

Opinion – The West's Role in Ukraine's Lost Future

Written by Ali Askerov

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Opinion – The West's Role in Ukraine's Lost Future

<https://www.e-ir.info/2025/09/24/opinion-the-west-s-role-in-ukraines-lost-future/>

ALI ASKEROV, SEP 24 2025

Three and a half years into Russia's war, Moscow has failed to win – but the West has also failed to craft a winning strategy. Although Moscow has failed to achieve its initial objectives – such as a rapid invasion of entire Ukraine, quick victory, and regime change in Kyiv – it is equally important to recognize that the West's strategy of decisively defeating Russia has also fallen short. The war has reached a painful stalemate, and both sides face limits to their ambitions. This war has exposed Russia's miscalculations and poor strategy, as well as the West's weaknesses – struggling with problems it has no clear tools to manage, despite long-held faith in its strength. Russia entered the conflict with considerable confidence. This assurance was not baseless but rooted in Moscow's earlier achievements and the world's quiet responses to them. The 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea both resulted in minimal costs for Moscow. Similarly, Russia's willingness to provoke and sustain conflicts in Moldova, Georgia, and other post-Soviet states reinforced the belief that it could act with relative impunity.

Even earlier, during the brutal campaigns in Chechnya in the mid-1990s and again in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Russia faced international condemnation but suffered no real consequences. Western governments issued sharp rhetoric, but effective sanctions never followed, and Moscow continued to exercise significant influence across the post-Soviet space. These weak responses to Russian aggression strengthened Vladimir Putin's confidence and convinced him that Western threats rarely translated into action. Moreover, Russia's position in the global system was ambiguous. It was neither fully integrated into Western structures, despite President Yeltsin's overtures in the 1990s, nor entirely excluded. This in-between status provided space for maneuver. When President Putin decided to invade Ukraine in February 2022, he had good reason to assume the West would hesitate to have military contact with Russia directly, particularly given Europe's deep dependence on Russian oil and natural gas. Whether his calculations were ultimately correct or not, Putin entered the war believing Western countries lacked the will to confront Russia strongly or jeopardize their own economic interests.

The West's reaction, while eventually more significant than Russia anticipated, was far from prompt or unified. European energy dependence created fractures, with some countries initially reluctant to support strong measures. Germany, for instance, hesitated to abandon Russian natural gas, while Hungary openly resisted several sanction packages. These differences slowed decision-making at crucial early moments. The United States and European Union did impose sweeping sanctions and provide Ukraine with weapons and ammunition, training, and financial support. Yet the response lacked the decisiveness necessary to paralyze Russia quickly. Instead, the conflict evolved into a war of attrition. Sanctions damaged Russia's economy, but not enough to force a strategic retreat. Moscow redirected much of its oil and gas trade to new markets, particularly China and India, which eagerly filled the gap left by Western buyers. These states, motivated by economic gain and strategic rivalry with the West, provided Moscow with alternative lifelines, reducing the impact of restrictions. The West's failure to build solid sanctions regimes – combined with its hesitation in providing unlimited advanced weaponry to Ukraine early in the war – further limited Kyiv's ability to use Russia's initial weaknesses. Western support has undoubtedly kept Ukraine in the fight, but it has not been sufficient to deliver decisive victories or shift the balance of power in a lasting way.

Ukraine's own policies added to its weaknesses, but they also showed the country's remarkable strength. President Volodymyr Zelensky, elected almost three years before the war, had time to improve the military and prepare for a possible large Russian attack. Ukraine did receive NATO help after 2014, but its efforts to strengthen the defense sector and fight corruption were slow and inconsistent. Zelensky also misjudged both how far Russia was willing to

Opinion – The West's Role in Ukraine's Lost Future

Written by Ali Askerov

go and how reliable Western support would be. At the same time, Ukraine's response once the invasion began demonstrated extraordinary determination. Kyiv's forces repelled Russia's initial push toward the capital, defended key cities, and mounted counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson that shifted momentum in 2022. Ukraine also managed to integrate advanced Western systems such as HIMARS rocket launchers and air defense platforms into its operations with remarkable speed.

Critics argue that an early chance for negotiation was wasted. Within days of the invasion, Ukrainian and Russian delegations met in Istanbul and discussed ceasefire frameworks. Instead of pursuing this opening, Zelensky leaned on assurances from Western leaders – such as Boris Johnson and Joe Biden – who encouraged continued resistance. This decision tied Ukraine's fate to Western support, for better or worse. That support has yielded mixed outcomes. Ukraine has secured billions in aid, but its dependence leaves it vulnerable to political changes abroad. The shift in U.S. policy following the 2024 election, which reduced enthusiasm for funding the war, left Kyiv unprotected. This highlights the paradox of Ukraine's position: it has demonstrated resilience, adaptability, and courage, yet its ability to sustain a long conflict remains constrained by reliance on external supporters.

