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What Will Happen After the War? Historical Models for the Future of Northern Eurasia

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Executive Summary

The Russo-Ukrainian War will eventually end in a settlement and the outcome of the war will define the terms of the peace. Whether peace is permanent or transitory, the settlement will define crucial features of European and global politics for decades to come. Like many other aspects of this bilateral war, the settlement will be influenced by pressure from the international community. It will also indicate a major transformation of the international order.

In current political practice, choosing, debating and adjusting available historical models constitutes a legitimate, and sometimes even a preferred, way of envisaging a future settlement. This report identifies four historical models that have been actively circulating in the western public sphere in the past year. Analysts, opinion formers and forecasters usually pursue one chosen model while ignoring others. By contrast, this report evaluates their political implications by comparing and contrasting all four identified models. Each historical model implies a particular pace of events and scenarios for all sides of the conflict, as well as mechanisms for international engagement in conflict resolution.

Introduction

Like human life, wars inevitably end. In contrast to human life, however, it is the end that defines the character and features of a war in historical memory. This outcome is usually determined by two factors. The first is the shifting balance of power between the hostile nations – a new reality emerges as a direct result of successes or failures on the battlefield. The other is the diplomatic efforts of the hostile nations in peace talks. Such talks are often mediated by the international community led by the great powers, and they often lead to the building of new global or regional institutions. Military and diplomatic success are correlated, but it is only a correlation, which allows for many distortions, exceptions and misunderstandings.

As historian Tony Judt demonstrated in his classical book on the aftermath of the Second World War, the immediate post-war period presents an extraordinary challenge.¹ Borders change, political regimes fall and rise, established leaders lose their popularity, and rogue figures come into the spotlight. While the defeated side confronts an uneasy choice between repentance and revanchism, the victorious side also struggles with political and economic challenges. Post-war periods raise questions that no side can escape: how to deal with the former enemy; what to do with one's own army; how to reimburse and re-educate the veterans; who to mourn, who to compensate and who to ignore among victims and their families; and finally, what to remember and what to deny.

It is possible to win a war and lose the peace, although the reverse sounds less plausible. In the long history of Russian wars, there have been examples of military failures that were, to an extent, compensated for by successful diplomacy, notably the Crimean War and the Russo-Japanese War, but also opposite examples of a military victory that was nullified by domestic

¹ Judt, Tony. *Postwar: A history of Europe since 1945*. Penguin, 2006.

events and diplomatic failures, such as the Seven Years War and the First World War. In more straightforward cases, military and diplomatic successes matched each other, as it happened in the Napoleonic wars and the Second World War. There were also examples of successful peace talks and a land grab without direct participation in a war, as it happened in the Opium wars, which granted the Russian Empire its control over southern Siberia.

At the time of writing, the military outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War is still difficult to predict.² However, various options for its diplomatic settlement have been discussed for many months. This report summarizes these options, evaluates their plausibility and discusses their costs and benefits for the belligerent nations and for the global community. In the light of this analysis, I also delineate possible scenarios for the international actors, focused mainly on the European perspective on events, but also taking account of the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China.

In formulating the policy implications of various scenarios, I assume that only the nations involved in the conflict – their peoples, leaders, soldiers and diplomats – will decide its resolution. The people's will is unpredictable, but historical experiences, theories of international relations and common sense help to prefigure possible options in a future settlement. We do not know the future and barely understand the present. What we know with certainty and in detail is the past. Facing a crisis in the present, options for its resolution can be found in the past, and scenarios for the future can be also based on these models. It is the choice among these models that is the problem.

