



# Australian Army Research Centre

## Spotlight Brief

No. 1, 2022

The Strategic Circumstances of  
the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War



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Research Centre**

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# The Strategic Circumstances of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War

## Abstract

*This Spotlight Brief provides an introduction and context to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. It discusses Ukraine's particular strategic circumstances and provides an overview of the chain of events which led to it. These include factors such as: geography, history, demography, economy and diplomacy. The Brief aims to provide a wide audience with a basis of knowledge to understand the relationship between Russia and Ukraine and why the conflict occurred.*

## Introduction

As the origin of its name implies, 'borderland',<sup>1</sup> Ukraine has long served as a buffer state between Eastern and Western Europe. Its history reflects the continued and often violent contest for its allegiance, if not ownership. Ukraine's importance has been recently underscored by its invasion on 24 February 2022 by the Russian Armed Forces. This was a significant escalation of the conflict which commenced with Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its explicit support to separatists in the Donbas region in 2014. Russia's most recent action against Ukraine has drawn global condemnation of Russia as well as support for Ukraine. However, the punitive actions of the European Union (EU), and others, and support provided by nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) risks wider escalation given Russia's history with, and strategic interest in Ukraine.

This article is the first of several Spotlight Briefs which will examine the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War. As the first, this Brief examines Ukraine's strategic circumstances in order to provide context to the current conflict. For the purposes of this analysis, strategic circumstances are those macro-strategic factors or variables which the national power of a state is founded upon, or is bound by. This analysis is conducted through the lenses

of geography, history, demography, economy and diplomacy. The initial examination of Ukraine's geographic location highlights its importance to both Europe and Asia. This is followed by a broad historical overview from the establishment of the *Kievan Rus* in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century to Ukraine's independence from the Soviet Union in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This overview provides the basis for subsequent discussion of Ukrainian demography, economy and diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Given this context, subsequent Spotlight Briefs will examine the application of military power in the conflict and the lessons that it may offer.

## Geography

Modern Ukraine comprises 603,700 square kilometres. Although it is dwarfed by Russia, Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe in geographic area.<sup>2</sup> It is bordered by Belarus in the north, Russia in the northeast and east, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary in the west, Moldova to the south and Romania in its south-west. Ukraine's 2,782-kilometre coastline runs along the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea. A number of major river systems empty into these seas, including the *Danube*, *Dniester*, *Southern Bug*, *Dnieper* and *Donets*. Of these, the Dnieper is the most significant as it is both a navigable inland waterway and it effectively divides the country into eastern and western halves; with the capital Kyiv straddling it in the north. Much of Ukraine lies within in the littoral with a number of major conurbations situated in the Crimea and coastal regions (see Figure 1). Ukraine's temperate climate generally results in warm dry summers with wet cold, and often severe, winters.



**Figure 1. Map of Ukraine and disputed regions prior to 2022.<sup>3</sup>**

More broadly, Ukraine is located on the southern edge of the vast East European Plain. The plain is bounded by the Ural Mountains to the East, Baltic Sea and Carpathian Mountains in the West, the Caucasus Mountains, Caspian and Black Seas in the South and the Scandinavian Mountains, Barents and White Seas in the North (shown in Figure 2). Notably, the Eastern European Plain flows into the much narrower North European Plain, which provides access to Central, Western and Southern Europe. The European Plain is important as the uninterrupted Eurasian Steppe provides the easiest and quickest land access from Europe to Asia. Conversely, these flat plain-lands afford little geographic protection to those who inhabit them. Consequently, strategic depth is an important factor for countries in the steppe. Depth offers the opportunity to gain security and time by trading land to absorb, and sap the strength, of any invasion by land.



**Figure 2. Ukraine and its geo-strategic location in Europe.<sup>4</sup>**

Ukraine's location astride the land bridge between Europe and Asia renders it of geo-strategic importance. Ukraine has served as the 'Gates of Europe' for thousands of years, witnessing the interchange of people, goods and the passage of conquering armies.<sup>5</sup> Its fertile and resource rich lands have served to feed the people and industry of Europe. Its rivers have enabled trade from northern Europe and its access to the Black Sea, which in turn provides access to the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean, itself vital to enact trade on a global scale.

