RUSSIAN-UKRAINIAN WAR: LESSONS FOR NATO AND EUROPE AS OF 2025

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Abstract: The article traces the main lessons of Russian-Ukrainian war as of 2025. Recognizing the conflict in its continuity since 2014 as transformative for contemporary international relations, it offers a structured periodization and names the important stages. Five key lessons are identified: the return of industrial-scale warfare, the importance of strategic communication, fragmentation of the existing global order, the crisis in strategic imagination as well as the risks of conflict spillover. The study concludes that international relations are in the era of great-power competition with no clear vision of a sustainable security order.

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Introduction

With shattering international security regimes, it is of crucial importance to trace and study the evolution of the conflicts as well as attempt to learn some lessons in the process. When it comes to the discussion of the lessons "from Ukraine," it is necessary to start with appropriate naming and periodization. These technicalities will serve as Lesson Zero forming the base for further research and discussion.

The naming of this conflict is significantly affected and even obscured by the layers of propaganda and disinformation. The additional factor driving the complexity is the protraction of the conflict (with the starting point in 2014) and different stages and forms it has taken during the years.

This complexity leads to rather peculiar situation in the scientific circles when the research under the title "Ukraine's Unnamed War: Before the Russian Invasion of 2022" has been published in 2023 (Arel & Driscoll, 2023) Another more recent example of rather ambiguous naming would be the report of March, 2025 titled "Conflict on the Eastern Frontier: The Russia-Ukraine Crisis and the Evolving Landscape of Migration and Refugees in EU Countries" (Macková, 2025). While the scientific pursuit behind such endeavors is legit, the titles in their current form only highlight the need to start with clear naming and identifying stages of this prolonged aggressive war.

The consensus in Ukrainian expert and scientific circles is to call it a Russian-Ukrainian war with the following periodization:

1. Russian military intervention to Crimea and the occupation of the peninsula (February-March 2014)

2. The war in the East of Ukraine, started in April 2014 in Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Official names used by Ukrainian authorities were Antiterrorist Operation Zone (Ukrainian: ATO) till 2018 and Joint Forces Operation between 2018 and 2022.

Before proceeding to the ongoing stage of Russian-Ukrainian war, it is prudent to clear out the usage of terms by citing official documents enforced by Ukrainian government. On 13th April, 2014 there was a decision by Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council called "On urgent measures to overcome the terrorist threat and preserve the territorial integrity of Ukraine," signed by then Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov (President of Ukraine, 2014)

In 2018, due to restructuring in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, there was a reformatting of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), involving the possible introduction of martial law or a state of emergency, and the transfer of command from the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which had formally directed the ATO, to the Joint Operational Headquarters of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The name used between 30th April 2014 and 24th February of 2022 was the Joint Forces Operation as stipulated by the Law of Ukraine "On the specifics of state policy on ensuring the state sovereignty of Ukraine in the temporarily occupied territories in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions" (Verkhovna Rada, 2018)

3. Finally, the third stage of the Russian-Ukrainian war commenced on the 24 February of 2022, can be called **"large (also, "full")-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian aggressor state"**.

The existing consensus among Ukrainian historians and other scholars is to call the current conflict Ukrainian-Russian (or Russian-Ukrainian, used interchangeably on the international stage) or Independence War (homeland stage) (Tynchenko, 2025). Therefore, being done with **Lesson Zero** that can be called **proper naming**, it is possible to proceed with other lessons that Russian-Ukrainian war offers as of August 2025.

Lesson 1: The age of industrial warfare and protracted conflicts is here

Large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has been called by different scholars in varying ways. Some see it as a product of Soviet succession wars, "the climax of a two-decade project to subvert and subordinate" the state of Ukraine (King, 2001; Brands, 2024) Others found themselves "unconvinced that Putin would risk a multipronged assault, including on Kyiv, that would leave his forces outnumbered and exposed" as late as in December 2021 (Bick, 2024)

Three years in, the point of agreement in almost every viewpoint on the conflict is as follows: this war is the largest on the European continent since the end of the Word War II. In such dire circumstances in the international security system, the fact that deterrence is ineffective in the face of blatant aggression is asserted. The conflict devolved into a grinding war of attrition, requiring a recalibration of strategic assessments.

Trench lines, artillery duels, and national mobilization – all signs of the 20th century – are back and now define war in Europe once again. Defense spending is rising worldwide, reaching a stunning 2718 billion $ in 2024 (Liang et al., 2025). In the age of protracted conflicts and industrialized warfare, security is increasingly prioritized over development.