The Korean Model

The Korean War (1950–1953) was one of the most destructive conflicts of the 20th century, directly leading to three million fatalities and a high proportion of civilian deaths. It occurred in a complex postcolonial context (Korea was occupied and colonized by Imperial Japan in 1910–1945) and was an early, major example of a proxy conflict that became typical of the Cold War. Many Korean cities were levelled and both sides blamed each other for massacres and atrocities. The front stabilized after a kinetic conflict in which Seoul changed hands four times. A war of attrition led to initial deadlock. Both sides hoped for a breakthrough and, following direct intervention by Chinese ground troops, hostilities intensified again. Only with a change of US administration in 1952 and the death of leader of the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, in 1953 did both sides acknowledge a new balance of power. The stalemate was formalized by the Korean Armistice Agreement in July 1953. No peace treaty was signed, however, and the conflict was frozen along the heavily fortified frontline. The war led to the division of the country into two parts with very different political regimes, economic arrangements and international allegiances. While South Korea developed into one of the most prosperous nations of the world and a democracy, the totalitarian regime in North Korea has kept its part of the country in poverty. The division of the country has resulted in regional instability, repeated famines and nuclear threats. The gap between the South and the North in terms of economic growth, life expectancy and human development has grown with every decade. The developed countries of the West and the East have honoured their

² Following two recent books by Sergei Plokhy and myself, I call the current conflict "the Russo-Ukrainian War"; see Plokhy, Serhii. *The Russo-Ukrainian War*. Random House, 2023; Etkind, Alexander. *Russia against modernity*. Polity/Wiley, 2023.

(mostly informal) commitments to the sovereignty of South Korea. At the same time, the role of China in supplying and protecting North Korea, and moderating its relations with the outside world, has increased dramatically.

The military and diplomatic support provided to South Korea in its confrontation with the North has been recently confirmed at a trilateral summit of the leaders of the United States, Japan and South Korea in August 2023 – 70 years after the end of the Korean War. It is no accident that this happened in the double context of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and escalating tensions with China. However, even this high-level summit has not led to the formation of an institutional framework that would provide security guarantees to South Korea. Even now, nothing like the Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty exists for South Korea.

A number of recent articles have suggested the Korean Armistice of 1953 as a model for resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian War.³ Following the disappointment of the Ukrainian counteroffensive, many voices in the West have urged an immediate resolution of the conflict by recognizing the deadlock and signing a Korean-style truce. As Andreas Kluth, a journalist at Bloomberg, puts it, if the Ukrainian leaders “formally say goodbye to the five Ukrainian regions” that have been annexed by Russia, a new border could be marked, an armistice signed and both countries would “have to be prepared to talk and fight at the same time”.⁴

Nobody knows how long this frozen conflict would last or how it might end. However, the double analogy between North Korea and Russia, on the one hand, and South Korea and Ukraine, on the other, suggests a strong view on the long-term development of the conflict. If Russia were isolated like North Korea, its regime would be impoverished but survive, stagnate and maintain its power. Although reduced in size and population, Ukraine would prosper like South Korea due to international trade, global guarantees and the ingenuity of its people. The growing differences between the two countries would lead to new claims and conflicts. The increasingly fortified border, an Eastern European analogy of the 38th parallel that separates the two Koreas, would have to deter Russia from new attacks and provocations. As happened in the Korean War, the growing role of China in the region would triangulate the Cold War rivalries, making them less manageable and far less predictable.

Here the analogy ceases to work. North Korea does not have the rare combination of abundant resources and low density of population that is a feature of the Russian Federation. Moreover, North Korea has never been as dependent on exporting its natural resources as Russia. This makes the Russian Federation a more attractive target for appropriation, submission or colonization than North Korea. If Europe and the US were to isolate the Russian Federation, as happened to North Korea, this blockade would throw the Russian Federation into the capable hands of China. The Korean model for ending the Russo-Ukrainian War would turn China into the undisputed hegemon of Eurasia and an overwhelming global force. This model would change the global balance of power more than any other possible outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

3 Pier Grosser (2022). The war in Ukraine: A Korean model? <https://www.cairn-int.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2022-3-page-11.htm>; Karter Malkasian (2023). The Korea Model: Why an Armistice Offers the Best Hope for Peace in Ukraine. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/korean-war-diplomacy-armistice-nato>

