

# The Russian Invasion of Ukraine and Some of its Implications on the USCENTCOM's AOR and Beyond

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*The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of a number of international officers within the Combined Strategic Analysis Group (CSAG) and do not necessarily reflect the views of United States Central Command, nor of the nations represented within the CSAG or any other governmental agency.*

## Key Points

- The following article, written in the fourth month of the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine, is an attempt to assess some implications and consequences of Russian aggression for the ME and the CASA region, and more yet to come.
- The Russian war is exacerbating food insecurity. Disruptions in exports from Ukraine and Russia are likely to exacerbate the food security problems already faced by many countries (*including some ME and CASA countries*).
- Food problems can be a trigger for internal dissatisfaction in the region (*an analogy to the Arab Spring*).
- The historic manipulation of oil prices was the most effective sanction against the USSR and its successor – Russia. The recent cold diplomacy between the US and Saudi Arabia has complicated matters.
- Iran could benefit from sanctions imposed on Russia. However, Tehran has so far put ideology above self-interest.
- Despite its democratic system and strong ties to Europe and the US, Israel is signaling that it is primarily a Middle Eastern state and is moving closer to other countries in the region where Russia once played an important role.
- The views of the West and the Middle East on the Russian war are diametrically different.
- Russia's war exhaustion may free Central Asia from Russian domination, but there is a likelihood that the CA states (CAS) will be immediately pushed into a new dependency – China.
- Turkey and China are benefiting from Russia's weakening. It is becoming increasingly apparent that Russia is being instrumentalized by China in their rivalry with the US.
- The united West poses a strong warning signal for China.

## Introduction

In many ways, the world will no longer be the same as it was before the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Paradoxically, the region where the effects of the war are most felt and capable of bringing about the greatest changes is not

Europe, but the Middle East (ME).<sup>1</sup> Regarding political significance – there are many indications that Russia will emerge weakened from this conflict.<sup>2</sup> This means, among other things, that Russia will be less and less able to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad, in particular due to a reduced number of forces of the Russian Federation deployed to Syrian territory.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the strategic fuels sector is affected. In conformity with the packages of sanctions imposed on Russia, some Western countries are no longer receiving supplies from Russia.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, the manipulation of oil production and oil prices have been used as a kind of weapon, including to cool down aggressive actions of the USSR and later Russia as well.<sup>5</sup> The breach between the US and Saudi Arabia diplomacy has made the use of the "oil war" more complicated this time. Iran suddenly turns out to be an alternative for energy resources from Russia as an oil supplier.<sup>6</sup> The ongoing war has disrupted the recovery of economies from the pandemic-induced slowdown. This will translate even more into already high inflation and may consequently lead to social dissatisfaction. Rising food prices can already be observed in the AOR. Soaring bread prices have led to protests in Iran, where shops have been set on fire and security forces have arrested "provocateurs." It follows a cut in government subsidies for imported wheat that caused price rises as high as three hundred percent for many flour-based foods.<sup>7</sup>

### **Why could this war have such a dramatic impact on events in the Middle East?**

Parallels can be drawn to the events of 2011, where the ME underwent a significant metamorphosis. Alongside the Arab Spring there was a series of social revolutions that spread mainly in the ME – a de facto revolt of poorer, "non-oil" countries that experienced a rapid population boom (e.g., *Egypt exceeded 100 million inhabitants*). Dissatisfaction coincided with a dramatic drought which, among other things, led to a drastic increase in bread prices.

According to the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), Vladimir Putin's most powerful weapon is not in his military arsenal. It is the threat of migration and unrest provoked by disrupting food supplies to Europe, North Africa, and the ME.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations estimates that 1.7 billion people in more than 100 countries are directly affected by war, of whom 43 million are on the verge of famine and 570,000 are threatened with starvation. Rocketing prices, shortages and hunger in the coming months may cause desperate people to rise against their rulers or flee. Poor Syrian refugees are likely to be one of the first victims of the Russian war-related price rises, not only because of limited means at the disposal of humanitarian organizations, but also due to redirection of supplies to the Chinese

<sup>1</sup> Maciej Kozłowski, „Bliski Wschód wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę”, *Wszechnica FWW*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNqEXRFwbA&list=WL&index=15> (accessed April 01, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Krzysztof Wojczal, „Federacja Rosyjska już przegrała – pytanie ile szkód zdoła jeszcze wyrządzić?”, *Krzysztof Wojczal author's blog*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.krzysztofwojczal.pl/geopolityka/europa-wschodnia/federacja-rosyjska-juz-przegrala-pytanie-ile-szkod-zdola-jeszcze-wyrzadzic-analiza/> (accessed May 01, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> Marcin Krzyżanowski, „Inwazja na Ukrainę a sytuacja na Bliskim Wschodzie”, *PolskieRadio24.pl*, March 13, 2022, <https://polskieradio24.pl/130/4428/Artykul/2919425,Inwazja-na-Ukraine-a-sytuacja-na-Bliskim-Wschodzie-Marcin-Krzyzanowski-wyjasnia> (accessed March 21, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Szymon Kardaś, „Czy do Zachodu płynie dalej gaz i ropa z Rosji? Sankcje na rosyjski sektor energetyczny”, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)*, March 01, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-0eRUb8ZQg> (accessed March 18, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Maciej Kozłowski, „Bliski Wschód wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę”, *Wszechnica FWW*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNqEXRFwbA&list=WL&index=15> (accessed April 01, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> „Jak Bliski Wschód widzi wojnę rosyjsko-ukraińską?”, *God Times Bad Times PL*, June 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U1IiCT7Bkw>, (accessed June 17, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> The editors of the National, „Iran protests break out over soaring bread prices”, *The National*, May 13, 2022, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/iran/2022/05/13/iran-protests-break-out-over-soaring-bread-prices/> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Edward Lucas, „Hunger Games. Russia is weaponizing starvation”, *The Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA)*, May 23, 2022, <https://cepa.org/hunger-games/> (accessed May 25, 2022).

market, which will be able to pay for it.<sup>9</sup> Terrified by the specter of another wave of migration, Western leaders could push Ukraine to sign a ceasefire so that food can be transported freely.<sup>10</sup>

Ukraine and Russia are the largest wheat exporters, and almost all these exports go to the ME due to their geographical proximity. In addition, the US and Europe are producers of grain themselves, and once the industry has adjusted to the increased demand, they can be assumed to be self-sufficient.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, this does not apply to the ME countries, which have their own stocks (for example, Egypt probably has 9 months of stocks)<sup>12</sup>, but this will not stop the price increase in the long term. The largest importer of Ukrainian wheat so far was Egypt, followed by Yemen, Lebanon, and Jordan. Egypt is also the largest customer of Russian wheat, which is also purchased by Turkey, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. In Lebanon, more than 60% of wheat imports come from Ukraine and 14% from Russia. The country has been in a deep economic crisis for several years, with people fleeing to Cyprus. In addition, the parliamentary elections were accompanied by deep ethnic, sectarian, and political divisions. In Iraq, food prices have risen by 20% and the authorities have been forced to increase the purchase price of wheat by 30% to stop farmers from selling it abroad (*the same happened in India, which allegedly has one of the best types of soil for agriculture*). The ME countries must remember that in 2011 the rise in food prices – the so-called "bread crisis" – was one of the reasons for the eruption of social discontent and consequently the Arab Spring.<sup>13</sup>

