

EVENT REPORT

Virtual Talk on **A CONTEMPORARY VIEW ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE**



18th October 2023



Platform: Zoom



ABOUT THE EVENT

Centre for Public Policy Research organised a virtual talk series on the topic 'A Contemporary view on the war in Ukraine' in collaboration with Research Centre for Contemporary Challenges at the University of Pecs, Hungary. The virtual talk is part of a series of 5 experimental engagements by the Centre for Contemporary Challenges at the University of Pecs, Hungary. The first two of them were hosted by the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and the second by Bangalore International Centre.

SPEAKERS



Dr Samir Puri, Visiting Lecturer, Kings College London, and Senior Fellow (Urban Security and Hybrid Warfare), International Institute for Strategic Studies, Singapore - Dr Puri has had a ringside seat to several major events covered in his book, *Russia's Road to War with Ukraine*. He served as an international observer at five Ukrainian elections, including the Orange Revolution in 2004. Soon after the first Donbas war began in 2014, he spent a year in east Ukraine working along both sides of the front line as part of an international ceasefire monitoring mission. During Russia's latest invasion of Ukraine, the BBC, Al Jazeera, Bloomberg, CNN, the Wall Street Journal, and other media outlets have featured his analysis of the war. His previous book was *The Great Imperial Hangover: How Empires Have Shaped the World*.



Ms Neelima A, Associate-Research, CPPR - Neelima is a postgraduate in MA Geopolitics and International Relations from the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE). Her interests and expertise are in West Asia, South Asia, Multilateralism, and Global and National Security. She has been leading several IR projects in CPPR and is continuously engaged in conducting discussions on relevant IR issues.

SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSION

The event commenced with the moderator, Neelima A, introducing the topic 'A Contemporary View on the War in Ukraine' and stating the importance of understanding the root cause of the conflict and deliberating on the roadmap towards peace. Neelima also briefly introduced CPPR and RCCC to the attendees and the speaker. In her opening remarks, Neelima provided a contextual backdrop to the discussion, referring to Dr Samir Puri's book. She highlighted how the book portrays the complexities of the conflict, emphasising Russia's role as the primary aggressor and the author's view of Western bodies like the EU and NATO exposing Ukraine to Russia's aggression by forwarding the unrealistic expectation of NATO membership.

Dr Samir Puri introduced the topic to the audience. The speaker elaborated on his involvement with Ukraine in 2004 as part of international election observation and the Orange Revolution. The speaker shared his experience with the election in Ukraine and the cheating in the election. He found the Russian favouring candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, cheating in the election, and on the other hand, the Western favouring candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, had a more professional approach. The malpractice led to the poisoning of the pro-Western candidate, which made the success of the pro-Russian candidate, as an outcome, led to the protest. However, the pro-western candidate won the re-election. This made Vladimir Putin and the elites of Russia state that the West is trying to take Ukraine into its orbit.

According to the speaker, he believes that the US and European Union had discussions and thought about bringing Ukraine closer to the West. He also spoke about the active discussion that took place during those times about Ukraine joining the European Union.

In 2008, George W Bush strongly backed Ukraine's membership action plan, but Germany and France opposed the American idea of bringing Ukraine into NATO. The 2008 NATO summit ended with the very odd quote that Ukraine and Georgia one day will join NATO. This infuriated Putin and the Russians. Russia feels a security crisis as NATO's forces march to the borders of Russia.

The EU membership ended in an accidental disaster. In 2013, the EU presented a technical agreement to Ukraine, which allowed a prior state to join the EU. As a counter to this offer, Russia made its proposal to Ukraine. This tug of war led to the Maidan protest in late 2013. At the end of the protest, Victor Yanukovich, who had been in power since 2010, refused to sign the EU accession. A protest arose, which ended up overthrowing Yanukovich, and later he fled to Russia.

