

Russia - Ukraine Conflict (RUC): Asymmetric Yet Intractable

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[Abstract: The article is an exploratory attempt to examine that the Russia-Ukraine Conflict (RUC), despite being asymmetric in nature, is an intractable one or that it is just *en route* towards intractability. The readers with little knowledge in peace and conflict studies and international relations would not, perhaps, be wonderstruck by the fact that asymmetric conflicts can also be intractable in nature, notwithstanding the fact that conflict history provides infrequent examples of such phenomenon. As empiricism reveals, only two conflicts, i.e., the Israel-Palestine conflict (1948) and the Indo-Pakistan Kashmir dispute (1948) fall within this category. Excepting time factor, the RUC meets up all the criteria that have mutated the two mentioned conflicts from asymmetry to intractability. The bulk of the paper, therefore, concentrates on juxtaposing the proven phenomenon of intractability of Israel-Palestine and Kashmir conflicts in case of RUC in order to address the above stated research query. The time factor is compensated by a very critical negative factor – the failure of all diplomatic efforts to end the current conflict. In other words, the RUC is not acquiescent to any peaceful diplomatic gesture from any quarter for its resolution. These are ample indications to prognosticate the future intractability in case of RUC.]

Key word: Russia - Ukraine Conflict (RUC), Intractable Conflict (IC), Asymmetric, intractability, Diplomatic efforts.

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Introduction

More than two years and more have elapsed since the eruption of Ukraine-Russia conflict in the heart of Europe with no practical signs in sight as yet for its ultimate resolution. Despite colossal damage in terms of human and material Loss, accentuated further by the conflict's adversative international effects on food security, energy security, functioning of international trade and commerce etc., the conflict, in the eyes of most of the international analysts and experts in the field, is now in the trap of a stalemate. And, this notwithstanding the fact that the conflict is an asymmetrical one. An asymmetric conflict is a type of conflict where one observes a blatant difference between the belligerents in terms of their relative spatial size, resource composition, military power, technological prowess, strategy, tactics and the like (Lele, Ajey, 2015).

A dispassionate look at the world conflict history would reveal that most of the asymmetric conflicts are short in duration. This is explained by no other fact than the conspicuous difference in power ratio between the belligerents. In such a scenario, a conflict comes to an end mostly due to the inability of a weaker power to sustain it or through means like third party arbitration, mediation or even through the instrument of UN peacekeeping mission. Exceptions to such case, however, are not refutable. The Indo-Pakistan conflict over Kashmir in South Asia, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East are the two chilling reminders that a conflict, even if asymmetric, can prolong itself for an indefinite period of time, therefore, attaining intractability in its course. Peace and Conflict Study experts and Political Scientists view such long-term rivalries from which there is no way out as 'intractable conflict' (IC). Intractable conflicts are among the world's most destructive social ills, and the most difficult ones to resolve (Jenkins, A. 2018).

In above background, the paper aims to deal with a very linear research query: Is the Ukraine crisis, a confrontation between two un-equals, moving towards intractability? While the time factor may not be supportive of the stated statement, an attempt will be made to reason out that intractability is now, more or less, *a fait accompli* associated with the ongoing Ukraine Crisis.

The Structure of the Paper

In view of the fact that literatures and documents on the causes, effects, hypothetical solutions etc., of the Ukraine crisis are redundant by now, the paper does not deal with traditional discussion on such issues. However, empirical facts, events and data etc., will be profusely used in theoretical section of the paper. The corpus of the paper is, thus, divided into the following sections. **Section 1** entitled '**Intractable Conflict (IC): A Theoretical Overview**' throws a theoretical reflection on the concept of IC in a brief manner. **Section 2** entitled '**Intractability: Exploring its Characteristics**' deals with various features or characteristics of IC which will be empirically tested in **Section 3**, entitled,

‘Juxtaposing the Phenomenon of IC in case of RUC. The aim of the latter consists in providing an appropriate or near-appropriate answer to the research query. The concluding part of the paper is entitled **‘In Lieu of Conclusion’**. It deals with certain probable scenarios with respect to RUS, and is thus conjunctural in nature.

Methodology of the study

From the methodological point of view, the study is content analysis. Various secondary sources, i.e., relevant articles from journals, books, published international documents on the subject, weblink, E-book, reputed international journals (on-line) constitute the research materials of the authors. All facts, information, data etc., have been used for an analytical and descriptive discussion of the problematic.

Section 1

Intractable Conflict (IC) A Theoretical Overview

Intractability is a controversial concept in peace and conflict studies, baptized under several nomenclatures as protracted, destructive, deep rooted, resolution resistant, intransigent, gridlocked, identity-based, needs-based, complex, difficult, malignant, enduring etc. (Lederach, J. P. 2003). It is a concept that is used by mediators and scholars in the field of international affairs, policy analysis, conflict studies, diplomacy, and increasingly in communicology.