### Iran's issues

Iran almost ritualistically blames the US for everything, and in the promoted narrative is the alleged cause of the conflict: NATO expansion, the destruction of the international balance and the desire to use Ukraine to attack Russia, making Russia – so the narrative goes – a defending victim of US and NATO aggression. Ukraine is reduced to a helpless tool, and the victims of war are suffering under the aggressive US policy. Thus, this narrative rejects the principle of sovereignty in decision-making regarding the choice of alliances, while at the same time this narrative favors the primacy of superpower rivalry and the struggle of ideological and political systems. In fact, Iran's approach is completely contrary to its own historical experience and real geopolitical interests. One of the strategic interests is that Iranian oil could be an alternative to Russia's sanctioned energy resources, and it should be particularly important for Iran that the West begins to perceive Iran as a serious trading partner. Instead, Iranian missile attacks on Iraqi territory continue (e.g., the missile attack on Erbil on March 11, 2022).<sup>14</sup> The narrative is pervasive throughout Iran's sphere of influence, particularly in pro-Iranian circles (media, politicians, and social media) in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen etc. The dominant belief is that the cause of the war is the imbalance by the "aggressive" NATO and the US, which are held responsible for the situation in Palestine, Yemen etc. The attitude of Iran's sectarian sphere of influence towards Russian aggression is defined by resentment towards the US, abstracting both historical experience

<sup>9</sup> According to Dorota Zadroga from the Polish Medical Mission, "Rozmowa z Dorotą Zadrogą z Polskiej Misji Medycznej", *TVP3 Szczecin*, March 16, 2022, <https://szczecin.tvp.pl/59081029/rozmowa-z-dorota-zadroga-z-polskiej-misji-medycznej> (accessed March 22, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Szymon Kardaś, „Czy do Zachodu płynie dalej gaz i ropa z Rosji? Sankcje na rosyjski sektor energetyczny”, *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)*, March 01, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-0eRUb8ZQg> (accessed March 18, 2022).

<sup>10</sup> Maciej Kozłowski, "Bliski Wschód wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę", *Wszechnica FWW*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNqEXRFwBA&list=WL&index=15> (accessed April 01, 2022).

<sup>11</sup> Amelia Suchcicka, "Światowe skutki wojny w Ukrainie: liczba głodujących na świecie wzrosnie", *300GOSPODARKA*, March 1, 2022, <https://300gospodarka.pl/news/swiatowe-skutki-wojny-w-ukrainie-liczba-glodujacych-na-swiecie-wzrosnie> (accessed March 22, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> By MENA, "Egypt has strategic stock of wheat enough for 9 months – cabinet's spokesman", *Egyptian State Information Service*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.sis.gov.eg/Story/163650/Egypt-has-strategic-stock-of-wheat-enough-for-9-months---cabinet's-spokesman/?lang=en-us> (accessed March 25, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> Maciej Kozłowski, "Bliski Wschód wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę", *Wszechnica FWW*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNqEXRFwBA&list=WL&index=15> (accessed April 01, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Amina Ismail, John Davison, "Iran attacks Iraq's Erbil with missiles in warning to U.S., allies", *REUTERS*, Mar 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/multiple-rockets-fall-erbil-northern-iraq-state-media-2022-03-12/> (accessed March 25, 2022).

and self-interest. Indeed, Iran's experience with aggressive Russian imperialism is far more dramatic than with US interference.<sup>15</sup> More importantly, as mentioned above, Iran could benefit from the sanctions imposed on Russia. Therefore, it would be in Iran's interest to quickly reactivate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which Russia has begun to block, and to ensure the construction of a gas pipeline from Iran to Europe via Turkey, as well as to eliminate the 'Turkish Stream'<sup>16</sup> as a competitor. However, Iran has so far failed to take such measures and prefers ideology over the economy. On the other hand, the signing of the agreement in 2015 and the release of financial reserves has led Iran to support its old allies, particularly Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthis in Yemen. History is likely to repeat itself, which is clearly against the interests of the KSA, the UAE and Israel. Therefore, the Arabs will oppose any agreement that makes too many concessions to Iran without having a comprehensive approach to the Iranian threat, including preventing the acquisition of nuclear weapons, maintaining the IRGC on the Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) list, and restricting Iran's ballistic missile program.

### Israel's special position

To justify their cautious stance towards the attack on Ukraine, the Israeli authorities cite the "special position" of their country. This term hides Russia's strong position in its neighborhood. After joining the war in Syria in autumn 2015, Moscow saved its ally Bashar al-Assad's regime from collapse and became a key player in that part of the ME, largely replacing the US in that role. For Israel, this situation means that Russia has partially become its northern "neighbor" and, through its control of Syrian airspace, has become the regulator of the Israel-Iranian conflict within that state. The Kremlin's favor allows Israel to operate freely in Syrian airspace and to eliminate targets linked to Iran. Any lack of such favor complicates it and opens the field to the enemy.<sup>17</sup>

Over the years, Israel has managed to develop good relations with Russia, which have allowed the country to pursue its security interests without significant obstacles. This has also translated into intensive bilateral contacts at the highest level and the development of political relations in other areas. As a result, the authorities in Jerusalem have ceased their public criticism of Moscow and have thus withdrawn from participating in the West's anti-Moscow front (*after the aggression on Ukraine in 2014, condemnation of Russia's actions in Syria, or the expulsion of Russian diplomats after the chemical attack in Salisbury, UK*). Good relations with Moscow are also part of a broader strategy of the rulers to develop relations with non-Western countries such as China, India, and Russia.<sup>18</sup> This is in response to the US withdrawal from the region and growing concerns about continuing to provide Israel with sufficient support against the Iranian threat. This is particularly important because the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine coincided with negotiations on a new nuclear agreement with Iran, which is among President Biden's priorities.<sup>19</sup> The success of the negotiations is not a given, but the authorities in Jerusalem are increasingly seeing the agreement as more likely and consider its expected shape – pushed by the United States – as a threat to their security. From an Israeli perspective, the US expects it to take a more unequivocal stance toward Russia, resulting in a deterioration of relations with it, while it is itself trying to finalize an agreement that Israel considers a threat. This situation brings

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<sup>15</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>16</sup> The 'Turkish Stream' is a Turkish-Russian natural gas pipeline project, running under the Black Sea from Russia (*from the Krasnodar Region*) to the European part of Turkey.