4 Andreas Kluth (2023). Ukraine's Future Isn't German or Israeli but Korean. https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/energy/2023/08/30/ukraine-s-future-isn-t-german-or-israeli-but-korean/99ce0dda-46ec-11ee-b76b-0b6e5e92090d_story.html

Military outcome: a stalemate

Time frame: immediate to long-term

Future for Ukraine: divided and reduced

Future for Russia: united and expanded

Future for China: domination in Eurasia and the growing global hegemony

Future for NATO: problematic

Western involvement: minimal

Probability of a new war in Eastern Europe: high

Probability of redrawing the map of Eurasia: moderate

Revision of the International Order and Institution Building: minimal

The German Model

After the Second World War, the defeated Germany was occupied by the victorious powers and divided into several zones of occupation. Confrontation between the occupying powers led to the division of Germany into two or three sovereign states: the Federal Republic, the Democratic Republic plus West Berlin. Divided by heavily fortified borders and walls, these successor states had different trajectories. In 1955, West Germany joined NATO, which guaranteed its security against Soviet claims. East Germany became part of the Warsaw Pact. In 1973, both Germanies became members of the United Nations. In 1990, even before the break-up of the Soviet Union, the German state was reunified and its integrity was again guaranteed by NATO.

There are similarities between the Korean model and the German model, but also differences. Unlike the Korean model, the German model specifies the required institutional framework for the long-term resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Massive international projects such as the Marshall Plan, the European Union and NATO were all created in order to stabilize, support and contain the western part of defeated Germany. The same is true of the Warsaw pact in relation to East Germany. The German model therefore opens the door for (Western) Ukraine to NATO and the EU, and promises the continuing support of the US. In practical terms, the German model means Ukraine's conditional capitulation, international recognition of Russia's annexations and a scheduled for access by Ukraine to NATO and the EU.

The German model is probably the shortest way for Ukraine to achieve its aim of NATO membership. However, as a model for Ukraine's eventual reunification, this story does not hold water.⁵ Germans remained one and the same people but only Putin in his infamous 2022

⁵ Yeni Safak (2023). Ukraine Rejects Western Germany Model. <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/news/ukraine-rejects-west-germany-model-3669075>; Anchal Vohra (2023) Ukraine Could Be the Next West Germany. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/10/ukraine-nato-west-germany-vilnius/>; M.E.Sarrotte (2023). NATO's Worst-of-Both-Worlds Approach to Ukraine. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/natos-worst-both-worlds-approach-ukraine>

article believes that the same is true of Ukrainians and Russians. International recognition of Russian annexation of the five Ukrainian regions would embolden the aggressor, providing a positive stimulus for new land grabs and illegitimate wars. This encouragement would work for both revisionist powers, Russia and China. There would be no better inspiration for pursuing Chinese imperial aims in Taiwan than legitimizing the results of the Russian invasion of Crimea and Donbas.

Annexed, depopulated and Russified, the occupied Ukrainian lands would change their character, and there would be no way back to a German-style reunification in the future. Dividing Germany was a result and symbol of its military defeat, and the same would be true of dividing Ukraine – it would mark the defeat of Ukraine and the victory of Russia. If the splitting of Ukraine were to be legitimized by the international community, there would be little to stop a triumphal Russia from repeating its attack further north and west. The Russian threat would be stronger and NATO would find it more difficult to honour its commitment in Eastern Europe. The resulting duplicity would split NATO into two camps: Old Europe and the US against New Europe and Ukraine. Radicalization of Ukrainian nationalism in this scenario appears unavoidable. The long-term results would be a Ukrainian guerrilla movement in Russia, including the annexed lands and central territories, Russian internal terror on the scale of the 1930s and a new Cold War between the West and a Russo-Chinese alliance. By turning Eastern Europe into an arena for repeated military conflicts, terror and fear, the German model for Ukraine would be destructive for global peace.