Intractable conflicts, broadly defined, are intense, deadlocked, and resistant to de-escalation or resolution. They tend to persist over time, with alternating periods of greater and lesser intensity. Intractable conflicts come to focus on needs or values that are of fundamental importance to the parties (Vallacher, Robin & Coleman, Peter & Nowak, Andrzej & Bui-Wrzosinska, Lan. 2010). The conflict pervades all aspects of the parties' lives, and they see no way to end it short of utterly destroying the other side. Each party's dominant motive is to harm the other. Such conflicts resist common resolution techniques, such as negotiation, mediation, or diplomacy (Coleman and Peter T, 2000). Or to cite Professor Andrew R Smith who quotes it in a more comprehensible manner, "Intractable conflict is a conflict that persists over time, resists resolution, and involves some form of violence (physical, structural, symbolic) between conflicting parties. Those involved perceive one another as threats, distort messages from and about the other in order to sustain enmity, become polarized and rigidified in their positions, and ultimately collude as identities become dependent on sustaining tensions. Typically, at least one party to the conflict benefits from intractability and maintains a dominant position over the other. Mediation efforts by third parties not only fail to resolve the conflict, they often exacerbate it. As a result, entire populations of people are affected and suffer injustices of various kinds, including isolation, marginalization, discrimination,

displacement, exploitation and statelessness" (Smith, 2014). In conflict studies parlance, the phenomenon of intractability is mainly associated with symmetrical conflict where the parties to the conflict remain, more or less, in relative powerful positions with total indifference to any standstill in the event. As observed, symmetric relationships are characterized by a balanced mutual relationship, based on similar allocations of power resources. In most generic sense, symmetric conflicts take place between coequal enemies. An end to intractability in such conflicts can only see the day if there is the occurrence of a single or multiple events of shocking or shattering nature. They may also be termed as sudden-onslaught events.¹ History abounds in examples to elucidate the point. The American War of independence was more or less a symmetrical conflict between the Royal British Army and the Continental Army (13 British colonies) until the latter was secretly aided by the French, Spanish and Dutch supplies to bring the event in favour of the revolutionaries. World War I was a symmetric conflict in the continent unless the US involvement in the war in 1917 that brought about advantageous changes for the then Triple Entente powers. In a similar fashion, World War II was too a symmetrical conflict until the US marine landing in Normandy (France) and the US bombing in Japan changed the course of war to the advantage of the Allied Powers. Still more, the Iran-Iraq war in the Persian Gulf was a symmetric conflict between the two countries until the former succumbed to unbridled presence of Western naval flotilla in the Gulf in support of Iraq plus the use of chemical weapons in Iran by Iraq. Added to this is the gunning down of Iranian civilian airliner by the US Marine Force stationed in the Gulf. The list can further be elongated with many other examples. A symmetric conflict can also end up when it reaches its ripening stage. The idea behind the concept is that, when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degrees or for the same reasons), they seek a way out.²

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1. The term is used in environmental disasters like cyclones, storms, tidal surges etc.
 2. While most studies on peaceful settlement of disputes see the substance of the proposals for a solution as the key to a successful resolution of conflict, a growing focus of attention shows that a second and equally necessary key lies in the timing of efforts for resolution. Parties resolve their conflict only when they are ready to do so—when alternative, usually unilateral, means of achieving a satisfactory result are blocked and the parties feel that they are in an uncomfortable and costly predicament. At that ripe moment, they seek or are amenable to proposals that offer a way out. The idea of a ripe moment lies at the fingertips of diplomats. As long ago as 1974, Henry Kissinger recognized that "stalemate is the most propitious condition for settlement. "Conversely, practitioners often are heard to say that certain mediation initiatives are not advisable because the conflict just is not yet ripe. The concept of a ripe moment centers on the parties' perception of a Mutually

A phenomenon opposite to intractability is tractability. Tractability in conflict means that it can be resolved through negotiation, compromise, or even the use of force as observed mostly in case of asymmetric conflicts (Vallacher, Robin & Coleman, Peter & Nowak, Andrzej & Bui-Wrzosinska, LAN. 2010).

Asymmetric warfare or conflict can be defined as a war or conflict that occurs between two forces of uneven strength and size.³ In other words, war between two actors or groups of actors characterized by a large gap in material power relative to each other. The parties to the conflict can be **state actors** themselves or **state actors versus non-state actors**. Since the end of the Cold War, the Western peace and conflict experts have had the tendency to categorize conflict between state actors and non-state actors as asymmetric. Many analysts also term these as non-conventional warfare or conflict. This is because the most common methods used in asymmetric war are guerrilla tactics and elements of psychological warfare. The guerrilla tactics are mostly used by insurgents or rebels. A few examples can be French Indochina War (Vietnamese insurgents against French colonizers), Arab Revolt (regional Arab forces fighting against the Ottoman Empire), Mexican Revolution (rebels vs. the national government) and Global terrorism (organized armies against armed, covert terrorist groups) (Chapel, 2023).

