

Deciphering Russia's Mystifying and Ruthless Invasion of Ukraine

A General Overview

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On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin effectively initiated a war against Ukraine, leading to Russia's invasion of the country. The origins of this conflict remain complex and puzzling. This project aims to shed light on the underlying causes of this perplexing war through the insights of five experts specializing in Russia and Ukraine.

The contributors and their respective topics are as follows: Professor Kimitaka Matsuzato analyzes the causes of the crisis that led to the war, taking into account historical factors, contemporary security concerns, and the situation in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Professor Mihoko Kato examines Russia's military and foreign policies before the invasion, explains the reasons for the diverse international reactions to the war, and highlights the possible emergence of a world of blocs. Professor Shinichiro Tabata focuses on the sanctions imposed on Russia, their immediate and long-term effects, Russia's responses to these measures, and prospects for the future transformation of the international economic order. Professor Mari Aburamoto examines the nature of Russian politics, which is difficult to see from the outside, by clarifying how changes in presidential approval ratings, the orientation of political elites, and the degree of repression of dissidents occurred before and after the invasion. Professor Yu Koizumi, after discussing the characteristics of the ongoing war, positions this war as a classic type of war influenced by considerations of nuclear deterrence, and identifies lessons that Japan, with nuclear powers as potential adversaries, should draw from the war.

Among the many issues explored by the contributors, two common themes will be discussed at the end of this paper. The first is the causes of the outbreak of the war. While there are nuanced differences in understanding the impact of Ukraine's pursuit of NATO membership, there is a certain consensus on what brought about the war. The second is the issue of Russian national identity. Each contributor approaches Russia's complex self-image in different manners.

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1. Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russian President Vladimir Putin effectively declared war on Ukraine, launching a full-scale invasion. More than nine months have passed since the war began, and fighting continues to this day. Such a prolonged period of fighting does not appear to have been anticipated, at least on Russia's part. Both the Ukrainian and Russian military forces have suffered significant losses, while Ukrainian civilians have endured immense suffering. However, the determination of both sides to continue the war makes it impossible to expect peace negotiations in the foreseeable future.

The outbreak of this war came as a considerable shock. Why Russia decided to wage such a war is undoubtedly a mystery. What was the objective of the Russian leadership in the war? How did the Russian political elite and Russian society react to the war that had suddenly begun, albeit after unproductive diplomatic negotiations? Why have some nations, such as the United States and other Western nations, condemned this war and imposed economic sanctions on Russia, while not a few others have not joined the West in this? What effect will economic sanctions have? How will Russia respond? The course of the war itself is certainly a constant focus of attention. Why have the Ukrainian forces been much more effective than expected, and why has their supposedly powerful Russian counterpart fallen short of expectations? And how will the war change the world? What are the implications and lessons for Japan's national security policy?

The list of questions is endless. This war will be a subject of study for a long time to come. With the help of five experts on Russia and Ukraine, our project will attempt to unravel the mysteries of this war as we witness both the ongoing conflict and the international political and economic events that accompany it, in order to point the way for future research.

Obviously, this project alone cannot address all the problems. Therefore, each contributor was asked a simple question in order to prevent the discussion from becoming too diffuse. Nevertheless, they have developed these simple questions in a multi-layered manner, constructing arguments that will be well worth the reader's attention.

The contributors and the issues addressed in their papers are as follows: Chapter 1, by Professor Kimitaka Matsuzato of the University of Tokyo's Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, clarifies the background of the crisis that led to the war in terms of historical factors, contemporary security problems on both sides, and the situation in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine. Chapter 2, by Dr. Mihoko Kato, a lecturer at the Hiroshima Peace Institute of Hiroshima City University, examines Russia's military and foreign policies prior to the invasion and suggests reasons for the international community's lack of a unified response to Russia's invasion, while warning of the coming division of the

world into blocs. Chapter 3, by Professor Shinichiro Tabata of Hokkaido University's Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, discusses the sanctions imposed on Russia, their short- and long-term effects, and the measures Russia has taken in response, and offers an outlook on the future transformation of the international economic order. Chapter 4, by Professor Mari Aburamoto of Hosei University's Faculty of Law, compares changes in public support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, trends among political elites, and the degree of repression of dissidents before and after the invasion began. In doing so, she explores the nature of Russian politics, a subject regarding which it can be difficult to obtain clear information from the outside. Chapter 5, by Yu Koizumi, a lecturer at The University of Tokyo's Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, discusses the character and nature of the current war, positioning it as a classic type of war under influenced by considerations of nuclear deterrence. The paper then clarifies the lessons that Japan, which considers nuclear powers to be its potential adversaries, should draw from this war.

