

Should the EU escalate in Ukraine?

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The war in Ukraine contributes to an ongoing crisis in the European Union (EU), consisting especially of an energy crunch and a global geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States of America (USA) (TLDR..., 2023). In this analysis, I utilize constructivist insights on Russian Strategic Culture (2022), Roger Cliff's theory of conflict escalation (2023) and John Mearsheimer's view of nuclear weapons use in Ukraine (2022) to assess the costs and benefits of escalation in the Ukraine war. It must be considered, as pointed out by Aggestam (2016, p.434) that the EU does not produce unified Foreign Policy decisions. Much of that is intergovernmental, and not supranational. As a result of this, there is internal disagreement, which can lead to inaction, or increased tension.

There is little literature produced on the European Union's current geopolitical standing and much of the literature skews towards normative or economic aspects. So, in geopolitical terms, I take for granted that the EU seeks a decarbonised economy (RENEWABLE..., 2023); increased competitiveness of European firms in key technology sectors (renewables included) (LEHNE, 2020); restoring peace in their immediate neighborhood; and not getting locked down with either side in the increasingly intense US-China rivalry (LEHNE, 2020). These key interests will be the focus when evaluating the costs and benefits of escalating the war in Ukraine.

The nature of escalation

Defined by Cliff as: "an increase in the intensity or scope of conflict that crosses threshold(s) considered significant by one or more of the participants" (2023, p.8), escalation is seen as something that occurs qualitatively, referring to the entering of a new stage in the conflict (ibidem.). It can take many forms with different objectives, for example: vertical escalation, involving different types of weapons, targets, number of attacks and targets; horizontal escalation, expanding the geographical boundaries of the conflict with

different targets, bases, violating neutrality etc.; or political escalation, changing military objectives, rhetoric, demands for peace, abandoning rules of engagement etc. (ibidem., p.20).

Wars naturally have an escalatory tendency. This is due to the rarity of de-escalation: once any type of escalation has occurred, the new state of affairs is taken as the new reference point. Therefore, States decide whether or not escalation is worth it, possibly by a marginal utility calculation. That means calculations are made based on the costs and benefits of the next decision (INVESTOPEDIA, 2023). On top of that, accidental escalation can occur in a war, but accidental de-escalation is near impossible. Political de-escalation sometimes happens, typically when States are subjected to extreme conditions. For example, if a State faces the possibility of nuclear holocaust, it can become keener on surrendering (CLIFF, 2023, p.34).

There are situations in which it is not worthwhile to escalate. Consider the following: if it is not clear who has the upper hand, assuming the costs of escalation isn't appealing. Escalation can bring costs to reputation, infrastructure, and added casualties (even though these may not be perceived as that much of a problem), so it isn't always desirable. Furthermore, if both sides think they have the upper hand, it doesn't make sense to escalate, because it wouldn't bring any advantages.

How the belligerents perceive the change in the level of conflict is what matters. Different factors such as windows of opportunity and reputational costs associated with escalation can influence decisions. But, since it is the perception of the actors that matters, it makes sense to glimpse what Russian perceptions on international security can tell us. This information is more limited on Ukraine's side, but reasonable inferences can be made by what president Volodymyr Zelensky asks for internationally and what Ukrainian generals order on the field.

When and how the belligerents escalate

The key insight of constructivism is that the "objective" facts of international politics matter less than how they are perceived by different actors. In the realm of security, these perceptions can take the form of a Strategic Culture. This concept was developed by Götz and Staun (2022), and

it refers to how information is processed by the security establishment in a given country. In the case of Russia, there are two main ideas in Strategic Culture: a deep-rooted sense of insecurity, and the desire to be a Great Power. The reality of international politics goes through this filter in Russia's interpretation and elaboration of foreign policy.

In general, the idea that the world is dominated by a few powers with their subsequent spheres of influence permeates Russian strategic thinking. But, a few key narratives underpin the two main ideas in Russian Strategic Culture, according to Götz and Staun (2022). First, the fear of attacks is supported by four narratives: Russia is too large, there is too much to defend; Russia has been successfully invaded many times; insecurity vis-à-vis "the West", lessons learned from the invasions; this "West" tries to change regimes on Russia's periphery. Second, the ambition to be a great power is present in official documents and can be seen in Lavrov's statement. Essentially, if Russia is not a great power, it will be insecure. This is consistent with the view of zones of influence. For this reason, Russia is entitled to have its own zone (they can and should control their zones). There are ties in terms of identity with Ukraine, in addition to the view that: one, only with Ukraine can Russia become a great power; two, Ukraine has certain attributes that make it necessary (potential for economic diversification and a large market) (GÖTZ, STAUN, 2022).