<sup>17</sup> Marcin Krzyżanowski, "Inwazja na Ukrainę a sytuacja na Bliskim Wschodzie", *PolskieRadio24.pl*, March 13, 2022, <https://polskieradio24.pl/130/4428/Artykul/2919425,Inwazja-na-Ukraine-a-sytuacja-na-Bliskim-Wschodzie-Marcin-Krzyzanowski-wyjasnia> (accessed March 21, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Michał Wojnarowicz, "Cena neutralności – Izrael wobec inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM)* March 08, 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/cena-neutralnosci-izrael-wobec-inwazji-rosji-na-ukraine> (accessed March 21, 2022).

<sup>19</sup> Steve Forbes, "New U.S.-Iran Nuclear Deal? Why Biden's Pursuit Is Dangerous And Delusional", *The Forbes*, March 17, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveforbes/2022/03/17/new-us-iran-nuclear-deal-why-bidens-pursuit-is-dangerous-and-delusional/?sh=21d34517609c>, (accessed April 21, 2022).

Israel's approach closer to that of the other Middle Eastern states, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which are using the war in Ukraine to demonstrate its dissatisfaction with Washington's policies in the region, including its inadequate response to the Iranian threat, as they claim.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their long-standing close ties with the US, these countries not only distance themselves from the war in Ukraine and avoid condemning Moscow, but also openly oppose American interests, including a refusal to increase oil production. The response to the war in Ukraine is a reminder that, despite its democratic system and its strong ties with Europe and the US, Israel is primarily a Middle Eastern state, which in its perception of international politics is moving closer to other countries in the region, where Russia plays and will play an increasingly important role, unless Russia is so exhausted by a war that it will strip all of its assets, capabilities, and regional presence, so their influence in the ME is lost.<sup>21</sup>

### Importance of Syria

Russian's influence in Syria is expected to weaken. Russia may be forced to withdraw a significant portion of its assets deployed abroad, including Syria, to use those forces instead in the war against Ukraine. There are already reports of some troop movements between the Syrian and Ukrainian theaters of operations.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, it could weaken President al-Assad's position unless he is able to fill the gap – left by Russian forces, based on Iran's resources. However, Russians have invested too much in military infrastructure in Syria to abandon it altogether.<sup>23</sup> The presence in Syria is strategically important to Russia because it is the window to the Mediterranean – "Russia's Mediterranean aircraft carrier" (*the Humayim Air Base and Tartus Naval Base allow the Russians to provide air support and logistics for their units operating in the Mediterranean Sea*)<sup>24</sup>. The myth of Russian military power has suffered badly in the face of the widespread perception that Russia "does not win", particularly in the eyes of Russia's opponents and those opposed to President al-Assad. In a situation where Iran is beginning to enter Syria more boldly, this would send a signal to Iran's opponents that Iran is expanding its sphere of influence into ever larger parts of the ME. For Iran it would be an additional effort – more spending and further stretching of its severely limited capabilities and resources.

President al-Assad's support for the Russian invasion and the convergence of his position with Russian propaganda are likely to prompt Western states to increase pressure to limit the normalization of Arab relations with the Syrian regime. Although they (*the Arab States*) initially supported opposition groups, they have been trying for several years to normalize relations with Assad and to reintegrate Syria into the League of Arab States (LAS). In March of this year, President al-Assad visited the UAE, his first visit to an Arab state in 11 years. Russia's involvement in the conflict was a decisive factor in changing the attitudes of the Arab Gulf monarchies (except Qatar) towards the al-

<sup>20</sup> Marek Matusiak, "The West's rear-guard: Israel's stance on the war", *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)*, April 04, 2022, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2022-04-04/wests-rearguard-israels-stance-war> (accessed April 11, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Michał Wojnarowicz, "Niedosyt i lawirowanie – stosunki izraelsko-ukraińskie", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM)* June 02, 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/niedosyt-i-lawirowanie-stosunki-izraelsko-ukrainskie> (accessed June 05, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Sara Nowacka, "Znaczenie wsparcia Syrii dla rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę", *The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/znaczenie-wsparcia-syrii-dla-rosyjskiej-inwazji-na-ukraine> (accessed March 23, 2022),

Thomas Kingsley, "Russia begins transfer of troops from Syria to Ukraine as Finland signals NATO membership", *The Independent*, May 12, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-syria-troops-moved-b2077499.html> (accessed May 16, 2022),

Levent Kemal, "Turkey planned Syria military operation after Russian troops withdrew over Ukraine", *The Middle East Eye*, June 3, 2022, <https://www.middleeye.net/news/syria-turkey-military-operation-russia-troops-withdrew-ukraine> (accessed June 6, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Aleksander Olech, "Rosja atakując Ukrainę nie zapomina o Syrii", *Defence 24*, March 15, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/rosja-atakujac-ukraine-nie-zapomina-o-syrii-komentarz> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Assad regime. They recognized that Russia's support for al-Assad would make it possible to stabilize the situation in Syria and limit Iran's unfavorable influence on the country. However, the invasion of Ukraine could diminish Russia's credibility as a guarantor of stability in Syria. A few days after the start of the invasion of Ukraine, Syrian government forces also agreed with Iranian paramilitary organizations to integrate their members into the Assad regime's forces.<sup>25</sup> So far, the Russian government has opposed this, which has also motivated Arab states to move closer to the Assad regime as part of building a counterweight to Iranian influence in Syria. Assad's support for the Russian invasion could take the form of direct participation of pro-government Syrian fighters experienced in urban combat (*that would be important for a possible siege of Kiev or Kharkov*). However, reports that Russians in Ukraine were supported by al-Assad's fighters or Iraq's al-Hashid al-Shaabi or even Lebanese Hezbollah proved exaggerated.<sup>26</sup> These forces have their own political and security interest forefront. Hezbollah has no doubt that Russia will never give it any military support (including weaponry or situational awareness) against Israel. In Iraq, Al-Hashed al-Shaabi supports its political representation in the struggle for power in Baghdad, even though no new government has been formed and Russia has no influence on developments there. Pro-Iranian forces are probably also aware of the agreements between Russia's Gazprom and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan with which they are in conflict.<sup>27</sup> Added to this is the tense situation between al-Hashed al-Shaabi and Turkey, and the omnipresent threat from the Islamic State, against which Russia has never shown support.<sup>28</sup> In return, al-Assad must consider that if Russia bleeds out in the war with Ukraine and he sends his best troops to Ukraine, in a few months the jihadists from Idlib with Turkish support will approach Aleppo and Damascus, and he will have nothing to defend himself with.

