

# INTERNATIONAL BALANCE SHEET 2021- 2022: THE WAR IN UKRAINE CLOUDS EVERYTHING



PHOTO:

**74-year-old Jeana had to leave her home and take refuge in the subway in Kharkov (Ukraine). Her house was destroyed by Russian bombing on March 3, 2022.**

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agreement**

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

First it was the COVID-19 global pandemic, and then the impact of the new fall of Afghanistan into the hands of the Taliban, now it is the war in Ukraine that has captured the world's attention. And it does so with the same effect as on so many other occasions when, unfortunately, the **entire international agenda seems to be reduced to a single issue**, on which debates, analyses, and more or less successful responses are concentrated. Meanwhile, **the rest of these unresolved issues on the agenda, which drag on year after year, are diluted in an increasingly invisible fog in which, paradoxically, the lack of will and inaction to deal with them in a resolute manner shine through.**

Both the **economic and political models**, social market economy and parliamentary democracy, respectively, **seem to have reached their limits**, subject to a deterioration accumulated over decades, and incapable of resolving the problems that their very application has generated, however many positive contributions they have historically made to the well-being and security of a large part of the planet. Added to this is an international order with clear imbalances and limitations in managing the current forces of globalization. An order that, although it claims to be guided by values and principles that are valid for the whole of humanity, responds rather to the defense of very particular interests by those who have had the opportunity, after the end of the Second World War, to impose it in their own image and likeness with the clear intention of preserving their hegemony over any possible rival. And today this has its own name: the United States - determined to maintain its position as world leader - and China - the clearest candidate for the same position. The result is a global competition that defines much of today's agenda and points towards greater levels of tension, with the Indo-Pacific now the main centre of gravity in world affairs.

Meanwhile, we continue to pay the consequences of the dysfunctions caused by these models and this competition between global powers, while waiting for alternative models to emerge, before it is too late, that will make it possible to overcome nationalist resentments and double standards when it comes to attending to the common needs of the 8 billion people who already inhabit the Earth. The diagnosis of the ills that afflict us is well known, as is the perception that, as Pepe Mujica, former Uruguayan president, has just reminded us, "we are not in an era of change, but in a change of era". **What is still lacking, therefore, is the political will to adopt the necessary measures to change a course that endangers the existence of the human species on this planet.**

# 2

## UKRAINE OMNIPRESENT

This short-sightedness has started again on 24 February, when the war in Ukraine began, a new chapter of a war that began in 2014. There can be little doubt when it comes to describing Vladimir Putin's decision: it is a violation of international law, to which have been added repeated violations of international humanitarian law and the most basic rules of warfare, with deliberate actions directed against civilians, using prohibited tactics and weapons. This opens

up a wide field for debate and speculation on the motivations, responsibilities and objectives of each of the actors involved more or less directly in the war and, likewise, on the prospects for the future.

Ukraine is fighting for its existence as a sovereign state, aware that Russia wants it to disappear as such. The unequal balance of power might have initially led Putin to believe that victory was within his grasp without too much effort, given Kyiv's weak response to his first strike (Crimea, 2014) and the West's unwillingness to move from words of condemnation to deeds. In a chain of mistakes that continues to grow - from overestimating his military strength to underestimating Ukrainian forces, to his belief that Western countries would not be able to unite in applying increasingly tough sanctions - Putin has become bogged down in a war scenario in which he has had to scale back his objectives, forced by a reality that, also, does not allow us to imagine that Volodymyr Zelensky can claim victory either.

This means that the end of the war is not around the corner. On the contrary, once Zelensky, thanks mainly to the economic support and arms supplies provided by the United States and other Western countries, has managed to seize the initiative on the battlefield, it is **foreseeable that the violence will continue indefinitely in an escalation that could lead to unmanageable situations**. Sadly, none of the main actors in this tragedy are now committed to ending it; or, in other words, **there is no hint of any negotiation on the horizon to reach peace agreement**.

As far as Putin is concerned, it is clear that he is ready to multiply efforts to eliminate Ukraine's existence as an independent state or, at the very least, to fragment it definitively (this is the aim of the declaration of the annexation of the regions of Kherson, Zaporizhzhia, Donetsk and Lugansk to the Russian Federation, proclaimed on 30 September). It is in this vein that one must understand his call for the defense industry to meet all military needs, his decision to carry out a general mobilization doomed to disaster, and the advisory farce in the four regions mentioned above, even if they are only partially occupied by Russian troops. All of this without forgetting his repeated nuclear threats.