Military outcome: Russian victory

Time frame: medium to long term

Future for Ukraine: temporarily or permanently reduced

Future for Russia: united, expanded and stabilized

Future for China: increasing domination in Eurasia and aggressive wars

Future for NATO: rebirth and enlargement

International involvement: high but deferred

Probability of a new war in Eastern Europe: high

Revision of the International Order and Institution Building: intensive

The Israeli Model

In July 2023, US President Joe Biden suggested that Ukraine was not ready for NATO membership and advanced an alternative idea: “the United States would be ready to provide while the process [of preparing for NATO membership] was going on, and it’s going to take a while, while that process was going on to provide security a la the security we provide for Israel, providing the weaponry and the needs, capacity to defend themselves if there is an agreement, if there is a ceasefire, if there is a peace agreement”.⁶ Soon, US pundits were calling this idea “the Israel model for Ukraine”. They were referring to a 2008 act of the US

⁶ <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2023-07-09/segment/01>

Congress that promises Israel “the ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors”. In practical terms, Israel has been the largest recipient of US foreign assistance since 1948. Successive administrations working with Congress have provided Israel with \$158 billion in bilateral assistance and missile defense funding. Since 2008, almost all US aid to Israel has been in the form of military assistance. Israel previously also received economic assistance.⁷ This aid is regulated by bilateral memorandums of understanding, which are updated every 10 years.

As multiple critics of this idea stated, the Israel model would not relieve the US of its financial burden: the level of foreign aid to Ukraine would be at least as high as in the case of full NATO membership. However, it would give future US administrations more flexibility in its relations with the Congress and the NATO.⁸ As Biden put it in the July interview, “we’re determined to commit every inch of territory that is NATO territory as a commitment that we’ve all made no matter what. If the war is going on, then we’re all in a war”. However, there will be no such commitment to Ukraine under an Israeli-style model. In this model, the US-Ukraine agreement would be complemented by bilateral agreements with other NATO members, which would also provide aid while preserving the flexibility and diversity of their positions. A vote by Congress would protect Ukraine against future changes of US administration. The Israel model would make Ukraine strong enough to deter future Russian attacks while minimizing the possibility that NATO forces might end up fighting Russia in Ukraine.

However, there are too many differences between the state of Ukraine in 2023 and Israel in 2008. By then, Israel had already won several wars in the Middle East and was a nuclear power. Israel was surrounded by a number of sovereign states with different and sometimes opposing interests, while Ukraine’s main (and almost only) adversary is Russia. Some of Israel’s neighbours and adversaries are US allies. Apart from Iran and (in the past) Iraq, successive US administrations have had no intention of changing their behaviour or policies, as long as they do not attack Israel or the US. The situation with Russia is entirely different. Decades of mutual grievances, accumulated misunderstandings, emotional tensions, economic sanctions and, in recent years, direct Russian provocations have spoiled US-Russian relations to an unprecedented degree.

The essential features of the Israel model presume full US support for the country under attack while ignoring, tolerating or even exploiting the particularities of the attacking country. This peculiar combination can barely be applied to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Military outcome: uncertain

Time frame: medium term

Future for Ukraine: divided into parts, blocked by Russia, fully dependent on foreign aid

⁷ Congressional Research Service. U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel. March 1, 2023

⁸ Eliote A. Cohen. The ‘Israel Model’ Won’t Work for Ukraine. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/07/israel-model-ukraine/674683/>; Maxim Trudoliubov. Israel as a Security Model for Ukraine. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/israel-security-model-ukraine>; Emma Ashford, Matthew Kroenig. Would the Israel Model Work for Ukraine? <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/14/russia-ukraine-nato-summit-zelensky-israel-model/>; Ian Brzezinski. Ukraine needs NATO membership, not an ‘Israel model’. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/ukraine-needs-nato-membership-not-an-israel-model/>; Joel Mathis. Is the ‘Israel model’ right for Ukraine? <https://news.yahoo.com/israel-model-ukraine-172453638.html>

