukraine and Russia.

The Russian Threat

The reason is that if at war's end Russia's inner conviction (not its public posture) is that it has won, it will not stop there. So much is clear from Russia's own publicly available strategic documents: Moscow looks at all former Soviet republics the way it looks at Ukraine. For Russia, these are subordinate states that have escaped, and therefore must be enticed or coerced back into, its exclusive sphere of influence.

If Russia would ever come to the conclusion, therefore, that Europe allows it a free hand in Ukraine, it would undoubtedly step up its efforts against other states as well, by hybrid actions if possible, but by military force if necessary. Moldova and Georgia, which have moved the furthest outside the Russian orbit, and are already the target of fierce hybrid campaigns, would certainly suffer an intensification of Russian pressure. And if, ultimately, Russia would conclude that not only does Europe not stand up for its partners, but that is too intimidated to unite and fight even for itself, then Moscow might be tempted into direct aggression against EU and NATO countries. In Putin's mind, the Baltic states, which had been forcibly annexed by the USSR, certainly also belong to Russia. Thus, Russian military expansionism must be halted now, in Ukraine, as far to the East as possible.

The American Challenge

Moreover, Ukraine now has a million men and women under arms, who count on the EU's and NATO's side in the balance of power with Russia. If Ukraine

would be defeated, that million-strong army would drop out of the equation, and the balance of power would suddenly shift dramatically in Russia's favour. All the more so because the American contribution to the collective defence of Europe has recently become doubtful. That is a result not only of the Trump administration's desire that Europe takes ownership of its own conventional defence, but also of the fact that Trump only ever puts pressure on Ukraine, and never on Russia, to come to an agreement to end the war. For Trump, peace in Ukraine is not an end in itself, but a means to allow him to normalise relations with Putin. If it had been up to him, he would surely long have sacrificed half of Ukraine or more, witness his 28-point plan that entirely favoured Russia. Fortunately, Europe has sufficient leverage (sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine that Trump cannot concede away because he does not control them) to prevent Trump's plan from being imposed on Kyiv. But because Trump's strategic purpose is a deal with Russia, Europe must assume that this US administration will not go to war with Russia over Ukraine under any circumstances; while it cannot assume that Trump will continue to support Ukraine indefinitely.

Trump is not wrong *per se* to want to end the war, because Europe has nothing better to offer either than freezing the current frontline and turning it into the line of control (without legally recognising any annexation). Victory, understood as the liberation of all of Ukraine, is only possible if Russia implodes, but that is too unpredictable to serve as an assumption on which to base strategy. Or if the European members of NATO and the EU join the war, but they will not, because the point of halting (and weakening) Russia in Ukraine is precisely to deter Russia from starting a direct great power war; for Europe to start that war itself would go against the entire logic of its strategy of deterrence and defence. The challenge is to arrive at a settlement that would certainly not be fair (for it would leave twenty percent of Ukrainian territory under Russian occupation), but that should be durable, in the sense that it would not make Ukraine even more vulnerable but would deter a third Russian invasion.

European Determination

Putin holds the cards, to borrow Trump's expression. Europe and the US cannot force him to negotiate in earnest. China could, by ending its economic relationship, but will not, for it sees Russia as an indispensable partner to counterbalance the US. For Beijing, Russia must not necessarily win, but it cannot be defeated. At the same time, China will never rupture its relations with Europe and the US for Russia's sake, hence it cannot afford the war escalating into a great power war either, for then it could no longer pretend to be neutral. As long as Russia does not move into that direction, China will likely just maintain its current stance.

Putin could opt for a deal: he could consolidate his considerable territorial gains and, through normalisation of relations with the US, undo to some extent his ever greater dependence on China. If agreement is reached, Europe must set the sovereign Ukraine that survives firmly on the path towards EU-membership. EU-membership is vital for Ukraine. This is a total war: if Russia wins, it will annex large parts of Ukraine and turn the remainder into a puppet state. If Ukraine survives, it is no longer viable as a buffer state in between the EU and Russia; it must join the Union. A *sui generis* formula may have to be found, allowing Ukraine to join the Union without immediately gaining decision-making powers and benefits in all policy areas. But one thing must be absolutely clear: whichever formula is chosen, the moment Ukraine joins the EU, Article 42.7 applies. An attack on any EU Member State is an attack on all.

If agreement is reached, therefore, Europe must provide a security guarantee to Ukraine. That means that if Russia violates the deal, Europe does join the war itself. Anything short of that cannot be called a security guarantee. A security guarantee can be a declaration: in March 1939 Britain and France guaranteed the security of Poland, and when Nazi Germany invaded, they declared war. But a declaratory guarantee is credible only if one's past record is one of decisive action; such, unfortunately, is not Europe's case. The Coalition of the Willing that is already preparing plans will have to pre-deploy land, naval, and air forces to Ukraine, therefore, to signal determination and strengthen deterrence. As stated above, given Trump's strategy, Europe must assume that if Putin calls its bluff and attacks Ukraine, this administration will not join the war. Europe, including Ukraine, must prepare to fight the next conventional war alone.

