

The Impact of Russo-Ukrainian War on South Asia: An Afghan Perspective

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Abstract

The Russo-Ukrainian War has had a global impact on financial markets, commodity prices and military alliances. Initially, for the West to assume Russia would be negligent of its security interests following the Cold War, was a major mistake. The whole world, including South Asia, is now paying a price. As such, this paper looks at the impacts of the Russo-Ukrainian War on South Asia from an Afghan perspective given the fact that Afghanistan has the longest engagement with its neighbour in the north, besides being an integral part of the SAARC. The paper argues that the Russo-Ukrainian War entails negative consequences for South Asian stability — with a particular focus on the situation in Afghanistan — and the region's economies. The paper also suggests that the Russo-Ukrainian War will impact alliance politics variably in South Asia, depending on each country's interests. Similarly, the paper notes that both Pakistan and India can learn invaluable lessons with respect to the use of modern technology such as surveillance drones in conventional warfare during the 21st century. Finally, the paper concludes by noting that no amount of trade and economic

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interdependence can prevent interstate wars, should one's security interests be compromised.

Keywords: Russia, Mistake, Impact, Afghan Perspective, Negative Consequences, Drones, Trade and Economic Interdependence.

Introduction

To begin with, it is important to look at the events that unfolded in Russia's relationship with the West after the collapse of the Soviet Union that eventually led to the current crisis. Analysing these events has key implications for South Asia and will help it prepare better solutions for similar crises in the future. The collapse of the Soviet Union and other Communist regimes in Eastern Europe in the late 1989-92 presented the West (the US and the European Community, which rebranded itself as the European Union -- EU -- in 1993) with a unique opportunity to spread the benefits of liberal ideas in Eastern Europe. In the mid-to late 1990s and 2000s, both the EU¹ and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)² managed to expand their multiple presence eastward, reaching the western borders of the Russian Federation as early as 1995, when Finland joined the EU.³ Russia itself, however, did not qualify or possibly was less enthusiastic about joining the EU or NATO. The EU itself has strict economic and political criteria, including "a stable democracy and the rule of law, a functioning market economy and the acceptance of all EU legislation" that aspiring candidates need to meet.⁴ The NATO too, has similar conditions for eager parties desirous of joining it, including "a commitment to the peaceful resolution of conflicts."⁵ During the 1990 and early 2000s, Russia was involved in a civil war in Chechnya. Additionally, the Russian economy in the 1990s and early 2000s was also struggling, and the country received billions of dollars in

¹ "40 Years of EU Enlargements," *EU Parliament*, accessed September 10, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/external/html/euenlargement/default_en.htm.

² "Enlargement and Article 10," *NATO*, July 6, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.

³ "40 Years of EU Enlargements," *The EU Parliament*, accessed September 10, 2022, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/external/html/euenlargement/default_en.htm.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Enlargement and Article 10," *NATO*, July 6, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49212.htm.

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loans from the World Bank.⁶ Thus, President Vladimir Putin's interest in joining NATO notwithstanding,⁷ it was unlikely that Russia would have met the NATO or EU preconditions concerning economic development and political stability. Having said that, there were other ways for the West and Russia to deepen their relationship. In 1997, Russia and the EU signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), aiming "to promote trade and investment, as well as to develop mutually beneficial economic relations."⁸

In addition to seeking economic benefits from engagement with Russia, the liberals in Europe thought that integrating Russia's economy with that of Europe would be mutually beneficial to both sides, and might also reduce the risk of future conflicts between Europe and Russia.⁹ The 19th century French liberal economist Frédéric Bastiat had famously claimed that "if goods don't cross borders, soldiers will."¹⁰ The Frenchman, of course, is not alone. The capitalist liberals, albeit with little empirical

⁶ Andrea Shalal, "World Bank halts all programs in Russia, Belarus," Reuters, March 2, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/world-bank-halts-all-programs-russia-belarus-with-immediate-effect-2022-03-02/>.

⁷ Jennifer Rankin, "Ex-Nato head says Putin wanted to join alliance early on in his rule," *The Guardian*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/04/ex-nato-head-says-putin-wanted-to-join-alliance-early-on-in-his-rule>.

⁸ "Russia: EU trade relations with Russia. Facts, figures and latest developments," The European Commission, accessed September 11, 2022, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/russia_en#:~:text=Trade%20picture&text=In%202020%2C%20the%20EU%20was,amounted%20to%20%E2%82%AC257.5%20billion.