## History

Ukraine, Russia and Belarus share history. While sources differ on certain details, it is generally accepted that their origins lie in the establishment of the *Kievan Rus* in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century. The Kievan Rus was a federation of peoples which included Eastern Slavs, Scandinavians, Baltic and Finnic people. It is generally accepted that a Varangian (Viking) chieftain, *Rurik* of the *Rus'* people, founded the dynasty which united the Eastern Slav tribes into the Kievan Rus.<sup>6</sup> At its height, the Kievan Rus, also called *Ruthenia* and its people *Ruthenians*, extended from the Black Sea to the White Sea, encompassing much of today's Ukraine, Belarus and Western Russia (see Figure 2). However, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century the Kievan Rus was conquered by the Mongolian Golden Horde, which swept-in from the east via the Eurasian Steppe. Over an extended period, this led to the fracturing of the Kievan Rus. Much of the western region of the Rus was eventually absorbed into the *Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth*, while the northeastern areas fell under the *Principality of Muscovy* with its capital in Moscow. The weakening of the Golden Horde in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century also led to the rise of the *Crimean Khanate* in the south, astride the Black Sea, which soon became a protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. The militaristic *Cossack Hetmanate* developed in central Ukraine in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, aligning itself with the Russians against the Ottomans and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.<sup>7</sup>

From this point in history, Ukraine's eastern neighbour becomes extremely significant. The Principality of Muscovy evolved into the *Tsardom of Russia* in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, which dominated northeastern Europe and rapidly expanded eastwards into Asia. As the Tsardom gave way to *Imperial Russia* in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, its European interests in the west led to conflict with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Cossacks and the Ottomans. Consequently, Russia gained control of Kiev as well as the Polish and Cossack lands east of the Dnieper, 'the Right Bank', while Poland retained control of the 'Left Bank'. However, over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Russia, in conjunction with the Austro-Hungarian Hapsburg Empire, annexed the remaining Polish lands on the Left Bank with the latter gaining territory in the south-west. Russia consolidated its rule by dissolving the Cossack Hetmanate and annexing the Crimean Peninsula, ending the rule of the Crimean Khanate there. The 19<sup>th</sup> Century witnessed the 'Russification' of Ukraine with the mass migration of ethnic Russians into the region, suppression of Ukrainian identity, language and religious freedoms.<sup>8</sup>

Modern Ukraine's establishment is linked to the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian Empires at the end of the First World War. In January 1918, Ukrainian nationalist leaders proclaimed an independent *Ukrainian National Republic*. The new republic included former provinces of the Russian Empire as well as parts of the Austro-Hungarian. However, the ensuing conflict between various Ukrainian factions, as well as foreign powers, ultimately resulted in the division of its lands between the newly Soviet Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania. In 1922, the *Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic* was formed as part of the *Union of Soviet Socialist Republics* (USSR), a federation of Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and Transcaucasia (present day Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia).<sup>9</sup> Ukraine was transformed during the Soviet period, experiencing extensive industrialisation, urbanisation and social change. While the policy of *Ukrainization* sought to provide local government representation, promotion of identity and language within the socialist ideology, these gains were negated by the effects of the Soviet command-economy and renewed Russification in the 1930s. Under the process of collectivisation, land and labour were requisitioned and controlled centrally by the USSR. As a result, Ukraine suffered greatly. Most significantly, a widespread famine in the early 1930s, the *Holodomor*, resulting in an estimated 3.9 million Ukrainians dying from starvation.<sup>10</sup>

The Second World War led to the exchange of Ukraine between great powers once again. The outbreak of the war led to the division of Poland between Germany and the USSR. Ukraine subsequently expanded through the incorporation of former Polish territories. While this united even more Ukrainian lands together, the Soviet occupation of them resulted in repression of Ukrainian/Polish identities and mass deportations. However, when Germany invaded the USSR in late 1941, Ukraine once again passed hands. German occupation, while initially welcomed in some parts, proved equally repressive. This situation continued until 1944 when the Soviet Army recaptured Ukraine and reimposed communist rule.