It is also obvious that **Zelensky**, who continues to insistently demand more and better weapons, **is forced to go to war**. Finally, Kyiv's main allies are also in the same position, with Washington at the forefront. Suffice it to recall that the US defence secretary's own stated goal is to weaken Russia to the point where it will be impossible for it to do anything similar again. And right now Ukraine is the most functional instrument for that purpose. It follows that they are willing to continue providing economic and military aid to Kyiv, seeking not only to degrade Russia's military power on the battlefield but also to leave Russia prostrate for a long time to come.

Seen in this light, both sides seem determined to continue the fight, as it is not clear if either can win a conclusive victory and that Putin, increasingly desperate, sees nuclear weapons not merely as instruments of deterrence but also as punitive forces. And while for the moment the violence is only directly affecting Ukraine, especially punishing the Ukrainian citizenry, **the war's capacity to contaminate is already being felt far beyond, be it in the form of an energy crisis, rising prices, or general uncertainty**.

An uncertainty that, however, does not seem to affect military spending, given that there is already an **immediate increase in**

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**defence budgets and this trend will surely only increase in the coming years.** According to the SIPRI Yearbook<sup>1</sup>, **global military spending in 2021 rose to \$2.113 trillion (equivalent to 2.2% of global GDP)**, setting a new all-time high and continuing the upward trend since 2015. As usual, the United States is at the top of the list, both as the world's leading arms producer and exporter, absorbing 39% of the market, and as the hegemonic military power, with a total of 801 billion dollars (38% of the world total), followed by China (with 293 billion dollars in defence), which has continued uninterruptedly in its militaristic efforts to neutralise the US advantage for 27 years now. Together with India (76.6 billion dollars), the United Kingdom (68.4 billion dollars) and Russia (65.9 billion dollars), these five countries account for 62 per cent of the world's total defence spending.

### 3 AND THE REST

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## It has further increased the fragility of those who were already in vulnerable situations

At a glance at the international panorama that defines the period analysed in these pages, it is striking to note that 2021 began with two significant notes of hope: the disappearance of Donald Trump from the political scene, with the final twist of a fortunately unsuccessful assault on Congress, and the beginning of vaccination against the dreaded coronavirus. This hope was immediately countered by the clear perception that the so-called "developed" countries were hoarding these vaccines, in a clear sign of lack of solidarity and blindness, failing to understand that we were facing a planetary emergency from which there was no way out except by joining forces for the benefit of all. As a result, **the fragility of those who were already in vulnerable situations**, whether as a result of a violent conflict, a natural threat, or the simple abandonment of people and territories considered "irrelevant" by the prevailing geo-economic and geopolitical model, has increased even more. And today, when the pandemic unfortunately continues to strike in many corners of the planet, dozens of countries have still not achieved a minimally acceptable level of vaccination.

On 1 February 2021, the **coup d'état in Myanmar** started a new cycle that was joined in the same year by **Sudan** (twice), **Mali**, **Guinea-Conakry**, **Chad**, **Niger** and **Burkina Faso** (twice already in 2022). A downward trend of the previous two decades was thus broken, in a context of a growing deterioration of democratic models, also among Western countries (perceptible both in the aforementioned US case and in the more recent case of Giorgia Meloni's victory in Italy). As has also been the case in Mali and other African countries, although the coup leaders often present themselves as saviours of the homeland, they barely conceal their intention to defend corporate interests, leaving aside the demands of populations whose basic needs are systematically unsatisfied and whose lives are threatened.