However, christening of all asymmetric conflicts as being simply non-conventional ones would be a fallacy, as many conventional wars in the past have as well been asymmetric in nature. For example, the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 (popularly known as Six-Day War) or the Operation Desert Storm against Iraq following the latter's annexation of Kuwait in the late eighties. In both the cases, the asymmetry between the belligerents had been simply glaring. Also, since 1948, the three Indo-Pak wars over the issue of Kashmir have been conventional in nature despite blatant asymmetry between these two inimical countries. The stereo-typed labelling of symmetrical conflict as intractable and of asymmetrical conflict as tractable should not be a rigidified one. This is because a conflict is a dynamic and changing process, and not just a linear progression towards winning or losing. Different factors can come into play that push conflicting parties towards the negotiating table; leading to a 'ripe moment'. The 'ripeness theory' as propounded by Zartman defends that ripeness in a conflict is a necessary condition for the initiation of negotiations, either bilateral or

Hurting Stalemate (MHS), optimally associated with an impending, past or recently avoided catastrophe, Ripeness: the importance of timing in negotiation.

3. An asymmetric conflict is characterized by the imbalance between the military capacity of the warring parties (e.g. in terms of weapon technology, equipment, intelligence information and number of troops)

mediated and it must be seized by the parties or by the third-party/mediator.⁴ The two necessary elements of ripeness are perceptions of mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) and a way out. Needless to mention, it is at this ripening stage that conflicts, both symmetric and asymmetric, meet their final end. It should be noted that the tractability in an asymmetric conflict is a **fait accompli** already established for reasons lie (i) disparate power capability between the parties; (ii) the legal status of asymmetric remains under challenge, in particular, if the asymmetric conflict is non-conventional in nature; (iii) the material replenishment in case of asymmetric conflict is a rare possibility. For these and other reasons, an asymmetric conflict finds its road towards tractability much before it reaches the ripening stage.

From the above theoretical discussion on conflict and its nature, some of the carry-away messages for the readers can be furnished in a tabular form as below:

Nature of Conflict	Solution	Reasons
Symmetric	Intractable	The warring parties are relatively equal in strength endowed with the capacity to replenish themselves with tangible war means even during the course of the conflict. Withdrawing from the game becomes a win-loss situation, and as well a loss of prestige
Asymmetric (Conventional)	Tractable	The warring parties are uneven in relative power strength with the stronger power capable of replenishing itself with tangible war means even during the Course of the conflict.
Asymmetric (Non-Conventional)	Tractable	As above

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4. The concept is based on the notion that when the parties find themselves locked in a conflict from which they cannot escalate to victory and this deadlock is painful to both of them (although not necessarily in equal degree or for the same reasons), they seek an alternative policy or Way Out. The catastrophe provides a deadline or a lesson indicating that pain can be sharply increased if something is not done about it now; catastrophe is a useful extension of MHS but is not necessary either to its definition or to its existence. If the notion of mutual blockage is too static to be realistic, the concept may be stated dynamically as a moment when the upper hand slips and the lower hand rises, both parties moving toward equality, with both movements carrying pain for the parties.

The above table behoves one to raise certain questions like: what is then the nature of Russia-Ukraine conflict? Is it *en route* towards tractability? If not, then what elements or features can be attributed to its intractability? These questions will be taken up for a critical analysis in the succeeding sections of the paper.

Section 2

Intractability: Exploring its Characteristics

This section of the paper starts from the premise that the RUC is an asymmetric one. Realistically speaking, or to argue in the light of our theoretical argument, if the RUC is asymmetric, it should be a tractable one. The reality, however poses itself in a different way: the RUC is not tractable, it is now rather on the road towards intractability.

If an asymmetric conflict is believed to be characterized by the imbalance between the military capacity of the warring parties (e.g., in terms of weapon technology, equipment, intelligence information and number of troops, network base etc.), then by all logical conclusions, the RUC is an asymmetric conflict of conventional nature (see Annexure). But to prove the conflict's intractability, the theoretical arguments as raised above would be inapplicable. Theoretically, an asymmetric conflict is tractable, and hence its time span is short. What is then the way out to prove the RUC's intractability? To prove out the case, we shall put the **time factor** as an *arrière baggage* in the shelf. The tools to be used to deal with our research query would be empirical deductions taken from the world's two most intractable conflicts, i.e., the Arab-Israeli Conflict and the Indo-Pakistan Conflict. As mentioned earlier, these two conflicts are an exception to the tractable nature of asymmetric conflicts due to their peculiar conflict dynamics. These dynamics have been rigorously studied by the conflict experts since long. The analysts and observers, in particular, have reflected on a few very distinguishing features that have characterized the mentioned conflicts.⁵

The characteristics or the features as associated with the phenomenon of intractability are the empirical deductions from the two conflicts, i.e., the Arab-Israel conflict and the Indo-Pakistan Kashmir conflict. They are discussed as follows.