### Arab states and the war in Ukraine

A slightly different view is taken by the Sunni monarchies, which conflict with Iran and the other Arab states. However, there is also a predominant perception of the conflict through the prism of the balance of power, with a complete misunderstanding of its axiological dimensions.<sup>29</sup> There is also very little knowledge of Ukraine's history, which encourages the idea that Ukraine is basically part of Russia, or at least its natural sphere of influence. This leads to the oft-repeated conclusion that the reason for the war was not the West's submission to Russia, which influenced its misjudgment that Western pacifism would result in a lack of a decisive response from NATO and the EU, but that it was the West's failure to meet Russia's demands.<sup>30</sup> This, in turn, has led to the belief that the solution to the conflict lies in a compromise that satisfies some of Russia's "security concerns" (i.e., NATO's withdrawal from the eastern flank and recognition of Ukraine as a Russian sphere of influence). This was precisely the objective of the diplomatic mission of the Arab League delegation, which visited Moscow and Warsaw in early April. Despite the very high level of this delegation, which included the Secretary General of the Arab League and the heads of diplomacy of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Algeria and Sudan, the mission played virtually no role and was a complete fiasco.<sup>31</sup> The Arab media, too, are convinced of the need to restore the balance and normalize political-economic relations between the West

<sup>25</sup> Amina Ismail, John Davison, "Iran attacks Iraq's Erbil with missiles in warning to U.S., allies", *REUTERS*, Mar 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/multiple-rockets-fall-erbil-northern-iraq-state-media-2022-03-12/> (accessed March 25, 2022).

<sup>26</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Sara Nowacka, "Znaczenie wsparcia Syrii dla rosyjskiej inwazji na Ukrainę", *The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, March 21, 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/znaczenie-wsparcia-syrii-dla-rosyjskiej-inwazji-na-ukrainie> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid 26.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid 26.

<sup>31</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

and Russia, as well as the tendency to consider the Kremlin's declarations as credible. The media debate is often reduced to the necessity and inevitability of recognizing Russia's "concerns" about its security and the return to normal economic relations, as sanctions and embargoes are said to be too damaging to global trade relations for such policies to continue. This approach dominates the narrative in the Arab world and understanding of the psychological impact on European public opinion of Russian crimes in Ukraine, demolished cities, and dead bodies, has been negligible in a region where war, crimes, terror, massacres, etc. are not unusual.

The political stance of the Arab states is based not on axiology, but on political calculations.<sup>32</sup> Although only Sudan and Morocco abstained in the vote on condemning Russian aggression, apart from the previously stated discussion above, the only state to vote in favor of Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council was Libya. The majority, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Egypt, abstained or voted against. Authoritarian Arab governments, traditionally allied with the West, began to diversify their foreign policies (i.e., balance them with relations with Russia) during President Obama's administration. This was linked to the emphasis on human rights and the US vision of democratizing the Arab world based on the key role of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>33</sup> Under President Trump, this trend has increased further, driven by the announcement of the withdrawal of US forces from the ME. In this context, the temporary US withdrawal from northeastern Syria in late 2019 allowed a Turkish operation against the Kurds, and was a wake-up call.<sup>34</sup> As a result, Russia occupied some US bases in a region crucial for containing the expansion of Iran's influence. This led the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula to conclude that they needed to secure and negotiate the matter with Russia. Following the advent of President Biden's administration, the concerns of many Arab states have increased further, with his criticism of authoritarian regimes, human rights abuses, and his push to reactivate the JCPOA and the Democrats' role in withdrawing US support for the war in Yemen after revelations of the bombing of civilian targets.<sup>35</sup>

Even if the complicated relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia stems from personal animosities, foreign policy should be free of hostilities. President Biden's latest visit in Saudi Arabia (on July 15, 2022) for talks with the kingdom's leaders, marked a dramatic shift in his critical stance toward the kingdom that he expressed as the Democratic candidate for the White House. However, the visit has been widely commented as not the most successful one, also in terms of mitigation of high gas prices.<sup>36</sup> Saudi Arabia, and specifically Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, has played a key role in setting OPEC production policy that determines the hydrocarbons' prices. OPEC has been cooperating with Russia in the 'OPEC+' format since 2016 and it has continued even after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine. OPEC and its allies had already decided (on 2 Jun 2022) to accelerate oil production in July and August 2022.<sup>37</sup> However, the move came just days after the EU agreed to impose a partial ban on Russian oil imports, deepening fears of a global energy shortage, whereas President Biden did not achieve a major goal of the trip to the ME to persuade Saudi Arabia to increase its oil production for the global market.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is strengthening relations with other traditional US allies, such as Turkey, that have complicated relations with President

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<sup>32</sup> Jędrzej Czerep, Patryk Kugiel, Hamza Meddeb, Ray Hartley, Sami Halabi, "The War in Ukraine and Food Security in Africa and the Middle East", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM)*, April 26, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AArpp7\\_nmqM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AArpp7_nmqM) (accessed April 28, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Matt Egan, "'Slap in the face': Biden's fist bump with MBS fails to move the OPEC needle significantly", *CNN Business*, August 03, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/03/energy/joe-biden-saudi-trip-opec-analysis/index.html> (accessed August 04, 2022).

<sup>37</sup> Derek Brower, David Sheppard, "OPEC agrees to accelerate oil production following US pressure", *The Financial Times*, June 02, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/bb130bb9-4b75-4626-961a-2c1ed9b0e7f9?curator=biztoc.com> (accessed June 06, 2022).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

Biden and are neutral regarding the war in Ukraine. It was no coincidence that President Erdogan's visit to Riyadh and his meeting with Mohammad bin Salman just recently took place.<sup>39</sup>

The ME is also linked with Russia by the growing interest in Russian weapons in recent years (among other things as a cheaper and more readily available alternative to the US Foreign Military Sales – FMS).<sup>40</sup> The position of the Arab states on the sanctions imposed on Russia is illustrated, for example, by the visit to Egypt at the end of April of a Russian delegation in connection with the nuclear power plant being built by the Russians in Dabaa. However, most countries in the region will not openly support Russia for fear of the consequences of the US government. Another concern is that Russia's possible defeat in the war with Ukraine could trigger a series of events that will lead to gigantic changes in the region.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that a weakened Russia will be forced to withdraw some of its interests (e.g., arms trades) or lose the ability to control its spheres of influence (e.g., Syria and CAS), and the vacuum that is left will naturally be filled by other stakeholders.