⁹ Dov Lynch, "Russia's Strategic Partnership with Europe," *The Institute for Security Studies*, accessed on September 11, 2022, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/analy077.pdf>.

¹⁰ Julian Adorney, "Want peace? Promote free trade," *The Hinrich Foundation*, September 10, 2022, <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/tradevistas/sustainable/trade-and-peace/>

evidence, have long maintained the line that countries that trade are far less likely to raid one another.¹¹

By 2010, the EU had concluded that Russia was its strategic partner.¹² By 2020, the EU had become “Russia’s first trade partner,” and their annual bilateral trade amounted to around US\$ 250 billion.¹³ In the process, the EU (as well as NATO) member states have become heavily dependent on Russian oil and gas.¹⁴ While Russia was happy with selling oil and gas to the West, it particularly did not like NATO’s eastward expansion. Russia especially could not afford to see Ukraine -- given its strategic location and historical relationship with Russia -- as a NATO member, although the prospects of Ukraine’s joining NATO were always grim. At face value, Ukraine’s admission into NATO would have deprived Russia of its Black Sea Naval Fleet -- the only warm water naval port -- at Sevastopol, Crimea, which Russia used to lease from Ukraine until 2014. Russia made its first chessboard move by annexing Crimea in 2014 when protestors in Kyiv toppled the pro-Russian Ukrainian government of President Viktor Yanukovich.

¹¹ Philippe Martin, Thierry Mayer, and Mathias Thoenig, “Make Trade Not War?” *The Review of Economic Studies*, (2008) 75, 865–900, accessed September 11, 2022, <https://www.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/docs/koenig-pamina/martinmayerthoenig.pdf>.

¹² Mira Milosevich, “Russia’s Westpolitik and the European Union,” *The Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 8, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-westpolitik-and-european-union>.

¹³ “Russia: EU trade relations with Russia. Facts, figures and latest developments,” *The European Commission*, accessed September 11, 2022, https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/russia_en#:~:text=Trade%20picture&text=In%202020%2C%20the%20EU%20was,amounted%20to%20%E2%82%AC257.5%20billion.

¹⁴ Ryan Haddad, “How Russia hooked Europe on its oil and gas – and overcame US efforts to prevent energy dependence on Moscow,” *the Conversation*, February 12, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/how-russia-hooked-europe-on-its-oil-and-gas-and-overcame-us-efforts-to-prevent-energy-dependence-on-moscow-174518>.

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Since 2014, the West -- while still conducting business with Moscow -- has been imposing incremental sanctions on Russia.¹⁵ Russia was aware that in case of her invasion of Ukraine, the West would impose debilitating sanctions on it which could have the potential to damage the Russian economy. Russia, nonetheless, decided to invade Ukraine in February 2022, eight years after annexing Crimea, triggering the largest and longest inter-state conflict of the 21st century, with a ripple effect across the globe, including implications for South Asia.

Following this macro context, now we look at how the Russo-Ukrainian war continues to impact stability in South Asia. Secondly, we will attempt to locate the economic impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war on South Asia. Afterward, the paper will look at how the Russo-Ukrainian war can impact alliance politics and future wars, especially between Pakistan and India. Toward the end, some recommendations are offered.

The Russo-Ukrainian War and South Asian Stability

Half a century ago, the Indus River was considered as the line dividing South and Central Asia. Although not acknowledged frequently, even a part of Pakistan to the right of the Indus is ecologically and demographically akin to in Central Asia, though there is no doubt that the Indus bestowed the collective identities as Hindustan, India and Hinduism. Afghanistan, thus, by default was considered a Central Asian country though occasionally it too was seen as a bridgehead between the two neighbouring terrains. With the passage of time, however, Afghanistan has also emerged as a South Asian country, joining the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) as a full member in April 2007.¹⁶ Given the impact of the conflict in Afghanistan on the rest of South Asia, as well as the level of commerce and cooperation between

¹⁵ "EU restrictive measures against Russia over Ukraine (since 2014)" *the European Council*, accessed September 10, 2022, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/>

¹⁶ "Afghanistan Formally Joins SAARC," *India Review*, May 5, 2007, <https://eoi.gov.in/kabul/?pdf0162?000>.

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Afghanistan and the rest of South Asia, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan, along with the Afghan exodus across the sub-continent, it is logical to conclude that today Afghanistan is an integral part of South Asia.