- A. **In terms of actors**, IC involve states with long shared history, culture and tradition. Out of common past and history between two countries

5. **Zionism**, Jewish nationalist movement that has had as its goal the creation and support of a Jewish national state in Palestine, the ancient homeland of the Jews (Hebrew: Eretz Yisra'el, "the Land of Israel"). Though Zionism originated in eastern and central Europe in the latter part of the 19th century, it is in many ways a continuation of the ancient attachment of the Jews and of the Jewish religion to the historical region of Palestine, where one of the hills of ancient Jerusalem was called Zion. The idea of Zionism is the brainchild of Theodore Herzl.

emerge forces, both positive and negative. On the positive side is the feeling of commonality bounded in social, cultural, linguistic and religious ties that existed since long. On the negative side is the feeling of deprivation, grievances, resentment etc. that arises when this cultural or civilizational heritage is ruptured. In case of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, one notices that the epicenter of the conflict lies in a piece of land over which both the conflicting parties have dissenting claims. The Jews claim the whole of Palestinian land as their original homeland dating back to the Old Testament Age. Whereas, the Palestinians' claim goes to back to 7th or 8th century AD when the entire area was inhabited by the Palestinian people up to the beginning of 19th century when the Zionist movement was set in motion in Europe (Heacock, R. (Ed.) 2008). This facilitated the settlement of the Jews in the Palestinian land from across the world. The consequent result is the opposition of the local people to forceful occupation of Palestinian land – the legacy of which continues till today in a very Intransigent fashion. Likewise, Kashmir is a contested piece of territory in case of Indo-Pakistan conflict due to the two countries' simultaneous linkage with the territory through history, culture and civilization with long sense of historical grievance, and a strong desire to redress or avenge the wrongs.

In case of Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir, the factor of common history, past, civilization and heritage find its resonance in a very powerful way. Thanks to a millennium back civilization that blossomed gradually into a great Indian civilization through the vicissitudes of time and space, both the countries are heirs to the same civilization, tied to each other through proximate geographic location, religion, language and culture. The intermingling and enmeshing of the people of the two countries is so deep rooted that ultimately, Pakistan, the weaker party in the crisis, suffers from a pathological obsession with identify crisis dwarfed by all pervasive Indian identity. This is the clash of these enduring identities that makes the conflict so persistent.

- B. In terms of relationships** IC involves polarized perceptions of hostility and enmity, and behaviour that is violent and destructive. This is Mirror Image which takes place 'because individuals (and, by inference, nations) are prone either to ignore or reinterpret information that runs counter to their beliefs and values, mutual misperceptions often fuel discord in world politics, especially when relations between nations are hostile. For example, distrust and suspicion between conflicting parties may arise because each sees the other as the other sees it. That is, *mirror images emerge* (Charles W.

Kegley Jr and Eugene R. Wittkopf (ed), 1993). This syndrome is especially clear in the images the leaders in India and Pakistan and Israel and Palestine hold of each since the inception of the two conflicts respectively. It applies to many other antagonistic relationships as well. When mirror images develop, self-righteousness often leads parties entrapped in conflict to view their own actions as constructive but to view their adversary's responses as negative and hostile. When this occurs, resolution of the conflict is extraordinarily difficult, as the seemingly endless Israeli-Palestine conflict and the Indo-Pak conflict illustrate. Peace is, thus, not simply a matter of expanding trade and other forms of transnational contact, or even of bringing political leaders together in international summits. Rather it is a matter of changing deeply entrenched beliefs.

- C. **In terms of geopolitics, intractability** clings on buffer zone as an inevitable component of the conflict. In International Relations or Comparative Politics parlance, states or zones lying between two more powerful rival states but not dominated by or allied with any of them are usually called buffer states or zones (Partem, M. G. 1983). However, such a general definition on buffer state is confusing and outdated. Scholars disagree on the definition of buffer zones and question whether such zones are a vestige of the great power politics of the past or a continuous phenomenon.⁶ In case of Arab-Israeli conflict, the Israeli authority considers Palestine as a state or mini-complex within a security complex, whose role is to separate rival powers, the neighbouring Arab countries. The Golan Heights in Syria also serves the same purpose for Israel. In a similar vein, in case of Indo-Pak conflict over Kashmir, the latter serves as a buffer between India and China – both locked in hostility towards each other for a number of complex geo-political, and security issues. Since Pakistan is an ally of China, occupation of Kashmir by the former impairs Indian security complex.

6. Buffer zones are a grey area in both geographic and disciplinary senses. These zones lie between domestic and international boundaries. In disciplinary terms, they straddle the realms of International Relations (IR), comparative politics, political geography and history. While a large body of scholarship is relevant to understanding the dynamics of buffer zones, the literature that directly addresses these topics has been limited and disjointed.

MAP 1



MAP 2



- D. **Intractable conflicts involve issues, both intangible and intangible.** The former incorporates issues such as identity, sovereignty, values and beliefs. The issues of this category are predisposed, in other words, inclined to peoples' sentiment, prejudice, bias, attitude etc. On the other hand, the tangible issues are very high stakes and irreducible, leading to a win-lose situation that probably finds no 'zone of possible agreement'. The tangible issue mainly revolves around the question of security and defense. In consequence, this is an area where the parties to the conflict, even if they are despairingly unequal, are found to be wayward and intransigent. Despite the fact that Israel as a political, economic and cultural entity has hardly any common ties with neighboring Arab countries, its strong military position is a fact recognized not only regionally but also internationally (Heacock, R. (Ed.) 2008). Numerous occasions have given Israel the possibility of showing its power in the region, namely, its victory over the Arab countries during several Arab-Israeli conflicts is a testimony to this. Israeli geo-political thought has been profoundly influenced by a

negative factor discussed in a book titled 'Israel's Political-Military Doctrine' by Mr. I Handel, one of Israel's most renowned political scientists and geo-strategists (Handel, Micheal, I, 1973). He said, "The Arab countries have always the motive to annihilate Israel at opportune moments. This is the reason for the increasing military development as well as the strengthening of its supremacy in the region. Israel, therefore, needs to keep the occupied Arab lands under its perpetual occupation leading to permanent control" (Neil A Butenshon, 1978). Needless to mention, this phenomenon further motivated Israel to acquire the status of a recognized power in the Middle East region.

