



The UN and Russia's war in Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has served as a serious test for the United Nations and its claim that it preserves international peace and security. Predictably, Moscow has used its veto in the UN Security Council to prevent the body from formally criticising Russia's actions. Yet other elements of the UN system have helped both to limit the fallout of the war and to highlight the validity of Ukraine's cause. UN Secretary-General António Guterres played a significant, personal diplomatic role in negotiating the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which has allowed Ukraine to export foodstuffs to world markets despite Russia's invasion. While the Security Council has been gridlocked over the war, votes taken by other UN bodies – such as the General Assembly and Human Rights Council – have condemned Russian aggression with large majorities.

The UN has also served as a channel for Russia and Western countries to find a degree of common ground over crises other than Russia's war in Ukraine. The Security Council has continued to pass resolutions authorising peace operations and sanctions in Africa and the Middle East. The council has also shown ambition in other areas, such as Afghanistan and Haiti.

The war has thus illustrated not only the UN's fundamental weakness in the face of aggression by members of the Security Council but also some of its residual strengths. The UN can help contain wars involving council members and provide a space to defend the principles of international law while also offering a venue for continued major-power cooperation even during a period of intense competition. The institution's capacity to play these roles does not compensate for its underlying inability to stop Russia's war, but these functions are still valuable.

If the war in Ukraine drags on for years or intensifies to levels yet unseen, tensions between Moscow and the West may further reduce the institution's room for manoeuvre. Nevertheless, Western powers have an interest in continuing to engage in UN forums, both to challenge Russia while the war continues and to cooperate in other areas.

Twin-track diplomacy in the Security Council

Ukraine has dominated the Security Council's agenda since the end of January

2022, when the United States first requested a meeting to issue a warning about Russia's invasion plans, but it has never had a chance to resolve the conflict. Moscow has blocked all council resolutions and statements regarding the war (with the minor exception of a brief statement from the council in May thanking Guterres for his humanitarian work), while Ukraine and its partners have treated the council as a venue for putting public pressure on Russia. The council has held meetings covering almost every aspect of the war, from threats to nuclear facilities to damage to cultural heritage. Russia has responded by convening meetings of its own, making outlandish allegations that the US has a bioweapons programme in Ukraine and that Kyiv has tried to make a 'dirty bomb'.

The goal on both sides has been to shape international political and media narratives around the war through the council, not to use the UN or the council as a space for real diplomacy. This is not surprising. Since the outbreak of civil wars in Libya and Syria in 2011, relations between Russia and Western powers in the Security Council have been increasingly toxic, often involving public rows.

Nonetheless, the permanent members of the council have managed to separate their differences over Syria and Libya from cooperation in other areas; as of December 2022, this has been mostly true about Ukraine as well. Soon after the Russian invasion, diplomats at the UN wondered whether all the council's work might grind to a halt. This did not happen, however. It has kept passing resolutions at a similar pace as in 2021, and Russia has cast its veto only twice in 2022 on matters not related to Ukraine (once regarding North Korea and once regarding humanitarian aid to Syria). Council diplomats say that talks on these issues have often been difficult, and they worry that the body has failed to grapple with some pressing matters on its agenda, such as the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel. China and Russia have also blocked the council from taking action on other major crises, notably the war in Ethiopia and turmoil in Myanmar. Yet the council did manage to agree a new mandate for UN engagement in Afghanistan in March – a priority because UN agencies have played a crucial role in assisting Afghan civilians since the collapse

of the government in Kabul in August 2021 – and it agreed a new sanctions regime targeting violent gangs in Haiti in October.

There are several reasons for the council's apparent resilience. Russia seems keen to show that it is not a total spoiler at the UN. Western diplomats have made quiet concessions to Moscow at times to avoid breakdowns; France, in particular, has wanted to avoid unnecessary vetoes. And China has also lobbied Russia to cooperate. The ten elected members of the council have not always seen eye-to-eye on Ukraine (India, for instance, has avoided voting against Russia), but they have generally been united in calling for the council to keep working on other issues.

The secretary-general steps up

Guterres has carved out a limited but substantive role in mitigating the effects of the war in Ukraine. He has developed a reputation for caution since taking office in 2017, and he played no real part in efforts to dissuade Russia in late 2021 and early 2022 from its all-out assault on Ukraine.

But upon visiting Moscow and Kyiv in April, he negotiated the evacuation of civilians trapped in the besieged Azovstal Iron and Steel Works plant in Mariupol. Building on this initial success, he worked with Türkiye to develop the Black Sea Grain Initiative, agreed by Ankara, Kyiv and Moscow in August, which enabled Ukraine to resume agricultural exports despite a Russian naval blockade. UN officials have stated frankly that the deal would not have been possible without Turkish involvement, but the UN brought technical expertise to the process and ensured that the deal had Washington's blessing. Some UN members have called for the secretary-general to mediate an end to the war – Mexico has suggested that he do so in tandem with Pope Francis and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi – but Guterres has been clear that he has not yet seen an opening to do so.