Meanwhile, beyond Ukraine, the Escola de Cultura de Pau, in its Alert 2022 Report<sup>2</sup>, reports **32 active armed conflicts** in 2021, two fewer than in 2020. Once again, most of these were in Africa (15)

1 SIPRI (2022). "SIPRI Yearbook 2022: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security." <https://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2022>

2 Escola de Cultura de Pau (2022) "Alert 2022! Report on Conflict, Human Rights and Peacebuilding." <https://escolapau.uab.cat/publicaciones/alerta-informe-sobre-conflictos-derechos-humanos-y-construccion-de-paz/>

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## There are more than 100 million forcibly displaced people

and Asia (9), followed by the Middle East (5), Europe (2) and the Americas (1), with high-intensity armed conflicts accounting for more than half (53%) of all cases worldwide for the first time in a decade<sup>3</sup>. In addition to these figures, there were 98 theatres of tension around the world (three more than a year earlier), with Africa again in the lead (40), followed by Asia (24), the Americas (12 each) and Europe and the Middle East (11 each). A disturbing balance, in short, that shows the widespread disregard for the call made in March 2020 by UN Secretary-General António Guterres for a generalised ceasefire following the outbreak of the pandemic.

This image of manifest conflict is exacerbated by the growing number of refugees and forcibly displaced persons in different regions of the world. Figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that by the end of 2022, there were 103 million displaced persons, of whom 32.5 million were refugees (26.7 million under the UNHCR mandate and 5.8 million Palestinians under the protection and assistance of UNRWA), another 60.2 million were internally displaced, 5.3 million were asylum seekers and 4.4 million were citizens leaving Venezuela in various legal situations.

The war in Ukraine has, of course, pushed these numbers even higher - with estimates of some eight million people having crossed the border into its neighbours and more than six million forced to move to other locations within the country - resulting in a current volume of **more than 100 million forcibly displaced people**. And it is worth recalling once again that, contrary to the image sometimes conveyed in some Western opinion circles, **it is not the developed countries that are bearing the brunt of this burden**. Thus, the Caribbean island of Aruba hosts the largest number of Venezuelans displaced abroad (one in six), while Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees (one in eight), followed by Curaçao (one in 10), Jordan (one in 14) and Turkey (one in 23).

The positive counterpoint to this dark picture comes from the **Global Terrorism Index 2022<sup>4</sup>** which, in its latest edition, shows a **1.2% decrease in the number of fatalities caused by terrorist attacks worldwide in 2021**. The resulting total figure is 7,142 people, which is only a third of the number recorded in 2015. This does not detract from the fact that the number of terrorist attacks has increased over the same period to 5,226 (17% more than in 2020). Overall, 86 countries have seen an improvement in the threat compared to a year earlier and only 19 have seen a worsening of the threat, with 44 countries reporting at least one deadly attack (43 a year earlier) and 105 countries reporting none (the best figure since 2007). This does not mean, of course, that the threat has disappeared - the Sahel, Afghanistan, and Myanmar are good examples of the remaining capacity of groups such as Daesh, the Taliban, and Al Qaeda - but it does reiterate that it is by no means the main threat to human security. This qualification corresponds very clearly to both the climate emergency and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The former COP26<sup>5</sup>, held in Glasgow at the end of 2021, has once again served as a showcase to confirm

3 Cameroon (Ambazonia/Northwest and Southwest), Ethiopia (Tigray), Mali, Mozambique (North), Lake Chad Region (Boko Haram), Western Sahel Region, CAR, DRC (East), DRC (East-ADF), Somalia, Sudan (Darfur), South Sudan, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

4 IEP (2022). "Global Terrorism Index 2022: Measuring the impact of terrorism." <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GTI-2022-web-09062022.pdf>

5 <https://www.un.org/es/climatechange/cop26>

the insufficient political will of national governments to meet their own commitments. However ambitious some appear to be - such as the members of the European Union who present themselves as being ahead of the curve in this area, trying to pressure others such as China, India or the United States to implement an energy transition that has long since become imperative (unless they impose a suicidal attitude) - it is a fact that, at least for the moment, they have not managed to overcome the reluctance of those who deny the climate crisis or remain trapped in a model subordinated to interests that are reluctant to change. It is foreseeable that the war in Ukraine, which is exacerbating a serious crisis in the gas and oil fields, will end up provoking a backlash towards coal and nuclear energy, further slowing down the adoption of measures that would promote a real change of model.

In the field of **weapons of mass destruction**, not only has there been no progress since the entry into force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (January 2021) - which none of the nine nuclear powers or any NATO country has joined - but the **war in Ukraine is once again fuelling their possible use**. It is enough to understand that Russia will not emerge empty-handed from Ukraine to conclude that the closer it comes to suffering an unbearable defeat for the Kremlin, the closer the time will come when nuclear weapons could become a real option.

