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Abstract

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Keywords: Russia-Ukraine War, Geopolitical Insecurity, Defensive Realism, Energy Crisis, International Relations

Authors:

Muhammad Naseeb Ikram: (Corresponding Author)
Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: naseebikram234@gmail.com)

Faizan Saeed: Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Abdullah Amjad Ali: Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

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Authors:

Muhammad Naseeb Ikram: (Corresponding Author) Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
(Email: naseebikram234@gmail.com)

Faizan Saeed: Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Abdullah Amjad Ali: Graduate, Department of International Relations, University of Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.

Abstract

This research delves into the geographical and historical factors underpinning the Russia-Ukraine war, exploring Russia's expansive strategies and the role of geography in its foreign policy. It highlights the conflict's extensive implications across the Eurasian region, manifesting in crises like global food and energy shortages, and shifting geopolitical alliances. By examining Russia's defensive maneuvers against Western influences, the study offers insights into the complex dynamics of regional security, the motivations behind Russia's foreign policies, and the broader impacts of the war on global stability. Recommendations focus on diplomatic resolutions to mitigate the conflict's repercussions.

Keywords: [Russia-Ukraine War](#), [Geopolitical Insecurity](#), [Defensive Realism](#), [Energy Crisis](#), [International Relations](#)

Introduction

Russia's expansive landmass and historical narrative are marked by persistent geopolitical insecurities and strategic defense mechanisms. This study examines Russia's expansive history, highlighting its most recent military engagement—the ongoing conflict with Ukraine that commenced

on February 24, 2022. As the largest nation globally, spanning one-eighth of the world's total land area and bridging Europe and Asia, Russia's geography presents unique challenges and opportunities. Its landscape features a stark diversity from deserts to frozen shores and high mountains to vast steppes. These flat steppes, historically unprotected by



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natural barriers, have significantly influenced Russia's defense policies, making the country susceptible to invasions, as evidenced by historical invasions led by figures like Napoleon and Hitler.

This geographical vulnerability, compounded by harsh winters, has ingrained a deep sense of survival in Russian society, shaping its political strategies and societal structures. The post-Soviet geopolitical landscape has further complicated these insecurities. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the loss of buffer states, many of which joined NATO, directly threatening Russia's security periphery. The Kremlin perceives NATO's eastward expansion as a direct threat, echoing the historical anxieties of foreign invasion and prompting Russia to secure its borders more robustly, particularly through its actions in Ukraine (Haider, [2023](#)).

The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine illustrates these dynamics vividly. It traces its origins to NATO's 2008 membership action plan for Ukraine, leading to heightened tensions following Crimea's annexation and the conflict in Donbas. The situation escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022, seen by Russia as a defensive measure against NATO's encroachment (Kolosov et al., [2022](#)). This conflict has not only strained international relations but has also led to severe global repercussions including inflation and supply chain disruptions, affecting global food security and economic stability.

The general goal of this paper is to reveal the historical and geographical background of Russian geopolitics and its reactions. Thus, this work will focus on the Russia-Ukraine war that is still ongoing to stress the role of geography in predicting geopolitical interactions and strategies. The Russia-Ukraine conflict is not a new one and has many factors that led to it; historical, political, economic, and social factors. Still, geography remains one of the most important and, at the same time, underestimated factors that define the Russian geopolitical vector. The Russian border with the West is practically non-existent and there are no geographical features that could prevent the threats coming from the Western powers, particularly the EU and NATO. This paper explores the geographical factors that have driven Russia's historical and contemporary aggression and

discusses the impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on the Eurasian geo-political environment.

This paper sets out to achieve several key objectives: First, to examine the historical background of Russian geopolitical anxieties; second, to investigate how geopolitical factors have shaped Russia's imperialist agenda up to the present crisis with Ukraine; third, to assess the role of the Western powers in the conflict and the effects on the whole Eurasian continent. Correspondingly, the research questions guiding this study are: In what way does the notion of geographic insecurity influence the Russian expansionist policies, especially in relation to the Russia-Ukraine crisis? Additionally, how does the conflict between Russia and Ukraine affect the rest of the Eurasian region? These questions are crucial for comprehending the multifaceted processes that shape the world and the impacts of geopolitical decisions that stem from geographic considerations

Literature Review

Geopolitics according to Colin Flint (2017) is the study of the relationships between politics, geography, and economy, which creates world politics through the management of geographical resources. This literature review is focused on Russia's historical geopolitical apprehensions, which are witnessed in the present-day war with Ukraine, and its impact on the Eurasian area. Tim Marshall ([2015](#)) discusses how geographical vulnerabilities have historically prompted Russian leaders to adopt defensive strategies, particularly highlighting the flat terrains of eastern Ukraine which have historically attracted invaders. Historically, Russian leaders like Ivan the Terrible embodied the principle of preemptive defense, fortifying domestic positions due to the lack of natural barriers in the western region (Andreyev, [2023](#)). The absence of natural defenses, such as mountain ranges or substantial water bodies, has perennially complicated Russian foreign policy and border security efforts (Ferris, [2020](#)). The modern geopolitical scene reflects these historical patterns, with Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 stemming from its vulnerabilities and strategic interests in response to NATO's expansion towards Eastern Europe (Marshall, [2015](#)).