While Russia has not achieved its main objectives in Ukraine, it has successfully cultivated allies that limit the West's ability to punish it. The recent summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in September 2025 revealed that Moscow enjoys substantial support from partners such as China, India, and North Korea. This coalition is not without problems, but it still gives Russia enough support to withstand sanctions and continue its war effort. China's role is especially significant. As a rising global power with advanced economic and military capabilities, Beijing has offered Russia critical markets, technology, and diplomatic backing. Western leaders, including NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte, have expressed alarm at China's rapid military modernization and its potential to challenge the global order. For Moscow, China's partnership is crucial in counterbalancing isolation. Other countries also support Russia in quieter ways. India buys large amounts of cheap Russian oil, giving Moscow steady income. Iran and North Korea send drones, ammunition, and other military help, allowing Russia to keep fighting. Together, these ties make it harder for the West to isolate Russia and force it reconsider its aggressive policies.

The war in Ukraine shows not only tactical mistakes by the West but also deep systemic problems in its security architecture. The institutions established after World War II were designed for a bipolar or unipolar international order, not today's global systemic realities. The inability to deter Russia effectively highlights the need for major reforms in Western security strategies. The situation is like the period between the world wars. In the 1930s, Japan invaded Manchuria and Italy took over Ethiopia, and the West mostly was confused, which encouraged more aggression. The West only acted strongly when Hitler's plan to control Europe became clear. In Russia's case, Western leaders underestimated Moscow's goals and acted only after Russia tried to take all of Ukraine. By that point, chances to prevent the war had already been lost.

Weak institutions made this failure worse. NATO countries, while united in principle, struggle to maintain consensus on long-term strategy. The EU has been slow to achieve energy independence and remains divided over defense spending. The United States, still the main power in the alliance, has not presented a clear long-term plan for dealing with countries that challenge the rules. Tariff policies and small, selective sanctions are insufficient substitutes for a comprehensive and robust strategy. The West is not losing the war – but it risks losing the future if it cannot adapt to new global political and economic realities. Transatlantic relations show increasing signs of strain. While democratic systems require dialogue and negotiation, the lack of decisive progress toward deeper cooperation weakens the West's capacity. Europe and the U.S. continue to diverge on issues ranging from burden-sharing in NATO to approaches toward China. These divisions send mixed signals to allies and adversaries alike. Meanwhile, the Global South is increasingly drawn into China's orbit. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), known in China as the One Belt One Road, has created deep economic ties across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, reshaping trade and investment flows. This expansion raises fundamental questions: is the world entering a multipolar era with multiple centers of power, or a renewed bipolarity defined by U.S.-China rivalry? Groups like BRICS are already challenging the dominance of the U.S. dollar, signaling at alternative financial structures.

Despite its global reach, the United States has struggled to offer a convincing strategy for this new era of competition. Washington often acts in response to events rather than setting the agenda. Military aid to Ukraine has been

Opinion – The West's Role in Ukraine's Lost Future

Written by Ali Askerov

essential, and tariffs on China show some willingness to confront rivals, but these measures fall short of a long-term vision. Without sustained investments in innovation, infrastructure, and alliances, such policies cannot underpin a durable strategy. This uncertainty upsets allies and encourages rivals. Without a clear or visible U.S. roadmap, the West remains reactive rather than proactive, giving China room to extend its influence beyond Asia. Russia and other powers also gain – or are likely to gain – from this over the long term. Some analysts argue Western actions have already achieved important results – slowing Russia's advances, keeping NATO united, and helping Ukraine withstand a stronger opponent. Sanctions have also reduced Moscow's access to technology. Yet others caution that a multipolar world is not inherently unstable; it could create balance rather than endless rivalry. The real danger, however, is the present moment of transition. Global institutions built for the Cold War and its aftermath are ill-prepared for today's challenges. The West must quickly adapt, if it wants to prevent future crises from spinning out of control.

The war in Ukraine reveals the simultaneous failures of Russia and the West. Russia miscalculated its ability to achieve a rapid victory, but it has nevertheless sustained its war effort, avoided collapse under sanctions, and secured the backing of key partners. The West, meanwhile, has failed to present a decisive, unified, and sustainable strategy to defeat Russia or reshape the international order. The conflict reflects deeper systemic weaknesses in Western security architecture, transatlantic cohesion, and strategic vision. Unless these shortcomings are addressed, the international community risks drifting toward instability, with revisionist powers exploiting divisions while the dangers extend far beyond Ukraine. The outcome of this war will shape the balance of power in the 21st century – whether toward a fragile multipolar order, a renewed bipolar rivalry, or a weakened Western-led system unable to defend its own principles. The West may not lose the war in Ukraine, but unless it adapts, it risks losing the century.

About the author:

Dr. Ali Askerov is a faculty member at the University of North Carolina – Greensboro, specializing in peace and conflict studies. His research focuses on ethno-political conflicts, forced migration, refugee issues, and structural violence, with a recent emphasis on Russia's aggressive policies. He has authored seven books and numerous articles, contributing valuable insights to the field.