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## The War America Didn't Fight — But Won Anyway

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that United States (US) has gained significant strategic advantages from ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, making it ultimate beneficiary and winning decisively without committing its own troops to direct combat. The theoretical frameworks of offensive realism, complex interdependence and constructivism provide different perspectives on how states interact, cooperate or conflict and can be used to analyze dynamics of Russia-Ukraine conflict and role of various actors involved. The study examines how US effectively leveraged the conflict to enhance its global influence and maintain its dominant position in international affairs. The war had three key effects, including strengthening U.S. leadership within NATO, improve US-Europe relations and solidify US's position as a leader in European security affairs. The war also had three key economic benefits for US including boosting US defense industry, expanding its energy exports and strengthening US dollar's position as a dominant global currency. At same time, Russia has faced two significant challenges that have reduced its ability to challenge Western dominance which include economic isolation due to sanctions or other economic restrictions and military attrition due to suffered losses and wear and tear in conflict. Meanwhile, China's careful behavior suggests that it recognizes and respects the US's significant power and influence in the world and is adjusting its actions accordingly. The conflict has helped US reassert its role as a leader in

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promoting democracy and freedom, potentially strengthening the appeal of liberal democratic values in a world where authoritarianism is on the rise. US has effectively used a strategy that exerts its influence and achieves its objectives while minimizing direct involvement and costs, marking a shift in how it approaches conflicts. Russia-Ukraine conflict represents a paradigm shift in global politics, where US prioritizes indirect engagement and mastering the art of winning the wars it never fights.

**Keywords:** Power; NATO; Russia-Ukraine; Containment; United States

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## INTRODUCTION

The launch of Special military operations by Russia on Ukraine in February 2022 was anticipated by most of the pundits and defence analysts as a short and swift war with a rapid end and the result a foregone conclusion. Very few would have expected the conflict to cross the time barriers and prolong into a long-protracted war. Almost four years have passed, and the most consequential event of the current century is persisting and is affecting global dynamics. It is not what it did with Russia or Ukraine, but because of what it restored for United States. Washington has emerged as economically rejuvenated, politically reassured and strategically dominant, while the main stakeholders, the frontline of Europe is facing the brunt of the war with millions displaced (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2023).

United States appeared as a concerned supporter from a distance and continued to arm Ukraine and rallied with NATO while defending democracy. United States choreographed a masterclass through indirect power projection, reasserting itself as a global leader by weakening its rivals and bolstering defence industrial base without firing a single bullet, flying a single combat sortie and deploying a single combat brigade. The paradox / juxtaposition is compelling: as America effectively won a war which it did not fight.

When viewed from the theoretical lens of offensive realism, U.S. acted as a rational power, while maximizing its advantage within an anarchic international system, (Mearsheimer, 2001). The conflict offered an unprecedented opportunity to drain a peer competitor's resources while re-legitimizing the American-led alliance system. Moreover, Complex Interdependence Theory (Keohane and Nye, 1977) highlights how the global economic networks – energy markets, sanctions regimes and dollar system were leveraged by U.S. to be used as instruments of influence without resorting to direct coercion.

America's liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports soared, while European economies reeled from energy shocks. U.S. Defence Corporation recorded unprecedented profits and Russian stockpiles dwindled. And as NATO rediscovered its collective purpose, Washington regained what it had lost in the aftermath of Afghanistan: a sense of strategic direction and legitimacy (CSIS, 2024).

**Pull Quote:** *“Washington found in Ukraine what it had lost in Afghanistan—purpose, profit, and primacy.”*

It is pertinent to mention that international order has been reshaped by Russo-Ukrainian war by recalibrating the power and not by redrawing borders. For the first time since the Cold War, the United States has been able to achieve its global gains without direct intervention— and it has been achieved through other’s sacrifices.

### **Strategic Windfall: Rebuilding American Hegemony through European Crisis**

NATO, as an alliance was losing its cohesion, effectiveness and to an extent coercive capability by the year 2022 and “alliance erosion” was on display. The military alliance painted an image of losing purpose due to political disputes between member capitals and high-profile critiques of “strategic drift”. The invasion had a profound impact on global politics and power dynamics and marked a significant turning point in global politics, leading to a new era of tensions, alliances and rivalries (Iqbal & Khan, 2025). The security threat posed by the "Russian Offensive" created an urgent situation that required Washington to take a leadership role and mobilize resources to address the security emergency. The Russian threat breathed new life into NATO, enabling it to become a more effective and powerful alliance. The newfound strength allowed it to effectively promote and protect the strategic interests of its member countries.

The security paradox prompted a surge in Europe’s military spending and modernization efforts. The allied forces rapidly purchasing more military equipment and supplies was to reconfigure their military forces for better response to the threat. The data of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (2023) highlighted that global defence expenditures were at their maximum since Cold War and Europe had a significant share in the rise. This rearmament resultantly afforded American defence contractors with a lucrative opportunity with massive orders for aircraft, air defence systems and precision munitions of various category were available on buffet menu (SIPRI, 2024).

