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GEOPOLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The paper analyzes in-depth the impact of the conflict in Ukraine on the geopolitics of international relations, highlighting how this war has accelerated structural transformations in the global system. Since Russia's invasion in 2022, the confrontation has produced a series of significant changes in the balance of power, international law norms, and strategic alliance configurations. The study explores the military, economic, energy, and diplomatic dimensions of the conflict, as well as its implications for collective security and the conventional international order. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the paper highlights the return to a logic of realpolitik, the rise of a multipolar world, and the redefinition of national interests in a context marked by uncertainty and global polarization. Finally, possible scenarios for the evolution of the international system are discussed, between institutional reform and systemic confrontation.

Key words: geopolitics, conflict in Ukraine, international relations, international security, world order.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the international system has undergone profound transformations, marked by the emergence of new global powers and the redefinition of geopolitical balances. The conflict in Ukraine, which broke out in 2014 and escalated in 2022, is an emblematic expression of these changes, illustrating the tensions between democratic and authoritarian values, as well as the competition for influence and security in Eastern Europe.

This conflict is not just a regional issue, but a phenomenon with major implications for the international order, requiring a complex and multidimensional analysis. Through this approach, we aim to investigate international relations from the geopolitical perspective of the Ukrainian conflict, identifying the determining factors, the actors involved, and the global consequences.

In addition to the tragedies caused by any armed conflict, through material destruction and inevitable loss of human life, the war in Ukraine represents a real turning point in the geopolitics of international relations, with major implications for global security architecture, regional alliances, and the international order. From a purely theoretical perspective of security studies, this conflict can be analyzed through the lens of realism theories and regional complexity.

In terms of European geopolitics and security, the conflict in Ukraine has emphasized NATO's role as the main guarantor of security in Central and Eastern Europe. Countries such as Sweden and Finland, traditionally neutral, have applied for membership in the alliance (already accepted as full members, Finland in 2023 and Sweden a year later), bringing about a significant change in the European security architecture.

At the same time, the European Union has intensified economic sanctions against Russia, while identifying new sources of energy to reduce/eliminate dependence on Russian resources.



Figure 1: The geopolitical and security situation in the Black Sea region, in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

(source: <https://origins.osu.edu/review/ukraine-nutshell>)

At the same time, this conflict has highlighted a geopolitical axis between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea. This partnership, suggestively named "CRINK,"¹ represents a direct challenge, a true contempt for the international

¹ The acronym CRINK (China-Russia-Iran-North Korea) was coined in 2024 by Peter Van Praagh, president of the Halifax International Security Forum in Washington, following the Hamas attacks

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order promoted by the West. For example, North Korea sent troops to support Russia (in the conflict with Ukraine), and Iran provided drones for attacks on Ukrainian territory. Cooperation within this coalition has grown steadily, as the four countries have exchanged food, oil, weapons, diplomatic support, and military assistance in a way designed to avoid Western sanctions.

I. THE DIMENSIONS OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The military conflict initiated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in 2014 and dramatically escalated in February 2022 has taken on multiple strategic dimensions, far exceeding the limits of a conventional confrontation. From a military perspective, Ukraine has demonstrated remarkable resilience, managing not only to reject the initial offensives of the Russian army, but also to recover strategic territories, particularly in the Kharkiv and Kherson regions, through well-coordinated campaigns supported by Western military assistance.² The adaptability of the Ukrainian armed forces to new tactical realities, as well as the rapid integration of NATO equipment, have been key elements in maintaining an effective line of defense.

On the other hand, Russia has gone for a wear strategy, counting on its troop numbers and its industrial and logistical capabilities. Recently, this strategy has taken the form of an intensification of massive air strikes, carried out with hundreds of Iranian-made Shahed-136 attack drones and ballistic and cruise missiles. These attacks have frequently targeted civilian infrastructure and densely populated urban areas—including cities such as Kiev, Odessa, Harkov, and Dnipro—having a severe psychological impact on the civilian population and seeking to demoralize it.³

In addition to the military and psychological dimensions, Russia has also exploited the economic and humanitarian dimensions of the war, using Ukraine's agricultural infrastructure as a tool for strategic pressure. Systematic attacks on grain silos, Black Sea ports, and rail and road infrastructure essential for exports have severely affected Ukraine's ability to sustain its war economy.⁴ At the same time, this strategy has contributed to the destabilization of the global food market, as Ukraine was, prior to the conflict, one of the world's leading exporters of

in October 2023. The term, a play on words with the BRICS nations, describes "a new alignment of nations from which the strategic challenges to global democracies now come." (<https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/ce-e-crink-si-cum-functioneaza-noua-axa-care-lupta-impotriva-ordinii-mondiale-5251777>).

