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Premium

One year of war in Ukraine: As conflict drags on, a changed Europe, India under pressure

Ukraine managed to push back the invading army from Kyiv. It also reversed some other territorial losses, including at Kherson in November, the only regional capital Russia had seized. For India, the Ukraine war has been an opportunity to practice strategic autonomy.

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Servicemen fire artillery from their position at Ukrainian troops in the Russian-controlled Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine, on Oct. 11, 2022. Russia and Ukraine both hope to turn the tide of the yearlong war with big offensives. (AP Photo/Alexei Alexandrov, File)

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“Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that any one who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever must realise that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events...”

– **Winston Churchill.**

Russia’s war against Ukraine is exactly a year old today. Calculations on both sides that this would be a short, swift war have proved wrong.

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The war grinds on

Russian President Vladimir Putin believed he would be done with the Ukraine operation in days, and after his stated objective of “de-Nazifying” the country, perhaps install a Moscow-friendly regime. Instead, after early territorial gains in four eastern provinces – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia – Ukraine’s fight-back under President Volodymyr Zelensky, with weapons, intelligence, and military advice from the US and the West, bogged down the Russian advance, especially in the north.



LAUNCH OF INVASION: Cities across Ukraine came under fire on Feb 24 last year.

Map showing regions in Ukraine which faced Russian airstrikes or attacks.

Ukraine managed to push back the invading army from Kyiv. It also reversed some other territorial losses, including at Kherson in November, the only regional capital Russia had seized.

In September, Russia annexed the areas it had walked into in the four provinces in eastern Donbas, and began to “Russify” them. Unable to take more territory, Russia bombarded Ukraine with artillery and missiles, targeting cities, destroying infrastructure and causing thousands of civilian casualties. A long and destructive siege of Mariupol in Donetsk ended with Ukrainian forces surrendering.

Though the fighting slowed down over the winter, both sides have spent considerable firepower recently on a small town called Bakhmut. The Russians believe it could serve as a staging post to take control of other cities in Donbas – after losing Kherson, Russia controls no cities in Ukraine. The Ukrainians believe preventing Russia from taking the city would be a show of national resolve and strength.

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What the two sides are fighting now a war of attrition, each trying to tire out the other, with sanctions an additional weapon that the West has deployed against Russia. As Ukraine is the battlefield, Russia has escaped the physical damage it has inflicted on its neighbour.



MID-MARCH: Areas under the occupation of Russia forces.

Map showing areas under Russian control in Ukraine.



Maps: The New York Times

MID-NOV: 54% of territory captured by Russia reclaimed by Ukraine.

Map showing territory regained by Ukraine (mostly in western Ukraine) and that captured by Russia (mostly in the east and south).

Geopolitical reshaping

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has reshaped the geopolitics of the world. The alarm over the invasion brought European focus on its security and defence. In this respect, the German turnaround from its post-World War pacifism was the most significant.

Before that, Eastern and Central European countries like Poland, a former Soviet satellite, and the Baltic states, all former Soviet republics, took the lead in calling for European assistance to Ukraine, signalling what German chancellor Olaf Scholz described as the shifting of Europe's centre eastward.

The war has re-energised the Europe-US security alliance. NATO has opened its door to the proposed inclusion of Sweden and Finland, that will, once in (Turkey's approval is awaited), form the new military frontiers of the alliance against Russia. Ironically, the primacy of US in European security could mean a less, not more, secure continent, because of what that signals to Russia.

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An early indication of this came with Putin suspending Russia's participation in the New START Treaty, negotiated with the US in 2011 to cap their nuclear weapons. Europe, which thought all that was behind it, finds itself in the middle of what could be a new arms race between Russia and the US.

The trust deficit between Russia and the West is at an-all time high. The US-led alliance is pouring weapons into Ukraine, though US President Joe Biden seems reluctant to accept all of Zelensky's demands, including for combat aircraft including F16s, perhaps mindful of the risk of widening the war.

8,006
CIVILIANS KILLED

13,287
INJURED

**IN THE WAR UNTIL FEB 21, ACCORDING TO UN HUMAN RIGHTS.
THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF THE DEAD IS LIKELY TO BE HIGHER**

The estimated number of dead and injured in the Ukraine-Russia war.

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China calculus

Former Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi's Europe trip, with stopovers at Paris, Rome, Budapest, the Munich security conference, and Moscow, provided insights into where Beijing stands. Wang, who now heads the Central Foreign Affairs Commission, met Putin in Moscow in an affirmation of the friendship formalised last year as "limitless". But it is also true that Beijing does not wish to jeopardise its Europe ties.

Over the last year, China, with its economic stakes in mind, has remained at arm's distance from friend Putin's war – no Chinese weapons for Moscow, and even a warning by President Xi Jinping against nuclear weapons. Big economies in Europe too need China. That much was clear from Scholz's Beijing visit last year.

Western commentators described Wang's visit as a "charm offensive". Wang urged France and Germany to reclaim their "strategic autonomy", but that did not cut ice, because of Beijing's failure to understand the extent to which the Russian invasion has changed Europe's thinking on security. Despite Chinese denials, the US and Europe remain concerned about Chinese arms supplies to Russia. Wang said he would unveil a peace plan on the anniversary Friday.

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Meanwhile, an early prediction that the war would distract US interest from the Indo-Pacific seems to have been off the mark. European countries are showing

more interest in the Indo-Pacific and the Quad than before, and want in.

India under pressure

For India, the Ukraine war has been an opportunity to practice strategic autonomy. Adopting a “nuanced” neutrality Delhi has maintained its relationship with Moscow and worked around Western sanctions to buy oil from Russia. As much as 25% of India’s oil purchase is now from Russia, from less than 2% before the war. But the longer the war continues, the more pressure on India from the Western alliance to choose the “right side”.

This week, Ukraine asked India to support a UNGA resolution timed for the first anniversary of the war, asking Russia to withdraw from its territory. The vote was to come up later Thursday.

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So far no serious diplomatic effort has been made to end the war. This will entail compromises on both sides. At this time, neither is ready to do that. India has expressed the hope that it can use its G-20 presidency to bring peace.

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