

# BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

Vol. 7 | No. 1 | Fall 2023

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# The Russo-Ukrainian War and the Exhaustion of the 1945 World Order

## Tracing the Origins, Examining the Consequences

*Manuel Becerra Ramírez*

In the early hours of Thursday, 24 February 2022, the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin launched what it called a “special military operation” on Ukrainian territory. On 21 February 2022, Russia officially recognized the two self-proclaimed people’s republics that had established themselves in earlier rounds of fighting. This was supposedly based on Article 51 of the UN Charter, which provides for legitimate individual or collective defense. Later that year, Russia annexed them outright.

Of course, in reality, Russia’s invasion violated the UN Charter and

the principles contained therein. This constitutes a disregard for the norms that emerged after World War II as understood by the proponents of the “rules-based international liberal order” and others. The UN Charter privileges the solution of conflicts by peaceful means. Legitimate defense is only permissible in the face of a current attack, not a hypothetical one (this is why, for example, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which was termed a “preemptive war” by the George W. Bush Administration). Moreover, the UN Security Council (with what is effectually an endorsement or legitimization function) must always be aware of such actions.

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It is sophistry to argue, as too many in the West do, that the present conflict over Ukraine is one between good and evil; rather, it is more accurate to state that the conflict represents the total breakdown of international order, notwithstanding the fact that it had previously had significant identifiable fissures since its establishment in 1945.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union left a natural void in the Central Asian region. This vacuum has been filled with a series of regional organizations, which, although they have somewhat worked, basic geopolitical logic dictates that the Russia-Ukraine war will result in various adjustment to these, given the expected new geopolitical reality.

Behind the conflict between the two Slavic cultures, it is possible to glimpse a conflict between two models of world order: one unipolar with the hegemony of the United States, and the other multipolar. With this armed conflict, the rise of the latter model has begun not only to grow but

to accelerate, thanks in part to the appearance of other centers of power, fundamentally with a Sino-Russian axis, as well as the choices by many of the countries of the developing world (the “Global South”) not to “take sides” but rather to focus on their own interests in this period of transformation. And it also reveals the urgent need to reform the international system that was born with the end of World War II, and which already manifests a clear obsolescence.

### *The Post-War World Order*

After two devastating world wars, the UN Charter established a new world order that, formally, remains in place today. Among its fundamental premises, we can underscore the prohibition of war and centralization of the UN Security Council—particularly the possibility of this organ being able to issue resolutions of a coercive nature and, above all, serving as a collective guarantor of international peace and security.

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Thus, in its first two articles, the UN Charter establishes the fundamental guidelines of the world order, pointing out the purposes of the UN and the principles of international law that form the backbone of global order and the international legal system. Amongst many other transformations and revolutions brought on or codified by this document, we can mention the relegation to the dustbin of history of the 1928 Briand-Kellogg Treaty as a means of settling disputes. The UN Charter takes up this pacifist position in Article 2. Along with that, we also have the terms of Chapter VI, which obliges UN member states to settle disputes peacefully, and only in specific cases can an argument be made that the resort to force is legitimate:

- In the case of individual or collective self-defense, in accordance with Article 51.
- In the case of the principle of self-determination (revolutions for independence against a regime of a colonial character).
- When the Security Council acts in accordance with the UN Charter's Chapter VII terms to deal with conflicts that endanger international peace and security—i.e.,

when the Security Council chooses to authorize the use of force.

However, this system of collective security did not fully function by virtue of the outbreak of the Cold War, mainly after the possession of nuclear weapons by the leading countries of the two hegemonic poles, the socialist and the capitalist. Both poles built their own systems of international organization, including parallel economic, political, and, most importantly, collective security systems (i.e., NATO and the Warsaw Pact). With this, a confrontation between the two blocks was avoided since a kind of balance was built by the “terror” of the indescribable capacity to destruct both poles; neither pole dared to attack the other side in the face of the escalatory danger of “mutually assured destruction” (MAD)—truly, a scenario of madness. In addition, a series of local conflicts (Vietnam, Nicaragua, Korea, Congo, dictatorships in South America, Egypt, etc.) had the help or encouragement of some of the hegemonic poles. In the fact of these conflicts, the security system of the Security Council did not work due to the veto power of its five permanent members. That was the system

that prevailed during the Cold War.