According to Steil (2018), the enlargement of NATO was perceived as a strategic threat by Moscow, leading to intense rivalry in strategically important zones like the Baltic states and Ukraine. Ziegler (2021) notes that the erosion of traditional buffer zones due to NATO's eastward enlargement has been viewed by the Kremlin as a significant security threat, prompting Russia to reassert its influence in Ukraine in 2022 to establish a more secure perimeter against perceived Western aggression. The invasion has led to severe geopolitical realignment, energy and food crises, nuclear risks, and humanitarian crises, marking a profound shift in global dynamics (Seven Ways Russia's War on Ukraine changed the world, 2023). These outcomes have particularly challenged Western powers, notably the United States, complicating their ability to discern Russia's motives amid strengthening ties between Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran (Writer, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this research is based on Defensive Realism, a subset of Neo-Realism, articulated by Kenneth Waltz (1979). Waltz posits that in an anarchic international system, security is the paramount concern of states, which shapes their behavior more than the pursuit of power. Defensive Realism suggests that states should aim for sufficient power to ensure security but avoid seeking hegemony, as this can provoke counterbalancing coalitions.

David Blair's critique of Western portrayals of Russian leadership, particularly Putin, in *The British Daily Telegraph* (Thalis, 2018), exemplifies the tension between Western media narratives and the realpolitik considerations of Russian foreign policy. The West often depicts Putin as a revanchist autocrat, yet from a Defensive Realist perspective, his actions are seen as rational responses to the strategic pressures exerted by NATO's expansion. In line with Defensive Realism, Robert Person (2017) argues that Putin's strategies are primarily driven by security concerns rather than a desire to expand Russian power per se. The disruption of the Cold War balance of power by NATO's expansion has instilled a perception of insecurity among Russian policymakers, validating a defensive posture in line with Defensive Realist principles.

This theoretical framework provides a lens through which to understand Russia's geopolitical strategies as rational responses to an evolving security environment, emphasizing survival and stability of over-aggressive expansion.

Russia's History of Geopolitical Insecurity, Expansion, and Protection

Russia, the world's largest nation, has a complex history marked by geopolitical insecurities stemming from its vast and vulnerable borders. From the days of Kievan Rus, Russia has faced threats from hostile neighbors and natural challenges, shaping its political and economic landscape and influencing its foreign and domestic policies. The historical narrative shows that despite its formidable military power, Russia's lack of natural barriers and access to warm water ports has perennially exposed it to external pressures and internal conflicts (Franklin & Shepard, 1996).

The evolution of modern Russia traces back to the unification of various tribes under Kyivan Rus in the 9th century, establishing a federation that laid the groundwork for the nations of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. This early stage, enhanced by trade and shared cultural and religious ties, faced significant geographic insecurities. The flat landscapes and extensive river systems made it susceptible to invasions from nomadic tribes and later, Mongol forces, prompting strategic military and political alliances to protect its territories (Marshall, 2015). In the Medieval era, the Grand Principality of Muscovy emerged as a haven of prosperity despite its geographic vulnerabilities. Lacking natural defenses, Muscovy relied on strategic leadership and diplomatic prowess to establish itself as a central authority, leveraging its position to build economic and military strength. This period witnessed the gradual expansion of Muscovy, as leaders like Ivan I capitalized on the disarray within the Mongol Empire to extend their influence (Wilson, 2023).

The 20th century and the era of the Soviet Union marked the peak of Russian expansion, with the Soviet state extending its influence across Eastern Europe and Central Asia, using these regions as buffers against potential Western aggression. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union saw Russia retreating to borders reminiscent

of the 17th century, losing significant buffer zones in the Baltics and Central Asia (Khan, 2010). Ukraine is strategically significant for Russia in the contemporary world, which is reminiscent of historical trends of Russian expansion and the creation of buffer states. The annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine illustrate how Russia still employs geographical approaches to safeguard its borders against Western influences, thereby illustrating that geographic insecurities remain a significant determinant of Russia's politics.