Below is a summary of each of these discussions.

2. The Origins of the Ukrainian Crisis

Professor Kimitaka Matsuzato (Graduate Schools for Law and Politics, The University of Tokyo) is a leading expert who has conducted research in Ukraine for many years, including in Crimea and the Donbas, both before and after the Maidan Revolution, secession movements, and Russian intervention. His research extends not only to current local information, but also to a wide range of historical data. Here, Professor Matsuzato discusses a broad scope of the background and the factors behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine, from historical events to up-to-the-minute information at the local level, enabling the reader to gain an understanding of the situation that connects the historical with the present.

Looking first at the historical situation, Professor Matsuzato begins by addressing the complex issue of how the peoples of the region have been categorized. The most important point is how the ethno-recognition frameworks for the three East Slavic peoples - Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians - have been changed by politics.

Professor Matsuzato points out that the Russian right wing, including President Putin, is extremely dissatisfied with the ethnic policies of the Soviet Union. During the Soviet period, each ethnic group was perceived as a separate entity, self-governing in its own territory. This meant that the Soviet power denied the multi-layered ethnic identities that existed during the imperial period. The Soviet way, an artificially fixed system of ethnic groups governing their own republic or territory, created the conditions for the division of

the greater Russian state, which has now caused the anger of the right wing. The Russian right wing believes that the scope of the Russian people should be more expansive than it was in the Soviet era.

After describing the historical background mentioned above, Professor Matsuzato discusses Russia's goals in the current war, which involve issues of national security. Although Russia's claims regarding its goals have changed, its main stated goal before the outbreak of the war was to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO. A territorial dispute between Russia and Ukraine over Crimea and the Donbas, which erupted in 2014, must also be included among the issues.

When it comes to national security issues, domestic politics and diplomacy have mutually influenced each other. Professor Matsuzato clearly shows the emergence of a downward spiral created by repeatedly adopting a hard-line diplomatic stance in order to win in domestic politics, which in turn led to a deterioration of diplomatic relations. Russia has categorically opposed NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, while Ukrainian politicians have used the security issue of joining NATO to help them win elections.

It was the violence of the Euromaidan uprising that triggered the separation of Crimea and the Donbas. The uprising grew out of protests against then-Ukrainian President Yanukovich's last-minute cancellation of an association agreement with the EU. Russia annexed Crimea while leaving the Donbas within Ukraine, hoping that the region would prevent Ukraine from joining NATO, but the Minsk 2 agreement that would have made this possible never materialized. Russia began acting against the spirit of Minsk 2 by issuing Russian passports to Donbas residents, and the Ukrainian side was no longer willing to implement it.

Professor Matsuzato's final message urges us to reflect. We have to watch and observe Ukraine per se. We have been so used to thinking of Ukraine in terms of relations with Russia that pointing out Ukraine's problems has often been understood as taking Russia's side. This is unfortunate not only for us but also for Ukraine.

3. Russia's Invasion of Ukraine and Asia

Dr. Mihoko Kato (Lecturer, Hiroshima Peace Institute, Hiroshima City University) is a young, rising scholar known for her research on Russia's Asia-Pacific policy and multilateral diplomatic relations involving Russia. Here she discusses a wide range of issues, including the changes in Russia's foreign policy and its outcomes, President Putin's worldview, the reasons why the international community has not responded uniformly to the invasion of Ukraine, and the implications for the future world order and

Japanese diplomacy.

Dr. Kato discusses the changes in Russian foreign policy in the decade before the invasion, noting that Russia has escalated its cross-border military interventions, beginning with the 2008 war in Georgia. At the same time, Russia has intensified its Eastern diplomacy, becoming active in the broader regions of the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and Northeast Asia, and establishing itself as a power broker in these regions.