The issue of Kashmir in case of Indo-Pakistan crisis has both intangible and tangible underpinning. It is intangible in the sense that re-annexation of Kashmir and its physical incorporation in Pakistan's existing territory will validate the two-nation theory on which Pakistan was founded in 1947. Pakistan still considers 'Kashmir problem as an unfinished agenda of partition in 1947'. For India, the loss of Kashmir has serious adverse implications for its secular polity. Moreover, from geostrategic standpoint, Kashmir under Pakistan implies India's meeting China, its rival, face à face in northwestern front. More ominous is the snow-ball effect of the loss on India's territorial integrity. In the past, many experts and analysts have expressed their opinion that in case of Kashmir's secession from India, the other provinces, in particular, the non-Hindi speaking ones, may be enthused to secede from mainland India. What is common to all intractable conflicts is that they involve interests or values that the disputants regard as critical to their survival. These underlying causes include parties' moral values, identities, and fundamental human needs

- E. **Time factor in Intractability:** Intractable conflicts persist over time, with alternating periods of greater and lesser intensity. Such conflicts resist common resolution techniques, such as negotiation, mediation, or diplomacy of any kind. Conflict experts normally ascribe a duration ranging from ten years to sixty years to an intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, D., Sharvit, K., Halperin, E., & Zafran, A. 2012). The RUC does not meet this criteria, and thus, as mentioned earlier, the time factor has been kept in arrièrè baggage. Time factor is, however, compensated by a very critical negative factor – the failure of all diplomatic efforts to end the current conflict. In other words, the RUC is not acquiescent to any peaceful diplomatic gesture from any quarter for its resolution. These are ample indications to prognosticate the future intractability in case of RUC.

Section 3

Juxtaposing the Phenomenon of IC in case of RUC

In this section, our analysis consists in proving that the RUC, despite being an asymmetric one, is getting intractable in nature. The section is, therefore, a test case one with the arguments derived from the preceding one.

- A. **Common history.** In case of Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we notice its epicenter lying in just a piece of land claimed by both the parties since remote past. Likewise, Kahmir is a contested piece of territory in case of Indo-Pakistan conflict due to the two countries' simultaneous linkage with the territory through history, culture and civilization. The same phenomenon resonates in case of RUC where the former considers latter as a part of its historical whole. The two countries' shared heritage goes back more than a thousand years to a time when Kyiv, now Ukraine's capital, was at the center of the first Slavic state, Kyivan Rus, the birthplace of both Ukraine and Russia (Kappeler, A. 2014). From that moment on, the Russians and Ukrainians have shared a common history of eternal friendship and bondage. This is eloquently expressed in the words of a person, no less than Vladimir Putin, the current President of Russia, when he stated "Russians and Ukrainians are one people, a single whole." However, despite the long historical connectivity between Russia-Ukraine, the relations between the two have not always been rosy. On many occasions, the relations turned out to be traumatic and vexing. The legacy of the tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union had left deep scar marks on the body politic of Ukraine due to outright Russification policy of Russia. The policy smacked of Russian feeling of superiority vis-à-vis Ukraine, its language, culture, tradition and the like. More important, Ukraine has always sensed a tinge of domineering tendency in Russian policy towards her. As a result, Ukraine's search for own identity has been a quest since long.

Even after its disassociation from the ex-USSR in 1991, Ukraine's move towards a free and independent domestic and foreign policy has been impeded by Russia on several occasions. The former's recurrent interference in the latter's democratic movement, annexation of territory, supporting separatist movements in eastern Ukraine etc. are some of the events still fresh in the living memory of the Ukrainians, and hence their unfettered penchant to liberate themselves from the Russian hegemony (Masters. Jonathan, 2023). In fact, Russia, from a peculiar geo-strategic angle accentuated further by its 'great power image' always considered Ukraine as an inseparable part of Mother Russia. Thus, President Putin, in his March 18, 2014 Kremlin speech, while celebrating Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of

Crimea, declared: "Kiev is the mother of Russian cities. Ancient Rus is our common source and we cannot live without each other." He also hinted that, to him, Ukraine "isn't a state. The border between Russia and Ukraine would, somehow, be the result of a staggeringly immense, ancient, but still ongoing conspiracy: The intention to split Russia and Ukraine, to separate what is essentially a single nation in many ways, has been an issue of international politics for centuries, and it would continue to remain so in the future" (Günar, A. and Saygin D. (Ed.), 2023).