As part of South Asia, both Afghanistan's stability and instability are intricately linked with those of its neighbours to the east. A century ago, Allama Mohammad Iqbal had rightly observed that Afghanistan's prosperity and corruption would lead to Asia's prosperity and corruption, respectively.¹⁷ If Afghanistan remains unstable, South Asia cannot be stable as armed fighters, weapons, drugs, and refugees will continue to cross into Afghanistan and neighbouring countries. It is hard to completely seal Afghanistan's borders and contain the instability there. We have seen that one way or another, instability in Afghanistan has had a spillover effect on other South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan. The severity of the spillover in each country is dependent on its proximity to Afghanistan. Thus, since 1978, the Afghan conflict, in its various forms, has been a contributing factor towards continued instability in South Asia.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has diverted both attention and resources from Afghanistan to Ukraine.¹⁸ Unlike Afghanistan, Ukraine is in Europe -- a neighbour of Russia, NATO, and the EU. Compared to Afghanistan, any spillover effect from the Ukrainian crisis can reach NATO and the EU momentarily. Ukraine is also important to the West because it provides NATO with an opportunity to drag Russia into a war of attrition, inflicting heavy losses on its economy and military. Some analysts are already looking at the similarities between the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in

¹⁷ Prof. Dr. Asghar Aftab, "Millat Afghan da Aan Paikar Dil Ast," *Nawai Waqt (Urdu)*, accessed September 12, 2022, <https://www.nawaiwaqt.com.pk/06-Oct-2009/106123>.

¹⁸ Abubakar Siddique, "'We Are Desperate': War In Ukraine Diverting World's Attention From Afghan Humanitarian Crisis," *Gandhara, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, March 4, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/ukraine-war-diverting-attention-afghanistan/31736163.html>.

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1979, and the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War.¹⁹ In both cases, Moscow felt obliged to intervene militarily in a neighbouring country to shape events in its favour. Afghanistan proved a proverbial graveyard for the Soviet military. To this day one can see damaged Soviet tanks lying along highways across Afghanistan. The West may desire to achieve a similar outcome in Ukraine by pumping billions of dollars in military aid to Ukraine.

With the collapse of the US-funded Afghan National Army in August 2021, and the Taliban back in power, Afghanistan no longer attracts the attention of the so-called military industrial complex to sell weapons as Ukraine has replaced Afghanistan. Since President Joe Biden took office in January 2021, the West has delivered to Ukraine military aid worth US\$ 14 billion.²⁰

But these are not the only reasons the West's attention has turned to Ukraine. Despite widespread anti-racism campaigns in the West, there are still people in the West who are surprised to see white people fighting one another because they believe war is a commodity that is primarily consumed by non-White, non-European people in Asia and Africa. The CBS News correspondent Charlie D'Agata, for instance, captured part of the popular mood in the West when, referring to the Russo-Ukrainian War, declared: "This isn't a place, with all due respect, like Iraq or Afghanistan, that has seen conflict raging for decades... This is a relatively civilized, relatively European — I have to choose those words carefully too — city, one where you wouldn't expect that or hope that it's going to happen."²¹

¹⁹ Griff Witte, "In Putin's Ukraine quagmire, echoes of Soviet failure in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, April 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/02/ukraine-afghanistan-russia-parallels-quagmire/>

²⁰ "Arms Transfers to Ukraine," *Forum on the Arms Trade*, accessed September 10, 2022, <https://www.forumarmstrade.org/ukrainearms.html>.

²¹ Lorraine Ali, "In Ukraine reporting, Western press reveals grim bias toward 'people like us,'" *the Los Angeles Times*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2022-03-02/ukraine-russia-war-racism-media-middle-east>.

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In other words, part of the Western media, especially in the initial days of the war, was shaping a narrative that the sufferings of white people in Ukraine should be addressed and stopped immediately as they are unfamiliar with violence and chaos, unlike Afghanistan and Iraq where chaos has been the order of the day for decades. However, before issuing sweeping statements about more and less civilized societies, one only needs to look at the years between 1914 and 1945, to see how many millions were killed, wounded, disabled and displaced across Europe -- from Russia to Britain and from Norway to Greece -- during the two most devastating wars in humankind's history. The devastation and dastardly acts and their legacies were not just confined to Atlantic regions, as the rest of the world suffered equally due to these intra-European conflicts.