Touching on these areas will elicit a tough response from Russia, including escalating the conflict (it is why there is a war in the first place). If the aforementioned goals are threatened on the battlefield, Russia can feel that it is time to escalate. It is important to note, as Mearsheimer (2022) argued in the Foreign Affairs magazine, that there is a possibility Russia uses nuclear arms in Ukraine. This is an even bigger risk when we consider the escalatory tendencies of war and the fact that neither side seems to be willing to de-escalate their demands.

With a better understanding of Russian Strategic Culture and their approach to Ukraine, I move on to consider the Ukrainian vision. Essentially, their claim is that Russian action in the region has been imperialistic, not respecting the sovereignty of the countries around it. Furthermore, there is a history of aggression and subjugation of Ukraine by Russia that Ukraine is now trying to fight by joining North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As the invaded country, their aim is rather simple: to defend their territory (REMICK, 2023).

We can conclude that in a situation where the war is continuously escalated by both sides, Russia would have the upper-hand. However, this isn't the only possibility, and is only really viable if Ukraine continues to get support from NATO. It can be wise, then, for Russia to draw out the war and wait for transatlantic support to halt, resulting in a window of opportunity for escalation. Finally, there is always the case wherein the conflict comes to a negotiated settlement. Right now, the only credible mediated solution is offered by China, if the belligerents resolve the conflict through those means, the war ends sooner than expected.

What can these different scenarios mean for the EU?

On an aggregate level, the EU doesn't benefit from the war, though arms manufacturers are getting a boost. It stands to reason that if there was a button the EU could press to end the war, they would press it. Lehne (2020), argues that a top priority for a geopolitical EU is to guarantee that EU firms are competitive in key sectors like artificial intelligence, quantum computing, semiconductor design etc. Since the EU fell behind on that race (ibid.), geoeconomic measures must be taken, some of which involve government subsidies, tax breaks etc. For this to happen, the EU needs money, money that can be better spent on increasing economic capabilities than financing a war in Ukraine like China and the US, the main players in this realm, is investing in these sectors.

A drawn-out conflict in Ukraine can happen if we assume that Russia is playing out the war not feeling the need to escalate to win. A full victory on the battlefield isn't necessary. As I mentioned before, if the situation gets dire enough, Ukraine can surrender (maybe give up part of their territory or be finlandized, that is, be coerced into not opposing a great power's interest). Europe seems keen on a Ukrainian victory even though US intelligence leaks make that seem less believable. Considering that public opinion largely still supports Ukraine (ECFR, 2023), and knowing that this is contingent on military performance and not having too much inflation, one must be cautious about drawing out the war.

Should the EU, then, escalate the conflict? This is a dangerous game. As I mentioned, there is always the possibility of a Russian first-strike. If this is not the case, there are other types of escalation that Russia can use to retaliate, such

as: attacks on European infrastructure (cyber and military); use of chemical weapons; perhaps the threat of different forms of escalation can be enough to guarantee a Russian victory. Europe has been engaged in escalating the conflict, by providing more weapons and different types of weapons to Ukraine which has kept Ukraine in the game, but makes it dependent on a steady stream of support.

EU geopolitical ambitions are best served by seeking to end the war. A gamble with NATO and the US' nuclear capabilities can dissuade Russia, and bring the conflict to an end. Alternatively, ceasing to support Ukraine would also end the war. This would entail significant reputational costs for the EU, but would free up resources to be used in strengthening geoeconomic capabilities.

Having more resources will be of utmost importance in giving some autonomy from China and the US. As this global rivalry continues to intensify, Europe cannot get into the position where making a deal with one global superpower eliminates the possibility of dealing with the other. This would lead to economically inefficient choices, and create strategic dependencies, which can be exploited down the line.

Final remarks

Europe must try to end the war in Ukraine. In purely rational terms, a gamble with Russian nuclear capabilities could work, but constructivist insights make that option appear way too risky. The tough pill to swallow is that perhaps allowing Ukraine to lose the conflict would free up resources to focus on economic development, both in Europe and abroad, with projects such as the "Global Gateway". Essentially, the goal is to assist developing countries with green infrastructure and digitalization. A coalition of State and private resources is meant to fuel this project, that has clear geopolitical ambitions, and distinguishes itself from previous approaches by trying to build mutually beneficial agreements, rather than helping out (BARBERO, 2023).

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