[**Unwinnable war**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1758911/unwinnable-war)

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RUSSIA’S ‘special military operation’ against Ukraine, launched on Feb 24, 2022, is morphing into a long, drawn-out war. Initially, Russia made substantial territorial gains, but the Ukrainians fought back and liberated several regions of their country. Nearly a year and a half later, the war is deadlocked. There are no prospects of either side securing a decisive military victory. How will this war end? The answer might lie in the genesis of the war and why it began in the first place.

Russia and Ukraine have a shared history of political, economic, cultural and familial ties. The Russians consider Ukraine as central to their identity. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine became an area of overlapping influence between Russia and the European Union. With the EU admitting several countries from Eastern Europe into its ranks, and Nato expanding eastward, Ukraine became keen to join both organisations.

Initially, Russia’s leadership did not show much concern about Nato’s eastward expansion, even though many in Russia and the West were familiar with the quote “not one inch eastward”, attributed to US secretary of state James Baker as an assurance to Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990. However, when Nato’s eastward expansion continued in the direction of Russia’s borders, Moscow’s anxieties swelled, and it sounded a warning that if Nato were to admit Ukraine into its ranks, it would be a red line for Russia.

Could the war between Russia and Ukraine have been averted?

Political developments in Ukraine further heightened Russia’s security concerns. Pro-Russia president Viktor Yanukovych, who had suspended association talks with the EU and revived economic ties with Moscow, was ousted in 2014 through street protests. Within days, Crimea was seized by Russia. Since the Ukrainian leadership continued to express its intent to join Nato and the EU, Russia began to amass troops along the border with Ukraine. In December 2021, Russia demanded a “legally binding guarantee” that Nato would not admit Ukraine as a member and scale down military activity in eastern Europe. The US reiterated that the decision was the prerogative of Nato and Ukraine. As the Russian troop build-up continued, President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine whipped up national sentiments to prepare his country for war. The stage was thus set for a fratricidal war in Europe.

After the Russian invasion, the West intensified its economic sanctions against Russia while extending material support to Ukraine’s war effort. Russia began to lean towards China. Meanwhile, the human and financial costs of the war have been rising for all. Ukraine has been devastated and millions of Ukrainians have been displaced. The conflict is also taking a heavy toll on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s forces. With neither side ready to cease hostilities, there is no end in sight.

Could the war have been averted? An opportunity for peace was lost when Ukraine and the West failed to address Russia’s security concern about Ukraine joining Nato. As mistrust deepened, several rounds of peace attempts between Ukraine and Russia during 2022 failed.

There could be two possible explanations for Russia’s military venture. One perspective is that Russia was provoked into invading Ukraine because the West refused to address its security concerns. The other is that this was Putin’s design to resurrect Russia’s glory and re-establish its area of influence. Regardless, the question now is: what endgame do the parties have in mind? Russia cannot annex Ukraine and would welcome an end to the war because its own human and financial costs are rising steeply. Ukraine cannot defeat Russia and needs peace to reconstruct the devastated country and bring home the millions who had to flee. The US cannot provide an endless supply of military hardware, intelligence and training in a war that is not directly under its control. The international community is also concerned about the severe implications the war has for the world economy, particularly energy and grain supplies.

The only reasonable solution is to negotiate an end to the war. Russia’s security concerns should be addressed. Ukraine must accept the ground reality and reconcile its desire to join the EU and Nato with the pro-Russia leanings of a segment of its population. The West should stop stoking a proxy war, and, instead, play the role of mediator to stop hostilities and resolve issues peacefully.

For Pakistan, Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine on the very day our then prime minister was in Moscow as his guest was unfortunate. The energy and grain crises triggered by the war have affected Pakistan as well. Importantly, Pakistan should also be deeply concerned that the war lends itself as a precedent of a larger country attacking a smaller neighbour and occupying a part of its territory.

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*Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2023*