Tracing the Origin and Underlying Causes of the Russia-Ukraine War

The direct cause of the Russia-Ukraine war was the Maidan Revolution of 2014 which was initiated by President Yanukovich's decision to reject the association agreement with the European Union and opt for the Union with Russia. This decision was considered as a direct challenge to Moscow's positions in its influence sphere especially in view of the proposed Ukrainian integration into the Eurasian Economic Union. Yanukovich's decision stirred up the public and triggered large-scale protests, namely the Euromaidan protests, to call for Yanukovich's resignation and the fight against the Russian intervention in Ukraine (Chupryna, 2021). These protests escalated into what would become the Revolution of Dignity, culminating in Yanukovich's ousting and the establishment of a pro-European interim government. Russia's response to these events was swift and decisive, resulting in the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the support for separatist movements in the Donbas region, thus marking the beginning of the prolonged conflict.

Following Crimea's annexation, the conflict spread to eastern Ukraine, particularly in the Donbas region, where pro-Russian sentiment was strong. The emergence of self-proclaimed republics in Donetsk and Luhansk led to intense military engagements between Ukrainian forces and separatist groups, heavily backed by Russia. This phase of the conflict has been marked by significant violence and humanitarian crises, underlining the deep-seated tensions between Ukrainian sovereignty and Russian geopolitical ambitions (Ray, 2023).

Security Dilemma Between NATO and Russia: A Cause of the Russia-Ukraine War

The security dilemma between NATO and Russia reflects a classic case of mutual suspicion and escalating militarization, where defensive measures by one side are perceived as offensive threats by the other. This dynamic has been particularly pronounced in the context of NATO's activities in Eastern Europe and Russia's military engagements in bordering regions, contributing to a cycle of tension and conflict that culminated in the full-scale invasion in 2022 (Benjamin & Davies, 2022). The complex interplay of historical grievances, strategic imperatives, and geopolitical shifts has culminated in a protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Understanding the origins and causes of this war is essential for discerning the broader implications for regional stability and international security.

Major Impacts of the Russo-Ukraine War in the Eurasian Region

Its implication is beyond the belligerent parties and indeed the Eurasian region and the global community must feel the heat of this Russia - Ukraine war. This conflict has appeared as a new geopolitical shake-up that worsened existing weaknesses, as well as introduced new problems in numerous spheres - from the disruption of energy supplies to food security issues.

Energy Crisis

The war has caused a drastic energy shortage, especially in Europe because it depends on Russia for energy products. It has become apparent that the European energy domain, mainly based on oil and natural gas - the latter imported from Russia - has been badly hit. This has put the European economy up for deep shocks starting from the manufacturing segment to the cost of living (Besson, 2022).

Germany, one of the leading economies of the European Union, has been greatly affected mainly because of its reliance on Russian gas. The disruption of gas supplies has not only affected big industries like chemical and automotive but has also forced the country to look for other energy sources and means. The Nord Stream pipeline, which transports Russian gas directly to Germany

and is an important object of this conflict, has been discussed most often. The political conflicts around this pipeline have been rising, and that has made Germany shift its focus and find other energy sources (Europe's energy crisis, [2022](#)). As a result, Germany has been forced to bring back into operation some of the coal-fired power stations and hasten the shift towards renewable energy sources. For example, the REPowerEU plan seeks to decrease the EU dependence on Russian fossil fuels by increasing the level of renewable energy in the energy sector (Russia's war on Ukraine, [n. d.](#)).

Food Crises

The Russia-Ukraine war has affected the food security of the world as both of these countries are major wheat-producing and exporting countries. This disruption has caused food scarcity and price rise which has a major impact on various countries especially the developing worlds in Africa and Asia that depend on their import. Economists from across the globe have labeled the current food crisis as one of the most severe disruptions to the supply of wheat and other food commodities since World War II. The World Food Program expressed that the global famine risk has increased tenfold in the last five years due to the energy crisis that affects agriculture costs. The situation has raised international concern about finding a solution to the conflict in order to stabilize the food supply. With the intensification of the Russia-Ukraine war most countries especially Pakistan have felt the heat of the conflict in the shape of commodity shortages and surging prices. The Russia-Ukraine war has significantly impacted Pakistan, leading to a severe rise in commodity prices and food shortages. Historically reliant on Ukrainian and Russian wheat, cooking oil, and grains, Pakistan faces escalating inflation due to disrupted supplies. The 2022 floods exacerbated the crisis by destroying crops and increasing hunger. This devastating effect on the economy has led millions of people falling to poverty and worsened the already poor nutritional status, with the government finding it difficult to soften the effect on its people. To address these issues, Pakistan has shifted its wheat imports from Ukraine to Russia, becoming a major importer of Russian wheat to mitigate the food crisis and support economic development.