² Institute for the Study of War (ISW), *Ukrainian Counteroffensives 2022–2023*, <https://understandingwar.org>

³ Human Rights Watch, *Civilian Harm from Russian Air Strikes in Ukraine*, 2023.

⁴ European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), *Weaponising Food: Russia's Targeting of Ukraine's Agricultural Infrastructure*, 2023.

wheat, corn and sunflower oil.⁵ The regions most affected by this induced food crisis were the countries of North Africa, the Sahel, and the Middle East, which depend significantly on imports from the Black Sea region.



Figure 2: The economic and destructive dimension of the conflict in Ukraine.
(source: <https://www.saab.com/da/markets/danmark/press-releases/seabed-warfare>)

II. THE INVOLVEMENT OF GLOBAL ACTORS IN THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

The conflict initiated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in February 2022 is not only a regional confrontation, but also reflects a systemic crisis of the international order. Since the beginning of the invasion, the conflict has quickly become a catalyst for the reconfiguration of the global balance of power, in a context where the major powers are disputing not only regional influence, but also the model of global governance.

The Russian Federation – geopolitical revisionism and challenging the international order

Russia justified its invasion of Ukraine with rhetoric focused on national security, the "denazification" of Kiev, and the protection of the russophone population.⁶ In essence, however, the military action reflects a revisionist vision that aims to reconfigure spheres of influence in the former Soviet space and counteract the expansion of NATO and the European Union.

⁵ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), *The Importance of Ukraine and the Russian Federation for Global Agricultural Markets and the Risks Associated with the Current Conflict*, 2022.

⁶ Pomerantsev, Peter. *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, Faber & Faber, 2019.

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Figure 3: The main security interests of the Russian Federation
(source: <https://cadranpolitic.ro/interesele-legitime-de-securitate-ale-rusiei-analiza-geopolitica-si-istorica/>)

The Kremlin is trying to force a multipolar order based on power hierarchies and regional domination, which goes against the UN Charter's principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The United States and NATO – defending the rules-based international order

The United States and its NATO allies have taken a firm stance in support of Ukraine, providing extensive military, financial, and informational support. By 2025, the US had provided over \$70 billion in military and economic aid to Ukraine.⁷ NATO has significantly strengthened its eastern flank by deploying troops and equipment to Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states, enhancing the Alliance's deterrence capability.⁸

The West's involvement is not only an expression of solidarity with Ukraine, but also a defense of the liberal international order, where borders cannot be changed by force.

The European Union – from economic actor to geopolitical power

The European Union reacted quickly and unanimously, imposing successive packages of economic sanctions on Russia, providing logistical and financial support to Ukraine, and opening up real prospects for European integration.⁹ At the same time, the war has accelerated common energy policies, drastically reducing dependence on Russian gas and diversifying supply sources.¹⁰

⁷ Congressional Research Service (CRS), *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*, updated August 2025.

⁸ NATO, *Strengthening the Eastern Flank: NATO's Deterrence Posture*, www.nato.int

⁹ European Commission, *EU support to Ukraine*, 2024, <https://europa.eu>

¹⁰ International Energy Agency (IEA), *Europe's Energy Crisis Response*, 2023.

However, internal tensions have arisen between member states, reflecting divergent interests in managing the crisis – especially with regard to military support and the economic costs of sanctions.