### *The Abandonment of Multilateralism*

In addition, the multilateralism that the UN Charter proclaims in Articles 1-3 was gradually abandoned by the great powers starting in the 1970s, after the almost total decolonization of the world, sponsored by the UN itself, in the 1960s. The emerging group of newly decolonized countries of Asia and Africa appeared on the international scene with strong criticism and demands, many of which grouped around the newly-established Non-Aligned Movement. For example, they demanded a minimum percentage of the colonizing country's gross national income (GNP) as compensation for their exploitation of their former colonies—as evidenced by King Willem-Alexander's recent apology on 1 July 2023 for the Netherlands' involvement in slavery. Instead of the powers assuming their responsibility for the underdevelopment of their former colonies, they withdrew from multilateralism and began to build ad hoc groupings composed of peers or near-peers (e.g., the G7 and then the G20).

### *Missed Opportunity at Reform*

The end of the Cold War (after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) provided a great opportunity to create a more democratic system within which the Security Council could function based on multipolarity. Since dawn of the *perestroika* campaign, President Mikhail Gorbachev had expressed the idea of Europe as a “common home,” including the USSR. Even later, the Security Council's reaction to Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, where the postures of all its permanent members were compatible enough to authorize a U.S.-led coalition to use force to act against Baghdad's aggression, led to the belief that this was where the future of world order, understood as adherence to the UN Charter by all powers, great and small, was headed. However, the First Gulf War turned out to be only a passing moment of effective global governance. Instead of the acceptance of a plural, multipolar reality, the “end of history” hypothesis (and its various derivatives) quickly began to drive Western thinking *about* the world and, more dangerously, Western conduct *in* the world.

To that end, U.S. hegemony (“unipolarity”)—instead of promoting

the reform of the United Nations system, which by the end of the twentieth century was already overtaken by the new geopolitical reality and seeking to strengthen multilateralism—engaged in changing global trade rules through its dominating power of international lobbying and bilateral free trade agreements. In addition, the U.S. promoted the expansion of NATO, under the ashes of the Warsaw Treaty, to create a system that sought to strengthen Anglo-Saxon hegemony.

On 11 September 2001, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York constituted the first warning that this unique world of American hegemony was not being achieved. However, the path towards a multipolarity of international relations could still be rectified. But it was not done. Instead, economic globalization was strengthened, causing an unequal world with the concentration of wealth in a few hands, putting transnational corporations at the center of the world economy. The most recent example is the political and economic power shown by transnational pharmaceutical industries during the COVID-19 pandemic, which did not give any concessions on their intellectual property rights despite the request of many in the Global South before

the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Similarly, in the post-Cold War international arena, the United States has tended to assert its global hegemony before sharing its power. Its wars (“interventions”) against Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria and the continuation of its unilateral sanctions regime against Cuba, Venezuela, and Iran, which have no explanation nor justification in international law, are all examples of that trend. It should also be noted that, in the wars fought against Serbia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, Iraq in 2004, and Libya in 2011, NATO illegally functioned as an instrument of Western coercion. It was logical to expect that as NATO was a product of the Cold War and working in opposition to the socialist bloc’s Warsaw Pact, NATO should have disappeared along with its politically and ideologically vanquished foe. But no, on the contrary, it has grown and strengthened.

### *The Ex-Socialist Space*

If we look at things coldly, from a purely historical perspective, the end of the Soviet Union in 1991, was a very violent event. The building of the Soviet

Union involved intense political, social, economic, and cultural construction that cost millions of lives; to tear it down and finish it in less than 10 years meant engendering a violent change that, of course, left many loose strands in the social, political, and economic fabric of the affected regions. For example, take the population. At the end of the USSR’s existence, it was said that 60 million Soviet citizens lived outside of their territory of origin. This was normal in a multinational country where the Russian population was predominant. However, with the end of the USSR, the Russian diaspora had problems in the Baltic States. In addition, it is now a factor that Russia uses as *casus belli* in its war against Ukraine, since it claims the protection of the Russian population in the Donbass and Crimea.