Although the Taliban swept to power in August 2021, and the Afghan conflict ended at face value, there are several key issues, including the ongoing economic crisis that needs to be dealt with on an urgent basis. For instance, according to the United Nations (UN), out of Afghanistan's estimated population of 40 million, 25 million people live in poverty.²² The Taliban's rigidity and exclusive approach to governance, where all key positions are occupied by the Taliban themselves, has discouraged the international community, including neighbouring countries, from bestowing diplomatic recognition upon it. As such, the Taliban regime is under US and UN sanctions, and cut off from the international financial system. To keep Afghanistan on life support, the international community delivers so-called humanitarian assistance to vulnerable Afghans through non-Taliban channels. The current course of pumping in cash (or aid) to Afghanistan on a monthly basis is not the right solution to the decades' long problems. It will continue to keep Afghanistan dependent on donors. The international community, especially the West that kept the war in Afghanistan going on for decades, is neither concerned enough nor does it want to commit its resources to find a durable solution to the Afghan problem.

²² Imran Danish, "OCHA: 25 Million Afghans Currently Live in Poverty," *Tolo News*, August 12, 2022, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-179366>.

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Similarly, Ukraine's more than seven million refugees²³ across Europe and beyond are receiving more resources and attention than Afghanistan's nearly three million refugees, who are mostly in Pakistan and Iran.²⁴ The diversion of resources from Afghanistan may also in part be due to the fact that the country is also suffering from donor fatigue, a syndrome where donors are no longer interested in assisting it as the predicament persists unendingly for decades now. Despite the donor fatigue aspect to consider, there is no denying the fact that Ukraine has diverted attention and resources at a critical time from Afghanistan, where deteriorating economic conditions can turn the country into a fertile ground for terrorist recruitment. For instance, the Islamic State can easily attract unemployed and dissatisfied Afghans to its ranks. Besides, continued economic hardship and a ban on girls' secondary education have the potential to force millions of Afghans to become refugees in neighbouring countries of Pakistan. They already have their own economic problems and are no longer able and willing to host a large number of new refugees. The lack of global attention towards Afghanistan also gives the Taliban a freer hand to play domestic politics more exclusively, including adopting more rigid policies and suppressing dissent without regard for the international community. Therefore, the Russo-Ukrainian War, in that sense transmits serious consequences for South Asian stability.

The Russo-Ukrainian War and South Asian Economies

The Russo-Ukrainian War has received immense attention in terms of how it has driven up commodity prices globally along with causing serious food shortages and an energy crisis. The World Bank states that the War will "cause biggest price shock in 50 years" and certainly the multiple forms of its impact have already reached every home and hearth.²⁵ Like other regions, especially in the Global South, this entails

²³ "Operational Data Portal," *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, accessed on September 12, 2022, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine>.

²⁴ "Afghanistan," *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, accessed on September 12, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html>.

²⁵ Jonathan Josephs, "Ukraine war to cause biggest price shock in 50 years - World Bank," *BBC News*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61235528>.

bad news for South Asians at large. On the one hand, South Asian economies “are consumption-based with food and oil accounting for half the consumption expenditure”²⁶ while concurrently, both Russia and Ukraine are major exporters of important consumer commodities such as wheat, vegetables, grain, gas and petroleum (especially Russia in the latter case). Ifitkhar Ali Malik, the SAARC Chamber of Commerce President, believes that “the direct impact [of the Russo-Ukrainian War] on South Asia would mainly occur through trade linkages, particularly through rising commodity prices as the region is a net importer of {these} commodities.”²⁷ For instance, although Pakistan is self-sufficient in rice production, it imports wheat worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year from both Russia and Ukraine.²⁸ Therefore, higher oil prices or supply disruption on the part of Russia and Ukraine with respect to exporting wheat to Pakistan will drive the wheat price further higher in Pakistan as is evident from food prices across the Indus lands. They had to make special exemptions for Sub-Saharan Africa to resume wheat supplies amidst the war mainly to avoid a near-famine situation in the continent.

In all fairness, most South Asian economies -- except for India and until lately Bangladesh, which have healthier foreign reserves -- were not in a

²⁶ “Effects of Russia-Ukraine conflict on Asian Economies,” *the Hindustan Times*, May 23, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-insight/economy/effects-of-russia-ukraine-conflict-on-asian-economies-101653290378940.html>.

²⁷ “Russia-Ukraine war to hurt South Asian economies,” *the Express Tribune*, May 3, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2355154/russia-ukraine-war-to-hurt-south-asian-economies>.