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## **We are witnessing a marked weakening of the regulatory framework for arms control and nuclear disarmament**

This fear is in no way diminished by the fact that China, the United States, France, the United Kingdom and Russia decided on 3 January 2022 to publish a joint communiqué<sup>6</sup> in which, as supposed champions of world peace, they say they are committed to preventing a nuclear war - which, they insist, no one can win - and to curbing the proliferation of the most destructive device ever created by the human mind. In this vein, they proclaim their intention to do whatever is necessary to prevent such a war from ever being waged and, as if the communiqué itself were a balm of Fierabrás, they are convinced that from this point onwards a phase of easing international tensions (Russia dixit) and greater international collaboration and cooperation (according to Beijing) will begin.

The stark reality, however, is that **we are witnessing a marked weakening of the regulatory framework for arms control and nuclear disarmament** established primarily during the Cold War. This worrying situation is compounded by the fact that, although it is true that there are far fewer nuclear warheads in existence today than at the height of the Cold War (some 13,000 compared to more than 60,000), none of the nine existing nuclear powers is not committed to modernising and even expanding its arsenals, as in the case of the UK. To think that a world without nuclear weapons is nevertheless just around the corner or that **nuclear war is more unlikely today than ever before** is simply a vain attempt to flee from a reality that Putin is once again branding with fire.

Meanwhile, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not only slipping into languid neglect, but are under direct attack on several fronts. The latest data suggest that the pandemic has negatively altered the Agenda in virtually all areas. While it remains to be seen how far the damaging impact of the war in Ukraine will also be felt, concern is growing about the possibility of effectively meeting the goals set for the end of this decade without substantial changes in current patterns of

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<sup>6</sup> Full press release: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/01/03/p5-statement-on-preventing-nuclear-war-and-avoiding-arms-races/>



behaviour at both the individual and collective levels.

This was pointed out by the UN<sup>7</sup> as early as last May, when it noted that **biodiversity loss and continued environmental degradation are not being sufficiently countered by policy action** that, in general, continues to fall short. As the most recent SDG progress report<sup>8</sup> notes, the problem starts with the fact that, despite some progress, serious data gaps persist in SDG monitoring. In addition, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and the upward trend in inflation are slowing down the effort, to the **extent that the number of people living below the extreme poverty line is increasing** (676 million instead of the 581 million initially estimated for this year), **as well as the number of those suffering from hunger or chronic malnutrition and the number of children out of school.**

As if that were not enough, the anti-globalisation movements have made the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs a direct target of their criticism from radical ultra-nationalist positions, refusing to admit any kind of supranational authority over and above that of the state, as if it were not clear enough that no country can have the slightest hope of succeeding in the global challenges that affect us. They understand that, instead of addressing the major socio-economic and environmental challenges of our age, the aim of their promoters is to destroy the middle classes, liquidate the sovereignty of nations and attack the family and life.

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**We could face a worsening of the already precarious levels of welfare and security for humanity as a whole**

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### PROVISIONAL CLOSURE

**The period under review is inevitably ending with a high degree of uncertainty**, with an international order that is in disarray everywhere, unable to adequately manage a globalisation that has shown its perverse effects both in terms of growing inequality and climate unsustainability, and with an unheeded alarm of famine and humanitarian catastrophe affecting a large part of the African continent.

Moreover, the development of the war in Ukraine, already in the midst of Russia's escalation to avoid by all means an unfavourable outcome for its militarist adventure, may well take us into a scenario that has not been seen since the end of World War II. And if the worst predictions are confirmed (be it the use of nuclear weapons by Moscow or a Chinese attack on Taiwan), **we could find ourselves in a situation that radically overturns all current parameters and frameworks for action, further worsening the already precarious levels of well-being and security not only of Europeans but of humanity as a whole.** Let us hope that this does not happen.

7 UNEP(2021). "Measuring Progress: Environment and the SDGs." <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/measuring-progress-environment-and-sdgs>

8 UN (2022). "Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022." [https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022\\_Spanish.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2022_Spanish.pdf)