Putin might also opt to continue the war, however. One can easily imagine how Trump, if the war continues, will find a reason to blame Zelensky: "I gave you a chance of peace, you didn't take it, you're on your own now". Then only Europe would continue to support Ukraine, and Putin likely thinks that in that scenario he will prevail on the battlefield. I firmly believe that is wrong: with or without the US, with the support of Europe Ukraine will hold the line. But the sad fact is that Trump's one-sided messages may precisely encourage Putin to continue the fight.

The Russo-Ukrainian War already is a European war, because ultimately the security of the EU and of all European members of NATO is at stake. And whichever course the conflict takes, it will most likely be Europeans alone who will support, and possibly fight alongside, Ukraine. A big responsibility, but one that Europe can and must assume.

From First to Second Gear in Ukraine – how to avoid a bigger war in Europe?

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Despite the intensity of American diplomatic efforts to end the Russian invasion of Ukraine, peace is not around the corner. Various rounds of meetings in Geneva, Kyiv, Moscow, Miami, and Riyadh are hardly closing the irreconcilable gap between Moscow and Kyiv. Putin wants to erase Ukraine from the political map of Europe, and Trump refuses to pursue peace through pressure on the aggressor.

Russia's maximalist agenda stands. What is currently the territory of Ukraine should become part of Russia, its identity and culture eliminated, and its resources (human and natural, especially fertile land) used to turn Russia into a European empire. Moscow perceives control over Ukraine as a crucial step towards achieving hegemony in Europe. Putin is driven by a manic desire to restore Russia's greatness and "gather historic" lands as Peter the Great and Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great, did. In his worldview, for such a legacy, no sacrifice of Russian blood and riches is too big.

Russia's appetite does not end in Ukraine. At the start of the 20th century, the borders of the Russian Empire included Finland, Poland, and the Baltic States. Putin's claims extend to other parts of Eastern Europe and to the USSR's post-World War II sphere of control, formerly known as the Warsaw Pact. In

his worldview, two things stand in the way of his dominance: the United Europe (the EU and NATO) and the US military presence on the continent.

To this end, Russia is already fighting in the grey zone against Europe, complicating the detection and attribution of attacks. The goal of these activities varies, but in relation to Ukraine, it is to undermine military logistics, production facilities, and break the resolve of European allies to support Kyiv's resistance. The number of such attacks almost quadrupled between 2023 and 2024, and the former Wagner group recruits people inside European societies.

Ukraine is determined to defend its full sovereignty and defeat the Russian military grouping on its legitimate territory. It continues fierce resistance to upset Putin's plan for victory. Four years ago, in 2022, the Russian plan was to achieve regime change in Kyiv, backed by the special military operation. Civic and military opposition was supposed to be crushed in a few weeks, and a new puppet regime would approve Ukraine's unification with Russia. After a failure to capture Kyiv, Putin did not abandon his plan – he moved into a second gear, into a full-fledged war. He dialled up recruitment, put his economy on a war footing, built factories that modernised and mass-produced Iranian drones, ramped up production of missiles, and even reached out for help to North Korea to patch manpower shortages and a ballistic missiles deficit. Moscow now spends nearly 40% of its budget on defence and security.

The scorecard of this war is harrowing. The current invasion now lasts longer than the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, but Russia occupied only an additional 13 percent of Ukraine compared to February 2022. The Russian army has lost more than one million dead and wounded. Nearly 30 percent of Ukraine's Donbas region, which includes a belt of highly fortified cities (Sloviansk, Kramatorsk, Druzhkivka), remains out of reach for the Russian army. Putin hopes that Trump will deliver it to him by exerting pressure on Zelensky. Nearly one third of its Black Sea fleet is destroyed or neutralised in the Russian base of Novorossiysk.

Ukraine has also taken heavy losses and has over half a million casualties. It struggles to replenish its manpower, especially in infantry. Failing to achieve strategic gains on the battlefield, Russia pursued total war to compel the country to capitulate. It deliberately targets civilian critical infrastructure to freeze people into submission, undermine railway logistics, and slow down its economy. Consistent intense aerial attacks have damaged all Ukrainian thermal power

generation, distribution grids, and residential heating systems. Russia targets gas storage facilities in the West and electricity supply to Ukraine's nuclear power stations. As a result, Ukraine has lost 70 percent of its generation capacity, and hundreds of thousands of people only have an electricity supply for 2-3 hours per day.