²⁸ “Pakistan & Ukraine bilateral trade,” *The Observatory of Economic Complexity*, accessed September 13, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/pak/partner/ukr#:~:text=M%20in%202020.-,In%202020%2C%20Ukraine%20exported%20%24573M%20to%20Pakistan%20&Pakistand%20Russia%20bilateral%20trade,the%20Observatory%20of%20Economic%20Complexity,accessed%20September%2013,%202022,https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/pak/partner/rus>.

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healthier shape even before the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War.²⁹ The main reason being COVID-19 pandemic, which had stupendously impacted South Asian economies. For instance, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Nepal, and Bhutan, which relied on tourism for earning foreign reserves, began facing economic hardship of varying degrees even before the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, with Sri Lanka finally defaulting on “its external debt obligations” in April 2022.³⁰

In the same vein, the Pakistani rupee “has lost 24% of its value against the dollar” while “foreign-exchange reserves have shrunk by more than half, to just over \$9bn, about six weeks’ worth of imports.”³¹ Earlier this year, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) predicted that Pakistan’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth would be 4% in 2022, compared to 5.6% last year.³² The ADB advised structural reforms as a “key to accelerating growth in Pakistan.”³³ Keeping in mind the fact that Pakistan has had to ask the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a rescue package every few years is indicative of the fact that its economy needs fundamental structural reforms to stand on its own feet, in order to escape this perpetual dependency.

No matter what the reason, the public anywhere does not like economic crises. In fact, economic crises at times have provided the public with an opportunity to vent its anger at the governments to the extent of even toppling them. For instance, in December 2010 Mohamed Bouazizi “a Tunisian fruit and vegetable vendor set himself on fire in the town of Sidi

²⁹ Gareth Price, “South Asia suffers from fallout of Russia’s actions,” *Chatham House*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2022/04/south-asia-suffers-fallout-russias-actions>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Pakistan may be able to avoid a full-blown economic crisis,” *The Economist*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2022/07/28/pakistan-may-be-able-to-avoid-a-full-blown-economic-crisis>

³² “Structural Reforms Key to Accelerating Growth in Pakistan,” *The Asian Development Bank*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.adb.org/news/structural-reforms-key-accelerating-growth-pakistan-ADB>.

³³ Ibid.

Bouazid and triggered the Arab Spring.”³⁴ In July 2022, fed up with the rising inflation and economic hardship, Sri Lankans took matters in their own hands, and toppled their government.

The recent floods have made matters worse for Pakistan, with economic losses amounting to US\$ 18 billion.³⁵ The floods have also negatively affected the agricultural sector in Pakistan, “wiping out more than 8 million acres of crops and displacing more than 33 million people.”³⁶ Floods have particularly impacted the cotton crop, destroying “45% of the cotton output.”³⁷ This means next year Pakistan will have to possibly spend billions of dollars on importing cotton for its textile mills. With foreign reserves already shrunk by more than half, Pakistan will have a daunting task ahead. If flood water does not recede in time from the agricultural fields, “it can cause serious issues for wheat sowing” as well,³⁸ implying that Pakistan might need to import more wheat next year for which its traditional source -- Ukraine -- is already in the doldrums owing to the ongoing hostilities.

³⁴ Thessa Lageman, “Remembering Mohamed Bouazizi: The man who sparked the Arab Spring,” *Aljazeera English*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/17/remembering-mohamed-bouazizi-his-death-triggered-the-arab>.

³⁵ “Economic losses in flood-hit Pakistan touches USD 18 billion: Reports,” *Business Standard*, September 24, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/economic-losses-in-flood-hit-pakistan-touches-usd-18-billion-reports-122090901003_1.html.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Faseeh Mangi, “Damage From Pakistan Floods Is ‘Far Greater’ Than \$10 Billion,” *Bloomberg*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-09-06/damage-from-pakistan-floods-is-far-greater-than-10-billion?leadSource=uverify%20wall>.

³⁸ “Economic losses in flood-hit Pakistan touches USD 18 billion: Reports,” *Business Standard*, September 24, 2022, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/economic-losses-in-flood-hit-pakistan-touches-usd-18-billion-reports-122090901003_1.html.

