
After the Ukraine War: Confronting the Problem of International Order

Should the West acknowledge that Ukraine is unlikely to evict Russian forces from all occupied territory, and therefore attempt to steer the conflict toward a negotiated outcome? This issue deals not only with whether to try to shape Ukraine's war aims more deliberately, but also the extent to which norms lying at the heart of the European (and global) security order can demonstrate their resilience. Given the chasm that has emerged between Russian and Western interpretations of these norms over recent decades, the emergence of a fragmented security order represents the most likely outcome.

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One of the central – and most controversial – discussions during the war in Ukraine has concerned the question of compromise. Specifically, should the West acknowledge that Ukraine is unlikely to evict Russian forces from all occupied territory, and therefore attempt to steer the conflict toward a negotiated outcome?

The implications of striking a deal concern more than just each side's war aims; they also touch on the norms at the heart of the European (and global) security system. Russia and the West have contested these norms for decades, leaving an international order in disarray and representing a net loss for all sides. With the line separating Moscow from Kyiv and Western capitals having now turned into a chasm, it may take several decades more before a cooperative approach to security between the parties can be fully re-established.

Although brave Ukrainians have managed to secure their sovereignty and independence, their country's territorial integrity remains compromised. Perhaps more controversially, any settlement acceptable to Moscow will likely restrict Kyiv's ability to join NATO. This touches on the question of Ukraine's "right to choose", enshrined in the [Paris Charter of 1990](#), which formalised the end of the Cold War. Some may argue that it even

concerns Kyiv's right to national self-determination under the UN Charter.

This discussion reveals two truths that Western thinkers and policymakers are often uncomfortable confronting. The first is that norms do not exist in a vacuum and must be considered alongside other factors such as geography, geopolitical rivalry and the distribution of power. The second is that the repeated invocation of norms and principles does not (on its own) offer a path to peace.

Great powers are states that can constrain the strategic choices and calculations of other great powers. Therefore, in a multipolar world one side's interpretation of certain norms cannot always reign supreme. This unfortunately clashes with the prevailing Western understanding of the "[rules-based international order](#)". But one cannot speak of *the* rules as much as *whose* rules should prevail. This consideration is particularly relevant in cases involving Russia, whose self-definition as a great power includes having a seat at the table where the global rules of the game are written.

Norms are not only political; they are also often ambiguous. Some international orders feature seemingly contradictory norms. The Paris Charter is one example, with the "[right to choose](#)"

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appearing alongside the principle of indivisible security. A Ukrainian decision to join NATO, while it may accord with the first of these two principles, may contradict the second if Moscow views Kyiv's membership of the transatlantic alliance as a security threat. Some individual norms are also the product of struggle and contestation, which can lead to disagreements between states over their meaning – for example, over the scope and nature of state sovereignty and the conditions under which it can legitimately be set aside.

The good news is that even when states violate international law or manipulate certain norms to achieve cynical ends, they often attempt to provide a legal justification for doing so. Even the George W. Bush administration, renowned for its propensity for unilateralism, initially attempted to seek approval at the UN for its 2003 invasion of Iraq. This points to the continued strength of international law and certain shared norms in structuring interstate relations, even if these principles are occasionally ignored or violated.

The bad news is that the selective application of some norms can worsen global security and lead to the erosion of the international order. Many in the liberal West who rigidly interpret the UN Charter's principle of national self-determination in the case of Ukraine have been more flexible in their understanding of the Charter's prohibition on the use of force in the context of humanitarian interventions. Instances of Western violations of international law, such as the 1999 NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, cannot be compared with Russia's more blatant and brutal illegal aggression against Ukraine. But they can set a precedent that other powers are only too happy to twist for (at least partly) cynical aims. They can also upset the delicate balance that exists between international law and other inherited norms such as the balance of power that allows these seemingly contradictory mechanisms to coexist.

While many in the West prefer to discuss the legitimacy or legality of particular actions on a case-by-case basis, the reality is that the impact of continued contestation among great powers is cumulative. The NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, for example, left a definitive mark on the Russian

leadership, persuading its members of the West's willingness to apply force unilaterally at Moscow's expense. Subsequent attempts at resetting the Russia-West relationship therefore occurred against this backdrop of already faltering ties. This highlights the difficulties involved in considering an individual instance of norm-breaking or norm-bending as a one-off that does not set a precedent.

Irrespective of how much Russia's military machine is degraded in its current campaign, this war will end with a fragmented security order, albeit one that features some elements of resilience. Relations between Russia and the West have descended to the point where Moscow has embraced full-blown revisionism and is running roughshod over established norms. Getting to this point has been a gradual journey over the course of the post-Cold War era. Undoing the damage that has been done will therefore also be a long-term endeavour.

However, great power or not, Russia remains Europe's largest and most populous country. Building a stable and durable continental order will be impossible without confronting the question of whose norms should prevail. If no common ground exists between the principles that the West espouses and the great-power identity that Russia has claimed for itself, then we may be doomed to inhabit an unpredictable security environment for decades to come – one that enhances neither Ukraine's security, nor Russia's, nor that of the West.

Managing this dangerous situation will above all require flexibility and compromise. But the pragmatic statesmanship needed to navigate the new status quo will inevitably call further into question the staying power of certain Western-backed liberal norms – norms that, contrary to those who believed in the “[end of history](#)”, had never completely won universal acceptance.