The Ukraine that emerged from the war was greatly changed and it continued to evolve in the decades following it. The impact of the war was significant. About 5.3 million, or one in six inhabitants of Ukraine, perished in the conflict and around 10 million people became homeless. Likewise, the 'scorched-earth' policies enacted by the Soviets and Germany resulted in Ukraine suffering more damage than any other European country during the war.<sup>11</sup> As a result, Ukraine underwent a significant and protracted

reconstruction effort. The fall of the 'Iron Curtain' and the division of the world into Eastern and Western blocs, ensured Ukraine remained aligned to the USSR. In certain aspects, it benefited from this relationship as it inherited former Polish lands and was gifted the Crimea. Equally, the 1955 *Warsaw Pact* ensured that Ukraine remained under, and part of, the USSR's collective security umbrella. Ukraine's population changed greatly in this period, largely driven by the forced deportation of ethnic minorities, migration of ethnic Ukrainians and immigration of ethnic Russians. The growth of ethnic Russians within Ukraine was important to foster loyalty to the USSR and to ensure control of the only country within the union large enough to challenge Russian hegemony. Consequently, Ukrainian culture was severely challenged by Russification during the Cold War period.<sup>12</sup> However, Ukrainian identity and the desire for independence was not extinguished and indeed ultimately proved stronger.

On 1 December 1991, in the midst of a failing and unstable USSR, an overwhelming majority of Ukrainians voted for independence. Consequently, the signing of the *Belovezh Accords* by Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, a week later, ended the USSR.<sup>13</sup> In its place, the *Commonwealth of Independent States* (CIS) was raised which included Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.<sup>14</sup> While Ukraine ratified these accords, it did not become a formal member of the CIS. Following the dissolution of the USSR, Ukraine entered a period of post-Communist transition, typified by the replacement of Soviet era political, economic, military, industrial and social apparatus. Arguably, it has yet to complete this transition.

From this broad historical overview, two important points emerge. Firstly, Ukraine and Russia share a common history. Due to this, certain elements in both countries consider them to be one people, viewing Ukraine as Russian and Ukrainians as 'Little Russians'.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, others point to the very different historical paths of each country as evidence of the differences between the two. Secondly, Ukraine has endured the yoke of many masters. The regions west of the Dnieper have witnessed the shifting control of European powers such as Poland, Lithuania, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Romania and Czechoslovakia. By contrast, control east of the Dnieper and of Crimea in the south has been dominated by Russia. Therefore, history has left indelible and lasting impressions upon modern Ukraine which are products of both Western and Eastern influences.

## Demography

Prior to the invasion in 2022, Ukraine's population was estimated at over 43 million.<sup>16</sup> While less than a third of Russia's 145 million, it is almost five times that of Belarus' 9 million. Ukraine has an increasingly urbanised population, with around 70% of its people living in urban areas prior to the current conflict. These areas are largely concentrated in coastal cities as well as in national and provincial capitals. They are administered under 24 *oblasts* (provinces), 126 *raions* (districts) and 1400 *hromadas* (municipalities), covering major urban centres and rural areas. Major urban centres of a million or more occupants include *Kyiv*, *Kharkiv* and *Odessa*. *Dnipropetrovs'k*, *Donetsk*, *Zaporizhzhia*, *Lviv* and *Kryvyi Rih* have populations larger than 500,000 people. The rural areas are largely underdeveloped and many lack basic infrastructure, transportation and utilities. Estimates indicate more than 6 million refugees have left Ukraine with another 7 million internally displaced due to the fighting.<sup>17</sup> Population movement is likely to affect the ethnic composition of Ukraine.

At the last census, the population of Ukraine comprised around 78% ethnic Ukrainians, 17 % ethnic Russians and about 5% made up of others including Poles, Hungarians, Bulgarians, Moldovans, Romanians and Crimean Tartars.<sup>18</sup> Ethnic Ukrainians dominate the western and central oblasts, with significant concentrations of ethnic Russians in the southern and eastern oblasts and Crimea. Linguistically, this variation is reflected in the languages spoken. The state language Ukrainian is spoken by about 67% of people as their primary language. Russian is also widely spoken by around 30% as their primary language, particularly in the south and east.

A majority of the country are adherents to the Christian religion, with two major denominations represented. Approximately 70% are Eastern Orthodox, the largest number outside Russia, and around 10% Ukrainian Greek Catholic. Christianity is particularly strong in the west of Ukraine. Islam is significant in the Crimea and Donbass.<sup>19</sup> Atheism is strongest in the east, possibly due to the large ethnic Russian population that may have been subject to the official policy of atheism promoted in schools during the Soviet era. There remains tension between Catholic and Orthodox Churches, with the latter's Russian orientation evident in the language used in sermons, publications and promotion of Russian icons. While the Catholic Church has witnessed a resurgence since independence, the Orthodox Church remains the largest and most influential of all the religious bodies in Ukraine.<sup>20</sup>

