

Ukraine's Revenge on the West

As the balance of power shifts again in Ukraine, its reverberations will impact the very unity of the EU project

By [M. K. Bhadrakumar](#)

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Vector politics in Ukraine has added new dimensions to the 222 day-old conflict.

Typically, any conflict behavior should end when a new balance of powers has been determined. But the 'balancing of powers' will not end until a balance is actually achieved - and evidence abounds that Ukraine is about to enter yet another 're-balancing.'

Russian Duma's ratification of the annexation of four regions of Ukraine (Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics, as well as the Kherson and Zaporozhye Regions), and the adoption of the relevant laws thereof, creates a new dynamic and will take some time to create a new balance of forces on the ground within Ukraine.

Meanwhile, the external environment is also phenomenally transforming. The deepening energy crisis in Europe following the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipelines becomes a serious contradiction. There is no knowing how it can be reconciled.

Thus, a complex situation presents itself, as all this is also happening against the backdrop of a massive Russian military build-up around Ukraine in the Kharkov region and in the southern Black Sea region, with long convoys of armor reportedly heading toward Crimea from Russia.

Russia's new borders

The Duma's unanimous ratification of the accession of four regions to Russia on Monday was to be expected, the relevant legislation was duly ratified on Tuesday by the Federation Council (the upper house of the parliament), and possibly, President Putin too will sign off on the documents today, following which it will come into force. That is to say, as of October 5, the annexed Ukrainian regions will have become part of Russia.

Importantly, the Duma has approved the government's proposals on the establishment of

the new regions' borders, based on the delimitation of territories which "existed on the day of their establishment and accession to Russia."

The relevant treaties outline that the borders adjacent to the territory of a foreign country will be Russia's new state border. Plainly put, the old boundaries of the Soviet era are being restored in those regions.

The determination of the Russian state boundaries has security implications. In the Donbass and Zaporozhye Regions, there are vast areas that still remain under the control of the Ukrainian forces. Liman city in Donetsk Republic was captured by the Ukrainian forces only three days ago. The Ukrainian incursions into Kherson continue. Heavy fighting is reported.

Evidently, much unfinished business remains for Moscow to bring under control the "occupied" territories that previously formed part of Donetsk and Lugansk. The Zaporozhye Region (which also happens to be an important littoral region on the Azov Sea and forms a part of what Russians historically call "Novorossiia"), is another priority where the capital city of the oblast itself is not yet under Russian control.

'Nyet' from NATO

In the emergent situation, Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky formally applied for Ukraine's NATO membership on an expeditious basis, but within hours, the alliance poured cold water on that request, explaining that any decision will require support from all 30 member states.

It signals that there isn't going to be any NATO intervention in Ukraine. Moscow will take note. The recent "loud thinking" about the use of nuclear weapons seems to have served its purpose.

The US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's meeting with the head of Ukraine's presidential office Andriy Yermak in Istanbul on Sunday was a low-key affair. The White House said Sullivan pledged Washington's steadfast support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and discussed with Yermak the situation at the Zaporozhye Nuclear Power Plant and Ukraine's continued work with the United Nations to export food to the world.

The White House readout on President Joe Biden's call with Zelensky on Monday mentioned a new \$625 million security assistance package by Washington that includes additional weapons and equipment, including HIMARS, artillery systems and ammunition, and armored vehicles. Biden "pledged to continue supporting Ukraine as it defends itself from Russian aggression for as long as it takes."

Later, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the recent aid delivery would bring the overall cost of US military aid to Ukraine to more than \$17.5 billion.

"Recent developments... only strengthens our resolve," Blinken said in a statement on Tuesday. "We will continue to stand with the people of Ukraine."

"The capabilities we are delivering are carefully calibrated to make the most difference on the battlefield and strengthen Ukraine's hand at the negotiating table when the time is right," he added.

Revamping Russia's strategy

On the other hand, the Russian military command will probably have to reset the parameters of the special military operations, since its forces will henceforth be safeguarding the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. What form it takes remains to be seen.

So far, the actual Russian deployment has been less than 100,000 troops. Most of the fighting was done by the militia groups such as fighters from Donbass and Chechnya and the Wagner Group of ex-special services personnel and other volunteers from Russia.

Certainly, the induction of 300,000 troops with previous military experience will impact the overall military balance to Russia's advantage. Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu has said that another 70,000 men have also volunteered, which will put the total strength of the additional forces at around 370,000.

Now, that is a huge increase. To get a sense of proportions, at the peak of the Vietnam War, the US deployment stood at around half a million troops. For the first time, Russia will have *vast numerical superiority* over Ukrainian forces. Therefore, it is entirely conceivable that the old pattern of "grinding" the Ukrainian forces may change and the objective will be to end the war quickly and decisively.

The US decision to set up a command centre outside Ukraine (in Germany) seems to anticipate Russian attacks on command centres in Kiev and elsewhere with much bigger use of airpower, as in Syria. In fact, the new commander of the Western Military District Lt. Gen. Roman Berdnikov previously led the Russian intervention in Syria.

Military experts anticipate that once autumn rains give way to the winter and the ground hardens, the Russian operations will intensify. Voices of dissent are heard lately within Russia that the war is meandering with no timeline as such. This may change.

Plainly put, the point of no return is fast approaching from where Russia will have no alternative but to push for a regime change in Kiev and pave the way for an altogether new Ukrainian leadership that shakes off the vice-like Anglo-American grip, and is willing to settle with Russia.