### **Impact on the Central Asia States (CAS)**

The former provinces of the Russian empire in Central Asia are too dependent on Russia to act against it, but none supported its assault on Ukraine. "If the world is to be divided by a new Iron Curtain, we do not want to be on the wrong side of it" – said Kazakhstan's Deputy Minister of Diplomacy Roman Vasilenko, and his words would probably be signed by all the leaders of the five CAS that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> The war in Ukraine has caused diplomatic headaches in Nursultan, Tashkent, Dushanbe, and Bishkek, but the most serious troubles threaten the Central Asian economies. Economic sanctions, the exodus of foreign companies from Russia, and the fall in the value of the ruble promise hard times for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, which rely on the earnings of seasonal workers. Many of them will lose their jobs, and the rubles that they send to their families have already lost their value. If the breadwinners decide to return home, they join the army of the unemployed and poor, which only increases the threat of hunger riots. The war and sanctions will also increase inflation and high prices, triggered by a Covid outbreak that has lasted more than two years. To make matters worse, Russia has already announced that it will not sell grain or sugar to Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Tajiks. The Kazakhs as well as the Turkmen and Azerbaijanis hoped for additional income from rising oil and gas prices during the war. However, they may be wrong, because they have been sending their "black" and "blue" gold to the world through pipelines, leading through Russian or Georgian territory to terminals on the coast of the Black Sea, which has been affected by the war. Mikhail Delyagin, a member of the Russian Duma, called the Azerbaijanis an American vassal and a Turkish puppet, and even proposed that the Russian army should destroy Azerbaijan's oil installations if it tries to sell energy resources to the West, to the detriment of Russia.<sup>43</sup> Forced to choose between Russia and the West, Central Asia may choose the South – Turkey, Iran, India, and above all, China, which has been conducting political and especially economic expansion in

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<sup>39</sup> Szymon Kardaś, "Jakie mogą być skutki embarga na rosyjską ropę", *Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich (OSW)*, June 02, 2022 <https://open.spotify.com/episode/7HXtUmrASMPJUXvVYQY4e1> (accessed June 03, 2022).

<sup>40</sup> Sara Nowacka, "Państwa arabskie a wojna na Ukrainie", *The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*, March 04, 2022, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/panstwa-arabskie-a-wojna-na-ukrainie> (accessed March 23, 2022).

<sup>41</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>42</sup> Wojciech Jagielski, „Azja Środkowa w dyplomatycznej pułapce. Jak trafić na dobrą stronę żelaznej kurtyny?”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, April 02, 2022, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/azja-srodkowa-w-dyplomatycznej-pulapce-jak-trafic-na-dobra-strone-zelaznej-kurtyny-172698> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>43</sup> Wojciech Jagielski, „Azja Środkowa w dyplomatycznej pułapce. Jak trafić na dobrą stronę żelaznej kurtyny?”, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, April 02, 2022, <https://www.tygodnikpowszechny.pl/azja-srodkowa-w-dyplomatycznej-pulapce-jak-trafic-na-dobra-strone-zelaznej-kurtyny-172698> (accessed May 12, 2022).

this part of the world for years.<sup>44</sup> Russia's war exhaustion may free Central Asia from Russian rule, but the likelihood that the CAS would immediately be pushed into a new dependence – China.

### **The role of Turkey**

For Ankara, Russia's weakening means greater Turkish influence in the Caucasus and Syria. Until now, Turkey's ambitions have been stymied by Russia, among others – on the principle that there cannot be two leaders in one region, and for several years Russia has considered both the Caucasus and Syria as its exclusive sphere of influence. Turkey's presence was against Russia's interests, and now a Russia focused on Ukraine, economically isolated from most of the world's largest economies, a Russia that will struggle economically, and most importantly, a Russia whose myth of a powerful military force has suffered badly, will no longer be able to restrain Turkey's inclinations so effectively.<sup>45</sup> Politically and as the official narrative of Turkey sounds, it remains a role of an impartial broker. President Erdogan has maintained good relations with Russia and Ukraine for years.<sup>46</sup> While Turkey has supplied Ukraine with the UAV systems (*Bayraktar TB2*),<sup>47</sup> it has also bought S-400 missile defense systems from Russia, even though it is a NATO member.<sup>48</sup> After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this balancing policy became even more difficult. President Erdogan cannot afford to favor one side over the other, because that would have serious consequences for Ankara, both in terms of security and economics– Russia will not replace Ankara's relations with the West, and the West will not replace Turkey's relations with Russia. Consequently, Turkey will "only do what is necessary within its capabilities."<sup>49</sup> Admittedly, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Turkey closed the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to the Russian navy. But Ankara is unlikely to join the Western sanctions regime against Russia, mainly because of possible Moscow's quick and harsh response, which would hit the Turkish economy severely, especially in areas such as tourism, construction services and wheat imports. 70% of Turkey's wheat imports come from Russia. Reuters reports, citing a source in the Turkish government, that Turkey is negotiating with Moscow and Kiev to open a corridor for Ukrainian grain exports. The planned corridor would open a route for Ukrainian products through Turkey to target markets. Ukrainian ports have been blocked since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, currently more than 20 million tons of grain are stored in silos for export.<sup>50</sup>

### **India's issues**

India has not condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is trying to maneuver between a proven supplier of armaments i.e., Russia, and the US, with whom relations have improved significantly recently. Now, however, new deals by Indian companies indicate that this market will be at least in part a salvation for Russian oil, which is being

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<sup>44</sup> By Eurasianet, "Czy powstanie linia kolejowa Chiny-Kirgistan-Uzbekistan?", *Studium Europy Wschodniej Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego*, May 31, 2022, <https://studium.uw.edu.pl/czy-powstanie-linia-kolejowa-chiny-kirgistan-uzbekistan/> (accessed Jun 01, 2022).

<sup>45</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Bliski Wschód wobec wojny na Ukrainie: rosyjska propaganda i biznes", *Defence 24*, May 07, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/bliski-wschod-wobec-wojny-na-ukrainie-rosyjska-propaganda-i-biznes> (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>46</sup> Maciej Kozłowski, "Bliski Wschód wobec agresji Rosji na Ukrainę", *Wszechnica FWW*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZrNqEXRFwBA&list=WL&index=15> (accessed April 01, 2022).

<sup>47</sup> Juliusz Sabak, "Bayraktar TB2 masakruje rosyjskie kolumny. Turcja dostarcza maszyny i amunicję", *Defence24*, March 02, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/technologie/bayraktar-tb2-masakruje-rosyjskie-kolumny-turcja-dostarcza-maszyny-i-amunicje-koemntarz> (accessed March 05, 2022).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid 46.

<sup>49</sup> Elmas Topcu, "Tureckie drony na wojnie w Ukrainie", *Deutsche Welle*, March 07, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/pl/tureckie-drony-na-wojnie-w-ukrainie/a-61034785> (accessed May 03, 2022).