From this analysis it is evident that Ukraine's demography contains important and significant divisions. While it risks oversimplification to categorise these as simply 'east' and 'west' divisions, there are generalisations which do apply. Eastern Ukraine, which has been influenced largely by Russian rule since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, has a large ethnic Russian populace — although they do not form an outright majority. These people speak Russian as their primary language and largely practice Orthodox Christianity. Western Ukraine, which has been ruled by Poland, Lithuania, Austria-Hungary and others, has a larger population of ethnic Ukrainians who speak Ukrainian as their primary language. This area has a significant number of Catholics. Traditionally these divisions have manifested in those in the East favouring closer ties with Russia and the preservation of Russian language, culture and allegiance. Conversely, Western and Central Ukrainians sought closer alignment with Europe, promoted the Ukrainian language and favoured independence. Crimea is arguably unique as it possesses a majority of ethnic Russians, who primarily speak Russian and consider the Crimea to be Russian. These divisions also manifest in voting behaviour. Those in western Ukraine generally vote for parties and candidates that support economic reform, pro-Ukrainian statehood and are pro-Western. A significant portion of eastern Ukraine favours those parties that endorse maintaining older Soviet style economic measures, the recognition of common language, history and culture with Russia and sustaining closer ties with the Eastern bloc.<sup>21</sup> In light of the 2022 invasion, which has been widely opposed across Ukraine, the strength of these divisions may have increased in some areas and weakened in others. Nevertheless, there remain significant demographic rifts between ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians.

## **Economy**

In economic terms, Ukraine remains a developing country and ranks amongst the poorest in Europe. However, given its abundant natural resources, fertile lands and latent work force it has the potential to be among its richest. In the period after independence, Ukraine experienced major economic decline. This stabilised and then improved in the early 2000s. However, it has made uneven economic progress since 2009. This is in part due to the coercive economic policies and practices to which Russia has subjected Ukraine. In response, Ukraine has gradually redirected trade activity towards the EU, displacing Russia as its largest trading partner. This trend culminated in the recent application for full EU membership in February this year.<sup>22</sup>

Ukrainian independence created significant economic challenges in the 1990s. Like other post-Communist countries, it faced the difficult task of adapting its economy from the centralised command-system of the USSR to global free-market capitalism. This required it to integrate its economy into global economic rules and patterns largely designed and directed by the policies of the EU and the United States.<sup>23</sup> However, during the 1990s Ukraine suffered hyperinflation, declining growth, job loss, and minimal foreign investment; teetering on economic collapse. Conversely, the 2000s saw Ukraine's economy grow at a rapid rate, its inflation decrease and its gross domestic product rise at rates greater than many EU nations. Much of this growth was driven by the privatisation of Ukraine's large industrial sector. This led to the rise of capitalist 'oligarchs' grown wealthy through the control of Ukraine's resource, energy, manufacturing and financial sectors. However, the reciprocation of support by favourable governments to these oligarchs has resulted in widespread corruption. Ukraine experienced further major economic fluctuations in 2009, 2014, 2018 and again in 2022. These have resulted in external monetary assistance packages and a suite of reforms to improve transparency, reduce corruption and broaden the country's economy.

Ukraine's economy remains founded on agriculture, resource, manufacturing and energy sectors. The country remains one of the largest agricultural producers and exporters in the world, often referred to as the 'breadbasket of Europe'. Among other commodities, it is a world leader in the cultivation of maize, wheat, potatoes and sunflower seed oil. Ukraine is rich in resources such as iron ore, manganese, mercury, titanium, lithium and nickel, as well as rare earths and gases needed for the production of semiconductors, computers and electronics. Ukraine also maintains powerful defence and manufacturing industries, producing a vast array of land, sea and air capabilities and associated heavy industry tooling and technology. Much of the Soviet-era industrial base is located in eastern and southern Ukraine.