Of course, the abrupt end of the USSR brought about a reorganization of the Caucasus and Central Asian republics, with a strong presence of Russia as a dominant power—the admittedly declining use of the term “near abroad” makes Russian ambitions evident, as do the terms outlined in Moscow’s most recent National Security Strategy (July 2021) and Foreign Policy Concept (March 2023).

Indeed, with the disappearance of the USSR, several organizations were established in the Silk Road region, broadly understood, that sought to create spaces for international cooperation. These include the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC). A brief examination of each follows.

One of the key factors that brought on the end of the USSR was the inability (or unwillingness) of the Kremlin to prevent the drifting away of the 15 Soviet republics from its centralizing orbit. Ironically, a precipitating cause of this implosion was the introduction and execution of the policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* by the government of the last Soviet head of state, Mikhail Gorbachev.

The idea of changing the parameters of the relationship between the center and its peripheries produced the unintended consequence of opening up space in (almost) all the Soviet republics—including the Russian one—for the emergence of popular movements that sought

to exit from the Soviet Union. Along with some others, the Baltic republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) were the most active in this regard. The repressive use of the Soviet military in places like Azerbaijan (January 1990) also played a significant role in delegitimizing the USSR in the eyes of many of its citizens.

By the time he got around to realizing what was happening, Gorbachev no longer had the political capacity or popular support to dismantle the burgeoning independence movements—including the Russian one led by Boris Yeltsin. He did make some feeble attempts with some projects, such as the establishment of the Union of Independent States (UEI), a project that was not successful and gave way to another one, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which had an ambitious objective: to create an area of political and economic cooperation. On 8 December 1991, the three Slavic states, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, concluded the Minsk Agreement establishing the CIS. The new organization was open to all Soviet republics and whoever shared its objectives. From the beginning, the three Baltic republics and Georgia refused to be part of the new organization.

Thus, 11 republics were originally part of the CIS: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. In 1993, Georgia joined the organization due to the support that it obtained from Russia in a civil war fought against secessionism.

However, the CIS has since thinned out. On 26 August 2005, Turkmenistan withdrew from the body and only remained as an associate member; Georgia withdrew in 2008 for well-known reasons (it formally disengaged in 2009); and Ukraine began its withdrawal 2014 (the process concluded in 2018). The same happened with Moldova. Having already expressed willingness to withdraw from the CIS and join the EU, the conflict over Ukraine prompted Moldova's parliament to vote for withdrawal from the CIS in May 2023—a petition that was approved by its Cabinet of Ministers on 14 August 2023.

In 1996, something called the Shanghai Group was established and promoted by China. Membership was made up of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined, and the name Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO) was adopted. The SCO deals with issues relating to Islamic radicalism, terrorism, drug trafficking, environmental and economic problems, and cultural issues.

Undoubtedly, there is domination from China, which provides financial aid through the SCO. According to experts, the consolidation of this body depends inter alia on the cooperative relationship between the two great regional powers—China and Russia—as well as finding a way to curb the antagonism between two newer members: India and Pakistan.

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) is an international organization created before the collapse of the USSR. It was promoted by Pakistan, Iran, and Türkiye in 1985 to advance economic, technical, and cultural cooperation among its member states. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and the five Central Asian republics joined it. The ECO is endowed with a certain cultural cohesion, as it unites all the non-Arab Muslim-majority countries of the Silk Road region, understood broadly.

In general terms, the ECO lacks a structure to enforce the obligations

of the member states and presents certain weaknesses derived from the intra-organizational rivalries, such as between Iran and Türkiye. However, it constitutes a space for those states that belong to it to diversify their foreign relations with those sharing cultural and religious commonalities.

The CSTO is today a collective security organization led by Russia, and its objective is to counterbalance NATO (and, to a lesser extent, China). Its origin stems from the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty (the Tashkent Treaty or CST), signed by Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 1992. Later, in 1994, as the CST had a sunset clause of five years, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia joined as the old members stayed on. The 1999 Protocol on Prolongation of CST was only signed by Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan.