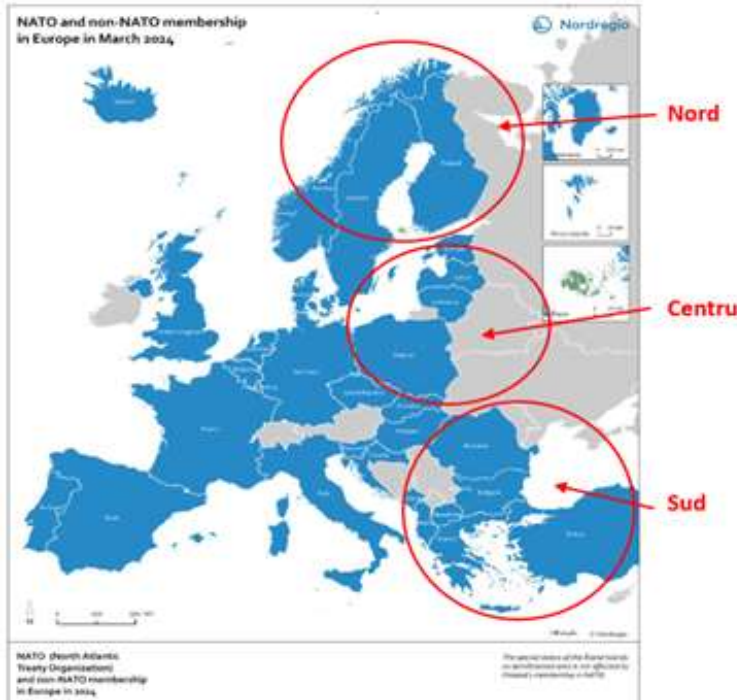


Figure 4: The NATO eastern flank

(source: <https://www.contributors.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Imagine1-4.png>)

China – strategic neutrality and geopolitical calculation

China has adopted an ambiguous position, claiming neutrality but indirectly supporting the Russian Federation through economic cooperation and anti-Western rhetoric. Although Beijing has avoided arms deliveries, it has maintained strong trade relations with Moscow and harshly criticized Western sanctions. For China, the conflict in Ukraine is a geopolitical case study with direct implications for the situation in Taiwan and the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Global South – pragmatic positions in a multipolar system

Countries in the Global South – India, Brazil, South Africa, Turkey – have adopted nuanced positions, oscillating between condemning the aggression and refusing to align themselves with Western sanctions. The motivations of these states are often economic, historical, or strategic in nature, reflecting an increasingly multipolar world in which the West is no longer perceived as the sole

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benchmark of legitimacy.¹¹ At the same time, these countries are using their position as "influential neutrals" to negotiate economic advantages and geopolitical status.

The balance of power – an international order in transition

The involvement of these global players confirms that the international system is passing through a phase of profound transition. We are witnessing a marked polarization between two rival blocs: on the one hand, the liberal-democratic West; on the other, an emerging authoritarian bloc comprising Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.¹² At the same time, a third pole – that of non-aligned or pragmatic states – is gaining influence, contributing to the fragmentation of international norms and the dilution of global consensus on international law.

The war in Ukraine is thus becoming more than a military conflict: it is an ideological and geopolitical battle for the model of order that will dominate the coming decades. Depending on the outcome and the ability of the actors involved to maintain their positions, we may witness either a revalidation of international norms or a dangerous drift towards a chaotic system dominated by force and unilateral interests.

III. THE IMPACT OF THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, was not only a serious violation of international law, but also a turning point in the dynamics of international relations. This conflict has called into question the foundations of the post-Cold War global order, exacerbating geopolitical tensions, fragmenting the international system, and reigniting competition between the major powers. Its consequences are being felt in the military and strategic spheres, as well as in the economic, energy, and diplomatic spheres, affecting global and regional balances. This chapter will analyze the main transformations generated by the war in Ukraine on the international system, with a focus on the reconfiguration of alliances, the evolution of international norms, and the emergence of new centers of power in an increasingly multipolar and unstable context.

Transformations of the international order and balance of power

The war in Ukraine has acted as a catalyst for profound transformations in the international system, accelerating the transition from a unipolar global order, dominated by the United States in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, to a

¹¹ Chatham House, *The Global South and the War in Ukraine: Between Neutrality and Strategy*, 2023.

¹² Foreign Affairs, *The New Global Polarization: Liberalism vs. Authoritarianism*, July-August 2024.

multipolar order, characterized by strategic competition between major powers and the contestation of the liberal global architecture. In this new configuration, actors such as China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa are claiming an increasingly active role in international affairs, calling into question both the legitimacy of Western supremacy and the effectiveness of the multilateral institutions founded in 1945.¹³

This geopolitical reconfiguration comes at a time of crisis for international norms. The basic principles of international law—such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the prohibition of aggression—have been seriously violated by the Russian Federation in the case of Ukraine, without collective security mechanisms being able to intervene effectively. The paralysis of the UN Security Council, caused by Russia's veto as a permanent member, has illustrated the structural limitations of the current system.¹⁴ This dysfunction raises fundamental questions about the need to reform the international order and redefine the concept of global legitimacy.