Future for Russia: stays united and expanded, with sanctions gradually relieved

Future for China: neutrality

Future for NATO: privileging bilateral agreements leading to irrelevance

International involvement: high

Probability of a new war in Eastern Europe: high

Revision of the International Order and Institution Building: minimal

The Habsburg Model

The Habsburg Empire is a classic example of a composite state: a collection of kingdoms and other polities that controlled life, trade and warfare in Central Europe. The Empire changed its constitutional form many times but could never overcome the juridical and factual diversity of its components. It survived many wars but preserved its cohesion until the First World War, which was to a significant extent ignited by the Habsburg Empire. The collapse of the Austria-Hungarian Empire in 1918 was signalled by the acts of emancipation proclaimed by its major constituent parts, Austria and Hungary. This was a shocking event that very few contemporaries expected or predicted. Even a major adversary of the empire, the US administration, promised to preserve its “place among the nations [that] we wish to see safeguarded and assured”, as Woodrow Wilson put it in his famous 14 Points. Disintegration was a messy process that alternated international treaties with new wars and revolutions. Acts of secession developed into a chain reaction. First broken into two successor states, the empire was eventually transformed into over 20 new countries, which kept changing their juridical forms and regimes of governance. Some states were absorbed by their neighbouring countries. Others shaped the new composite states, which later disintegrated in their own turn. Sometimes peaceful and sometimes bloody, this sequential disintegration lasted for at least a century and continues today. It led to new wars, but their scale was small in comparison with the First World War. Only big states launch big wars and empires are the biggest of them all. Although Hitler was Austrian, the issues of the Habsburg succession played only a minor role in the Second World War and no role in the Cold War. However, many of these unresolved issues re-emerged in the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001).

This is a historical model for the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation. Various authors and organizations believe that the Federation will not survive the war that it has launched in Ukraine.⁹ Although increasingly vocal inside and outside the country, these voices still belong to a tiny minority of activists and scholars. However, there are several reasons for believing in the de-federalization of Russia. Economically, a major part of the Russian state budget has been shaped by the export of oil and gas from West Siberia to Europe, which has decreased due to economic sanctions. To some extent, this export has been redirected to China and India, but the western allies of Ukraine control and should minimize

⁹ <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/06/08/the-future-defederation-of-russia-a77934>; <https://www.politico.eu/article/opinion-russia-benefits-disintegration/>; <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/misfiring-war-ukraine-creates-potential-russia-disintegration>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/3/4/russias-looming-economic-crisis-will-be-worse-than-1991>; <https://ridl.io/will-the-ukraine-conflict-splinter-russia/>

this trade through sanctions, a price cap, and so on. Politically, the main burden of the war has been carried by the periphery of the Federation, and this unfair burden has increased their traditional hatred of Moscow. Militarily, Ukraine's attacks on Moscow and Russia's central regions have created chaos in the line of command. The country is overflowed by legal and illegal weapons. New private military companies, and even some regular regiments, have ethnic or regional allegiances and the central government is firmly identified with the failed war. Ideologically and culturally, the domestic authority of Moscow has never been lower. The disastrous war with Ukraine is destroying the last bastions of Russian patriotism. In June 2023, the failed Prigozhin coup exposed the ongoing decomposition of the Russian state. There will be more putsches, juntas and revolutions in Moscow and other places. At this point, the Russian government can stabilize the situation by paying recruits and mercenaries salaries that are high by the standards of provincial Russia, and promising compensation to the mothers or widows of those killed in action. However, the value of these payments depends on the exchange rate of the Russian rouble and on the economic situation in the country. By controlling the tankers and most of the pipelines that export Russian oil and gas, the western coalition of Ukrainian allies holds the key to the rouble exchange rate in its hands. It would be a political choice to allow the Russian Federation to disintegrate and then deal with the consequences or, for some reason, to maintain this composite state in its current and problematic form.