Shifting Alliances

The conflict has broken the old relations and has given birth to new ones. For example, Germany and Italy can be mentioned, as those countries that rely on Russia's energy resources, have to find a way to meet their economic needs, and at the same time, follow the political agenda set by the majority of the Western countries. This fine line is a reflection of changes in the system of international relations in the Eurasian area (Geres et al., [2023](#)).

The Russo-Ukrainian war has altered the geopolitics of the Eurasian region and paved the way for new alliance systems, especially between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. These countries have also aligned themselves into a strategic block which may be a result of reduced relations with the West and imposing sanctions on them. This new alliance is characterized by the common desire to challenge the Western geopolitical influence and cope with the economic sanctions. China and Russia have strengthened the relations thus boosting the economic and political relationship between the two countries. China has had a rather ambiguous approach to the conflict; it has condemned NATO's expansionism while stressing the importance of Ukraine's sovereignty while not explicitly denouncing Russia's actions. This approach is part of a larger plan to strengthen the cooperation with Russia as an opposing power to the United States and to enhance the interaction with it in the spheres where Russian-American relations have become progressively active, including the energy sphere and the sphere of technology (Freeman et al., [2023](#)).

This dynamic, Iran being under Western sanctions as well, has become closer with Russia, providing military support in equipment and otherwise, which signifies the stronger tie of this Eurasian axis that is responding to increasing Western pressures. In the same way, North Korea has also backed Russia through diplomatic and material support whereby it has offered military assistance in return for economic assistance from Russia as seen in the recent Madhani ([2023](#)). These alliances are not only counteraction to Western policies but are the signs of a new shift in Eurasian politics, where these states try to develop a new world order with several poles to diminish the role

of the West. It can be observed that these nations have come together to form a new bloc that aims at changing the current world order and increasing their geopolitical power and security through the use of economic and military strength.

Humanitarian Crisis

The conflict has led to a humanitarian crisis, people displacement, and a large number of damaged facilities. More than 11 million people have been displaced, including 7.7 million internally displaced persons; others have fled to neighboring countries like Poland and Romania. The international community has provided humanitarian assistance but the problem remains and is even worsening due to the ongoing conflict (OCHA, [2023](#)).

The conflict in Ukraine is not just a regional war, but an event of great importance for geopolitical shifts as well as energy, food, and political spheres. The consequences of the war will probably redefine the structure of power in the Eurasian region and impact world politics for the following years. These threats have to be tackled globally to reduce the effects of this conflict on the global society.

Conclusion

This thesis has provided an analysis of the geopolitical context of the Russia-Ukraine war with a special focus on the role of geography. Historical geographical vulnerabilities of Russia have tended to push it into aggressive policies to secure its territory. The conflict with Ukraine is presented as a counteraction to the increasing presence of the Western structures, primarily NATO and the EU, which seems threatening to Russia from the Southern and Eastern borders.

In the discourse, the Russia-Ukraine conflict has been seen to have caused a lot of crises in the

Eurasian region such as the food and energy crises, humanitarian crises, and the shifting of alliances within the geopolitical systems. The above consequences are more discernible in Eurasia than in the rest of the world due to the region's closeness to the conflicting region. Geography has always been a major determinant of Russian foreign policy because of the country's territorial greediness and interventions in the neighboring countries. The desire of Ukraine to join NATO became a reason for a counteraction from Russia that saw a threat to its western borders. This thesis indicates that geographical factors stand out as critical in the formulation of Russia's aggressive postures, which are actions to counter perceived Western advances.

Recommendations

In order to tackle the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the right manner, the following strategic approaches are important. First of all, it is necessary to promote the diplomatic process of Russian-Ukrainian relations with the involvement of all the interested parties for the regulation of the conflict and security issues. The UN and OSCE should also play an active role in conflict-solving and prevention. Third-party mediators are very useful in ensuring that the two conflicting parties come to an agreement without resorting to violence and in building trust between the two conflicting parties. Also, it is crucial to prohibit the spread of fake news and promote independent and fair coverage of the events to avoid more armed conflict. To the above, Ukraine should remain a neutral country and should not seek to join NATO while Russia should desist from expanding its territory. Economic cooperation and interdependence in the Eurasian Region through large-scale projects can alleviate fear and strengthen stability in the region. Also, ensuring that the affected people receive humanitarian aid, and helping them with their resettlement and rehabilitation is essential.

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