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THE IMPACT OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE ON THE GLOBAL SYSTEM

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- The war in Ukraine marks the end of the neo-liberal post-Cold War global order.
- Whatever end this war reaches, the world will be less prosperous and more divided and dangerous.
- With wisdom and luck, mankind may turn this ordeal into a catalyst for the transformation of the global order.

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What Russian President Vladimir Putin declared a “special military operation” that started on February 24 has had enormous impact upon the global system. Whatever label is put on the operation, it is a war as defined in the traditional sense, so it is called as such in this paper.

The most fundamental characteristic of this war is that it has virtually ended the post-Cold War era during which Western liberal ideology was the dominant force in the global system. In that sense, the war is more appropriately called the final nail in the coffin since Western liberal ideology has been receding from at least the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. The literature on democracies in retreat is now expanding, and the supremacy of Western-style capitalism is also in decline. It was US President George W. Bush’s idea in the aftermath of the Lehman Brothers’ bankruptcy in September 2008 to call for a G20 leaders’ meeting where the West solicited help from the emerging non-Western economies to save global capitalism. However, an oversized membership as well as conflicting interests among members had already hollowed out the G20.

That said, the explicit act of invasion by one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council has been devastating to the global system. There is no starker contrast than to August 1990, when US Secretary of State James Baker was in the Soviet Union to meet Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze when the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. At that time the two foreign secretaries quickly came to a consensus on responding to this outright invasion in the UN Security Council, which opened the way for the multilateral use of force under the auspices of the Security Council. Given the deep division now between the US, Great Britain, and France on the one hand and Russia and China on the other, the UN Security Council is highly unlikely to recover as a substantial security forum for the foreseeable future.

In addition, whatever course the war in Ukraine follows, the result will not produce the resounding optimism for the West that came with victory in the Gulf War. There are basically three scenarios imaginable. The first is a protracted quagmire between Russia and Ukraine. As the war nears its half-year mark, the situation seems to be following this scenario. Given the opposing territorial claims between the two countries, over Crimea in particular, the prospect of a negotiated truce is much lower than in the case of the Korean War in the early 1950s. A prolonged war in which the major Western economies are closely involved will perpetuate the division of the world economy already started by the US-China rivalry and exacerbated by the COVID-19


pandemic. Even if a truce is agreed, the West will not return to business as usual with Russia as long as the country is ruled by Putin or his allies.

The second scenario is an escalation of the war to more countries and/or deadlier weapons. So far, both the US and Russia have avoided a direct military clash, largely because of the fear of a global-scale war, probably with nuclear exchanges. Nevertheless, massive Western military assistance to Ukraine as well as severe economic pressure over the Russian economy may become enough of an excuse for Putin to escalate, especially if he fears defeat and a loss of power. In addition, any large-scale war in Europe will inevitably spill over to East Asia because of Russia's Eurasian identity and the US' Pacific presence. The Northern Hemisphere at least will face warfare on a scale not experienced since the end of the Second World War.

The third scenario is a Russian regime collapse. Of course, this may well be the best scenario for the West and possibly for the world, but it is highly unlikely that this would follow the pattern of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Then there were 15 republics within the Soviet Union that had taken on substantial political authority during Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms. There are no viable political forces within Russia to replace Putin's regime nor any established political institutions to cushion the political explosion. For the West, the most acute concern would be control of the six thousand nuclear warheads as well as the nuclear facilities and materials, including several dozen nuclear power plants, within Russia. As the failures of Napoleon and Hitler show, it is beyond the capability of any outside power to occupy and control the vast territory of Russia.

Whichever end the war reaches, the prospects for this war are not rosy to say the least. The world will most likely be less prosperous and more divided and dangerous. However, there is no turning back the clock. All the world can do now is achieve justice with the least damage possible, even though the war has already been inhumane and disastrous.

If with wisdom and luck mankind can survive this ordeal, several changes could be made in the global system to produce some improvements. First, there will be a chance for broad international organizations to be reorganized in ways that reflect the current realities of global power distribution and civilizational diversity. It is an ironical truth that, as the United Nations becomes less effective, there are more chances of reformulating the UN or even creating a new universal organization whose presiding powers would reflect the current balance of power across the world. Second, the war is likely to enhance the power shift, already started some time ago, from the Atlantic to the

so-called Indo-Pacific, or the area called “Asia” by the West before the modern age. The rise of China and India, as well as the notion of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific advocated by late Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, had indicated this trend. The notion of “Global Britain” as post-Brexit UK foreign policy and the ongoing economic separation of Europe and Russia may enhance this shift from the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific. Third, global capitalism, which flourished from the 1980s to the 2000s under the ideology of neo-liberalism and ever-growing monetary assets, may be replaced by technological globalism, where actions against global natural disasters are based on a globalized cyberspace. COVID-19 has already changed our sense of normalcy by imbedding online activities deep into our daily lives. The Ukraine war has changed the context of the energy problem but, given the severity of climate change effects, the war will enhance medium- and long-term de-carbonization rather than inhibit it. Combined, these changes may move mankind into the next stage of governance, but that remains conjecture. 

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