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States of Insecurity: Recalibrations After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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SYNOPSIS

Three senses of insecurity have developed since the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine: The assault on democracy, the global imbalance of power, and the disregard for the international rules-based system. Addressing these fears can only happen through multilateral cooperation.

COMMENTARY

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres issued a stark warning at the General Assembly this month when he said, "I fear the world is not sleepwalking into a wider war. I fear it is doing so with its eyes wide open." One year on from Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the world has been profoundly changed and any hopes that a conflict far from Asia would not be significantly felt here has been dashed as inflationary pressures exacerbated by the conflict have threatened to cause a global recession.

The assessments of the consequences of the Russian invasion on global security, however, are far from unanimous. Such analyses are built on assigning meaning to these implications and yet a multitude of available facts mean that cherry-picking is rife. Ironically, the partial selection of facts is revealing not of the situation, but of the analyst, and three fears are identifiable based on the primary concerns of their analyses.

Three Reactions to the Invasion

An immediate response to the Russian invasion was that this represented a continuation of the assault on democracies. The alignments in Europe – between authoritarian Russia and liberal neighbours – certainly lend credence to this

interpretation. Links were made between influence operations allegedly traced to Russia with populist movements in the West that reflected a worrying concerted attack on the structures of liberalism: internally using the very spaces of freedom to undermine liberal states and externally using their dependence on necessities such as Russian oil and gas to pile pressures on them at a time of crisis.

A second distinct reaction to the invasion appeared to be one of ambivalence towards, or alignment even, with Russia. China has been frequently criticised for tacitly supporting Russia, but there were other countries historically associated with non-alignment such as India, Indonesia, and various African states, which took the same stand. For these states, past experience with Western unipolarity and intervention was as undesirable a state of affairs as Russian aggression. The invasion of Ukraine had galvanized the West when previously it had been fracturing, hence threatening to upset the balance of power. Following realist logic, where this balance is critical to ensuring peace, analysts in these states were more inclined to balance against the West regardless of the egregiousness of Russia's action.

A third reaction was from small states which could empathise with Ukraine over the existential threat that it faced. If a big power is able to reject or manipulate the principles of the UN-based order and get away with it, then all states contiguous to larger ones may now be at risk. It was no coincidence that eyes immediately turned to Taiwan as the situation represents a security challenge with many parallels to Ukraine.

Fractured Responses, Fracturing World

The repercussions of Russia's war on Ukraine have caused states globally to feel more insecure, minimally at an economic level, but also in hard security. If realist logic applies, then insecure states will tend to rearm or forge new alliances. One of the lessons of Ukraine is that conventional arms may not be enough: the talk in East Asia is how some states now seriously countenance nuclear options. Even if these discussions do not ultimately lead to acquisition of nuclear weapons, an arms race seems inevitable. But arms races are costly, and they privilege large, developed economies; an option not open to all.

Among those who view the Russian invasion as having increased the insecurity of democracies, one policy response has been that of 'friend-shoring' or 'reshoring' to bring the production of critical strategic goods and services back home. The strategic weaknesses of interdependence are seen to be in need of ameliorating in the face of a rising hostile power. Because Western states are largely aligned with both the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Union (EU), this is a feasible strategy for them, but it also causes the intensification of competition. It is again an option only available to some.

For countries that are large but less developed and therefore occupy fewer critical strategic nodes in the global economy, reshoring is a much tougher game. For those who believe that the balance of power is critical, the view of Western friend-shoring is zero-sum and threatening to their strategic autonomy, while fears about the weaknesses of interdependence are even more acute, having witnessed its weaponization by the West against Russia. To counter friend-shoring, they may need to build their domestic capacities, but this is a long-term game. In the short term,

cornering the market in some critical globally scarce resources may be seen to be a more viable strategy.

Finally, the small states are in the most difficult position. These countries can neither embark on arms races, reshore whole supply chains, nor corner strategic resources. For them, they may eventually be forced to choose a side, but this only exacerbates the fracturing of the global system should they do so. To avoid this outcome, they have urgently called for the upholding of the rules-based international order, one that has already been under stress long before the Ukrainian crisis.

The Need to Revive Multilateralism

The small states are correct in their response. All the other strategies only resolve short-term problems, but they exacerbate long-term ones. The history of international affairs is replete with examples of the consequences of arms races and mercantilism. It was not a coincidence that complex interdependence was considered the best guarantor of peace. But its weaponization has made it difficult to uphold, and defence mechanisms are now being erected to safeguard against that eventuality.

Multilateralism has not recovered fully from the 2008 global financial crisis and the backlash resulting from the populist perception of the system as being beholden to the elites rather than the people. Yet unilateral policymaking by states facing fears caused by a receding multilateral order is more dangerous. We might be, as Antonio Guterres warned, sleepwalking into a wider war with our eyes open. The remaining regional pockets must continue the pursuit of cooperation and buffer themselves from the intensifying competition among the great powers. It is only through demonstrating the benefits of cooperation by example that this trust can be rebuilt.

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