Domestic energy production includes coal, electric and nuclear power. Ukraine has the second-largest known gas reserves in Europe, although these are largely unexploited. It has been almost wholly dependent on Russian gas which has affected Ukraine's economic and foreign policy settings. Notably, Ukraine contains a major natural gas transmission network. This network links gas systems in Russia and

Belarus with those of Poland, Romania, Moldova, Hungary and Slovakia. Russian state-owned *Gazprom* produces 25-40% of Europe's total gas consumption, yet Ukraine controls the pipelines through which 80 percent of its energy exports reach central and Western Europe. Consequently, Ukraine has exacted significant transit fees upon the network, reportedly earning up to \$3 billion annually in fees. Conversely, Russia has routinely increased the price of gas sold to Ukraine, which significantly contributes to its national deficit. In combination, these factors have triggered a number of disputes between the two countries over the past three decades.<sup>24</sup> Importantly, these disputes have become trans-national issues as they have affected the supply in numerous European countries dependent on Russian gas, with the current conflict resulting in an energy supply crisis and crippling price increases.

The competition for Ukraine's resources is a critical factor for both European and Russian markets. The exploitation of Ukraine's large, and largely untapped, gas reserves could prove a boon to its economy and remove its dependence on Russian supply while also displacing Europe's reliance on Russian supply too. Conversely, it is in Russia's interests to control Ukraine's natural gas reserves, the transit pipelines and to ensure Ukraine's continued dependence. That is because Russia can markedly affect Ukraine's economy through these means. Likewise, control of supply across agricultural, resource and manufacturing industries, not only enables market control, but also assures food, energy and supply security. Therefore, Ukraine's natural resources are of significant importance to both Europe and Russia.

## **Diplomacy**

Since its independence in 1991, Ukraine has struggled to establish a strong, stable and democratic state. Efforts to do so have two dimensions; internal nation building and external state building. Internally, Ukraine has had difficulty in transitioning from the legacy of its Soviet era socialist government to a democratic one. Upon independence, Ukraine lacked the apparatus to function as a nation due to its seven decades as a satellite territory of the USSR. Consequently, it was forced to build the tools to govern itself after its split from Russia. This included practical measures such as creating a constitution, tailoring laws, instituting a bureaucracy, and establishing national institutions to cater to its diverse and politically divided population.

This process has been uneven, riven by political corruption and scandal and intertwined in the broader issues of Ukrainization. Ukrainization efforts have aimed to enshrine Ukraine's separation from Russia by prioritising the Ukrainian language, literature, history, customs and culture.

Externally, the most important state issue for Ukraine has been, and remains, its relationship with Russia. While Ukraine initially sought international recognition as an independent nation, it also adopted a policy of non-alignment with either of the blocs. As a result, Ukraine eschewed membership of the CIS, which Russia had promoted as a multilateral arrangement for post-Soviet states to ensure political alignment and economic integration. However, Ukraine was unwilling to cede sovereign control over these issues to Russia.<sup>25</sup> Ukraine's desire to be recognised as independent has, however, driven competition between the Eastern and Western blocs for its allegiance. Consequently, Ukraine has been pulled by opposing spheres of influence. These are the Eastern political sphere, led by Russia partnered with the CIS and its military alliance of the *Collective Security Treaty Organisation* (CSTO) on the one hand, and the Western political sphere of the EU and NATO on the other. Since independence, Ukraine has vacillated between these spheres, largely driven by alternating Russophile and Europhile state leadership.

The presidencies of Leonid Kravchuk (1991–4) and Leonid Kuchma (1994–2004) bore witness to this tendency to vacillate. Each wavered between closer ties with Europe or with Russia. Kravchuk sought to balance the preponderant Russian influence by developing closer ties with the West but within the realities of the immediate post-Soviet era governing apparatus. In contrast, Kuchma's second term witnessed a reorientation of Ukraine closer to Russia. This reorientation, however, was interrupted by a deep political crisis driven by Kuchma's entanglement in murder, corruption and other crimes.<sup>26</sup> Increased disaffection with the Kuchma government and its policies manifested during the 2004 presidential election. Viktor Yanukovich, anointed as Kuchma's successor and publicly supported by Russian President Vladimir Putin, was elected to president amidst accusations of widespread election fraud. This situation led to mass nation-wide protests, dubbed the *Orange Revolution*. In the face of this opposition, a repeat election was held, resulting in pro-Western Viktor Yushchenko winning.

The Yushchenko presidency (2004–10) sought closer ties with the West. Over this period, Ukraine applied to commence integration with NATO via a membership application plan at the 2008 *Bucharest Summit*. However, internal divisions, claims of corruption and multiple cabinet dismissals destabilised the government, stagnating efforts to integrate into NATO and the EU. Equally, relations with Russia soured, particularly after its invasion of Georgia, leading to damaging economic sanctions. Given widespread disaffection with the government, Yanukovych was controversially elected to the presidency in 2010. The Yanukovych period (2010–14) steered Ukraine back towards Russia and the future *Eurasian Economic Union* (EEU). Plans for NATO membership were shelved and the *European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement* was abandoned in late 2013. In consequence, a wave of civil unrest and protests fell across Ukraine, with very large protests centred on Kyiv's Independence Square, or *Euromaidan*.