Energy Politics amplified the strategic advantage manifolds. Russia using gas supplies as a weapon and the sabotage of energy infrastructure forced Europe to explore alternate options. U.S. seizing the opportunity tripled the LNG export between the initial periods of war (2021-2023). This not only improved Washington trade balance but at the same time deepened Europe’s dependence on transatlantic energy flows (Reuters, 2023; BP Energy Review, 2024). A partial application of Liberal Institutionalism, in which economic interdependence reinforces political hierarchy was manifested, as U.S. not merely gained economic advantage but also renewed geo-economic leverage (Keohane, 1984).

The confrontation also had an impact on diplomatic front by giving Washington a second order benefit. Europe’s pre-war steps towards “strategic autonomy” were halted and to an extent reversed. Paris and Berlin’s vigorous debates in creating a more independent security identity for Europe were paused. One of the outcomes was shifting the momentum silently in favour of Washington. Europe has since been busy in re-institutionalize their defence planning within NATO’s framework, but this time reorienting it under American stewardship.

All this occurred without U.S. actively participating in the war through traditional deployment of ground forces and re-positioning of aircraft carrier. Instead, primacy was achieved through low-cost methods through arms sales, intelligence sharing and energy diplomacy. And guess what United States reaped high strategic returns with minimal exposure.

**Pull Quote:** *“The crisis returned NATO its purpose—without Washington firing a single battalion.”*

### **The Economics of War: Sanctions, Markets and the Power of the Dollar**

When Washington announced sweeping sanctions against Russia in early 2022, the immediate expectation was economic punishment for Moscow. Yet the long-term consequence has been the entrenchment of America’s central role in global finance. The war in a way reinforced dollar as the world’s indispensable medium of exchange. If viewed from the perspective of Complex Interdependence Theory, the sanctions regime highlighted how strong and deep-rooted U.S. centric market system and economic grid is in international system. It is strength of this U.S. system that despite rhetorical shift towards de-dollarization, the arms trade and cross border energy are undertaken through dollar-based systems (Eichengreen, 2023). When U.S. and the European countries froze Russian assets and expelled the banks from SWIFT, a strong message to international market that the global market system and the global finance is still dominated by America (Obasun, 2024).

The economic coercion by United States in the form of sanctions on energy, semiconductor and banking not only isolated Russia but also coerced States tempted to bypass US restrictions. The research by Brooking Institute also highlighted that the “secondary effects of sanctions” has been to reinforce Western, and consequently U.S. economic coalitions (Reinhart & Goldstein, 2023). US dollar's widespread acceptance, ease of exchange and ability to be readily converted into other currencies or assets without significantly affecting its value also countered China or India attempts of decoupling and to use alternate payment mechanism

The crisis forced Europe to manage this leverage. The sanctions resulting in Russian energy exports plummeted and consequently American liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments to the European States surged. U.S. which had little share in energy exports to Europe displaced Russia and became the largest LNG supplier in 2023 – the European peninsula energy demands were linked and dependent on the security of transatlantic routes (Reuters, 2023). The political downside came out that the European Union energy dilemma was forced into a strategic compliance.

**Pull Quote:** *“In sanctioning Russia, Washington didn’t just punish an adversary—it reasserted ownership of the global economy’s operating system.”*

### **The Arsenal of Democracy Reborn: The U.S. Military-Industrial Renaissance**

A key impact of the war was that the European States shifted emphasis on enormous military spending and logistics risks and United States emerged as an immediate and automatic beneficiary with defence industry reaping historical boost. At the time of Ukraine conflict, U.S. industry which was trying to recover and was under controversial sequestration to reduce budget deficits got an injection. U.S. arms

export grew by an astounding more than 40 percent in 2023, to fulfil the Europe's requirements of precision guided munitions, HIMARS rocket system and Patriot air defence system (SIPRI, 2024).

Mearsheimer key argument of Offensive Realism explains this phenomenon whereby great powers exploit vulnerabilities to gain advantage. Washington not only secured profit but was also able to enhance policy influence by feeding on Europe's insecurities. American military hardware firms like Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Northrop Grumman worked overtime to rearm Europe under the umbrella of NATO, thereby ensuring strategic leverage and creating economic dependency.

**Pull Quote:** *“Europe is rearming—but to American specifications.”*

The policy feedback loop amplified the policy's effects, making it more entrenched and difficult to change. US Congress approval for defence spending justified this renewed increased production capacity. The supply chains spanned across the Atlantic Ocean producing and delivering goods and services between America and Europe enhanced ability of European forces while adopting U.S. operational procedures, communication protocols and equipment compatibility. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (2024), Europe's defence-industrial interdependence ensured that if at any stage, Europe aspires for autonomy, its operational infrastructure will remain deeply ingrained in American system of technology and support. The consequence is a result of Franklin Roosevelt's principle of 1940s that the United States is the “arsenal of democracy”. On this occasion U.S. has, however; postured deterrence against Revanchism after Europe has experienced perceived injustice on the hands of Russia.