Dr Puri comprehensively overviews the events surrounding the Russian military annexation of Crimea in 2014, which marked a significant turning point in the geopolitical landscape. He discussed the global perspective on empire, its decline, and the chaos it caused, setting an example for France and Britain as they didn't annex their former colony. The annexation of Crimea, a region of strategic importance, was followed by the retention of Sevastopol, the headquarters of the Black Sea naval fleet for Russia, for almost a decade, highlighting Russia's sustained presence in the area.

Dr Puri also discussed the Donbas conflict and the pro-Russian uprisings in Johansk, further underscoring the complex dynamics at play in the region. The Minsk process led to a ceasefire on paper in 2015, albeit with persistent challenges to its implementation. Amid these regional conflicts, Russia expanded its military operations to Syria in 2015, shifting global focus towards the Middle East and diverting attention from the ongoing crisis in Ukraine.

In 2022, the world responded to the issue in various ways. In response to the invasion, nations like Japan, South Korea, and Singapore imposed sanctions on Russia. Putin proved his resilience by maintaining his political mission in the face of sanctions while displaying his capacity to withstand external pressure. The speaker emphasises the results of Ukraine's unsuccessful attempts to align its foreign policy with Western objectives, as NATO's backing was insufficient, leaving Ukraine open to Russian assault.

The speaker presents a sobering prediction that Ukraine may not be able to entirely remove Russian influence from its territory, drawing parallels with the divided nature of the Korean Peninsula. He also provided a comprehensive analysis of the long-standing division in Cyprus to analyse the issue of Ukraine. Stemming from the island's struggle for independence from British rule and subsequent efforts to unify with Greece led to a Turkish invasion and the capture of a significant portion of the island in 1974. Despite ongoing efforts, the conflict remains unresolved, with the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus unrecognised by any country except Turkey. The Speaker also highlights the complexities surrounding Cyprus' 2004 bid to join the EU, which was recognised in principle but only partially integrated.

Concerning Ukraine, the speaker emphasises the problems that central and western Ukraine have in regaining lands that were partitioned de facto but not de jure as part of their efforts to join the EU. Given the complicated geopolitical circumstances on the ground, the suggested solution is highlighted as partition.

The moderator put forward the question regarding the contrasting nature of public opinion in the West and Russia and the role of negotiations in ending the war. She also asked about an alternative to try out in Ukraine to establish peace. Dr Puri replied about the unsuccessful negotiations in March 2022, which showed Russia's initial confidence before Ukraine's fierce resistance forced a change to mediation. There is an additional level of complexity brought on by Turkey's role, which supplies Ukraine with armaments while abstaining from placing sanctions on Russia. It emphasises the fine line President Zelensky walked by, suggesting a willingness to forego NATO membership in favour of a potential peace force solution while Russia maintains its maximalist demands.

Dr Puri also highlighted the difficulties Ukraine will likely encounter shortly by outlining Boris Johnson's suggested posture of non-negotiation and perseverance in the struggle. The research emphasises the production of resources in Russia but their refining elsewhere, with the West possibly needing to fully understand the developing geopolitical dynamics. This transition towards a more multipolar world order is reflected in how the globe has responded to the present crisis.

On the question regarding the purchase and sale of Russian oil by India to Europe and the comment made by Indian external minister S Jaishankar, Dr Puri said that the contemporary geopolitical landscape reflects a departure from the ideological blocs of the Cold War era. Rather than strict non-alignment, nations prioritise independent decision-making driven by national interests. This is exemplified by the strategic relationship between the USA and Israel and India's ties with Russia. Countries are increasingly diversifying their defence procurement strategies, reducing dependency on a single source, as seen in the case of Ukraine's acquisition of the S-400 missile system, indicative of a more nuanced approach to international relations.

On the question about the Russian people's sentiments towards Ukrainians and Putin's authoritarianism, Dr Puri underscores the historical closeness of Belarus and Ukraine to Russia, perpetuated by President Putin's long-standing tenure, which is coupled with an outdated understanding of Ukraine's global perspective. Contrary to expectations, the anticipated uprising did not materialise, with only a minority supporting the invasion and a significant majority opposing it.