During this period, Vladimir Putin, who was in a position to determine foreign policy, expressed his dissatisfaction that the unilateral actions of the United States had shaken the existing world order. Such dissatisfaction is not limited to Russia, but is widespread throughout the world. However, Russia has come to consider that its sovereignty extends beyond its borders and has intervened militarily on this basis, and thus is no longer in a position to simply criticize the United States for such actions.

Putin gives a distinctive nuance to sovereignty: a sovereign nation can ensure its own security and economic growth without the assistance of other nations. His worldview can be understood as a multipolar order in which the world is composed of several poles, each consisting of a fully sovereign nation and smaller nations dependent on it, with the poles competing with each other.

The world's nations are divided in their responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Western nations have condemned Russia and imposed sanctions, while other nations have condemned Russia but not imposed sanctions. Other nations have neither condemned Russia nor imposed sanctions, although certain of them have distanced themselves from Russia since the invasion. Each of these reactions is based on the interests of the respective nations. This very division could be seen as the result of Russia's Eastern diplomacy.

Dr. Kato predicts that the war will be prolonged and that distrust of Russia will continue, that the world may become increasingly bloc-oriented, with the West positioned against China and Russia, and that dialogue across blocs may become difficult. Under these circumstances, Japan, as a member of the West, must participate in sanctions against Russia. However, Japan needs a strategy to integrate Russia into the regional order while maintaining a close relationship with the United States, because Japan and Russia have issues to resolve, such as territorial disputes, fisheries, and energy.

4. Economic Sanctions against Russia and Their Impact

Professor Shinichiro Tabata (Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University) is a

leading researcher specializing in the quantitative and institutional analysis of the Russian economy, focusing on issues such as Russia's dependence on oil and gas. In his paper, Professor Tabata examines the economic sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia's response to them, and their short- and long-term effects on the Russian economy, and he also predicts their long-term effects on the world economic order.

Professor Tabata begins by pointing out that the sanctions against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine, which include bans on the export of high-technology goods and the import of oil and gas, are far more severe than previous ones. Russia has responded by ensuring supplies to the domestic market through export controls, preventing the ruble from collapsing through exchange controls, reducing inflation by raising the policy interest rate, and avoiding financial collapse by using the National Wealth Fund, which is financed by oil and gas revenues.

Professor Tabata then discusses the impact of the sanctions from a short- and long-term perspective. Negative GDP growth, reduced oil and gas exports, inflation, depreciation of the ruble, and falling stock prices were expected as short-term impacts in 2022. Of these, inflation and currency depreciation have improved due to policy responses. On the other hand, the long-term impact will be on public finance. If the war drags on and export revenues from oil and gas decline, it will be difficult for the Russian National Wealth Fund to make up for the budget deficit. This also means that Russia will not be able to maintain an economic system based on oil and gas exports as it has in the past. Russia will be cut off from the global economy and will be connected to the world exclusively through China. In this case, import substitution is expected to progress, but the quality of products will inevitably deteriorate as technology transfers from abroad are drastically reduced.

Professor Tabata extends the discussion further to the global economic order. Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that Russia was outside the U.S.-centered global economic order and that India and other countries that did not participate in the sanctions were not sufficiently integrated into that order. With the U.S. not comprehensively acting as the guardian of the global economic order, the creation of a new order will be fraught with difficulties. Therefore, we need to build a system in which the U.S. and the rising nations, such as China, cooperate economically even as they engage in political confrontation. Professor Tabata warns that if such a system cannot be established, there will either be no order or an existing order that is no longer functional.

5. The Invasion of Ukraine and Russian Domestic Politics

Professor Mari Aburamoto (Faculty of Law, Hosei University) is a talented Russia

specialist who studies Russian domestic politics at both the central and local levels. She discusses whether and how domestic politics changed after the invasion of Ukraine. She has chosen three topics to assess possible changes: presidential approval ratings, tendencies among the political elite, and the approach to anti-regime dissidents. Professor Aburamoto tries to reveal the elusive realities of Russian politics by comparing the situation before and after the invasion.

We often find rumors, speculations, and wishful thinking in news and articles concerning Russian politics because it is not easy to access enough information. Therefore, Professor Aburamoto argues that we need to collect and analyze the scattered information regarding Russian politics carefully in order to understand it more accurately. Based on this idea, Professor Aburamoto chose the three topics mentioned above to explore Russian domestic politics.

