

Russia – Ukraine war: The armed conflict that destabilises the world

Note from a HERE-convened Roundtable - Geneva, 24 March 2022

The escalation of the war in Ukraine due to the large-scale Russian offensive on 24 February 2022 challenges the current global geopolitical landscape and contributes to ever-increasing humanitarian needs. World political leaders grapple with the ramifications of this new international armed conflict in Europe given the global destabilising impact of this armed conflict, while humanitarian actors are addressing the immediate consequences of the war. Although the rules of war relevant to international armed conflict are applicable, the ability to deliver humanitarian aid and protection is severely hampered, testing the effectiveness of the rule-based world order and the functioning of multilateralism to the limit. With this in mind, HERE convened a diverse group of experts to discuss how Russia's invasion of Ukraine affects multilateralism and the UN; the implications of cyberwarfare for humanitarian actors; and the expected impact of the war in Ukraine on the financial resources for humanitarian crises globally.

This Note provides a summary of these discussions.

Is multilateralism on its deathbed?

Given the inability of multilateral crisis management – including the collective security mechanism of the UN Charter – to prevent Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the opening question of the roundtable was whether a new world order is in view. Participants acknowledged that the Russian intervention has once again challenged the role of multilateral bodies in a post-Cold War world, while signaling that this role should not be overestimated: they have generally been unable to prevent armed conflict. This was for example seen in the case of South Ossetia/Georgia in 2008. The UN and the OSCE do not appear fit to be front-line conflict prevention actors, though they are likely to continue to play a role in terms of technical assistance and support. The widespread condemnation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine – including from traditionally neutral countries – and the emphasis put on ethical questions in international debates indicate that there are preconditions for a new version of multilateralism to emerge.

What could such a 'new order' look like? Some participants highlighted that the wide support received by the UN General Assembly resolution demanding an end to the Russian offensive in Ukraine was based not only on moral considerations and a rejection of violence, but also on a reassertion of state sovereignty and territorial integrity. There is also an expectation that a new non-aligned camp could create their own coalition. It is still unclear what role China can play, given that its political choices

are also very much linked to economic interests. The discussions concluded on the recognition that for Russia to engage meaningfully in peace talks, it needs to first achieve a substantial military objective, which it has not done yet. Maybe then UN and other multilateral organisations can play a role.

Impact of cyberwarfare

The war in Ukraine has raised questions around the increased use of cyberwarfare. 'Cyber' touches every aspect of our lives; we are continuously connected. This is also leading a transformation of how war is conducted. In this sense, Ukraine is not unique, it is the next evolutionary step.

There are several implications. Misinformation becomes a new weapon in itself; there is a greater interpenetration of different weapon systems. Conflicts are fought not only in the traditional terrains of land, sea, and air but also in cyberspace (and space itself as cyber activities rely on satellites). From attacks on civilian infrastructures, cyberwarfare also enables attacks against support systems such as the financial/banking system, utilities and/or other essential services, while the misuse of data collected by humanitarians can directly impact trust in humanitarian actors and ultimately affect humanitarian access.

What rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) apply to cyberwarfare? It is very clear that war crimes can be committed through cyberwarfare. Whether and how to denounce such crimes is more unclear however, as cyberwarfare is less visible, and attribution tends to be more difficult. What is being witnessed in Ukraine, for example, is the very strong role of non-state actors who fight in the cyber arena (hackers, Anonymous...). At the same time, it is the first time that States have shown such an interest in supporting the International Criminal Court (ICC). This indicates that the existing normative framework is not only not being challenged, but may also be getting a new impetus for monitoring and enforcement, thanks to videos and images becoming available (which also allow for manipulation). In order to fully capitalise on it, however, there will need to be a recognition that Ukraine is only one of a number of other conflicts that requires the attention of the ICC.

Participants then reflected on what this all means for humanitarian actors. It is clear that humanitarian actors can become targets of cyberattacks. The moral and ethical responsibility that humanitarian actors have in terms of data protection is enormous. Humanitarian actors should protect data at least as well as any service providers such as banks. What the war in Ukraine is showing is that there is no restraint in mis/disinformation. One of the immediate risks for humanitarian actors is that of being manipulated or used for the manipulation of others.

Global funding prospects

As a final point, participants turned their attention to the implications of the war in Ukraine on the global funding prospects for humanitarian responses around the world. The funding for the humanitarian response in Ukraine and neighbouring countries needs to be looked at in the broader context of the state of humanitarian financing. In the past few years, the gap between increasing needs and available funding has only grown. The 2016 recommendation from the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing “to shrink needs”, as a way to bridge the gap, has been entirely unsuccessful. In the last few years funding has remained at about 60% of needs, mainly provided by the same few donors.

With the response in Ukraine, however, it is not business as usual. There is an involvement from the general public and private companies at rarely seen levels. It remains to be seen whether these efforts will be sustained over time. Private sector involvement is generally a promise that remains a promise, while ‘emerging donors’ show an interest in some crises but not in others. These opportunities have not really taken off and are not yet replacing public funding to any meaningful extent.

Regarding the support to refugees, there is also greater capacity and margins for more efficient responses in EU countries, which means that the impact on global humanitarian financing may be less significant. The money to support refugee-hosting countries within the EU, for example, is not found in the humanitarian (or development) budgets, in spite of some countries (or at least one) taking such steps. In the short term, therefore, the impact on other crises may not be that great. Traditional donors had already programmed their funding allocations for this year, and it may be difficult to reallocate – at least for those with heavy bureaucratic processes. The longer term is hard to predict. What is clear is that it is easier for donors to be impartial within rather than between crises.

Conclusions

The roundtable discussion was an opportunity to broach the likely implications of the war in Ukraine on humanitarian action more broadly. While much can change as the conflict evolves, it is important to anticipate difficult questions/dilemmas humanitarian actors may be confronted with. For HERE, the starting point was to reflect on whether multilateralism can still be an effective model to structure an international response (including the question of the UN’s leadership in such a scenario), whether IHL is an effective normative framework for new types of warfare such as cyberattacks, and what to expect in terms of resourcing for other ongoing humanitarian crises around the world.

The discussions also allowed HERE to reflect on whether we should reprioritise our research agenda. While our focus on humanitarian principles, accountability and

humanitarian coordination remains important, it may be time to link it more closely to IHL. As the funding for the Ukraine response is amassing, it appears all the more important to draw the attention of humanitarian actors to what it means to provide aid in occupied territories, and what the rules of occupation mean with regard to impartiality, neutrality, and independence.