The limit of space puts a check on further elaboration of Russia-Ukraine history. Suffice it to say that the conflicting stands of the two parties, in others, differing perceptions of each towards the other, has now become an important ingredient to garnish the intractability of present RUC. By all logical conclusions, the case is analogous to the ones observed in case of Israeli-Arab and Indo-Pak conflicts.

- B. In terms of mirror image** alluded to in section 2, the Russian-Ukraine relations contain both positive and negative elements, with the former weighing heavy. Long relationship between the two has created both association and disassociation. Russia has deep cultural, economic, and political bonds with Ukraine, and in many ways Ukraine is central to Russia's identity and vision for itself in the world. Some of the bonds can be mentioned here to elucidate our argument.

Family ties: Russia and Ukraine have strong familial bonds that go back centuries. Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, is sometimes referred to as "the mother of Russian cities," on par in terms of cultural influence with Moscow and St. Petersburg. It was in Kyiv in the eighth and ninth centuries that Christianity was brought from Byzantium to the Slavic peoples. And it was Christianity that served as the anchor for Kievan Rus, the early Slavic state from which modern Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarussians draw their lineage.

Russian diaspora: Approximately eight million ethnic Russians were living in Ukraine as of 2001, according to a census taken that year, mostly in the south and east. Moscow claimed a duty to protect these people as a pretext for its actions in Crimea and the Donbas in 2014.

Superpower image: After the Soviet collapse, many Russian politicians viewed the divorce with Ukraine as a mistake of history and a threat to Russia's standing as a great power. Losing a permanent hold on Ukraine, and letting it fall into the Western orbit, would be seen by many as a major blow to Russia's international prestige. In 2022, Putin cast the escalating war with Ukraine as a part of a broader struggle against Western powers he says are intent on destroying Russia.

Crimea: Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev transferred Crimea from Russia to Ukraine in 1954 to strengthen the “brotherly ties between the Ukrainian and Russian peoples.” However, since the fall of the union, many Russian nationalists in both Russia and Crimea longed for a return of the peninsula. The city of Sevastopol is home port for Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, the dominant maritime force in the region.

Trade: Russia was for a long time Ukraine’s largest, although this link withered dramatically in recent years. China eventually surpassed Russia in trade with Ukraine (Hugo von Essen, 2023). Prior to its invasion of Crimea, Russia had hoped to pull Ukraine into its single market, the Eurasian Economic Union, which today includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Energy: Moscow relied on Ukrainian pipelines to pump its gas to customers in Central and Eastern Europe for decades, and it paid Kyiv billions of dollars per year in transit fees. The flow of Russian gas through Ukraine continued in early 2023 despite the hostilities between the two countries, but volumes were reduced and the pipelines remained in serious jeopardy.

Political sway: Russia was keen to preserve its political influence in Ukraine and throughout the former Soviet Union, particularly after its preferred candidate for Ukrainian president in 2004, Viktor Yanukovich, lost to a reformist competitor as part of the Orange Revolution popular movement. This shock to Russia’s interests in Ukraine came after a similar electoral defeat for the Kremlin in Georgia in 2003, known as the Rose Revolution, and was followed by another—the Tulip Revolution—in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Yanukovich later became president of Ukraine, in 2010, amid voter discontent with the Orange government

Strong Partnership: In a similar manner, among all of the countries that border Ukraine, the Russian Federation is its most important partner. Ukraine’s relations with Moscow are the key issue of its foreign policy to such an extent that each option of the Ukrainian foreign policy is first and foremost a choice as to the shape of its relations with Russia. This is mainly a consequence of Ukraine’s geographic and geopolitical situation, the legacy of many centuries of political, economic and cultural bonds between these two countries, as well as Russia’s inevitably dominant position in their mutual relations. It is the domineering tendency of Russia that acts as the fault-line in Russia-Ukraine relations ultimately leading to a very complex and negative mirror image of one towards the other. This factor incubates conflict intractability.

C. Defense and Security Issues: As mentioned earlier, intractable conflicts involve issues, both intangible and tangible. The former incorporates issues such as identity, sovereignty, values and beliefs. The issues of

this category are predisposed, in other words, inclined to peoples' sentiment, prejudice, bias, attitude etc. On the other hand, the tangible issues are very high staked and irreducible, leading to a win-lose situation that probably finds no 'zone of possible agreement'. While both the issues are present in case of RUC, it is the defense and security factor that would probably continue to keep the RUC in its present route towards intractability. Before commencement of our argument, the following points should be touched upon in a manner as brief as possible.