### **The Ideological Dividend: Restoring the Narrative of the ‘Free World’**

The phrase is that weapons do not fight a war, but are fought through meanings involving ideological, psychological and cultural dimensions. United States reputation, influence and prestige were declining gradually and legitimacy had diminished, making it less effective in promoting its values or interests globally due to Iraq, Guantanamo and domestic polarization. The Ukraine war revived the old narrative that America is a champion of freedom, protecting individual rights and democracy against oppressive and authoritarian forces.

In the theoretical perspective of Constructive theory, Washington got the leverage to re-establish its credibility and moral authority based on its alignment with certain values, norms or ideas. Biden administration portrayed the war as a conflict between democracy representing freedom, individual rights and rule of law and aristocracy representing authoritarianism, centralized power and limited individual freedoms. This brought together allies by emphasizing their shared values, beliefs and sense of belonging rather than just appealing to their practical interests or benefits (Wendt, 1999; Mead, 2023). The masses of Europe who were disturbed and worried by the war happening next door resonated strongly and were appalled by Washington's moral aspect emphasizing values like democracy and freedom.

**Pull Quote:** *“Ukraine gave Washington something it hadn't enjoyed in decades—moral coherence.”*

It can be said that win or success in terms of ideas or values is disputed and is not universally accepted or acknowledged. Many states in Global South have different views or interpretations and accuse Western countries' moral stance or actions driven by self-interest or a selective application of values. U.S. has increased its impact and reach through soft power, and non-military means such as media, communication and strategic messaging. The U.S. Agency for Global Media and Western social media used the sharp power to shape opinions, making the U.S. look credible and influential without directly controlling the narrative.

### **The Long War Trap: Russia's Strategic Overstretch**

War analysts initially perceived the long-protracted war costly for the West but instead Russia's position has been undermined due to various factors such as sanctions, economic struggles or military setbacks. This can be understood by the fact that in 2024, almost 40% of the country's total government spending went towards funding its military and defense activities. Western countries-imposed sanctions on Russia, limited its ability to get cutting-edge technology like microchips, crucial for modern electronics and military equipment (IMF, 2024). Clausewitz has in the same context emphasized the importance of having a clear understanding of the nature of war, its objectives and the means to achieve them, rather than simply focusing on endurance or perseverance.

The longevity of the war is seen as beneficial to the undeclared objectives of United States. U.S. is willing to tolerate a longer war with global implications, potentially at the expense of other countries involved, if it serves their interests. The prolonged conflict is not only hurting Russia in the immediate sense but also limiting its ability to pursue its broader interests and goals, both domestically and internationally. By being tied down in the war, Russia's capacity to address other important issues, such as security threats, economic development or diplomatic priorities is reduced. The war is restricting Russia's actions and influence, and this containment is happening without a formal or publicly stated strategy to constrain Russia. Conversely, the war is strengthening NATO's internal bonds and keeping its members on high alert, likely in response to the perceived threat from Russia.

### **The Third Tier Triumph: How the U.S. Wins Without Winning**

US main achievement in the Ukraine war was not any victory in the battlefield but was creating a structured approach to the conflict by architecting a hierarchy of engagement by involving various countries and organizations. The primary effect is that the war is taking a toll on Russia's strength and sustainability with significant drain of resources. At the second level of involvement, NATO as an alliance takes on the responsibility of defending Ukraine and helping with reconstruction efforts. And at the third level of involvement, the US with its distant geographical location benefits from the situation and emerges as a strategic winner, boosting its position without directly engaging in the war.

**Pull Quote:** *"The U.S. fights from the rear—and wins from the distance."*

The current approach of US preventing conflict or aggression by having others (like Ukraine and NATO) act or bear responsibility, rather than engaging directly has

transformed the traditional deterrence theory to deterrence through delegation (Schelling, 1966). US has skillfully turned its allies and even adversaries into tools or assets that help advance its broader strategic goals. Keeping the war going, but controlled, serves the strategic interests of the US and its allies, weakening Russia without major escalation and provides global leverage while avoiding domestic fatigue. Above all, the US avoids a potentially catastrophic direct conflict with Russia, which has nuclear capabilities.

## CONCLUSION

The Russia-Ukraine war has re-written the rules of global power politics and has significantly changed the way how states interact, make decisions and use power as a tool. The old principles of maintaining hegemony through territorial occupation or direct intervention are replaced with strategic orientation of 21<sup>st</sup> century, leveraged through networks, narratives and crises.

The war not yet over has been transformative for U.S. and has dramatically changed the situation, likely in terms of its role in the world, relationships with other countries or its strategic priorities. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has been strengthened and rejuvenated, US defense industry reinvigorated due to increased demand for military equipment and supplies, the dollar reinforced and above all US has regained some of its moral standing or influence on the global stage, although not completely.

The rising global powers, such as China and Turkey observe the US's approach to global politics and conflict and are reminded of a harsh truth that US is still the primary designer and maintainer of the global system, navigating and benefiting from challenging situations, emerging stronger and more resilient. The war is happening in Ukraine and on European soil but the country which has benefitted the most from this chaos is located miles away in the safety of distance in Atlantic, likely due to its influence on global politics, economy and security.

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