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Ukraine war brings a new era of geopolitical uncertainty

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While the end state of the Russia-Ukraine war is unpredictable, it is bound to hugely shape the contours of the 21st century due to the tectonic shift it has caused in the balance of power equations



US President Donald Trump and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin. Representational Image - FP

It was on February 24, 2022, that President Vladimir Putin launched ‘special military operations’ to ‘demilitarise and denazify’ Ukraine, shattering the myth of European inviolable borders. The full-scale Russian invasion was a blitzkrieg, as within days its troops gained control of a large swath of Ukrainian territory, advancing up to the suburbs of Kyiv and capturing important cities

of Kherson and Mariupol. Ukraine's crushing defeat at the hands of the Russian army appeared imminent.

One of the defining characteristics of war is unpredictability. The Russian offensive met with unexpectedly stiff resistance from the Ukrainian forces, with the US and Europe providing unstinted support. Having failed to take Kyiv, coupled with logistics constraints, after six months, the Russians withdrew eastwards. Immediately, in September, the Ukrainians went on the counteroffensive, making significant gains in the Kharkiv region and recapturing Kherson. Through 2023, the two sides were largely engaged in attrition warfare.

The third year of war witnessed the expansion of conflict both geographically and politically. In August 2024, Ukraine pulled off a high-stakes invasion into Russia's Kursk Oblast region, making significant gains. The US and Europe accelerated military assistance to Ukraine, including authorisation of long-range American weapons. North Korea sent 10,000 troops in support of its ally Russia.

Lacking the ability to execute large-scale combined arms manoeuvres, the two sides are currently engaged in tactical operations along the frontline, with Russians making steady gains while Ukrainians are facing acute shortages. As of now, Russia controls roughly 20 per cent of Ukrainian territory, besides laying claims to a chunk of land in four regions, namely Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson, with around 3.5 million Ukrainians living in the Russian-occupied areas. Ukraine occupies approximately 500 square km in Kursk.

Both sides have taken heavy casualties. In the absence of exact figures, it is estimated that Russia has suffered between 150,000 and 200,000 casualties (killed/wounded), while its Defence Ministry confirmed 5,937 killed so far. The Ukrainian casualties, going by the official announcement, stand at 45,100 killed and 390,000 wounded, besides over 8 million of its citizens displaced. Around 1100 North Korean soldiers have also been killed during fighting in Kursk. The losses in terms of weapons and equipment have also been very high for the two sides.

With President Trump returning to the office, the global geopolitical arena is witnessing intense churning. His 90-minute conversation with President Putin on February 12 sent a clear message to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that Ukraine will have to fend for itself. Trump went

on to blame Ukraine for starting the war. In the recent talks between the US Secretary of State and Russian Foreign Minister at Riyadh to end the war, Kyiv was not part of the process.

February 24, 2025 was a dramatic day at the UN when, during the General Assembly Resolution on the Ukraine conflict, the US voted against its allies and sided with Russia. It marked a seismic shift in the balance of power dynamics. Trump's negotiating strategy involves offering concessions to Putin before engaging in serious negotiations. In his public statements, Trump declared that Ukraine will not join NATO and the restoration of pre-2022 borders is not feasible, implying that Russia will be able to keep the territory it seized during the recent aggression.

Trump is not just reshaping American policy towards Ukraine and Russia but upturning the global economic order as he is expected to strike deals with the so-called rivals—Moscow and Beijing—in the coming future. In case the US pulls out of Europe, leaving the defence of the continent to the Europeans, it will be able to focus on the Western Pacific to keep China in check. India has maintained a neutral stance by critiquing sanctions and advocating dialogue to resolve the conflict. In the ongoing reconfiguration of the international order, Delhi will have to navigate carefully and play its cards astutely to maintain stable relations with Washington, Moscow, the EU, the Gulf, and ASEAN.

The much-awaited meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy at the White House on February 28 was expected to be a game changer as they were all set to sign the critical minerals deal and lay the groundwork to end the war. On the contrary, it turned out to be a blow-up with Trump publicly humiliating Zelenskyy in front of the global media. Trump's parting words to Zelenskyy were, "Come back when you are ready for peace". The showdown at the Oval Office has certainly contracted the space for manoeuvring amongst key players at the top table.

With the emerging global alignments, the eighty-year-old Euro-Atlantic alliance has come under unprecedented stress in view of the complete reversal of US foreign policy under Trump. In fact, the very existence of the trans-Atlantic partnership is under scrutiny. The European leaders met in London for a hastily convened summit on March 2 to bolster support for Ukraine and also build bridges between Kyiv and Washington. They have put forward their own peace plans for Ukraine that would keep the EU in the midst of future peace talks.

The fourth year of the Russian-Ukraine war is set to be a pivotal one, given the defining global reset that is underway, shaking the very foundation of European security. Immediately on assuming the office, Trump, in a bid to end the Ukraine conflict, has adopted unorthodox ways, without paying heed to the existing alliances. He has even gone on to pause military aid to Ukraine, which to date amounts to around \$69 billion. The war now is expected to drag on as Putin will take full advantage of the current situation to make maximum gains to claim decisive victory. Although European nations have rallied behind Ukraine, without Washington's military assistance, Kyiv will not be able to hold out.

In the current circumstances, an early ceasefire agreement to end fighting in Ukraine is highly unlikely. While the end state of the Russia-Ukraine war is unpredictable, it is bound to hugely shape the contours of the 21st century due to the tectonic shift it has caused in the balance of power equations and the traumatic impact on the socio-economic fabric of the society.

The writer is a war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost's views.