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Russia's Special Operation in Ukraine – Not to be Ignored by Africa

Introduction

Democracy never really took hold in [Russia](#); and in February 2022, at the peak of his authoritarian power, President Vladimir Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, blaming the invasion on the [eastward](#) expansion of NATO, and threatening the West with [nuclear war](#) if it intervened militarily. The Ukrainians have always been deeply ambivalent about joining NATO; and NATO has always been divided over Ukraine's [membership](#). Yet, Putin still plays up NATO as a bogeyman reflecting Russia's phobias more than the actual dangers facing [Russia](#). Thus, it is not only NATO's enlargement that led to Russia's attack on Ukraine; but also Russia's fears of the spill-overs of democratic successes of in its neighbours to the [West](#).

Discussion

Various critical geo-strategic realities provide some perspective as to what is unfolding in Ukraine at present. Below follows a brief overview of five geo-strategic aspects that helped shape, and flow from the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

Firstly, geopolitics matters, but geopolitics with a difference. For quite some time the world accepted that the West is in decline and that powers like China and Russia are to shape the pace of development in future. The realities of this assumption were quite visible in Africa, especially in terms of Chinese involvement in Africa. However, the decline of the West was relative, not absolute; in the same way that the growth of the economic and political power in the East was relative and not absolute. The war in Ukraine, and the response of the West to Putin's so-called special military operation exposed the difference between potential and real power in Russia. In many ways, Russia is a [spent](#) force in international politics, with even [China](#) turning its back on [Russia](#). The [focus](#) of the US is on China. Yet, China is facing some real [demographic](#), [political](#), [health](#) and [economic](#) crises at present; and these are not bound to disappear soon. China is resource dependent on [Africa](#); whilst Europe's search for alternative resource and [gas supplies](#) raises the strategic importance of [Africa](#) for Europe. Though

Africa is on the periphery of the current war in Europa, it will be affected by the geopolitical landscape emanating from the war and it is up to African leaders how to make the best of the altered strategic landscape.

Secondly, proxy wars are down, but not [out](#) – as is clearly visible from [Western support](#) for Ukraine in its war against [Russia](#). The end of the Cold War brought a significant decline in the number of proxy wars in Africa with the last 20 years reflecting largely, positive great power involvement in African [security](#). This was accompanied by an effort to minimise direct military involvement in African conflicts. More specifically, great powers increasingly rely on private military companies and air or drone systems as a way to increase deniability and distance themselves from accusations of direct [military involvement](#) in Africa. A growing competition for resources from Africa, though, may lead to more direct involvement in African security with the indirect approach giving way to big power proxy wars guided by economic rather than ideological imperatives.

Thirdly, military power and economic capacity are two sides of the same coin. The unfolding economic realities of the war in Russia will be instrumental in the strategic outcome of the war. Since the invasion of Ukraine in February, Russia already spent a quarter of its annual budget on the war; the direct military costs for the 9 months to support military operations are about \$82 billion – approximately 25% of Russia's 2021 budget revenues of about [\\$340 billion](#). This does not reflect total Russian defence spending on or economic losses due to the war. In comparison, the US spent about three percent of its budget on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan; and current US aid to Ukraine war effort amounts to about 0.8% of the US federal budget. The war, together with the decline of the oil price and the impact of international sanctions, will have a devastating effect on Russia. It is to affect Russia's influence and standing in the world, and its involvement in Africa. Meanwhile, Ukraine's reconstruction is bound to further detract from international African investment flows.

Fourthly, and from a geo-strategic perspective, vulnerable populations are always at the receiving end of conflict, violence, and war. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, some [seven million](#) people were internally displaced and millions more have sought refuge outside of the country. It is a trend that is closely tied to the large-scale Russian destruction of critical civilian infrastructure and housing. Europe has been pivotal in housing millions of Ukrainian refugees – women and children, specifically. In contrast, Russian occupation officials forcibly transferred Ukrainian [children](#) from occupied territories in Luhansk Oblast to Russia under the guise that the children require special medical care. The displacement of people through conflict, war and violence is a well-known trend in Africa and disrupts Africa's potential for [growth](#). As is the case in Europe, the burden of caring for these migrants is falling on neighbouring countries. Unlike Europe, though, Africa does not have the systemic infrastructure to manage and absorb the humanitarian fallout from war. Moreover, unlike Africa, the nations in Europe are already planning for a post-conflict reconstruction and development programme, a [Marshall plan for Ukraine](#), that is to create an ultra-modern democracy on the border with Russia. This is bound to drain significant resources away from Africa as the UN and other aid agencies are also prone to follow suit.

Lastly, war is at the same time a deeply human and a deeply political endeavour. Strategic actors in Africa ought to be aware of the importance of strategic effect in the employment of force, and the reality of a possible ironic effect and outcome of strategy. For Ukraine, success on the battlefield is critical for its [information campaign](#) to sustain Western military support for its battle against Russia. Russia is pinning its hopes for success, increasingly, on a strategic drone and [missile campaign](#) based upon attrition against Ukraine's critical infrastructure networks. Cutting Ukraine's electricity and gas network in winter, Russia hopes, is to make up for Russian personnel and material [shortage](#) in sustaining the battlefield offensive. In a paradoxical way, though, Russia's strategic bombing campaign

may have strategic value for Ukraine, rather than Russia. Attrition and destruction of a foe holds dual outcomes and political leaders must carefully consider both the strategic gains, as well as potential losses when embarking on a dominant kinetic only campaign.

Synthesis and conclusions

Much to Russia's surprise, Ukraine is surviving the Russian onslaught. Democracies seems to be resilient against campaigns of this [nature](#). Instead of undermining support, the Russian missile campaign may [galvanise domestic morale and support for the war](#). Also, air defence systems are seen as legitimate defensive weapons resonating with Western notions of supplying non-offensive weapons. From a diplomatic perspective, the Russian campaign may encourage countries like Germany, France, Britain and Italy to be more resilient in their [assistance](#). From a cost perspective, regardless of the Western supply of air defence systems, the Russian campaign remains destructive for Ukraine. Yet, and at the same time, for Russia to sustain the campaign will be a costly affair as well.

Overall, some observations from the above discussion must be noted. First, quick wars premised upon regime collapse remains a very risky and dangerous political assumption. Second, despite precision technologies, civil societies still bear the brunt of wars and particularly so if civil infrastructure becomes precision targets of choice. Indirect costs also accrue to civilians when political blunders, economic costs and critical infrastructure destruction converge to stunt economic development. Finally, in an interdependent world the ripple effects of a distant war hold consequences for African countries – whether it be energy costs, food insecurity, heightened potential for proxy wars or the dilemma of siding with protagonists and getting it wrong.

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