

## Blowback from Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Sarah Cliffe and Leah Zamore, with inputs from James Traub

Last updated: March 16, 2022

### *Blowback (definition, Oxford Advanced American Dictionary)*

- a process in which gases expand or travel in a direction opposite to the usual one
- the results of a political action or situation that are not what was intended or wanted

While the Ukrainian army and people continue to resist, the costs of Russia's invasion in human terms are mounting. As of March 15, the United Nations (UN) [had verified](#) 1,900 civilian casualties, including 726 deaths (fifty of them children), as Russia [intensifies its assault on civilian targets](#), [seizes the Zaporizhzhia nuclear site](#), [lays siege to Mariupol](#) which is without food, energy, or water in freezing temperatures, continues to [threaten](#) Kyiv, begins a [push](#) on Odesa and [assaults](#) Kharkiv with heavy and indiscriminate shelling. Already, the International Criminal Court has launched an investigation into [possible war crimes](#), while more than [three million Ukrainians](#) have fled to neighboring countries, which are [scrambling](#) to accommodate what is the swiftest mass exodus of this century and soon to be the largest refugee movement in Europe since World War II.

The human suffering unfolding in and around Ukraine is unlikely to dissuade Putin, whose narrative has always centered on Russia's pride and its own security: a destabilizing effect on Europe and punitive approach to Ukraine may be appealing, at least in the short term. Yet Russian casualties are increasing fast, with the Kremlin [announcing](#) close to 500 deaths of its own soldiers and over 1,500 injured as of Wednesday, March 2 (US, European, and Ukrainian estimates for Russian military casualties are much higher). As of today, there are many signals that Russia overestimated the speed with which it would advance and [is experiencing logistical and supply](#) problems. The Ukrainian resistance is impressive and rightly lauded, both in terms of the dedication of its civilian leadership and army, and the popular mobilization that has taken place. Yet no one should celebrate prematurely: it took the US and UK [twenty](#) days to topple the regime in Baghdad in the occupation of Iraq in 2003, and this invasion is still in its first ten days.

### Part I: the evidence on violent blowback from invasion and occupation

We hope that Ukraine, with its allies, can continue to resist. Our point in this piece, however, is to lay out the evidence that, even if Russia succeeds in its short-term military goals, this will not serve its long-term security interests. Russia's public argument has been about stability on its borders. But occupation and the consequent human rights abuses fuel instability—not order. A decade ago, I directed, and CIC made significant [contributions](#) to, the World Bank's *World Development Report* (WDR) on conflict, security, and development, which identified external interference and occupation as a significant spur for future violence. Why is this the case?

The human rights abuses that go along with most episodes of occupation spur long-lasting grievances and resistance and weaken the institutions that are crucial to resist risks of conflict. Groundbreaking work for the WDR ten years ago by Jim Fearon [showed](#) that high levels of past political terror increase the chances of current conflict. More specifically, Barbara Walter [found](#) that significant increases in the number of political prisoners and extrajudicial killings (which generally accompany occupation) make civil conflict between two and three times more likely.

We see this from recent episodes of occupation and externally driven conflict in Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Levels of violence in Palestine have remained persistently high. In Iraq, the occupation presaged almost two decades of devastating violence. And it did not benefit the occupier in terms of stable alliances—indeed Iraq was one of thirty-five countries to abstain from the vote in the UN General Assembly (GA) on March 2 against the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In Afghanistan, Russia had to withdraw after a decade of external involvement. In all three cases, occupied territories become breeding grounds for terrorist recruitment as well as different forms of criminal trafficking.

Moreover, foreign occupations can and do undermine domestic stability, as protests breed police repression which in turn foments grievances among the occupier's citizenry. The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance, spawned an anti-war movement which led to increased police militarization and domestic surveillance, followed by a wave election that repudiated the Bush administration. Russia has already [closed](#) down Facebook and Twitter, and criminalized what it deems to be “fake news” about the military. Russia does not have the democratic institutions that allowed Americans to address their grievances at the ballot box.

The speed and depth of sanctions will also be difficult for Russia to bear. Some of this will undoubtedly have been factored in by Putin prior to the invasion. But the unity and resolve of the West, the speed of reaction to freeze large amounts of Russia's reserves, the use of broad and targeted sanctions, and perhaps above all, the private sector response may have been an unpleasant surprise. [Some economists](#) are predicting that the economic contraction will significantly exceed the 1998 debt crisis. This aspect is unlike the episodes of occupation we describe above. Indeed, sanctions of this scale are simply [without precedent](#) vis-a-vis an economy as large and internationally entwined as Russia's.