<sup>50</sup> By Reuters, "Wojna w Ukrainie. Turcja negocjuje z Kijowem i Moskwą ws. eksportu zboża z Ukrainy", *polsatnews.pl*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.polsatnews.pl/wiadomosc/2022-05-26/wojna-w-ukrainie-turcja-negocjuje-z-kijowem-i-moskwa-ws-eksportu-zboza-z-ukrainy/> (accessed May 03, 2022).

pushed out of Western markets. The Western sanctions imposed on Russia have created a good financial opportunity for India and, at the same time, an excuse for maintaining good relations with Moscow. In recent years, India quite rarely bought crude oil from Russia because of the high transport costs. However, now the government in New Delhi is straddling the line between dealing with a sanctioned entity and making a bargain. The Russians have offered to sell the Indians 15 million barrels of oil at a discounted price of up to 35 USD per barrel, while a barrel of oil is currently hovering around 100 USD. More importantly, the Russians have proposed that transactions should not be denominated in USD but in Indian Rupees and that the transactions should be handled by the Russian SPFS (*rus. Sistema Peredachi Finansovoykh Soobscheniy*) payment system.<sup>51</sup> At first, the Indians hesitated, probably to avoid destroying their relationship with the US, which they still need to neutralize the power of their main regional adversary – China. Nevertheless, India took the risk of negotiating with Russia, as sufficient supply of cheap fuel will help to tackle inflation and prevent widespread shortages that can incite violence and political turmoil, as happened recently in nearby Sri Lanka.<sup>52</sup> Indo-Russian deals have faced a wave of criticism from Western countries. India's foreign minister S. Jaishankar defends the country's strategy, saying Western sanctions on Iran and an isolationist policy against Venezuela have left India with fewer and fewer options in the face of rising energy prices.<sup>53</sup> Consequently, Chinese and Indian purchases of Russian crude oil are undermining the West's efforts to isolate the Kremlin and turn global oil markets upside down. India is also heavily dependent on Russia for key technologies and spare parts for military equipment and armaments. There are more recent signs of an impasse in the arms trade with Russia [India has relied on domestic rocket artillery – Pinaka Enhanced Rocket System (EPRS)<sup>54</sup> and abandoned purchase of *early warning helicopters (Ka-31) from Russia – contract valued at \$520 million*]. The reasons cited were political issues related to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, but also financial issues and doubts about the ability of the Russians to fulfill the terms of their arms contracts. Apparently, sanctions against Russia in connection with the aggression against Ukraine are taking an increasing toll – the loss of another export contract after Egypt and Indonesia withdrew from buying Su-35 fighter jets.<sup>55</sup> Russia's problems create a problem for India, which relies heavily on Russian types of weapons, without guaranteeing autonomy to continue them. The potential economic collapse of Russia and its industry calls into question the maintenance of India's military capabilities. It cannot be ruled out that a costly, time-consuming, and labor-intensive conversion to Western (*the US and/or French*) and, of course, indigenous-Indian armaments will be required. However, the Indian industry is not yet able to provide all the necessary solutions.

## China

In the bipolar world, China's place is not in the free world, and this naturally determines the existence of an alliance between Beijing and Moscow. However, this is not a system of equal partners,<sup>56</sup> and China is trying to take advantage of Russia's weakening and isolation, as it has previously done with Iran, for example.<sup>57</sup> Meanwhile, Russia lacks a

<sup>51</sup> Hubert Walas, "The End of the Dollar Monopoly?", *Good Times Bad Times*, May 10, 2022, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTAXAC\\_vL8U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTAXAC_vL8U) (accessed May 12, 2022).

<sup>52</sup> Clifford Krauss, Alexandra Stevenson, Emily Schmall, "In Russia's War, China and India Emerge as Financiers", *The New York Times*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/business/russia-oil-china-india-ukraine-war.html> (accessed June 26, 2022).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Adam Świerkowski, "Indie stawiają na krajową artylerię raketową", *Defence24*, April 25, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/polityka-obronna/indie-stawiaja-na-krajowa-artylerie-raketowa> (accessed May 01, 2022).

<sup>55</sup> Maciej Szopa, "Indie rezygnują z rosyjskich śmigłowców", *Defence24*, May 17, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/przemysl/indie-rezygnuja-z-rosyjskich-smiglowcow> (accessed May 18, 2022).

<sup>56</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Asymetryczny sojusz Chin i Rosji" *Defence 24*, April 03, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/asymetryczny-sojusz-chin-i-rosji-opinia> (accessed April, 07, 2022).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

political alternative. The statements of representatives of the Chinese authorities about the war in Ukraine leaves no doubt on whose side China is on. Although Beijing did not support the Russian invasion and formally advocates respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, it does nothing to put pressure on Russia. Moreover, China sharply criticizes Western pressure on Russia and blames the US and NATO for the invasion, propagating the absurd (and characteristic of all enemies of the free world) narrative that the reason for the invasion was Russia's "legitimate security concerns" related to NATO's eastward expansion, which allegedly poses a threat to Russia.<sup>58</sup> China's approach is not only the result of its apparent tendency to attack its archrival, i.e. the US, and to support a potential vassal (Moscow), but is also the result of a clash of two visions of the international system.<sup>59</sup> China, like Russia, appeals to classic realism, in which the anarchy of the system is ordered by force. In other words, whoever has more power can do more, and peace is determined by the balance of powers in a multipolar world. States that are not superpowers do not have sovereign alliance rights but should submit to the balance established by the powers. This vision does not include any axiology or any reference to values such as freedom or democracy. Moreover, stimulating a pro-democratic political transition in a state considered to be part of another power's camp is a crime against balance and therefore also against peace.<sup>60</sup> According to this logic, China blames the US and NATO for the war in Ukraine. The liberal paradigm of the international system, especially in the neo-Trumanian version, threatens the order and worldview of authoritarian regimes. The Cold War liberals around Harry Truman created the concept of a "vital center," which was the US. This "vital center" was the core of the free world built on the ideological foundation of freedom and democracy.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, it was a development of Wilsonian liberalism i.e., a vision of an international system based on liberal values such as democracy, free trade, and the institutionalization of international cooperation.<sup>62</sup> Cold War liberals denounced the assumption that democracies should not be aggressive, pointing to the enemy – the USSR (an "Empire of Evil") and communist ideology as the main threat to the free world. The task of the "vital center" was, on the one hand, to continuously expand (that is, to integrate more countries into the free world by initiating the political transformation) and, on the other hand, to stop the spread of communism. Part of this doctrine was the principle of applying double standards. On the one hand, it was about a revisionist approach to the theory of democratic peace by introducing the principle that democratic states apply different standards to themselves (especially non-violence) and others to non-democratic states (against which they can and should be aggressive). On the other hand, it was about the permissibility of cooperation with some authoritarian regimes insofar as it served to stop communism, which was considered the main threat to the free world. The above comments on the situation almost 80 years ago allow us to understand the current reality, because history has turned the wheel.<sup>63</sup> It should be remembered that the Truman Doctrine was the foundation of a long struggle that ultimately ended in the victory of the free world. However, it was not permanent, and now we are back to the beginning. President Biden outlined a neo-Trumanian vision of the international system during his election campaign.<sup>64</sup> He confirmed this during his visit to Warsaw, given that the free world is facing a long fight. It is not just about the war in Ukraine, which is only a battle in that fight, but about a new Cold War against a new "Empire of Evil". According to Joe Biden's early vision, the core of the new "Evil" was Beijing, and although Russia

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Stieb, "The Vital Center Reborn", Cambridge University Press, September 06, 2021, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-american-history/article/vital-center-reborn-redefining-liberalism-between-911-and-the-iraq-war/17EB072C55B92149939B41E8983E83A2> (accessed March 05, 2022).

