



A WAR TOO MANY: THE MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT AND ITS COST FOR UKRAINE

Regional update Russia/Ukraine|

After 4 years of brutal full-scale war and a harsh winter, the approaching spring had brought some cautious optimism for Ukrainians. The constant energy blackouts were almost over, the Ukrainian Armed Forces were holding the line and making modest gains on the battlefield and there were reports of the Russian economy stagnating - with the IMF projecting GDP growth decline. A diplomatic breakthrough, however fragile, appeared to be within reach.

This careful positive sentiment was shattered by the outbreak of war between the United States, Israel, and Iran, which initially brought some hope for the elimination of the regime of Russia's biggest ally. Iran transferred its Shahed drone technology to Russia, which now produces them domestically at scale and it is these drones that have been responsible for thousands of civilian deaths in Ukraine.

Observing the development of the war, most experts agree that it is bringing negative consequences for Ukraine. The most pressing question is: to what extent will the war in the Middle East influence the war in Ukraine - across the battlefield, the geopolitical landscape, and the energy and economic dimension?

To assess these perspectives, this article draws on exclusive interviews with Keir Giles, Senior Fellow at Chatham House and Michel Don Michaloliakos, founder and Geopolitical and Geoeconomic analyst at HIG.

As Keir Giles summarised -

"There's good news and there is bad news — and that is for both sides of this conflict. For both Russia and Ukraine, there are disadvantages, and there are opportunities."

MILITARY PERSPECTIVE

The most immediate and measurable impact of the Iran war on Ukraine is the effect on air defence munitions. Only in the first 3 days of active US-Israeli operations, Gulf states and American forces used approximately 800 Patriot interceptor missiles, compared to the roughly 600 PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles Ukraine has received across the entire four years of full-scale. This highlights the difference in the resource management from the Gulf countries together with the United States, which brings harm to Ukraine's long-term air defence posture. Even though the country is actively using its brand new interceptor drone technology, it is struggling to fully replace the speed and precision of the autonomous missile defence systems.

With the shift of attention to the Iran war, the country now looks at the potential deficit of the PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles that the country would not be able to get even with the European funds. Ukraine can also forget about the opportunity of getting long-range Tomahawk missiles, since the American stocks of them seem to be running out. Keir Giles captures the broader consequence:

"The United States is firing off precision guided munitions at vast rates in excess of what has been supplied to Ukraine. All of these are detrimental to the future survival not just of Ukraine but also of Europe."

On a more positive note, this war has shown that Ukraine is an established military player that has its battle-tested autonomous technologies up for development. From there comes a demand from the Gulf states to buy them and it brings economic opportunities to Ukraine.



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During his so-called “whirlwind” tour to the Middle East, Ukrainian President Zelenskyy has already [signed bilateral defence agreements](#) with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and UAE. These treaties are long term and concluded in a way to be beneficial for both parties. Having them, Ukraine can share its drone technology that is tested in the real time, while the Gulf states can financially invest in the technology, bringing innovation and getting protection for their own. Over the span of the full-scale war, Ukraine has developed a variety of affordable drones that are not only traditional air threat interceptors. [According to Zelenskyy](#), they are taking a systematic approach, encompassing electronic warfare and naval drones. Ukraine has been quite successful with the latter in its fight for domination in the Black sea without having such a strong fleet, but using drones like [Magura-V5](#) that can be controlled from the base and strike faraway targets.

ENERGY PERSPECTIVE

From an energy and economic perspective, this war brings huge gains for Russia. The disruption of the Strait of Hormuz is now bringing back the interest for Russian crude oil and LNG. According to Michaloliakos, this is a double-edged sword for Russia: higher oil and gas prices and expanded export markets benefit the Kremlin, but they also accelerate the erosion of the sanctions regime.

The United States has weakened its sanctions by [issuing a 30-Day Sanctions Waiver](#) for Purchase of Russian Oil at Sea, but the pressure does not only exist in Washington. Since the blockade of the Strait, multiple countries in East Asia are now considering buying Russian. The clearest example of this is India, that [reduced](#) Russian crude imports from a peak of approximately 1.5 million barrels per day to around 400.000 barrels per day under US sanctions pressure in early 2026, however, reversed course almost immediately after the start of the conflict with imports surging to over 1 million barrels per day in the first weeks of March.