As is once again proven by the Russian-Ukrainian war, on the battlefield a timely delivery of weapons is as decisive as the production capacity itself. Rather loud headlines, such as ones coming from the European Union with their pledge - and failure - to provide 1 million artillery shells to Ukraine within twelve months (March 2023–March 2024), illustrate the gap between industrial promises and battlefield realities. This led to the conditions of acute "shell hunger" experienced by the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

In modern industrial warfare, the ability to not only produce but to bring munitions to the front in time is part and parcel of success. The war has also demonstrated that quantity and quality are not substitutes but complements. Russia has maintained fire superiority by producing roughly 2–2.3 million shells annually. (Lehalau, 2025) Those are supplemented with an estimated 4–6 million additional rounds supplied by North Korea since late 2023 (Balmforth & Zahra, 2025). Yet quantity alone does not seem to deliver decisive breakthroughs. Precision systems (HIMARS, Storm Shadow/SCALP-EG missiles, and domestically produced long-range drones) have struck high-value Russian targets. This confirms the following takeaways: volume sustains endurance, precision shapes outcomes.

Lesson 2: Research, Innovation, adaptation and opening Pandora's boxes

Nothing drives society's resilience more than battlefield pressure and a real threat of extermination. During war years, Ukraine innovated dramatically. From fiber-optic, jamming-resistant drones with up to 100 km reach to improvised ground robots used for logistics, weapons deployment, and medevac, its military ecosystem represents rapid, decentralized adaptation.

In recent years Ukraine has become a frontrunner in defense innovation, scaling drone production from tens of thousands to hundreds of thousands per year and fielding multi-domain systems across air, land, and sea (Thornhill, 2025). Breakthrough platforms such as the Marichka underwater drone, MAGURA strike vessels, and Sea Baby kamikaze systems demonstrate how battlefield pressure drives rapid, high-impact R&D.

At the same time, electronic warfare has become a must at the current stage in war, transforming everything on the battlefield. Networked systems like Atlas and the innovations fostered by the Brave1 cluster now underpin frontline survivability, neutralizing thousands of hostile drones weekly. Though forced, these advances mark Ukraine not just as a defender, but as a pace-setter in the future of warfare. Via research and development, home production and scaling, Ukrainian companies turn into leaders in autonomous small drones, autonomy modules, and autonomy simulations for defense.

When it comes to asymmetric conflicts – and in Russian-Ukrainian war there is also an aspect of nuclear disparity – strategic innovations are of utmost importance. One such example of innovation leading to opening

Pandora's box is undoubtedly the Operation Spiderweb, conducted in June 2025.

The extent of preparation, taking the enemy by surprise, and most importantly, damage done, all serve as a universal lesson for many corners of the globe. Some experts call it "the future of a drone warfare" (Horowitz, 2025), while others choose to draw lessons from such acts, naming them "Trojan horses". For instance, as Indian Maj. Gen. B.K. Sharma puts it, "India cannot afford to ignore the operational and psychological blueprint that Spiderweb presents… future conflicts may not commence with conventional force-on-force engagements across borders. Instead, the opening salvos may arrive in the form of disguised civilian cargo laced with drones, malicious code embedded in software updates, or synchronised cyber-attacks targeting transportation, energy grids, and command networks." (Sharma, 2025)

Researchers from other nuclear powers, namely China, also made their own conclusions regarding this asymmetrical attack (Zhen, Choi & Dang, 2025) The fact that nuclear arms-stripped Ukraine was able to a) affect the adversary's leg on nuclear triad (Kostina & Tyshchenko, 2025) and b) initiate such a rippling effect in the world is a lesson in itself. Apart from being a new model of tactical adaptation under pressure.

The level of drone engagement in the battlefield makes the frontline wider to *+-25 km from both sides at the frontline. With the case of Operation Spiderweb and other assymetrical attacks deep into the enemy territory the lesson is as follows. The usage of operational*

resources to gain strategic consequences leaves no safe area that cannot be endangered by hostile capacities.

Lesson 3: Strategic communication is warfare

While the lesson as formulated above falls into the category of "nothing new under the Sun," it remains the important conclusion drawn from Russian-Ukrainian war. The proverbial struggle for "hearts and minds" is a separate domain in this conflict.

While it is important to highlight that Ukraine has been successful in rapid and emotionally resonant communication immediately after the full-scale invasion, there has also been serious issues in this domain. One such strategic drawback was described with Lesson Zero – the inability to draw the same attention to the war in the period of 2014-2022, lack of conceptual clarity, misguided – or absent – naming. This pertains to many other factors such as the intensity of the conflict, its localization, the impact (e.g. migration flows pre and post 2022.)

After 2022 full-scale invasion, Ukrainian official and unofficial messaging proved effective in Euro-Atlantic societies. Yet, the same messages tend to resonate less in other regions (for the lack of better name - Global South) (Taranenko, 2023; Pavliuk, 2024)

While Ukraine remains an open, resilient and democratic society under attack, there is no lack of clear messaging to counter Russian disinformation manufacturing machine. However, there are also other issues, such as limited reach or the disparity of information warfare budgets and other resources.