At the same time, the conflict has led to a revival of Western solidarity and a reaffirmation of traditional alliances. NATO, considered by some analysts to be in decline before 2022, has strengthened its strategic position by expanding with the accession of Finland and Sweden, two formerly neutral states, in what represents a historic change in the European security landscape.¹⁵ Coordinated military support for Ukraine and member states' defense investments have marked a revitalization of the Alliance's deterrent capability.

On the other hand, Russia, isolated from the West, has strengthened its strategic relationship with China, based on common interests in undermining American hegemony and challenging the liberal global order. Sino-Russian cooperation has expanded beyond the economic sphere to include political-diplomatic, energy, and even military components. At the same time, alternative organizations such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) have become platforms for expressing dissatisfaction with the Western-led international order. Initiatives such as the expansion of BRICS or calls for a new global financial architecture reflect these states' tendency to negotiate a more influential position in the international system.¹⁶

Thus, the conflict in Ukraine is not just an isolated episode in Eastern Europe, but a mirror of a world in transition. In the long term, the direction in

¹³ Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2008. See also: Mahbubani, Kishore. *Has the West Lost It?*. Penguin Books, 2018.

¹⁴ United Nations. “Veto Initiative – Security Council Reform.” <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/reform>.

¹⁵ NATO. “Finland and Sweden’s Accession to NATO – Strategic Implications.” NATO Official Portal, 2023.

¹⁶ BRICS Policy Center. “The Expansion of BRICS and the Emerging Multipolar Order.” Policy Brief, 2024.

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which the balance of power will tilt will depend on the ability of global actors to adapt to new realities, reform multilateral institutions, and reaffirm the fundamental norms of international relations. In the absence of a global consensus on values and mechanisms for conflict resolution, the international order risks becoming increasingly fragmented and volatile.

Economic, energy, and diplomatic reconfigurations in the context of the conflict in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has generated major transformations in global economic dynamics, particularly in terms of trade relations, energy flows, and international diplomatic architecture, especially since many countries are dependent on agricultural products from Russia and Ukraine.

These changes highlight a process of recalibration of international relations, in which national interests are returning to the forefront, to the detriment of the economic interdependence promoted by globalization.

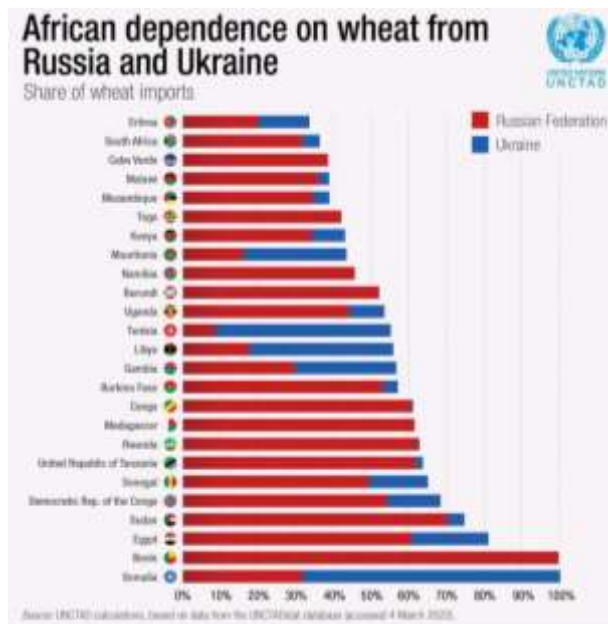


Figure 5: African countries' dependence on agricultural products from Russia and Ukraine (source: <https://x.com/cobbo3/status/1504548846835314701>)

Economic and energy disengagement between Russia and the West

Economically, the conflict has caused a deep rift between the Russian Federation and the Western bloc, with long-term implications for trade flows, investment, and international regulations. The European Union, in particular, has been forced to reduce its critical dependence on Russian energy resources, especially natural gas and oil, which before 2022 accounted for over 40% of the

EU's energy imports.¹⁷ This recalibration led to an acceleration of investment in alternative energy infrastructure, including liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminals, energy partnerships with countries in the Middle East and North Africa, and a forced transition to renewable energy sources.¹⁸

At the same time, Russia was forced to refocus its energy and trade exports to Asia, particularly to China and India. For example, Russian oil deliveries to India increased more than tenfold between 2021 and 2024, and China became the main beneficiary of Russian natural gas through pipelines from Siberia. These trade reconfigurations have strengthened alternative economic axes to the traditional transatlantic circuit, but they have also come at a significant cost to the Russian economy, which has faced sanctions, technology embargoes, and loss of access to Western markets.