In 2000, within the framework of the Tashkent Treaty and at the proposal of the CIS, the establishment of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was suggested. The CSTO charter was signed in 2002 and ratified in 2003 by six original member states: Armenia, Belarus,



Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan joined the CSTO in 2008 but suspended its membership in 2012. The CSTO's objectives are cooperation, "the fight against traditional threats," international terrorism, and drug trafficking.

However, the CSTO cannot escape from two crucial factors: the hegemony of Russia (for example, in 2003, a Russian military base was established in Kyrgyzstan) and Russia's concern about the advance of NATO, which is why it provides cheap weapons and other forms of military assistance and guidance to fellow CSTO members. Armenia's recent publicly expressed dissatisfaction with this organization is also another limitation, the impact of which may become quite serious in the time ahead.

The EEC is inspired by the European Union, although it is far from having the success of its model. It was created in 2000 at the initiative of President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan as an economic mechanism that enables successful economic cooperation.

Today, even though the EEC's organizational structure is not fully functional, core Eurasia

(what the editors of *Baku Dialogues* call the "Silk Road region") is very important for three reasons. First of all, it is a communication route or bridge between the rising Asian power, China, and the Middle East and Europe. Secondly, it has large important energy resources essentially in three states of the region: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. And finally, because water is a resource that is potentially the cause of conflicts between them. It is an important energy resource enclave for current powers (the United States with its well-known addiction to oil, Russia with its historical dominance in the region, China with its emerging power via its Belt and Road Initiative) and emerging powers such as Iran and Türkiye, which stands as the Silk Road region's gateway to Europe.

The foregoing helps to explain why such resources are presented as transcendental geopolitical factors in the region. Central Asian states, in particular, must take these factors into account and be willing to negotiate or enter alliances. For example, the Chinese are willing to build energy pipelines to supply or distribute oil and gas.

## *Peace and War in the Ukrainian Theater*

It would be hard if not impossible to make a convincing argument that Russia's war on Ukraine does not violate the UN Charter. This violation of international law—similar in principle if not in scope to what the West did with the arms of NATO in various theaters in the recent past—shows us how far the post-war international order of 1945 has been overtaken by events and gives us clues to what the emergence of a new system will look like. One characteristic will probably be the end of U.S. hegemony.

In principle, the urgency of a negotiated end to the war may be taken up by China and the other members of BRICS. This is a controversial position to take in some quarters, but the fact of the matter is that by unilaterally imposing a sanctions and export restrictions regime on Russia (and threatening to penalize third countries for not adhering to said regime), the bloc of countries led by the U.S. and the EU has effectually become a party to this conflict. Serving as an honest broker in trying to end it seems to be problematic, to say the least: their actions (along with those of

Russia, of course) have further downgraded the centrality and legitimacy of the Security Council's supreme authority under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.

The belligerents have turned down a series of peace initiatives formulated by Brazil, China, Italy, Mexico, and Türkiye. The Vatican itself has activated a peace mission led by Cardinal Matteo Supp, to facilitate dialogue between the direct belligerents, which has not been successful to date. Brazilian President Lula da Silva has been clear in stating that the "United States must stop encouraging war and start talking about peace, and the European Union must start talking about peace." Other major non-Western powers have echoed this sentiment, as has at least one EU and NATO member state (e.g., Hungary; Slovakia may soon follow; also, the Austrian posture is in some ways similar to that of Hungary, although it is not a NATO member state).

Neither Russia nor the United States show signs of seeking peace, due to a fever of arms production, untold billions of dollars spent on the war effort. Instead of bringing NATO expansion to an end, the opposite has happened. Putin is now at a dead end, leaving victory as his

only choice—a very dangerous position considering that he has the option of pushing to red button to launch nuclear weapons at Ukraine (or elsewhere) in case it becomes necessary to defend what he considers Russian territory (especially Crimea).