These protests culminated in, what has been termed, the *Revolution of Dignity* in February 2014, which led to the ousting of Yanukovych. This event in turn sparked further protests in support of Yanukovych, particularly in the east of Ukraine, and violence between various factions both in the capital and regionally. Consequently, Russia, under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians from ultra-nationalist Ukrainians, intervened with military force. It annexed the Crimea and supported two self-proclaimed breakaway states centred on Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas. This led to outright war between Ukraine, armed separatists, irregular and regular Russian forces. Despite several ceasefires, the war continued sporadically until fighting escalated in early 2022.

The removal of Yanukovych, and the fighting in the Donbas, triggered a reversal of Ukraine's foreign policy, turning it towards Europe and away from Russia. In late 2014, then President Petro Poroshenko signed the *Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement*. This agreement committed Ukraine to economic, judicial and financial reforms to align its policies and legislation with those of the EU. Subsequently, Ukraine joined NATO's enhanced opportunity partner interoperability program, a step towards membership of the organisation. This commitment was reinforced at the *Brussels Summit* in June 2021 where NATO leaders reiterated that Ukraine would become a member of the NATO Alliance. This position was strongly opposed by Russia, which sought assurances that NATO would not expand

further eastward (e.g., beyond Poland and the Baltics). Russia's stated opposition was followed by a build-up of its forces along its border with Ukraine in October 2021. Russia then called for security guarantees from both the United States and NATO to exclude the further expansion of NATO eastward, specifically Ukraine and Georgia, and for the reduction and/or removal of troops, infrastructure and materiel in Eastern Europe.<sup>27</sup>

On 21 February 2022, Russia officially recognised the *Donetsk Peoples Republic* and *Luhansk Peoples Republic* as independent states, and deployed further troops to the Donbas. This deployment was followed on 24 February 2022 by a large-scale invasion of Ukraine across multiple fronts, signifying a major escalation in the war. Perhaps in response, and in a further step towards the EU, the incumbent Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, signed the application for full EU membership on 28 February 2022 and called for an acceleration of the acceptance process to join NATO. If successful, Ukraine could join Sweden and Finland who announced their intention to join NATO in May 2022. These developments, as well as the accession of Georgia in the Caucasus, would significantly strengthen NATO's eastern boundary (Figure 3), but may serve as a further provocation to Russia.