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The news coming out of Ukraine is not encouraging either. Due to a lack of support and funds from the Ukrainian government and the ongoing fighting in the south and east of the country, where most of the wheat fields are located, the Ukrainian wheat sowing area is expected to “fall by 30 to 40%” for the year 2023.³⁹ Thus, the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on South Asia, especially Pakistan, is not going to be limited to 2022. Around the world, including South Asia, countries that rely on Ukrainian wheat are going to be impacted by the Russo-Ukrainian war perhaps for the next few years.

Unlike Pakistan, India has found a silver lining in the Russo-Ukrainian war, especially the purchase of Russian oil at discounted rates. The Indian government has stated that it was buying Russian oil to manage inflation.⁴⁰ At present, India imports 12% to 13% of its oil from Russia, a spike from 2% before the Russo-Ukrainian war began in February 2022. Pakistan, however, does not have the facilities to process Russian crude oil,⁴¹ otherwise it possibly too could benefit from the discounted Russian oil. Additionally, in the case of Pakistan, buying Russian oil might also upset the US, and consequently impact Pakistan’s ability to receive assistance from the IMF. In comparison, India has a freer hand to act with regards to Russian oil.

The Taliban government in Afghanistan, while still at odds with the US over various issues, is moving closer to inking an agreement with Russia

³⁹ “Ukraine's 2023 wheat crop seen falling to 15 mln T -agrarian council,” *Reuters*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/ukraines-2023-wheat-crop-seen-falling-15-mln-t-agrarian-council-2022-09-01/>

⁴⁰ “India Says Russian Oil Imports Help Its Inflation Fight” *Asia Financial*, September 10, 2022, <https://www.asiafinancial.com/india-says-russian-oil-imports-help-its-inflation-fight>.

⁴¹ Asad Ullah Kamran, “Why aren’t we buying Russian oil?” *Pakistan Today*, June 20, 2022, <https://profit.pakistantoday.com.pk/2022/06/20/why-arent-we-buying-russian-oil/>.

for buying oil, gas, and wheat.⁴² As sanctioned entities by the US, both Russia and the Taliban are destined to conduct business with each other since they have been mostly cut off from the US-dominated global financial system. It is also an opportunity for Russia and the Taliban to demonstrate their independence by doing business in roubles. The Russo-Ukrainian war, the diversion of international attention and resources to the Ukrainian theatre notwithstanding, might prove to be a blessing in disguise for Afghanistan if it manages to buy Russian oil, gas, and wheat at discounted rates. However, deepening Taliban-Russian cooperation should not be construed as a sign of the Taliban's *de jure* recognition by Russia, which is still concerned about the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan.

Having faced economic hardships throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the IMF reported that the Maldives' "economic growth is gathering pace, supported by a strong recovery in tourism. While tourists from Russia have declined since the start of the war in Ukraine, strong arrivals from other countries in Europe have so far offset this decline."⁴³ Fears about Nepal repeating Sri Lanka's fate may be premature, because "unlike Sri Lanka, Nepal is witnessing an uptick in tourism and remittances and the Himalayan nation may survive the current financial crisis."⁴⁴ Thus, the trend in Nepal is encouraging, especially given that the country faced a similar situation last year, and was able to cope with it. Now with rising revenues from tourism, Nepal is in a better position to overcome its economic woes.

⁴² Mohammad Yunus Yawar and Charlotte Greenfield, "Taliban officials nearing contract for purchase of gasoline from Russia," *Reuters*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/taliban-officials-nearing-contract-purchase-gasoline-russia-2022-08-29/>

⁴³ "IMF Staff Concludes Visit to the Maldives," *International Monetary Fund*, July 26, 2022, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/07/27/pr22276-imf-staff-concludes-visit-to-the-maldives>.

⁴⁴ Neeraj Singh Manhas, "Nepal, despite credit shortage will not be Sri Lanka," *Daily Pioneer*, July 22, 2022, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2022/columnists/nepal--despite-credit-shortage-will-not-be-sri-lanka.html>.

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Bhutan does not have any major trade links with either Ukraine or Russia to feel the immediate economic impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Unlike Bangladesh, Bhutan produces a fair amount of hydropower for its use.⁴⁵ Bhutan, however, still imports fuel for transportation purposes from India. Given that India has not been impacted much by the rising fuel prices, Bhutan is also expected to do well.