Russian-Ukrainian war at its current stage proves that OSINT communities, journalists, and private platforms shape credibility on par with state actors, meaning that one cannot monopolize wartime narratives. Still, personalized appeals are powerful but vulnerable to fatigue and leadership change.

Lesson 4: No global order in sight: A crisis of strategic imagination

In 2025, one of the clearest implications of Russian-Ukrainian war is its highlighting the fractured state of international politics and therefore international security system.

On the one hand, Russian full-scale invasion of 2022 has initiated both tactical and strategic shifts in a range of regional and international alliances. From NATO's expansion with Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) to Russia moving its tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus (Detsch & Gramer, 2024) following 2023's suspension of participation in a New START agreement (Williams, 2023), the field of International Relations seems to be abundant with before-unthinkable changes.

Yet, there is an evident lack of clear vision, and the situation in the international arena seems to amount to managing fragmentation rather than building order. In 2025, the system has come to a default mode of contested deterrence and transactional alignments, not a stable order.

All the plural fora (e.g.: G20, expanded with the African Union in 2023) and new institutions (e.g.: the creation of the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression against Ukraine same year) seeking

justice seem to lead to rather thin problem solving. (Vines, 2025; Eurojust, 2024)

While previous-era institutions such as UNSC remain paralyzed with aggressor possessing the veto power, China hold a signing ceremony introducing a new international organization to the world: International Organization for Mediation. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025)

The idea for the establishing of IOMed was signed in a Joint Statement in fall 2022, by China and ten friendly countries. With the aims of reforming global governance and addressing international economic disputes, this project is yet to offer substantial results, but already poses the alternative. At least in rhetorics, the operation of IOMed seems to be tailored to the needs of the Global South. (Sun, 2025)

The emergence of different novelties in the international arena only reasserts the deficit of shared global strategic thinking about the future. There is no end goal, but rather blurred division lines among the states, as well as low or non-existent accountability for documented war crimes.

Lesson 5: The threat of spillover: End it sooner rather than later?

The earliest academic investigations of the spillover effects of Russian-Ukrainian war date back to the first stage of the conflict. For instance, Rahbek-Clemmensen (2016) was arguing about the effects on the Arctic almost a decade ago. In 2025, spillover effects of this war have manifested in different domains.

The issue of nuclear proliferation was covered above; there are also recurrent violations of NATO countries'

airspace. Both Baltic and Black Sea regions are risk theaters of different magnitude.

When it comes to studying conflict spillovers, economic ripples are of high interest to researchers. There are several works concerning financial and market fluctuations caused or affected by Russian-Ukrainian war as well as those concerning the refugee flows. (Mu et al., 2022; European Parliamentary Research Service, 2025)

With this particular war, ruptures continue to be felt in many regions. There were substantial energy shocks in 2022–23 impacting global gas and oil flows. There were higher food prices and global food insecurity due to Russia's strikes on Black Sea and Danube ports.

There were also serious implications on a normative level. Russia has "normalized" nuclear blackmail, while narratives on sovereignty, territorial integrity, and a unicorn in the IR called "just peace" continue to instigate debates all over the world.

The more protracted the conflict, the larger the sum of its effects – domestically and externally. It has already highlighted the fragility – or absence – of today's international order. A threat of escalation into NATO–Russia confrontation, further global economic shocks, and erosion of humanitarian law and different IR regimes persist.

Simultaneously, premature settlements risk institutionalizing aggression, rewarding the use of force in the international relations and undermining deterrence.

Conclusion

Protracted Russian-Ukrainian war remains one of the highest security challenges for global community. The lessons one can draw from it in 2025 range from the return of industrialized warfare to a threat of uncontrollable conflict spillover. Industrial-scale war is back, and it is demanding, in terms of arms, people, economy and constant adaptation. In Ukrainian society, as in the international security system as a whole, resilience and fragility coexist. Prolonged Russian-Ukrainian war, especially in its high-intensive post 2022 phase, highlights the importance of resilient industrial research, development, innovation and scaling all serving a sole purpose of supporting defense activities.

No new form of global order is visible, and the world is witnessing few great powers attempting to manage emerging policrises without clear vision and lacking strategic imagination.

While many experts in the field were preparing themselves for short wars, what occurs is a war of attrition, rising geopolitical competition and global order fragmentation.

The choice is not between war and peace, but between managed instability and uncontrolled escalation. The main lesson of Russian-Ukrainian war is a sum of intensified great-power struggle, messy or non-existent alliances and geopolitical turmoil.

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