Economic regionalization and decline of globalization

These changes have accelerated a broader process of regionalization of the global economy, reflected in a preference for short supply chains, strategic partners, and bilateral trade agreements, to the detriment of neoliberal globalization and open trade that had dominated recent decades. The concept of economic interdependence, promoted as a guarantee of peace in the post-Cold War period, has been called into question by the geopolitical reality of Russian aggression.¹⁹ In this context, states have redefined their economic priorities in terms of strategic resilience, vulnerability reduction, and economic security.

This trend has also fueled a redefinition of foreign policy, which is becoming increasingly anchored in the logic of national interest, geared toward gaining strategic advantage and reducing exposure to external risks. Multilateral cooperation, the foundation of the post-1945 international order, seems increasingly fragile, replaced by circumstantial, transactional alliances and selective diplomacy based on temporarily converging interests.

Strategic neutrality and the crisis of diplomatic legitimacy

On the diplomatic front, many countries in the Global South—notably India, Brazil, Turkey, and South Africa—have avoided taking a clear stance on the invasion of Ukraine, adopting *a strategy of pragmatic neutrality*. These positions reflect the complexity of bilateral relations with Russia, energy and economic interests, but also a certain reluctance towards Western positions, sometimes perceived as selective and dominated by double standards.²⁰

¹⁷ International Energy Agency (IEA), *Europe's Energy Crisis Response after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*, 2023.

¹⁸ European Commission, *REPowerEU Plan: Accelerating Clean Energy Transition*, 2023, <https://ec.europa.eu>

¹⁹ Waltz, Kenneth. *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley, 1979. See also Nye, Joseph S. *The Future of Power*, PublicAffairs, 2011.

²⁰ Chatham House, *The Global South and the Ukraine War: Strategic Neutrality and the Multipolar Order*, Policy Report, 2024.

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This erosion of global consensus in the face of blatant aggression complicates the effective enforcement of international sanctions and undermines the authority of fundamental norms of international law. In a system where there is no consensus on the definition and sanctioning of aggression, the legitimacy of collective action is challenged and the instruments of coercive diplomacy become ineffective.²¹

Thus, the war in Ukraine has accelerated a *profound economic and diplomatic reconfiguration* with lasting implications for global governance. The polarization of the international system and the emergence of alternative economic and strategic blocs are shaping a new, more unstable and fragmented geopolitical landscape, in which the rules of the game are being renegotiated by actors with divergent visions and interests.

Implications for international security and prospects for the global system

The conflict in Ukraine has had a profound impact on *international security*, weakening multilateral norms and fueling a return to *the geopolitical logic of spheres of influence*, characteristic of the 20th century. The principle of sovereignty—the cornerstone of the modern international order—has been flagrantly violated by the Russian Federation's invasion, and collective security mechanisms, led by the United Nations, have proven ineffective in stopping the aggression.²²

This situation reflects the limitations of the current international system, based on a precarious balance between international law and power relations. The UN Security Council, dominated by the veto power of the major powers, has been paralyzed by Russia's opposition, which has prevented any significant coercive action against the aggressor. In the absence of effective enforcement mechanisms, the war in Ukraine becomes a concrete example of the crisis in the global governance system.

The return of realpolitik and the reconfiguration of strategic alliances

This erosion of international norms favors *the return of a realistic paradigm*, in which military power, alliances, and strategic capabilities take precedence over normative values such as democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. From the perspective of offensive realism, Russia's actions can be interpreted as an attempt to secure its sphere of influence in the face of NATO expansion, while the West's reaction reflects *the logic of the balance of power*.

At the same time, the conflict has led to a *restructuring of international security relations*. NATO has strengthened its eastern flank and undergone historic expansion with the accession of Finland and Sweden, while Russia has

²¹ United Nations, *Challenges to Collective Security and the Role of Sanctions*, Report to the General Assembly, 2023.