Although Bangladesh managed to do better than some other South Asian economies during the pandemic, the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War is now being felt across the country. Higher gas and fuel prices have led to power cuts for residential homes, schools, and offices across Bangladesh as well as shrinking foreign reserves.⁴⁶ As a response, Bangladesh is working on a dual track approach to seek financial assistance from the IMF along with buying cheaper gas and fuel from Russia.⁴⁷ Additionally, it is also looking at burning more coal to produce power locally, with serious consequences for the environment.⁴⁸ It is because Bangladesh, with its thriving textile industry, cannot afford power breakdowns for extended hours.

Overall, the Russo-Ukrainian War has had a negative impact on South Asian economies, which are consumer-based and import various commodities such as grains and fuel. The war has, thus, driven up prices, inflation, and the exchange rate of local currencies vis-à-vis the US dollar. One reason why the impact of the Russo-Ukrainian war has been different

⁴⁵ Tashi Deman, "South Asian nations should come together to solve food and energy security issues," *Kuensel*, June 2, 2022, <https://kuenselonline.com/south-asian-nations-should-come-together-to-solve-food-and-energy-security-issues/>.

⁴⁶ "Bangladesh cuts school, office hours to save power amid crisis," *Aljazeera English*, August 24, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/8/24/bangladesh-cuts-school-office-hours-to-save-power-amid-crisis>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Faisal Mahmud, "Frequent Power Cuts Hitting Bangladesh," *South & Central Asia*, July 9, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/frequent-power-cuts-hitting-bangladesh/6651831.html>.

on different economies across South Asia is that, even though the SAARC has been around for decades, South Asian economies are some of the least connected and regionalised in the world.

The Russo-Ukrainian War and Alliance Politics in South Asia

Based on the age-old concept of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’, the Russo-Ukrainian War can help bring Russia and Afghanistan closer once again. As discussed above, both the Russian and Afghan governments have been targeted by US economic sanctions. With the US out of Afghanistan, Russia is in a better position to play a larger role in Afghanistan, though China may also keep a watchful eye on their growing mutuality. As such, despite a suicide bomber targeting the Russian embassy in Kabul in early September 2022, the Russians have decided to keep their embassy open there.⁴⁹

However, Russia still has two major concerns with respect to Afghanistan: first, the Taliban government is not inclusive; second, terror groups filtering out of Afghanistan can destabilize Central Asian republics and even Russia. Should the Taliban assuage Russian concerns, the groundwork will be in place for genuine cooperation between the two sides. Afghanistan’s current UN representative’s vote against Russia in March 2022, condemning its invasion of Ukraine, does not seem to carry much weight or meaning. It is not entirely and legally clear whom the Afghan representative purports to represent when the Taliban have overrun the entire country. The exercise of an anti-Russian vote, perhaps, was an attempt on the part of the so-called Afghan representative to either attract Western support to the Resistance Front against the Taliban in Panjsher or just to salvage his own job at the UN headquarters.

While India—like China—has welcomed the opportunity to buy cheaper Russian oil to keep inflation in check, it has also maintained warm ties

⁴⁹ Mohammad Yunus Yawar, “Two Russian embassy staff dead, four others killed in suicide bomb blast in Kabul,” *Reuters*, September 5, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-police-report-suicide-bomb-blast-near-russian-embassy-kabul-2022-09-05/>.

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with the US. India along with Australia, Japan and the US (collectively known as the QUAD) have engaged in a series of strategic dialogue with respect to safeguarding their wider interests in the Indo-Pacific region, especially keeping in mind the China factor.⁵⁰ It is not without reason that China views the QUAD as an “Asian NATO.”⁵¹ India, at the same time, is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of which China is a founding partner. Keeping its interests in mind, India is walking a diplomatic tightrope between various powers and organizations. It is unlikely that the Russo-Ukrainian War will bring India and Russia any closer than they already are.

Pakistan, like India and China, refused to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine at the UN.⁵² In the case of Pakistan, it is a fair point to strive for neutrality between the West and East. One thing that Pakistan, however, will have to keep in mind is that a continued expression of neutrality in the Russo-Ukrainian War might equally affect its relations with the US, especially if it wants additional economic relief from the IMF. Russia is in no position to assist Pakistan either economically, or in bringing India to the negotiation table over Kashmir, or any other issue. Lately, Pakistan has witnessed that all its three non-Western close friends -- China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE -- were not keen on assisting it financially, leave alone Russia.

In the long run, when its economy no longer needs Western monetary assistance, Pakistan can strive to preserve a balance between the West and East. In other words, allying oneself with regional powers should not be just for the sake of getting into a regional grouping with no clear

⁵⁰ Iain Marlow, “What Is the ‘Quad’ and Should China Fear It?,” *Bloomberg*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-19/what-is-the-quad-and-should-china-fear-it-quicktake-l3dcbt0u?leadSource=verify%20wall>.