In conclusion, even in terms of Putin's own logic, the invasion of Ukraine is likely to result in more instability for Russia, not less. This will be due to levels of ongoing violence beyond initial resistance, which we already see is much higher in Ukraine than Russia perhaps estimated; potential links to terrorism and trafficking; as well as economic shocks within Russia itself.

Of course, the rest of the world will also bear costs, in food and energy prices amongst others ([wheat prices](#) have increased 50 percent): part of the balance of forces in the next period will be who can best [sustain](#) those costs. **Multilateral unity may depend on keeping a close eye on the secondary and tertiary effects of the invasion and the sanctions.**

## Part 2: The secondary effects on multilateral action

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a clear [breach of international law](#) by a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The response appears to have been equally clear—after Russia vetoed a vote in the security council, 141 countries voted in the GA to condemn the invasion less than a week later.

This seems like overwhelming numbers, but for those watching the UN, it was actually a bit less than expected. Five countries opposed, and thirty-five countries abstained. The latter group included some expected countries, some less so. There are also eleven countries that did not vote at all, being conveniently absent from the chamber. As with the abstentions, some are easily explained—Venezuela has lost the vote because of arrears in its dues to the UN—some less so.

### Figure 1: United Nations General Assembly resolution

**141 countries condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine, five countries voted no, thirty-five countries abstained, and 11 countries failed to vote**

*Source:* 2021 Edelman [Trust Barometer](#)

*Source:* Screenshot from the UN General Assembly meeting. March 2, 2022

**What are the issues at play here?** There are different dynamics, often active in the same country relationships, that are possible:

- **Security agreements:** India, for example, is heavily dependent on Russian-made equipment for its army and navy. Other countries, such as Mali, are dependent on Russian mercenaries to support national armed forces.
- **Historic relations:** Some of the countries voting against or abstaining have longstanding relations with Russia. It is somewhat surprising, for example, that Cuba abstained rather than voting against, but certainly unsurprising that it did not support the resolution.
- **Direct deals between Russia and certain countries:** For example, the widespread [coverage](#) that Russian endorsement of the listing of the Houthis in Yemen as terrorists was exchanged for United Arab Emirates' abstention in the Security Council vote (it voted for the resolution in the GA).
- **Third party pressure:** For some countries that are heavily dependent on China as well as Russia for trade and investment, this may have played a role.
- **Sentiments about the US as a less than reliable partner:** This grew during the Trump administration but has been reinforced in some ways by vaccine nationalism, the failure to ensure adequate access to post-Covid financing, inept preparation of the US's democracy summit, and the mode of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan—some of which has occurred under the watch of the Biden administration. The approach to immigration, vaccines, and access to financing also affects the trust between the Group of 77 (G77) countries and the European Union.

China has appeared to shift positions, going from the clear endorsement of Russia's security concerns in the first forty-eight hours of the invasion to statements of "grave concern" on civilian casualties and nuclear safety. One plausible dynamic is that China, which dislikes incompetence and disorder, has been taken aback by the prolonged and messy course of the invasion and wishes to distance itself as a result.

**At the UN, there will be many things to watch closely in the coming period.** Outreach to China is central, as well as countries that may waiver in both directions: this includes understanding the motivations of those who somewhat unexpectedly abstained or failed to vote in the GA resolution. A third issue of importance will be attention to concerns amongst those who supported the GA resolution, but have worries—notably, many G77 countries are concerned that the depth of the "shock and awe" sanctions will have unexpected second- and third-order effects on their food and energy prices and humanitarian situation.

The UN secretary-general will also need to consider how his "good offices" can be used in a situation where direct UN mediation will not be welcomed or appropriate. This will be a question going forward—if the UN is not well placed to mediate in this conflict, who can help support dialogue? China has [offered](#), and other countries with ties to Russia may be prepared to play a role. Close outreach from the secretary-general to third-party countries is likely to be the most promising way forward.

Lastly, the effect on other negotiations at the UN is not yet clear. There are some early signs that other discussions in the Security Council, such as on Afghanistan and Syria, will be adversely affected (although these were already very difficult, so the bar is low). There will likely be a deep knock-on effect on other issues.

These issues are very much still playing out in real time. There is an immediate imperative to protect the Ukrainian people and Ukrainian sovereignty. Beyond this, to make “opportunity out of crisis,” there is a need to strengthen a unified, multilateral approach. This is not what international peace and security in the twenty-first century was supposed to look like. Countries need to band together to support a very different collective vision and renew their commitment to protect future generations from the scourge of war.

*All opinions and views expressed in this article solely represent the views of the authors and the Center on International Cooperation at New York University. Support was provided through generous contributions from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*