First, Russia has been a great power since centuries. Keeping the neighborhood safe and stable is one of the most fundamental defense imperatives of a big power. The old age practice of the big powers to keep their periphery safe in perpetuity finds a plethora of examples in world history. The Monroe Doctrine propounded by the US President in 1823⁷ clearly states that the American continents are "not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers. Furthermore, the President declared that "we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety'. In other words, the US wanted to keep its maritime periphery free from any external intrusion. France, victorious out of World War I and invigorated with material war gains from Germany still suffered from a perennial sense of insecurity from the latter during the interwar-period. And hence, her incessant efforts to erect the Maginot Line⁸ in its eastern periphery in order to forestall any possible German invasion in the future from the east. The avowed strategic India Doctrine⁹ conceives the perimeter of its national defense not at the Indian border, but at the outer limits of its neighbors. It opposes any external intervention in the internal

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7. The Monroe Doctrine is the best known U.S. policy toward the Western Hemisphere. Buried in a routine annual message delivered to Congress by President James Monroe in December 1823, the doctrine warns European nations that the United States would not tolerate further colonization or puppet monarchs.
 8. The Maginot Line, an array of defenses that France built along its border with Germany in the 1930s, was designed to prevent an invasion. Built at a cost that possibly exceeded \$9 billion in today's dollars, the 280-mile-long line included dozens of fortresses, underground bunkers
 9. The two tenets of India Doctrine as defined by Indira Gandhi government in 1983 are: India will not intervene in a nation's internal conflict but would not tolerate an outside power's intervention if it is against Interest. But if a South Asian country in trouble requires outside help, it should be sought from South Asian nations including India".

affairs of other South Asian countries, and in particular that of external powers whose objectives could be perceived as hostile to the politico-strategic and security interests of India.

MAP 3



Perhaps, Russia's extreme concern for safe periphery is noticeable nowhere other than in its Cold War alliance against the NATO, i.e. the WARSAW Pact. The latter included all the East European countries that belonged to the Russian socialist bloc, and together, they all constituted the **cordon sanitaire** for USSR's defense and security in its eastern perimeter. Such a line of defense ceased to exist for Russia after the dissolution of the USSR following the end of the Cold War.

The existence of NATO in post-Cold War period is subject to controversy. Literatures on rationality of NATO's existence in contemporary world are redundant (Howorth, J. 2009). The paper does not seek to enter the debate. What is, perhaps, important to mention here is the enlargement or east-ward expansion of NATO. Russia has, time and again, expressed concern over NATO's growth in Eastern Europe and the former USSR, particularly in Ukraine. In effect, President Putin has been against NATO's expansionism since USSR collapse in 1991. He said that it was inappropriate for NATO to include countries that border Russia, despite NATO's assurances that it is a military alliance and not a threat to Moscow. In the eyes of the leader of Russia, 'NATO has just one objective-to splinter – to disintegrate Russian society'. Before the start of the RUC, the Russian leader asked NATO to turn back the clock to 1997, halt its invasive eastward expansion, and withdraw its troops and military facilities from allies that joined the organization after 1997 and cease utilizing offensive weapons close to Russia's borders (Glucroft, William Noah, 2022).

From a realist perspective, Russian perception of threat from Ukraine is not without its rationale. Ukraine's hobnobbing with the EU and decision to join NATO at its convenience were always considered by the Russian authority as antithetical to Russian security interests, and a fundamental threat to Russia's maneuverability in its military and defense affairs.

In Russian eyes, Ukraine's accession to NATO is like placing a behemoth in its door step which is west. The Ukrainian crisis has created the deepest rift between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War. This rift is a result of a complex mixture of economic, political and historical factors, but one of its more curious antecedents is a disagreement over an alleged promise made over 20 years ago. Russia says the origins of the Ukraine crisis lie in NATO's decision to expand the alliance eastward. In a televised interview in the spring of 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin asserted: 'we were promised (I mentioned this at the Munich security conference) that after Germany's unification, NATO wouldn't spread eastward. The then NATO Secretary-General told us that the alliance wouldn't expand beyond its eastern borders.' Putin went on to admit that the fear of Ukrainian entry into NATO had partly motivated his decision to annex Crimea. To surmise, the Russian government views the situation in Ukraine through a lens of repeated western betrayal, creeping NATO encroachment and disrespect for its security.

D. If in terms of geopolitics, intractability clings on buffer zone as an inevitable component of the conflict, then the phenomenon marks the RUC as well. The recent Russian invasion of Ukraine has led many commentators to remark that 'geopolitics is back'. And with geopolitics, the interest in buffer zones is back as well.

As mentioned above, in most generic sense, a buffer state is one that lies between two great powers, one hostile to the other. However, in case of Russia-Ukraine, buffer state can be viewed as states situated between conflicting spheres of influence, whose primary function is to separate the conflicting sides and thus reduce the likelihood of physical (military) contact. In this regard, Ukraine is a buffer state lying between Russian and Western spheres of influence respectively. With the disappearance of Cold War cordon sanitaire in favor of Russia, Ukraine is now in a periphery facing the Western powers directly. Somehow, differently, Ukraine can also be regarded as an internal buffer zone.

Internal buffer zones are *geographic borderlands located within states in rivalry and are adjacent to the international borders between the two rivals*. Like, buffer states, internal buffer zones can only be understood in the context of interstate rivalry. With the outbreak of RUC, Russia is now in proxy war with the Western countries lying adjacent to Ukraine. Some internal buffer zones may mitigate

rivalry conflict and thus be considered active buffers, while others remain nominal buffer zones.