[The Philippines](#) has purchased approximately 2.48 million barrels of Russian crude amid the conflict, having lost access to the Middle Eastern supply when the Strait closed. [Thailand](#) is actively preparing to open the talks on purchasing Russian oil, emboldened by the US sanctions lifting. [Japan](#), which sourced 94% of its oil from the Middle East in 2025, is under some supply pressure, with reports that the country will “consider” Russian crude imports, which is a notable shift from a Ukraine supporting G7 member. Receiving an additional 150 million dollars from oil exports a day, with a potential of this amount going up, Russia is coming back to the world stage as a critical supplier of fossil fuels.

European countries, that already have gone through an energy crisis in 2022, are so far gripping tight for not fueling the Russian economy with buying its resources. According to Michaloliakos, all the major players like France, the UK or Germany are not likely to ease up the sanctions for Russian resources, aligning with EU’s Energy Commissioner Dan Jørgensen statement:

“There is no road back to dependency on Russian energy”

However, the debate from the non-Ukraine supporting EU member states like Slovakia and previously Hungary, has now become more relevant and is spreading towards the Western Europe as well. Even though he later backtracked from it, the [Belgian Prime Minister](#) has called a quick deal between Russia and Ukraine that would result in renewing the exports of the fossil fuels – by doing this he brought out the somewhat marginalised narrative amongst Ukraine supporters to the surface. Even though the talks over buying Russian oil are now intensified, a month has passed since the start of the crisis and Europe still stands strong – this points to the progress towards abolishing Russian dependence that the Union has achieved in the past 4 years.



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GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Looking at the geopolitical perspective, the war in the Middle East is definitely shifting attention from the Russian war in Ukraine around the world and the redistribution of already weakened support from Washington.

As of now, Ukraine receives most of its weapons via the PURL program, meaning European allies purchasing ammunition from the US and providing it to Ukraine. Because of its struggles in the Middle East, recently Pentagon stated that it considers diverting the existing flow of weapons from Ukraine towards its operations in the Middle East, having struck 9,000 targets over the span of the war. The Pentagon has notified Congress on its intention to divert about \$750 million funded by NATO countries through the PURL program to restock the U.S. military's own inventories, defining Washington's priorities. The conflict also showcases the intentions of the US regarding Russia, when they are willing to lift sanctions and let the partners buy Russian oil as soon as it is convenient. This demonstrates to what extent Washington is willing to compromise with Moscow, even though the latter is now assisting Iran in drone technology usage and sharing intelligence.

According to Keir Giles, the attention of the European counterparts will definitely be kept on Ukraine, as it is Europe's own threat.

Having observed the conflict for more than a month already, we can clearly see that even though Russia is backing Iran in some aspects, it was not able to support the Islamic regime comprehensively. The same happened with the US intervention into Venezuela - Putin was not able to support a fellow dictator in any way. This way, Russia turns into a regional leader instead of a great power, losing its influence around the world, and now specifically in the Middle East, where except for the fragile help to Iran, the country has lost influence over Assad's regime in Syria last year. Strategically, because of focusing all its will and effort on the war in Ukraine, Putin is losing its key hubs of influence around the world, and sometimes oil does not help to restore these relations.

For Ukraine, none of this will bring immediate and fundamental change, however, the stronger Russia is, the more challenges the Ukrainian military, society and economy is facing.

CONCLUSION

The war in the Middle East has not fundamentally changed Russia's war against Ukraine, but it has tightened the constraints on many dimensions. Munitions stocks have less missiles for Ukraine, American strategic attention is away from Ukraine, and Russian oil revenues started recovering its economy at the point when everybody thought it was at its lowest.

These past 6 weeks have also demonstrated that Ukraine is becoming increasingly relevant in the defence field, being able to share its experience and technology with others. Multiple defence agreements with Gulf states and deployment of the experts to American bases demonstrate the ability of Ukraine to translate its skills into leverage, and the time will show how much impact the country can make in the current security state in the world and in Europe.

For Ukraine itself, this war has not become a turning point or a drastic change at the front or in the air, where the country has been forced to rely more heavily on its own interceptor-drone technology in the absence of consistent US support. The consequences highly depend on the duration of the blockade of Hormuz and the economic crisis that could follow - the Ukrainian economy, which is highly subsidised by the European countries, would weaken even more, while Russia could keep on benefiting from its oil industry.