²² United Nations. *Charter of the United Nations*, Article 2(4), 1945. See also: Chesterman, Simon. *The UN Security Council and the Rule of Law*, United Nations University, 2008.

sought alternative alliances, particularly with China, Iran, and North Korea. This process has contributed to the polarization of the global system, with increasingly visible trends toward *the fragmentation of the international order* into rival blocs.²³

The risk of a frozen conflict and danger of precedent

In the long term, the war in Ukraine risks evolving into a frozen conflict, similar to those in Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or the Korean Peninsula. Such a scenario would maintain a high level of regional instability, with the potential for escalation at any time, and would set a dangerous precedent for other sensitive geopolitical situations, such as Taiwan, the Western Balkans, or the Middle East, where territorial status and sovereignty are contested.²⁴

This possibility raises concerns about the normalization of geopolitical violence and the erosion of non-aggression norms. In the absence of a sustainable negotiated solution and solid security guarantees, Ukraine could remain trapped in a negative security regime marked by chronic insecurity, militarization, and economic stagnation.

Alternative perspectives: reform or systemic confrontation

In a favorable scenario, the conflict in Ukraine could become the catalyst for structural reform of international institutions, through the modernization of the UN, the adaptation of the collective security system, and the strengthening of conflict prevention mechanisms. This direction would involve reconsolidating international norms, relaunching multilateral cooperation, and including new actors (such as states from the Global South) in the global decision-making architecture.²⁵

In a pessimistic scenario, however, the world could be heading towards a new period of systemic confrontation, marked by competition between rival blocs, an arms race, and the continued destabilization of geopolitical border regions. The similarities with the Cold War period—including ideological rhetoric, border militarization, and coercive diplomacy—are becoming increasingly striking, even if the current multipolar context is more complex and unpredictable.

In conclusion, the implications of the conflict in Ukraine for international security extend beyond European borders and outline a systemic crisis in which the rules of the world order are being challenged and the future depends on the international community's ability to respond to this challenge in a unified and coherent manner.

²³ NATO. *Strategic Concept 2022*. Bruxelles: NATO, 2022.

²⁴ International Crisis Group. *Frozen Conflicts in Eurasia: Risks and Opportunities*, Policy Brief, 2023.

²⁵ Acharya, Amitav. *The End of American World Order*, Polity Press, 2014. See also: Thakur, Ramesh. *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

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CONCLUSION

The conflict in Ukraine has had a catalytic effect on developments in the international system, accelerating the transition from a unipolar global order dominated by the United States to a multipolar, fragmented, and unstable one. The Russian invasion was not only a military aggression against a sovereign state, but also a direct challenge to the norms and institutions that underpinned the post-Cold War international order.

Geopolitically, the war has reactivated the logic of spheres of influence and intensified competition between the major powers. Traditional alliances, such as NATO, have been strengthened, while new strategic axes (such as the Russian-Chinese one) have begun to take shape. The Global South has taken a more nuanced position, reflecting an increasingly multipolar world that is less dominated by global consensus.

Economically and energetically, the conflict has caused a deep rift between Russia and the West, accelerated the regionalization of trade relations, and brought the concept of economic security to the forefront. Diplomatically, the ability of multilateral institutions—especially the UN—to manage major conflicts has been seriously called into question.

The war in Ukraine is more than a regional crisis: it is a symptom of the crisis in the current international order. How this conflict is managed, as well as the ability of international actors to rebuild a framework for cooperation and collective security, will decisively influence the architecture of international relations in the coming decades.

In this context, it is essential that policymakers—both at the national and international levels—adopt a strategic, coherent, and long-term approach. Firstly, it is necessary to strengthen conflict prevention mechanisms and reform the collective security architecture by strengthening the capacity of international institutions such as the UN, OSCE, and NATO to respond effectively to systemic threats.

Romania must adopt a proactive, coherent foreign and security policy that is adapted to the new geopolitical reality. As a state located on the eastern border of NATO and the European Union, Romania has a strategic role not only in ensuring regional stability, but also in defending Euro-Atlantic values and interests.

In this regard, it is recommended to strengthen national defense capabilities, intensify cooperation within NATO, and develop bilateral and regional partnerships with key states on the eastern flank. Romania should also actively support the European path of Ukraine, the Republic of Moldova, and other countries in the Eastern Partnership, contributing to the expansion of the area of stability and democracy in its eastern neighborhood.

In terms of the economy and energy, it is necessary to diversify supply sources and strengthen regional interconnection infrastructure in order to reduce

vulnerabilities to geopolitical blackmail. At the same time, Romanian diplomacy must intensify its efforts within international organizations and actively promote the reform of the collective security system so that it more accurately reflects current realities and risks.

In an increasingly fragmented and unpredictable world, Romania must remain firmly committed to defending the rules-based international order, acting as a factor of stability, cohesion, and solidarity within the Euro-Atlantic community.

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