President Putin's approval rating rose sharply after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, following which it fell in the summer of 2018 with an increase in the pension age. However, Putin did not lose power after 2018. The presidential approval rating rose once again following the invasion of Ukraine. For now, the majority of the public seems to support Russia's military action. Yet, Professor Aburamoto notes that the fervor that swept Russian society at the time of the annexation of Crimea is absent on this occasion.

Professor Aburamoto points out that the trends in the elite class and its subdivisions are inherently difficult to observe. Before the invasion, conservative ideologues were on the rise, but it cannot be concluded that liberals have declined in influence. Liberals and non-conservative technocrats appear to have maintained their autonomy. Since the invasion, there has been little deviation from the government line among the Russian elite, although some reports indicate that cracks are emerging. At this stage, however, there have been no significant changes.

Dissidents are groups, media, and ordinary people who, in the authorities' view, do not conform to the official discourse, but rather challenge it. The suppression of dissidents has intensified since Putin's third term. There have been anti-war demonstrations and protest campaigns since the invasion, but these have been met with repression. Some citizens have fled the country, but their numbers should not be overestimated. Control of the media has also been tightened. On the other hand, there are limits to this control. For example, the administration does not have complete control over access to the Internet.

As indicated above, the foundations of Putin's rule have not yet been shaken. However, the invasion has created uncertainty among the political elite. Excessive tightening of controls over the political opposition could make it rather difficult for the authorities to

monitor Russian society.

6. Russia's War against Ukraine

Yu Koizumi (Lecturer at the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology, The University of Tokyo) is a prominent Russia specialist who began his career studying the Russian military and expanded into national strategy and Russian society. Here he discusses the overall characteristics of the war against Ukraine, Russia's operational failures and changes in strategy, Western support for Ukraine, the future course of the war, and its implications for Japanese security policy.

In terms of the characteristics of the war, Professor Koizumi describes it as a classic type war influenced by considerations of nuclear deterrence. While the use of new technologies such as drones has attracted attention, the approach to warfare itself has not changed.

Professor Koizumi sees the invasion as motivated more by Putin's nationalist ambitions than by the issue of Ukraine's potential NATO membership. Operational failures have led to changes in Russia's strategic goal of replacing the Zelenskyy government and bringing the nation under Russian control. The Russian government had underestimated Ukraine's defensive capabilities. Moreover, while the Ukrainian armed forces are passionately committed to defending their country, the Russian side lacks such a passion for offensive operations.

Western aid is vital to Ukraine's war effort. The West has gradually increased its support as the war has progressed, albeit with the constraint of Russia's nuclear deterrence. Nevertheless, it is considered militarily and politically difficult for Ukraine to significantly escalate the war into the territories occupied prior to a full-scale invasion by Russia or into Russian territory. Professor Koizumi also points out that while Russia's nuclear weapons constrain the West from greater involvement, Russia is at the same time constrained by the unpredictability of developments in the event of the actual use of nuclear weapons.

This war will continue under conditions of nuclear deterrence, and the antagonism between Russia and the West will remain. When the war is over, the issues of Ukraine's abandonment of the goal of NATO membership and neutrality will once again come to the fore. However, neutrality alone will not adequately ensure Ukraine's security; credible military guarantees will be essential.

Concerning Japan's security, Professor Koizumi notes that all of Japan's potential adversaries possess nuclear weapons. In other words, if a war were to break out involving

Japan, it would likely begin as a classic type of war under conditions of nuclear deterrence, as in the case of the current war. Learning from the lessons of the Ukraine war, Japan should ensure U.S. extended deterrence, anticipate a scenario in which the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty ceases to function, and strategically disseminate information, as Ukraine is doing.

7. Conclusion

Although there is little overlap in the topics discussed in this volume, as each contributor focuses on his or her area of expertise, one of the most important of the common themes is the cause of the outbreak of the war. Professor Matsuzato, Professor Kato, and Professor Koizumi each touch on this subject. It is of considerable interest that they differ in their assessment of the significance of NATO enlargement for Russia.

Professor Matsuzato argues that NATO expansion would be unfavorable to Russia, and in particular that NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia was a step beyond the limits of Russian patience. Professor Kato believes that rather than NATO expansion, the cause of the war was Russia's rejection of a U.S.-centered unipolar world order and its determination to defend its sovereignty. In other words, she emphasizes Putin's rejection of the U.S.' ability to intervene globally and unilaterally. Professor Koizumi stresses that Ukraine's NATO membership was not expected to be achieved rapidly, and instead attributes the cause of the war to Putin's nationalist ambitions.