However, the most important actors in this scenario are Ukraine's leaders. They have made it clear that they see the disintegration of the Russian Federation as one of their strategic goals. Oleksiy Danilov, Secretary of the National Security and Defence Council, stated in July 2022 that "the result of the Russian war in Ukraine will be the decolonization of the territory of the occupying country....It will get rid of those colonies that she grabbed".¹⁰ In February 2023, Danilov claimed that Ukraine's victory would entail "Russia's disappearance as an integral subject of history and politics....Only after the full cycle of first external and then internal decolonization is completed, and a number of independent territorial entities are formed, will Russia cease to be a threat to humanity".¹¹ Mykhailo Podolyak, an adviser to the Office of the President of Ukraine, believes that the increasing chaos in Russia will lead to its "systemic disintegration", which will signal the victory of Ukraine.¹² Ukraine's leaders know that Russian imperialism prevented democratization of Ukraine, blocked its modernization and finally launched the invasion. There is no path to peace, reform and development as long as Russia remains "united", as its ruling party wants it.

Russian voices on this strategic issue are split along the centre-periphery axis, which is a new phenomenon. Various grassroots organizations from different parts of the Russian periphery have united in the Forum of Free Russia.¹³ In contrast, among the Moscow-based Russian opposition which has been forced into emigration, only the most radical authors promote the idea of collapse and disintegration. Its leaders, such as Navalny or Khodorkovsky, maintain a strategic ambiguity on this question. Ironically, the Western community of pundits is even more

10 <https://ukrainetoday.org/2022/07/27/danilov-predicts-the-decolonization-of-russia/>

11 <https://www.pravda.com.ua/eng/columns/2023/02/11/7388917/>

12 Mykhailo Mykhailovych Podolyak is a Ukrainian politician, journalist and negotiator, serving as the adviser to the head of Office of the President of Ukraine

13 <https://www.forumfreerussia.org/en/>; <https://t.me/s/FreedelUral>; for an example of political anthropology of a Russian region at war, see: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2023/09/01/astakhan-russias-least-russian-oblast-at-the-crossroads-of-emerging-separatisms/>

sceptical about the prospects of Russia's disintegration, although the number of dissenting voices is growing. It is important to remember that only a tiny number of the Kremlinologists predicted the end of the Soviet Union. In the conservative environment of western political think tanks and university departments, the very idea of the collapse of a formerly powerful state sounds outlandish. However, historians know that all empires eventually collapse, even the most powerful ones, and history still moves ahead. The decline and fall of an empire is not an intentional process that can be blocked or accelerated at will. The model of the Habsburg Empire, remarkable in its scale and close to the post-Soviet empire in its complexity, presents the trajectory of this collapse in painful and realistic detail.

Military outcome: Ukrainian victory

Time frame: medium to long term

Future for Ukraine: united and independent

Future for Russia: divided into constituent parts, some of them independent and others absorbed by neighbouring countries

Future for China: strengthened by the annexed parts of the former Russian Federation

Future for NATO: central role in mediating relations among the new successor states, and between them and their neighbours

International involvement: high

Probability of a new war in Eastern Europe: high

Revision of the International Order and Institution Building: intensive

Conclusion

This report has identified four historical models for the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War. They differ radically in their political paths and implications. The relevant dimensions of these differences are military outcome, time frame, predicted futures for Ukraine, Russia, China and NATO, international involvement, probability of a new war, revision of the international order and institution building. Following one of these historical models, any possible resolution of the Russo-Ukrainian War will be a product of political choices, military outcomes and diplomatic efforts. Exploring the variety of historical models helps us to understand, structure and foresee these outcomes. Historical analogies, with their hypothetical effects and necessary adjustments, constitute a legitimate, albeit far from perfect, methodology for prediction in international affairs.



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