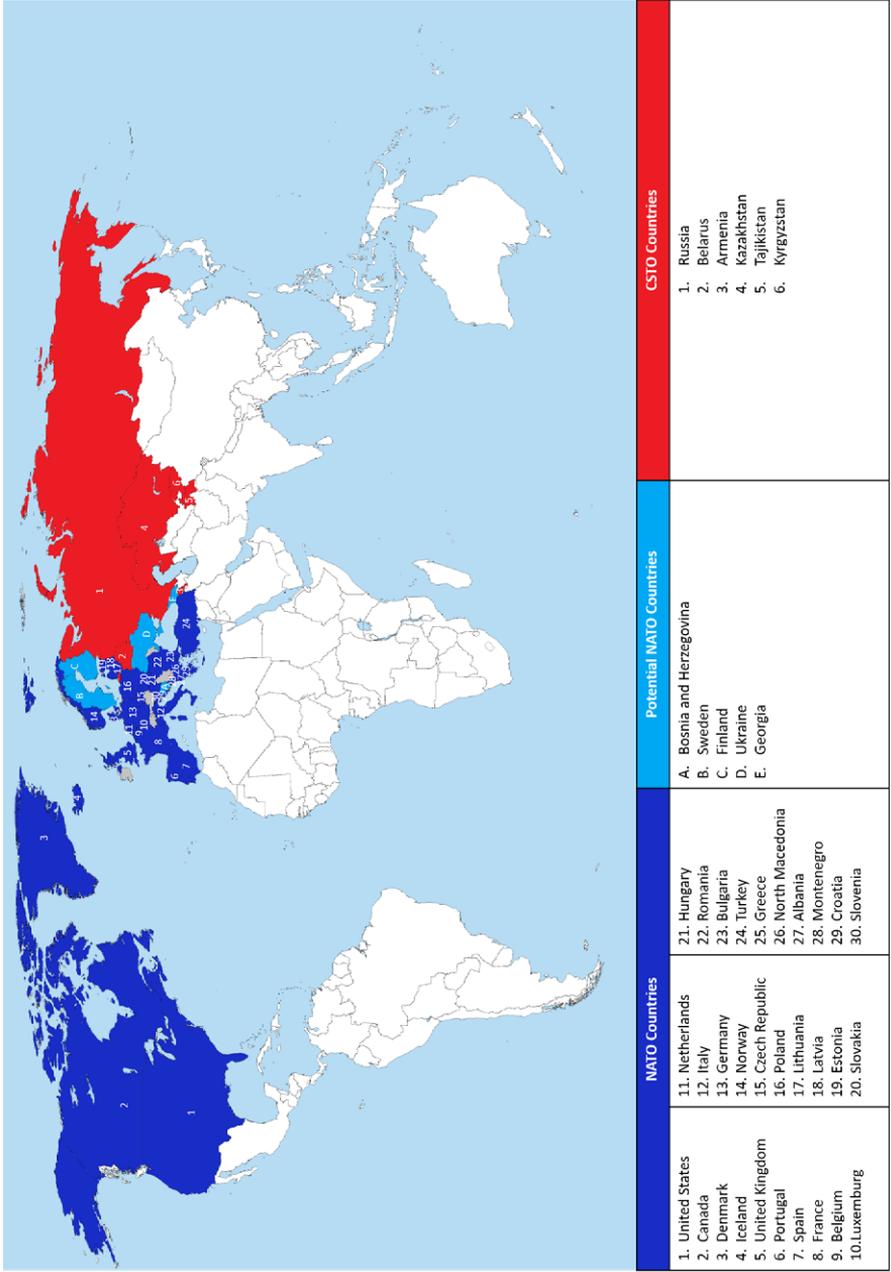


Figure 3. NATO and CSTO countries.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

This Spotlight Brief has examined Ukraine's unique strategic circumstances in order to provide context to the current conflict. Five focus areas bounded this analysis — geography, history, demography, economy and diplomacy. This examination illustrated that Ukraine's geographic location is of great importance to both Europe and Russia. Situated astride the land bridge between Europe and Asia, Ukraine has historically facilitated migration, trade and the exchange of ideas. However, given its position as the borderland between East and West, Ukraine has been a tempting target for invaders throughout its history. This history has left an ineradicable imprint upon Ukraine.

Three deductions can be drawn from this analysis. Firstly, Ukraine's people are shaped by both Eastern and Western influences. Ukraine has been ruled in the past by various states with different cultural, linguistic, religious and political practices. For some, this situation provides a reason to decouple from Russia, for others a need to restore closer ties. These demographic fault lines create division across Ukraine's various ethnic groups. Secondly, Ukraine's difficult economic path since independence belies its potential. Given its location, the competition for, or control of, Ukraine's resources is likely to intensify. The ability for Ukraine to exploit its reserves of natural gas, rare earths and ores, and to maximise food production, is critical to developing its economy and to improving the livelihoods of Ukrainians. Such developments are equally important to broader markets as increased productivity assures food, energy and commodity security. Perhaps most notably, while the exploitation of Ukraine's largely untapped gas reserves could provide a major benefit to its economy, it also threatens Russia's dominance of the European market.

Lastly, given the existential threat Russia poses, Ukraine's diplomatic efforts are dominated by the need to counter Russian interests and to integrate itself within the broader security apparatus and geo-politics of Europe. Over three decades since independence, Ukraine has decisively gravitated towards Europe and away from Russia. However, acceptance into the EU and NATO is not the end of this decades long hemispheric transition. Russia has demonstrated that it still considers Ukraine vital to its strategic interests and that it is willing to contest Ukraine's shift towards Europe.

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- 28 Map created by author derived from original. 'A large blank world map with oceans marked in blue', Wikipedia Commons, licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Accessed 13 May 2022, [https://pt.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:A\\_large\\_blank\\_world\\_map\\_with\\_oceans\\_marked\\_in\\_blue.PNG](https://pt.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ficheiro:A_large_blank_world_map_with_oceans_marked_in_blue.PNG)



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