While the political influence of UN officials in Ukraine has proven to be limited, they have made use of other diplomatic, technical and humanitarian capabilities. UN agencies have been involved in relief operations throughout the conflict (the UN has over 1,000 aid workers in-country), and the International Atomic Energy Agency has been prominent in its efforts to

stabilise the Zaporizhzhya nuclear plant. The body is thus in a familiar position regarding Ukraine, as in many crises, including those in Afghanistan and Syria, it has had little political leverage and therefore has focused its efforts on issues such as humanitarian assistance.

Fighting 'Ukraine fatigue'

While Russia has used veto threats to paralyse the Security Council regarding Ukraine, it has been unable to obstruct other UN forums in the same way. The General Assembly has passed a series of resolutions criticising Moscow by large margins. In March, 141 of the assembly's 193 members voted to condemn Russia's aggression, and in October, 143 members rejected Russia's illegal annexation of Ukrainian territory. The Geneva-based Human Rights Council has also passed several resolutions calling for investigations into possible Russian war crimes. Yet Western diplomats have worried that the international support expressed for Kyiv in these UN forums is broad but shallow.

Some significant non-Western UN players – including China, India and South Africa – have abstained on resolutions condemning Russia. Many UN members that have been willing to call out Russia in general terms have been less willing to impose specific penalties. Only 93 countries backed a General Assembly resolution to suspend Russia from its own seat on the Human Rights Council in April, although most other states abstained, and the initiative passed comfortably. American and European diplomats, sensing 'Ukraine fatigue' among UN representatives, have urged their Ukrainian counterparts to temper the pace at which they put forward anti-Russia proposals. The assembly did, however, pass a resolution in November recommending the creation of a damages register to record the destruction Russia

has inflicted on Ukraine as the basis for future reparations. The resolution received 94 votes in favour.

Non-Western diplomats have asserted that they have substantive reasons not to exert more diplomatic pressure on Russia. Some argue that isolating Moscow in multilateral forums will not incentivise it to end its aggression, and they complain that Western powers do not appear ready to look for a peace agreement through UN mechanisms – in contrast to the West's frequent calls for African and Middle Eastern countries to submit to UN mediation. Many also complain that the war is distracting from other urgent concerns, including climate change and the global food-price crisis, that impinge more directly on non-Western states' security and prosperity.

In response, American and European diplomats made food security a priority during the General Assembly session in New York in September. They have also had some success in focusing their non-Western interlocutors' attention on how Russia's behaviour infringes on core principles of the UN Charter, including sovereignty and territorial integrity. Overall, the General Assembly's role in supporting Ukraine will probably remain limited given non-Western caution, but it has a unique role as a platform to reaffirm that Russia's actions breach core principles of the UN Charter.

The administration of US President Joe Biden has generated some turmoil at the UN by arguing that Russia's actions also show that the UN, and especially the Security Council, needs to be reformed. While it is unusual for the US to treat Security Council reform as a diplomatic priority, many other UN members agree that it is essential. The General Assembly took a small step towards holding the permanent members of the council accountable this spring,

passing a resolution demanding that they should publicly explain their vetoes to the full UN membership. But bigger steps – including changes to the council's membership, which would require altering the UN Charter – are still remote. UN members have widely differing views regarding the shape that council reform might take. A similar debate took place after the 2003 Iraq War but led nowhere.

Outlook

While the UN system has demonstrated some resilience in the face of Russia's war in Ukraine, a protracted conflict would continue to test the institution. If the war enters a period of extended attrition, UN member states and officials may be able to keep the organisation functioning much as it has done this year. But the ongoing collapse of trust between Russia and the West may make even minimum cooperation in the Security Council harder, while 'Ukraine fatigue' (whatever its causes) will probably increase in the General Assembly. Any serious intensification of the war will make it harder to sustain multilateral cooperation with Moscow.

In a more positive scenario, in which the war ends in 2023 or 2024 on terms favourable to Ukraine, the council might have some role to play in endorsing and monitoring the implementation of a peace agreement. But a blue-helmet peacekeeping force on the Russia-Ukraine border – an idea that Kyiv promoted prior to 2022 as a step towards regaining control of Donbas – now looks out of the question. Few countries would risk sending soldiers. Western diplomats also wonder how a weakened post-war Russia would behave at the UN. It might try to win back goodwill by cooperating with the US and Europeans, as it did in the 1990s, or it might ally itself even more closely with China, which now seems the likeliest course.

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