Furthermore, this unbridled armament has an economic explanation. In one of his writings, renowned economist Branko Milanović reminds us that wars, such as the one in Iraq, create a lot of economic benefits, including government outlays such as lobbyists, private security companies, and military companies. Additionally, the economic machinery of armament production and commercialization generates a huge spill of money.

### *War Pushes Transformation*

Regardless of the effects of war on the death of thousands of people, the migratory effect of people fleeing war, the immeasurable damage to the environment, the violation of humanitarian rights, and the impact of the globalized economy when armed conflict

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continues, we can also see a gradual transformation of the world. This includes a Sino-Russian alliance, the strengthening of the BRICS-type economic-political alliances, a partition of the world between the countries of the West (the United States, Europe, and their allies) and the East (Russia, China, India, North Korea, Iran, and their allies), and creating a de facto new Cold War, not between states of different political, economic, and social ideas, but between states unwilling to attach themselves to the perpetuation of Western hegemony, commanded by the United States.

On the other hand, as signs of the phenomena being produced, we have a quickening of the de-dollarization trend in world trade, with the Chinese RMB now the currency with which 90 percent of trade between China and Russia is carried out. In the same direction, BRICS is looking for a new currency for their commercial exchanges, indicating another possible manifestation of the quickening of the de-dollarization trend.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has demonstrated yet again that

the avowed institutional axis of multilateral world order rooted in international law—i.e., the United Nations—is totally ineffective, notwithstanding the evident fact that this conflict endangers peace and security and puts the world on a path towards a Third World War. For example, the UN has been unable to bring the conflict's real geopolitical contenders to the negotiating table (i.e., the NATO countries, along with Russia and China) to resolve the conflict. The present period reminds us like nothing else of the time in Europe between the end of World War I and the start of World War II.

A fundamental change in the United Nations system is necessary, starting with the reform of the Security Council—an issue that has been discussed since the disappearance of the bipolar world. One of the first substantial changes must be the concept of “international security,” which, in the philosophy of the UN Charter, is linked to the outbreak of a military conflict. The experience of humanity suggests that the source of global imbalances is also inextricably connected to economic inequality (both within and between states), internal security, systematic violation of human rights, the environment, and others, which produce phenomena

such as mass migration along with a whole host of others.

Undoubtedly, the world's flagship international organization must substantially reform its institutions. As Portuguese professor Boaventura de Sousa Santos says:

The UN is a state organization, and Kofi Annan's attempt to make it more open to civil society failed. After the crisis in Iraq and Ukraine, the UN will follow the path of discredit. And this will only deepen the greater their submission to U.S. geostrategic interests. If we live permanently in war even though the ordinary people of the world (except those linked to the military industry or mercenary armies) want to live in peace, isn't it time we had an organized and global voice to make itself heard?

### *Taking Responsibility*

The leaders of the great powers have a historic responsibility to stop the Russian-Ukrainian war. They must show up at the negotiating table instead of pretending that everything is up to Ukraine to decide. Surely, it is clear to everyone now that this is no longer a war between two neighboring Slavic states, but a larger conflict between different models of life. Sooner or later, every war has an end. In such a case,

logically, we would have different hypothetical scenarios, which only reality can confirm or reject.

First, if Russia wins the war, that Slavic country would strengthen itself as a regional power with global projection. Second, if Russia loses the war, then we would have an advance of the NATO countries in a region that Russia still dominates, and the latter would become a weakened and limited state. Third, there could be a negotiation in which Russia does not lose its status as a military power, but it becomes limited, and Ukraine's sovereignty is maintained but equally limited. However, in all these scenarios, a reform of the international order would be necessary.

The mistakes made after the end of the Cold War must be

corrected. The pact of world order conceived after the Second World War and enshrined in the UN Charter must be renewed and adapted to current almost revolutionary conditions—a notable characteristic of which is the enormous and still growing state of inequality between developed and developing states. Such a project of renewal and adaptation—if successful—surely would mitigate the likelihood of future conflicts of global significance.

The resulting new world order would need to reflect the geopolitical reality of a multipolar world—one in which political diversity is truly respected and genuinely understood to represent an authentic expression of the cultural richness of humanity. **BD**

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