- E. **The time duration in intractable Conflict:** This point has been clarified in section 2 of the paper.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Drawing a conclusive note on a conflict that we have tried to prove as intractable is likely to end up in putting forward nothing other than certain conjectures and predictions. The fact that RUC is now in an impasse is well recognized by the international community.

At the diplomatic and political front, efforts are almost stalled for the moment to bring the conflict to any meaningful resolution. At the military and battle front, the conflict is surviving in somewhat low intensity form with sporadic attack and counter attacks between the two warring factions. The adverse economic, political, social, humanitarian effects are still continuing with international implications.

How long will the conflict continue or will it attain intractability at all? (As argued by us) is a scenario difficult to predict through the fog of time. Currently, perhaps, a more realistic attempt would be to draw a pessimistic picture of the RUC.

- (1) Currently it is unlikely that either side can completely prevail. Russia's hopes for a swift, shock regime change in Ukraine have foundered, and its tactics have turned more brutal. Incidents of the use of banned weapons and evidence of war crimes are growing. Indiscriminate attacks and siege warfare are intended to grind Ukraine into a deal that meets Russian objectives. Ukraine, meanwhile, is determined to resist and expel Russian forces from its territory. It believes that the war will bleed the Russian economy and weaken Putin. Neither side, therefore, feels compelled to concede anything to the other.
- (2) The goals and objectives of the conflicting parties are not only incompatible and contradictory, but in essence, they are the questions involving 'existence' for both. Ukraine wants to survive as an independent free country with pro-west leaning away from Russian domination, whereas Russia wants to absorb Ukraine in its territory, or to use it as a subservient buffer for secured existence in the future. In their demands, both are very obdurate and recalcitrant like the conflicting parties in case of Arab-Israel and Indo-Pakistan conflict respectively.
- (3) The RUC can be termed as a hybrid Cold War clash between the West represented by Ukraine, and Russia, erstwhile enemy of the West. What is more ominous is the likelihood of a rapid armament race by the conflicting parties. The two proposals, the US sponsored 'Ukraine

Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act passed in 2022 and the much talked about Chinese Lend-Lease for Russia, are likely to aggravate further the RUC placing it in an uncontrollable intractability. This is reminiscence of President Roosevelt's military aid bill (passed in 1941 amidst World War II), better dubbed as US Lend-Lease Programme. The programme's objective was to dispose of arms" and other supplies needed by any country whose security was vital to the defense of the United States.

- (4) The analysts and observers seem to remain skeptical about any negotiation in the coming days. Negotiations are a continuation of the conflict, not an alternative to the conflict. As such, they rarely can deliver more than can be achieved militarily. Negotiations raise a new set of diplomatic and strategic questions. At the diplomat front, a few questions likely to be raised are (i) what would be nature of negotiation – bilateral or multilateral? In this connection, any bilateral negotiation between Russia and Ukraine is a distant possibility as bilateral negotiations hardly succeed unless the concerned parties are symmetric in strength. (ii) After the shameful failure of the UN in reaching any negotiation on the RUC, what would be the nature of multilateral negotiation? Who would be the parties to initiate it? (iii) No power is acceptable either to Russia or Ukraine for a third party mediation. More important are the strategic questions. (i) Will Russian accept any settlement short of Ukrainian capitulation? (ii) Can Ukraine be made a neutral state? (iii) Will the West currently waging a proxy war against Russia accept permanent incorporation of Ukrainian territory into Russian Federation? (iv) What guarantee is there that Ukraine with pro-West leaning (membership in EU and NATO) will not be a security menace for Russia in future? (v) Can West continue to remain a perpetual guarantor of Ukraine's security? These are some of the questions answers to which at the moment would just be a matter of conjecture and chimeric intellectual exercise.
- (5) Last, but not the least, it should be mentioned that RUC has taken place at a very crucial point of power transformation in the global level. The world seems to be moving towards a multi-polar configuration of power in the international system. Under the circumstances, the US, the current dominant world power, already in Thucydides' Trap ¹⁰ due to rise of China, does not favor any further rise

10. What the Thucydides trap presumes is that an established dominant power predictably breaks into conflict with a rising power, for the reasons that the dominant power seeks to maintain its dominant position by preventing the rise of any power competitor.

of Russia as Sino-Russian dyad would severely affect its dominant and hegemonic standing in the global current power hierarchy. As a result, a stalemate in the RUC is a preferred option for the US as it is expected to sap Russia's progress and prosperity.

A Few Words by the Author (s)

It has been expressed by the authors that, the subject under discussion is exploratory in nature, and hence, with its own novelty. The study rather acts as a "food for thought" to future research enthusiasts in this specific field. This work remains open to alternative interpretations and recommendations to be articulated in a sequential paper.

Annexure

Indicator	Russia	Ukraine
Personnel	-	-
Estimated total military personnel	1,330,900	500,000
Active soldiers	830,900	200,000
Reserve forces	250,000	250,000
Paramilitary units	250,000	50,000
Air force	-	-
Total aircraft	4,182	312
Total helicopters	1,531	113
Fighters	773	69
Dedicated attack	744	28
Attack helicopters	537	33
Trainers	524	71
Transport aircraft	444	26

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