To the question of comparing the Ukraine crisis to the beginning of another cold war by China and the West led by the USA, Dr Puri responded, highlighting Kinmen Island and drawing a comparison to Crimea regarding geopolitical significance for Taiwan and China.

It outlines a shift in the dynamics of the contemporary Cold War, characterised more by national interests than ideological blocks, illustrating the strategic relationships of countries such as the USA with Israel and India with Russia, emphasising the significance of independent decision-making rather than non-alignment.

On the question centred on the humanitarian aspect and the refugees from Ukraine and the destruction of nuclear plants or dams, Dr Puri said that the refugee crisis is a huge issue and funding the infrastructure is difficult; the challenges associated with it is mainly that it invokes pessimism as the infrastructure will be easily demolished by Russian missiles. He also emphasised the ethical dilemma of choosing between ending the conflict and supporting Ukraine in its fight for victory. He also commented concerning the Zaporizhia nuclear reactor and the need for IAEA access.

On the question of the globalisation of war, Dr Puri distinguishes the impact of globalisation from the conflict, emphasising that one does not directly cause the other, with no direct linkage to the Israel-Palestine situation. It underscores the West's focus on the Middle East, potential ammunition supply stresses, and the forecasted consequences for Ukraine if the conflict persists, potentially shifting global sympathies, which may favour Russia to the detriment of Ukraine.

Regarding the question of how the war in Ukraine is accelerating Beijing's policies that are designed to reduce the dependencies on Western financial institutions and Asian geopolitics, Dr Puri highlighted the concept of de-westernisation and the BRICS leaders' contribution to it, particularly in the context of the economy, currency deals, the emergence of the BRICS currency, and trade deals bypassing the West, exemplified by China's trade deals with Iran. This reflects an evolving global economic landscape with new power dynamics and alliances. He also added that it would make the Chinese government detach itself from Western power.

Regarding the question about Moscow's military funding amidst the sanctions, the speaker quoted the rise of the Chinese economy from 4% of the global economy to 15%. According to Puri, that is where Russia's economic and financial survival comes from. On UNSC, he commented that it is still relevant; however, between the five members, there exists a dispute, and therefore it is useless.

Dr Puri concluded the session by stating that future global events are unpredictable. Neelima summarised the session by recalling the key topics discussed.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The attack by Russia on Ukraine in 2022 can be traced back in history, and there have been a series of events that led to the current conflict. The history is interlinked with the current geopolitical events in the region. Ukraine became independent in 1991 after separation from the Soviet Union. The 2004 orange revolution, which led Yanukovich, a pro-Russian president, to win the election by cheating, and the poisoning of the other leader, Yushchenko, who was believed to favour the West, led to widespread protests and civil unrest in Ukraine.
- Ukraine's independence from the erstwhile Soviet Union has been considerably peaceful as compared to the Central Asian region, and the Ukrainians experience a Soviet nostalgia, which establishes the fact that there are considerable bonds between the Ukrainians and Russians. However, the 1991-2004 period saw the development of fractures mainly because of generational changes, which divided the population of Ukraine into one group becoming pro-West and one still continuing as pro-Russia.
- From 2004 to 2014, there have been attempts by the USA to further westernise democracy in Eastern Europe. In 2008, in fact, at one of the NATO summits, it was promised that Ukraine and Georgia would one day become part of NATO, which was supported by Germany and France.
- Tensions grew when, in 2013, Yanukovich refused to sign the technical agreement to formalise Ukraine's joining the European Union. The Ukraine European Union (EU) membership bids led to widespread protests, and eventually Yanukovich was deposed and fled to Russia.
- Sevastopol was used as the Black Sea naval fleet headquarters for Russia, and in light of the rising insecurities, Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. The Donbas and Luhansk regions were polarised into pro-Russia uprisings. The Minsk process was initiated, which focused on a ceasefire and the granting of self-government in the Donbas region.
- The recent invasion of Ukraine by Russia has led to diverse global reactions. The world is much more multipolar than it used to be. However, the West does not realise this multipolarity, which has led to countries taking independent positions on the issue. Russian President Putin has been there for too long and has an outdated understanding of Ukraine's view of the world. He expected uprisings to accept the Russian invasion, and even though there was minority support, the majority wanted to westernise their foreign policy. However, Ukraine has been let down by NATO.