A Kafkaesque moment

Unsurprisingly though, the attention in Europe is turning more and more towards the economic crisis with looming double-digit inflation and recession, which can lead to social unrest and political turmoil all across the continent. The growing public discontent is turning into protests in many European countries already. The crisis can only deepen once winter sets in.

Conceivably, the shift in the popular mood may prompt the European governments to concentrate on their domestic issues rather than dabble in the Ukraine war. The most ardent votary of open-ended war with Russia is Britain, but even London is caught up in massive economic (and political) crises of its own. Prime Minister Liz Truss is fighting for political survival. The Conservatives have practically forfeited their mandate to rule.

Germany's predicament

Again, the centre-right Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union opposition bloc in the German Bundestag stalled a motion urging the government to “immediately” allow the export of German battle tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to Ukraine. *Politico* reported that “A vote on weapons deliveries in the Bundestag would have risked revealing fatal cracks in the government unity and could even have led to a defeat of (Chancellor Olaf) Scholz in parliament.”

On the other hand, the German government also faces mounting pressure from the Eastern European allies in recent weeks to drastically increase the scale and type of Berlin's military support to Ukraine.

The influential *Foreign Policy* magazine in Washington wrote last week,

“In the eyes of Berlin's NATO allies in Eastern Europe, particularly the countries that border Russia, Germany, the economic and political power centre of Europe, isn't doing nearly enough. And the longer it delays, the more it risks a long-term diplomatic fracture with those allies in the East.”

But despite this pressure tactic, polls show that while some 70 percent of Germans are supportive of Ukraine generally, only 35 percent endorse stronger military support.

In this situation, the sabotage of the Nord Stream gas pipeline dovetails into the energy crisis in Europe and threatens European countries with “de-industrialization.”

For Germany, in particular, the country's economic model is riveted on the availability of abundant gas supplies from Russia, per long-term contracts, at cheap prices, through pipelines. Clearly, the sabotage of the Nord Stream has monumental implications.

To be sure, whoever perpetrated that terrorist attack calculated shrewdly that Russian gas should not flow to Europe for the foreseeable future. The perennial fear in Washington is that a German-Russian proximity may develop if energy ties are restored. Besides, today, US oil companies are having a huge windfall of profits in the European energy market, replacing Russia, by selling LNG at five to six times the US domestic price.

Preventing Russian-German reconciliation

What complicates matters is that Europe needs energy security in the short and medium term without also wrecking climate targets. It means heightened geopolitical sensitivity. The point is, Europe's orderly energy transition away from fossil fuels critically needs Russian gas and was built on the earlier assumption that there would be cheap and plentiful natural gas.

Arguably, Moscow kept hoping that Nord Stream would eventually be a catalyst to heal the rupture in German-Russian energy ties. Interestingly, on Monday, Russian energy giant Gazprom proposed to European gas customers that part of the damaged Nord Stream network could still transport fuel — but only on the newly constructed Nord Stream 2. Nord Stream 1 is virtually destroyed.

A Gazprom statement in its Telegram account said that one of the three lines of the Nord Stream 2 remains unaffected and the gas giant has lowered the pressure to inspect the link

for damage and potential leaks. Nord Stream 2 has a shipment capacity of 55 billion cubic meters per year, which means its line B could deliver as much as 27.5 billion cubic meters per year to Germany across the Baltic Sea.

However, the Nord Stream 2 requires EU approval, which is problematic given the tensions between Brussels and Moscow. These tensions may only increase if the EU approves the US-led decision by the G7 countries to impose a price cap on Russian oil.

Most certainly, that is also Washington's calculus — pin down Germany and keep Russia out. The spectre that haunts Washington is that Berlin may lose interest in the Ukraine war. The ascendancy of the Atlanticists in the echelons of power in Berlin in the most recent years — and their nexus with the virulently Russophobic EU bureaucrats in Brussels — has so far worked splendidly in Washington's favor.

The EU is effectively over

But the ground beneath the feet is shifting, as the dramatic turn in Sweden and Italy's politics has shown.

Do not underestimate the "Meloni effect." The heart of the matter is that the far-right forces invariably have more to offer to the electorate in times of insecurity and economic hardship.

In France too, President Macron is immobilized, lacking a parliamentary majority to legislate, and is being worn down by serial crises. As for Britain, the financial crisis triggered by the Chancellor of Exchequer Kwasi Kwarteng's budget highlights fundamentally the scarcity of feasible alternative economic models. Sterling is in free fall. Two consecutive Tory administrations failed to come up with a post-Brexit model, while Labour never wanted Brexit. The Truss government is the last chance to get Brexit really done, but no-one is holding their breath. And then, the Deluge — events will intrude.

What all this means is that the three main power centers within the Eurozone and Britain are finding it hard to escape the old, dying industrial world of the 20th century and this is not the best of time to take on the half-million strong Russian allied forces in Ukraine, the Biden Administration's bravado notwithstanding.

Do not lend credence to the inaugural summit of the European Political Community (EPC) in Prague on Wednesday bringing together the leaders of 27 EU member states and up to 17 non-EU countries — namely, the UK, Turkey, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Norway, Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Israel.

The plain truth is that the European integration project is over and done with. Any attempt to impose it will produce severe backlash. Looking back, therefore, the rupture with Russia has ushered in a new geopolitical landscape in Europe where Brussels' conundrum regarding EU expansion stands exposed. The EPC is nothing but a disguised French ploy to slow down actual EU membership for countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The EPC summit at the Prague Castle only serves to highlight that this is a Kafkaesque moment in European politics. This must be Ukraine's revenge on Europe for staging such a cynical, violent coup in 2014 to cut its umbilical cord with Russia.

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