Ukrainians are exhausted; many are cold (several hundred thousand will remain without heat in Kyiv and Kharkiv until the end of winter). The temperatures were merciless as well, with thermometers reaching -20°C in February. But the society is determined to defend and sustain a high level of mobilisation. The perception is that it is better to be cold and under bombing than to live under the Russian occupation. The majority of Ukrainians deeply mistrust any deals with Putin and are against retreating from the "fortress city beltway" in Donbas. This would only provide a better operational ground for a renewed Russian attack on the rest of Ukraine and open the way for an open terrain with few fortifications.

Given Russian strategic intent and Ukraine's determination to resist, Europe must urgently speed up its action in three directions. The overarching goal of these actions is to shatter the conviction that Russia can subjugate Ukraine and mount internal pressure on Putin's system to a threatening degree for its own stability. Only when Russian elites see evidence of domestic stability crumbling might they change their calculus for Ukraine and Europe.

This action plan should first ensure that Ukraine has military capabilities to defend its territory effectively and strike deep into Russia. Currently, the military revolution is challenging the traditional mass advantage, favouring Ukraine. Ukraine's new technological defence-industrial base is booming. Growing from a market of \$1 billion USD pre-2022 to nearly \$35 billion USD in 2025. Ukraine today produces 40% of the capabilities it uses on the battlefield. Its army is fighting a technological war, where nearly 80% of all casualties are caused by unmanned systems, and the ratio is the following: 4% of Ukrainian drone operators destroy 30-40% of Russian ground forces. New Ukraine's Foreign Minister Fedorov set a benchmark of eliminating 50 000 Russian troops per month to choke off Russian offensive operations.

Western allies should help intensify long-range strikes against the Russian military-industrial base, the oil and gas sector, while at the same time ramping up air defences for Ukraine. Air defence remains the weakest link. Ukraine has demonstrated the

effectiveness of diminishing oil revenues by kinetic means. Kyiv needs more long-range missiles and drones. The new approach of strategic neutralization of Russia could curtail its capabilities to deliver results on the battlefield.

Winning the new military-technological race is key to this war and to Europe's own security. A combination of European funding, innovation, its manufacturing base, and Ukrainian technological ingenuity gives a good chance to outpace Russia. Take a recent example of a German-Ukrainian joint venture, Quantum Frontline Industries, opening a new production facility in Germany for a multi-purpose drone. It will produce 10 000 drones per year for a system already deployed by 60 units on the frontline. Such a partnership, which builds on the Ukrainian IPO (initial public offering), will enable an urgent need for scale and help modernise European armed forces. It is a clear win-win.

Second, in the war of attrition, funding is key. Putting a resolute squeeze on Russia's budget while securing long-term funding for Ukraine is critical. There should be a more aggressive effort to dry up oil income for the Kremlin. The 20th EU sanctions package should aim for a full oil embargo, curtailing the shadow fleet and intensifying pressure of secondary sanctions on countries purchasing Russian crude or helping in sanction evasion. The current dynamic is favourable to Kyiv, as Russia's oil revenues plunged to a 5-year low. But still over 1 500 shadow fleet tankers are operating globally, and many are transporting Russian oil via the Baltic Sea.

Gold is another enabler of sanction evasion and finances the war. Russia uses its footprint in the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Mali to smuggle its own and extract African gold. It then uses it for payments to Iran, North Korea, and others. This smuggling and laundering of gold through fragile states helps Moscow bypass economic restrictions, fund its war in Ukraine, and undermine the effectiveness of the global financial system.

Simultaneously, Ukraine's allies must secure financing for military purposes and economic stability. Repurposing Russian sovereign assets for Ukraine's defence and rapid reconstruction must progress. The option of moving the remaining 210 billion euros from Euroclear to an EU custodian and repurposing them for Ukraine could mitigate the risks the Belgian government is so concerned about. European taxpayers should not bear the debt of Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion.

Finally, the weakness of Ukraine's winning strategy is in the Western mind. The European bloc is 12 times more powerful economically than Russia, and it has all the resources to degrade and exhaust the Russian army in Ukraine. It is time to dispel Putin's narrative power over some European capitals, that Russia is invincible and will sooner or later prevail. Four years of its aggression have demonstrated that Russia has nothing to show in terms of victory. If we provide Russia time to consolidate its gains in Ukraine and rearm, a wider war in Europe is more likely.

That is why Russia actively attacks the cognitive frontline in Europe by manipulating reality and aiming to compel key capitals to act against their own security interests, such as abandoning Ukraine. European political leaders should speak openly with voters about why Ukraine is a keystone of European security and why investment in Ukraine is the best decision we could make today to secure our tomorrow.

A Guerra na Ucrânia e o Direito Internacional

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A guerra na Ucrânia não se trava apenas no campo de batalha. É também uma guerra jurídica. Moscovo não se limita a violar o direito internacional: procura cinicamente instrumentalizá-lo, reinterpretá-lo e apresentá-lo como fundamento da sua ação militar.