These differences reflect the individual perspectives and interests of the contributors. Nevertheless, they do not appear to be ultimately contradictory. Professor Matsuzato emphasizes the strength of Russia's attachment to Ukraine rather than the possibility of Ukraine joining NATO; indeed, he argues in another paper that Ukraine's NATO membership is unrealistic (Matsuzato, 2022). Professor Matsuzato's "Russia's attachment to Ukraine" and Professor Koizumi's "Putin's nationalist ambitions" most likely refer to the same idea. In addition, it can be said that the unipolar world system discussed by Professor Kato constitutes the background to the NATO expansion.

Given that Ukraine was unlikely to join NATO immediately, why did Russia decide to use military force and invade Ukraine at this particular time? NATO's cooperation with Ukraine may provide a clue. Ukraine received military assistance from the U.S. without joining NATO; while the Obama Administration refused to provide lethal weapons, the Trump Administration made it possible for Ukraine to acquire them. In other words, with U.S. or NATO assistance, Ukraine's military capabilities could be expected to become more robust over time, and the creation of a U.S.-backed and militarily strong Ukraine, even without NATO membership, would itself seem to be worth preventing for Russia.

There is another common theme in the contributions to this volume, which is Russia's national identity. Having lost the Soviet Union, a territory it had held for centuries, Russia needed to reassert its national identity. There was a possibility that Russia could see itself as a European nation. However, NATO's eastward expansion complicated Russia's integration into European security arrangements and discouraged Russia from identifying itself as part of Europe or the West. Moreover, because Russians believed there was a promise that NATO would not expand, the actual eastward enlargement became a symbol of betrayal by the West and consequently a source of hostility toward the West. Russia's diplomatic eastward shift discussed by Professor Kato took place during a period of confrontation with Western nations. This shift may include an attempt to establish a non-Western identity.

Contrary to the security issues, Russia has deep economic ties with Europe, especially as an oil and gas exporter, and was considered to have established comparatively good relations with the European nations. This is precisely why the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which was sure to antagonize the West, was received with surprise. However, as Professor Tabata points out, the invasion demonstrated that Russia was outside the existing economic world order. For Russia, which had not acquired an identity as part of the West and had not been integrated into European security arrangements, economic interdependence with the West was something that could be replaced.

Since the outbreak of the war, Putin has orchestrated a break with Western values, for example, by expressing hostility toward the West's tolerance of the LGBT community. The reaction of the Russian political elite to this aggressive stance may influence future political developments. According to Professor Aburamoto, there is a great diversity among the elite surrounding Putin, from those who would prefer to cooperate with the West to those who would like to sever such ties. The wide range of attitudes among Russia's elite suggests the absence of a core Russian identity that helps determine national interests. Professor Aburamoto also points out that discord may have emerged among the elite after the war began, despite the fact that they initially presented a united front. We need to pay close attention to which group gains power.

It is also important to note, as Professor Matsuzato and Professor Koizumi have pointed out, that Russia's goals in this war have changed several times. Russia's failure to maintain its goals was primarily due to the inability of the Russian military to realize its goals, but it is also possible that these goals were unclear from the beginning. This inability to define clear goals can be attributed to an uncertain identity. The Russian leadership could only express resentment and hostility toward the West but could not provide a distinct identity on which to base strategies. Without defined goals, it would be difficult for Russia to even decide when to end the war. Uncertainty about Russia's

identity may be one of the reasons why Russia's actions often seem to lack a rational purpose.

Ukraine, on the other hand, has a clear and stable goal of regaining its territory, namely Crimea and the Donbas. Western nations supporting Ukraine also have a clear goal of preserving the international order, including maintaining territorial integrity, in contrast to Russia's shifting goals. Although it is difficult to assess how this contrast will affect the course of the war, the lack of clarity regarding Russia's goals contributes to Ukrainian suspicions that even if a ceasefire is reached, Russia would not strictly observe it and would soon attack again. Of course, as Ukraine continues to try to regain all of its territory, there is no reason to stop fighting now. Neither a ceasefire nor an end to the war is in sight.

Reference

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