<sup>62</sup> Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations", *Palgrave Macmillan*, 2002, pp. 23–49.

<sup>63</sup> By the Office of the Historian, *The U.S. Department of State*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine> (accessed May 03, 2022).

<sup>64</sup> Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again> (accessed May 12, 2022).

now claims primacy in the hierarchy of the enemies of the free world, Moscow will in the long run still be reduced to the role of a Chinese vassal.<sup>65</sup>

By February 24, 2022, both Moscow and Beijing could have hoped that the free world (as the new "vital center") would remain merely a concept whose implementation would be prevented by internal divisions and pacifist submission by the West. However, the reaction of the free world to the Russian invasion of Ukraine came as a negative surprise to both Moscow and Beijing. A united free world rebuilding transatlantic ties and neo-*Trumanian* readiness to face a new "Empire of Evil" is bad news for both countries. Theoretically, this could lead to a joining of the forces of the enemies of the free world i.e., by open support from China to Russia. The problem is that while the free world is bound together by common ideas and values, while its enemies are united only by interest. In addition, China knows that it can lose a lot if it overtly supports Russia, while Western oppression of Russia is giving China an increasingly strong position in Moscow-Beijing relations.<sup>66</sup> It is an open question whether Vladimir Putin informed Beijing of his invasion plans during his stay at the Olympics. There are many indications that he did, but President Xi was presumably misled by President Putin, who likely assured the Chinese leader that it would be a *blitzkrieg* and that the West would be humiliated. However, things turned out differently, and so China took a seemingly neutral position by abstaining from voting in the Security Council and then in the General Assembly. The war itself has advantages and disadvantages for China. On the one hand, the protracted war poses a problem for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. On the other hand, an isolated and weakened Russia will be easier for China to control. This is reminiscent of China's approach to Iran, where President Trump's policy of "maximum pressure" led to an asymmetric (*more beneficial for China*) investment and trade agreement. The problem is that sanctions prevented China from consuming in its entirety, just as it failed to plan to colonize Afghanistan after the Taliban took power.<sup>67</sup> The same goes for Russia. Their isolation is beneficial for Beijing, but the risk for Chinese companies of exposing themselves to US consequences by violating the sanctions imposed on Russia is too great. This means that China is forced *nolens volens* to comply, at least in parts, with the sanctions imposed on Russia. Certainly, they would also like to supplement Russian weapon losses, because they are interested in both an end of the war and a victory of Russia.<sup>68</sup> This would not bring Russia out of isolation, that is, not strengthen Moscow *vis-a-vis* Beijing, but it would weaken the West and undermine its credibility in defending the free world. On the other hand, it would pave the way for China to invest in Ukraine's reconstruction and give it the chance to return with Europe to a "business as usual" policy. China has received a clear warning from the US, and everyone seems to be unwilling to take the risk. A similar warning was sent by the EU to China after Minister Lavrov's visit to Beijing.<sup>69</sup> Asymmetry in Russia-China relations is expressed by the fact that Russia accounts for only 2% of Chinese exports and 3% of imports, while trade with the EU and the US is crucial for China. For Russia, China was already the largest recipient (15% of Russian exports) and supplier (23% of Russian imports) even before the economic effects of the war in Ukraine.<sup>70</sup> This imbalance has already been exacerbated by the withdrawal of Western companies from Russia, the sanctions imposed and the "de-Russification" of the energy imports from Russia. These allow China to dictate prices freely to Russia.<sup>71</sup> If the war in Ukraine lasts for months or years, the likelihood of the Afghan scenario

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<sup>65</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Asymetryczny sojusz Chin i Rosji" *Defence 24*, April 03, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/asymetryczny-sojusz-chin-i-rosji-opinia> (accessed April 07, 2022).

<sup>66</sup> Marcin Przychodniak, Mateusz Józwiak, "Czy Chiny pomagają wojskowo Rosji na Ukrainie?", *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych (PISM)*, March 18, 2022, [https://pism.pl/pism\\_w\\_mediach/podcasty/odcinek-522-czy-chiny-pomagaja-wojskowo-rosji-na-ukrainie](https://pism.pl/pism_w_mediach/podcasty/odcinek-522-czy-chiny-pomagaja-wojskowo-rosji-na-ukrainie) (accessed March 25, 2022).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid* 65

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid* 65.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid* 65.

<sup>70</sup> Witold Repetowicz, "Asymetryczny sojusz Chin i Rosji" *Defence 24*, April 03, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/asymetryczny-sojusz-chin-i-rosji-opinia> (accessed April 07, 2022).

<sup>71</sup> Elżbieta Proń (the University of Silesia in Katowice, Poland), "War in Ukraine and its Potential Implications for Central Asia: China's Perspective", *Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI)*, May 26, 2022,

increases, that is, humiliating defeat leading to Russia's disintegration. China could exploit Russia's weakness and soon force Russia to give it informal control over resource-rich Siberia (e.g., *under Chinese protectorate*).<sup>72</sup> For now, it seems that China will rather try to take advantage of the situation and demand from Europe some form of compensation for its formal neutrality, otherwise threatening to support Russia, and/or use the situation for an aggressive policy in Southeast Asia (e.g., strikes on Taiwan). But the West will not bow to China. Firstly, it would ensure coherence of the transatlantic policy and the neo-Trumanian model advocated by President Biden. Secondly, it is indeed China that would pay a price in the first place if it could fulfill its threats. China's openness to Russia's side is irrational for Beijing, but since one madness has already taken place on February 24, the other cannot be ruled out.<sup>73</sup> Just as it was worth not giving in to Russia (*even if knowing that Russia is not bluffing and is ready to start a full-scale war*), it is not worth giving in to China now.<sup>74</sup> If China decides to confront the West, the total cost of a new Cold War for the West will increase, but it will be deadly to China's development and China may lose in the long run in Strategic Competition.<sup>75</sup> However, it is also to be expected that China will in some way test what it can afford, including in relation to Taiwan. China must then receive a clear signal that it cannot afford such a threat. The strongest signal will be to strengthen the unity and solidarity of the free world – now more than ever.