- Russia has been able to survive the sanctions imposed by the West as well as some of the Asian countries, like Japan, and has found alternative economic arrangements to keep it afloat. With BRICS having a greater share of the global economy as compared to the G7, the proposition of BRICS currency, currency deals not involving the dollar, and trade deals without the West (China - Iran) are clear indications of de- westernisation of the global economy.
- This situation cannot be seen as a Cold War replication, as there are no concretely formalised ideological blocks in the global order now. It can also not be seen as a globalised war, as one does not cause the other. However, if the Israel-Palestine war accelerates, it will have an effect on Ukraine. The focus is shifting towards the Middle East, and the USA's ammunition supplies are also under greater stress. This is good news for Russia and bad news for Ukraine.
- India has been playing a balancing role, guided by its own national interests. India has remarked that 'How the USA has a strategic relationship with Israel, similarly, India has it with Russia.' However, rather than it being a non-alignment, it is more about independent decision-making. India was quick to point out that even if oil is produced in Russia, if it is refined in some other country, that can't be seen as India sourcing oil from Russia. India is focused on diversifying its defence procurements and being less dependent on Russia. The conclusion of the S400 deal with Russia even after CAATSA sanctions by the US highlights how India is guided by its own interests.
- China and Russia are developing closer connections. There are some similarities in the China - Taiwan and Ukraine - Russia issues, and it has been remarked that the Kinmen island is the "Crimea of Taiwan".
- The March 2022 negotiations failed. Russia was initially very confident in its acceptance of the invasion by the people of Ukraine, but then Ukraine fought back, and they eventually had to move to mediation. There was a hint that the Ukrainian President, Zelenskyy, would agree to not join NATO if there was a possibility of a peace force solution, but Russia was maximist on demands at that time. In the future, such negotiations will be very hard. The West is against it as Zelenskiy is against it, and it is assumed that Russia will breach the agreement. There is a lot of anger and hurt, and to achieve a stalemate where nobody wins and nobody loses, a lot of time is needed. Thus, there is no end to hindsight.

- The future prediction by the speaker is that Ukraine will not be able to oust Russia entirely, and the situation will be very similar to divided Cyprus, 30% of which was invaded and established as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Though the EU or any other country does not recognise the Turkish invasion, the issue was never resolved. Similarly, there will be a part of Ukraine that cannot be recaptured, and central and western Ukraine might join the EU. It will not be a de jure partition but a de facto partition.
- It is a reinforcement of the imperialism ideology where Russia is seen as the senior and Ukraine as the subjugated partner. The conflicts amongst the P5 in UNSC further create paralysis. The most difficult moral question that the world is facing right now is - Whether it is right to bring the fighting to an end or keep helping Ukraine fight for its victory.

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About CPPR

Centre for Public Policy Research (CPPR) is an independent public policy organisation dedicated to in-depth research and scientific analysis with the objective of delivering actionable ideas that could transform society. Based out of Kochi, in the Indian state of Kerala, our engagement in public policy that began in 2004 has initiated open dialogue, policy changes, and institutional transformation in the areas of Urban Reform, Livelihood, Education, Health, Governance, Law, and International Relations & Security.

About Centre for Contemporary Challenges, University of Pecs, Hungary

The Research Centre for Contemporary Challenges at the University of Pecs, Hungary, aims to study contemporary challenges, approaching them from a multidisciplinary perspective, including several fields of the humanities and the social sciences. Research in the RCCC focuses on contemporary phenomena that present serious challenges to modern society, so a study thereof and the elaboration of appropriate response strategies would have important social benefits.