Desde o início da invasão em larga escala, a 24 de fevereiro de 2022, a Rússia afirma agir em conformidade com a Carta das Nações Unidas. Justifica a guerra como humanitária e defensiva, denunciando tanto um alegado genocídio no Donbas ucraniano como uma suposta ameaça da NATO, e apresentando a Ucrânia como um fantoche ocidental liderado por "nazis". Estas alegações são repetidas de forma sistemática e amplificadas por campanhas de desinformação que visam moldar a perceção pública muito para além do espaço europeu.

O apelo insistente ao direito internacional não é accidental. Revela, antes de mais, que a ordem jurídica internacional continua a ser central para a legitimidade política. Se fosse irrelevante, não precisaria de ser invocada. Mas revela também como as normas podem ser distorcidas quando deixam de funcionar como limites ao poder e passam a ser usadas como instrumentos de justificação do uso da força.

Juridicamente, a situação é inequívoca: trata-se de uma guerra de conquista e anexação, em flagrante violação da Carta das Nações Unidas, a primeira deste tipo em solo europeu desde o final da Segunda Guerra Mundial. Há um agressor e há uma vítima.

O agressor é a Federação da Rússia, que invadiu um Estado soberano por não aceitar a sua reorientação política e estratégica rumo à integração europeia. O objetivo é impedir a consolidação da Ucrânia como um Estado de direito democrático fora da esfera de influência que Moscovo reclama para o espaço pós-soviético. A Rússia recorre sistematicamente à ameaça do uso de armas nucleares para dissuadir o apoio internacional à Ucrânia e bloqueia qualquer ação eficaz do Conselho de Segurança das Nações Unidas. Sobre o presidente russo impende um mandado de captura do Tribunal Penal Internacional por crimes de guerra relacionados com a deportação e transferência ilícita de crianças ucranianas.

A vítima da agressão é a Ucrânia. Um Estado que, na década de 1990, abdicou do seu arsenal nuclear em troca de garantias – que se revelaram vãs – quanto ao respeito pela sua soberania e integridade territorial. Luta agora pela sobrevivência com o apoio de uma coligação de Estados, determinados a não legitimar uma ameaça crítica a uma ordem internacional baseada em regras, e não na lei do mais forte.

O colapso do sistema de segurança coletiva das Nações Unidas é evidente. O Conselho de Segurança mostrou-se incapaz de agir quando um dos seus membros permanentes é o agressor. Mas esse fracasso institucional não equivale à inutilidade do direito internacional. Pelo contrário, evidencia os riscos estratégicos de permitir que a sua violação sistemática conduza à gradual obsolescência. O que está em causa não é apenas a Ucrânia, mas o precedente que se cria se a agressão e a anexação forem toleradas sem consequências.

Para potências pequenas como Portugal, o direito internacional é um instrumento essencial de proteção da soberania. Em Davos, o primeiro-ministro do Canadá, Mark Carney, descreveu a fase atual da ordem internacional como um momento de rutura, marcado pelo regresso da rivalidade imperial entre grandes potências. Significa isto que os Estados que dependem de normas partilhadas só se conseguem proteger se atuarem em conjunto, apostando em projetos políticos de integração regional e alianças militares aptos a projetar capacidade estratégica efetiva. Num mundo sem regras, quem não está à mesa corre sempre o risco de estar no menu, como referiu Mark Carney.

A guerra na Ucrânia antecipa, assim, muitos dos dilemas políticos e estratégicos que marcarão os conflitos do século XXI e assinala a abertura de uma nova fase na ordem internacional, na qual se torna visível o fim do longo período de declínio das guerras entre Estados que se seguiu à adoção da Carta das Nações Unidas, em 1945. Durante décadas, os princípios da autodeterminação, da soberania, da integridade territorial e, especialmente, da proibição geral do uso da força contribuíram decisivamente para reduzir tanto a frequência como a letalidade dos conflitos interestatais. O seu enfraquecimento progressivo não significa apenas mais instabilidade, mas o regresso de conflitos armados entre Estados, com níveis de destruição e perda massiva de vítimas humanas que o sistema internacional do pós-guerra procurou e conseguiu precisamente evitar.

O direito internacional não decide batalhas nem substitui capacidades militares. Ainda assim, tem sido a principal fonte de legitimação de um auxílio militar e económico multinacional sem precedentes, que tem permitido à Ucrânia resistir, contra todas as expectativas, à brutal agressão russa durante quatro anos¹.

¹ Ver: Coutinho, Francisco Pereira, “Guerra, Mentiras e Direito Internacional: 46 questões sobre a agressão russa à Ucrânia” Zigurate, 2026.



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