## Conclusions

There are many indications that the Russian Federation has already lost, and Vladimir Putin will do anything to survive – the question is how much damage he can do in the process. Apart from the devastation of Ukraine, Russia has not achieved any strategic goal. The Russian economy has been stagnating since 2012. Before the war, it was estimated that it might take 10-20 years for Russia to recover. Now worst-case scenarios for Russia speak of 100 years. Russia has been able to survive major crises, but not without great payoffs, and what the Russian economy is experiencing can be described as the geometric inverse. World progress is moving at a geometric pace, while Russia is retreating, and the gap is widening dramatically.<sup>76</sup> The war in Ukraine was a desperate attempt to stop Russian backwardness. Russia is falling completely out of the economic cycle and will soon not be a superpower in the energy sector, as traditional energy resources will soon become obsolete. Russia has also fallen out of the technological circle, and is no longer a competitor, either with Israel, the US or China.<sup>77</sup> There are no longer areas in which Russia is globally competitive, especially as Russia has now decided to shut itself off. Russia therefore faces the alternative of ending the war and trying to return to cooperation with the West or switching its economy back to the warpath under a centralized command-and-control system.

One of the most important “weapons” against Russian aggression is the integrity and strength of the West, including NATO. This integrity was tested positively in the following months of the war but requires further investment to completely thwart Putin's plans. Continuous investment in integrity is also critical against Chinese expansion.

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<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/war-ukraine-and-its-potential-implications-central-asia-chinas-perspective-35060> (accessed May 28, 2022).

<sup>72</sup> Krzysztof Wojczal, “Federacja Rosyjska już przegrała – pytanie ile szkód zdoła jeszcze wyrządzić?”, *Krzysztof Wojczal author's blog*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.krzysztofwojczal.pl/geopolityka/europa-wschodnia/federacja-rosyjska-juz-przegrala-pytanie-ile-szkod-zdola-jeszcze-wyrzadzic-analiza/> (accessed May 01, 2022).

<sup>73</sup> Witold Repetowicz, “Asymetryczny sojusz Chin i Rosji” *Defence 24*, April 03, 2022, <https://defence24.pl/geopolityka/asymetryczny-sojusz-chin-i-rosji-opinia> (accessed April 07, 2022).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Agnieszka Zielińska, Robert Cheda, “Putinowi potrzebna jest świeża krew. Zrobi wszystko, by przetrwać”, *money.pl*, June 03, 2022, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/putinowi-potrzebna-jest-swieza-krew-zrobi-wszystko-by-przetrwac-6774399699425856a.html> (accessed June 06, 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Ibid 72.

As the panic flight of the Russian elite from Russia is underway, the Kremlin must reach out to other people – faithful but narrow-minded, following every order – and the environment that remains with President Putin is being severely radicalized. This is a rather frightening prospect of a government model along the lines of the so-called "oprichnina" – the policy used by Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible to crush the opposition and consolidate tsarist power.<sup>78</sup> One might expect that Russia will now focus on solving its internal problems, but in the meantime, it may become more aggressive externally as a compensation for its failures in the war. In fact, this is a typical Russian method of compensating internal crises with external aggression.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that China is using Russia in rivalry with the United States. Consequently, the Sino-Russian alliance is de facto a master-versus-vassal relationship for China and an expression of lack of the alternatives for Russia. Therefore, it is clear to reasonable Russians that the real threat to Russia, including the military one, does not come from the West, but primarily from China.<sup>79</sup> Until the war, Russia based its policy on a balance between China and the US, which gave Russia an advantageous political position. In the current situation, China's role in relation to Russia will be to limit or stimulate Russia's aggressive responses, and only in accordance with China's plans. According to them, China wants to become the most powerful economy in the world by 2049. This is to be done on the centenary of the Chinese Revolution of 1949. Until then, the US is to be pushed out of its superpower role.

Russia's entire policy so far has been based on raw materials, including oil and gas. It is already clear that other countries can benefit from the weakening Russian energy sector. It turns out that Russian raw materials are not irreplaceable. However, much still depends on the success of green energy implementation. Russia is preparing an alternative: the production of food, agricultural products, and mining of rare metals. This is a niche that the Russians would like to enter, but for this they need Ukraine, which has fertile soils and deposits of rare metals and is also rich in uranium.<sup>80</sup>

The best-case scenario for Russia would be a quick victory. This is also true for the West – only that it would be a victory for Ukraine instead. However, the war may take the form of a prolonged low-intensity conflict. In the long term, a positive end to the war in Ukraine does not necessarily mean peace. In the coming years, the Russian Federation will be inclined to carry out desperate measures against the internal collapse and continuation of Vladimir Putin's regime, which could mean aggressive outward measures.

### **Recommendations for the US / USCENTCOM**

- Promote a STRATCOM message stressing that the US sanctions imposed on Russia do not undermine or affect trade relations between US and CASA.
- In addition, effective communication about sanctions in some ME States (e.g., Emiratis) could increase fear and limit business cooperation with Russian companies.
- Observe symptoms of Russian recruitment of Syrian militants.
- Exploit the position of the CAS in the Russian war and strengthen existing relations with the CAS governments at the military level.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Agnieszka Zielińska, Robert Cheda, "Putinowi potrzebna jest świeża krew. Zrobi wszystko, by przetrwać", *money.pl*, June 03, 2022, <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/putinowi-potrzebna-jest-swieza-krew-zrobi-wszystko-by-przetrwac-6774399699425856a.html> (accessed June 06, 2022).

<sup>79</sup> Krzysztof Wojczal, "Federacja Rosyjska już przegrała – pytanie ile szkód zdoła jeszcze wyrządzić?", *Krzysztof Wojczal author's blog*, April 12, 2022, <https://www.krzysztofwojczal.pl/geopolityka/europa-wschodnia/federacja-rosyjska-juz-przegrala-pytanie-ile-szkod-zdola-jeszcze-wyrzadzic-analiza/> (accessed May 01, 2022).

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Andrea ZANINI, "Kazakhstan's Position in the War Between Russia and Ukraine", *CSAG – CC15-G-USCENTCOM*, June 03, 2022, <https://nesa-center.org/category/centcom-csag-papers/> (accessed June 03, 2022).

- Promote counter-abandonment narrative strategy in the ME; consider introduction of the CSAG recommendation to establish Centre of Excellences in AOR (*Integrated Air Missile Defense CoE in ME and Counter Terrorism/ Border Security CoE in CASA*).<sup>82</sup>
- Cooperate with Poland by focusing on Poland's role as "guardian of NATO's eastern flank" and NATO's closest neighbor to Ukraine. Support Poland's ambitions to assume the Baltic Maritime Coordinator Function (BMCF).

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<sup>82</sup> CSAG US CENTCOM, „TROC2 [Brief to the US CENTCOM CMD]”, May 31, 2022.