⁵¹ C. Raja Mohan, “Why China Is Paranoid About the Quad,” *Foreign Policy*, May 12, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/05/17/india-china-quad-summit-modi-xi-biden/>

⁵² “Pakistan abstains from voting against Russia at UNGA,” *The News*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/938140-pakistan-abstains-from-voting-against-russia-at-unga>

objectives and no tangible dividends. As long as Pakistan continues to receive crucial economic assistance from the West, it is hard for it to profess genuine neutrality, unless it can tactfully manage the fallout, if any, from adopting such a position.

One interesting development that the Russo-Ukrainian War has brought to the fore in South Asia is that unlike in the past when it used to follow the Indian line at the UN, Nepal along with Bhutan and the Maldives condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine.⁵³ Nepal's position is also in stark contrast to those of its two powerful neighbours: India and China. One reason behind the stances held by Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives in voting against Russia was that smaller countries inherently fear aggression from their larger neighbours.⁵⁴ It may also have been an attempt on the part of Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives to express their displeasure at their larger neighbours wanting to meddle in their domestic affairs.

As such, to sympathize with Ukraine as the smaller country in the Russo-Ukrainian War and out of fear for their own future, South Asia's smaller countries voted against Russia. If Ukraine emerges victorious, there will not be a major change in South Asia, especially pertaining to the smaller states in the region. However, if Russia bags victory and acquires an increasingly larger-than-life status in South Asia, it will likely make the smaller countries — especially Nepal and Bhutan, sandwiched between India and China, and which voted against Russia, feel less comfortable.

⁵³ Balachander Palanisamy, "Why South Asia is divided over Russia-Ukraine," *The Deccan Herald*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/in-perspective/why-south-asia-is-divided-over-russia-ukraine-1089811.html>.

⁵⁴ "Explained: Why Nepal chose to go against Russia over Ukraine invasion," *Frontline*, March 24, 2022, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/explained-why-nepal-chose-to-go-against-russia-over-ukraine-invasion/article65273957.ece>.

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The Russo-Ukrainian War and Military Developments in South Asia

Of all the South Asian countries, Pakistan and India should be watching closely how the Russo-Ukrainian War continues to unfold itself on the battlefield. The war is going to have an undeniable impact on any future conflict in South Asia, especially with regard to the use of technology both on the battlefield and in support of operations. Some believe that “the Russia-Ukraine war is the most technologically advanced war that humanity has ever seen thus far.”⁵⁵ Before the start of the hostilities and during the first few days after the war began, most military analysts favoured Russia, and rightly so because it is a bigger country than Ukraine, and has a larger military and weaponry—both conventional and unconventional.

However, with the passage of time, the Ukrainians have surprised many, especially when the Russians failed to capture Kyiv and started retreating from areas north of Kyiv in late March.⁵⁶ In addition to poor planning by the Russians, their long supply lines, and a multi-front attack, the Ukrainians made the Russians pay a heavy price by using simple but deadly weapons: anti-aircraft Stinger and anti-tank Javelin missiles, supplied by the NATO.⁵⁷ The Javelin anti-tank missiles, for instance, are easy to carry and use. By late March, the Ukrainians had taken out hundreds of Russian tanks. Pakistan, for instance, should take note of this development and incorporate the following lesson—if it has not yet—into its army training manual: to efficiently use anti-aircraft and anti-tank missiles on a massive scale against a numerically superior enemy,

⁵⁵ Aleksandre Tsereteli, “Use of Technologies in the Russia-Ukraine War,” *the Friedrich Naumann Foundation*, August 2, 2022, <https://www.freiheit.org/ukraine-and-belarus/use-technologies-russia-ukraine-war>.

⁵⁶ Karoun Demirjian, “As Russia retreats from Kyiv, U.S. sees uglier fights to come,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/04/russian-forces-eastern-ukraine/>.

⁵⁷ Meredith Deliso, “Key lessons from the Ukraine conflict about conventional warfare,” *ABC News*, April 1, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/key-lessons-ukraine-conflict-conventional-warfare/story?id=83746590>.

especially should it manage to break Pakistani defenses and enter Pakistani territory.

Moreover, the Russians are known to have sophisticated offensive cyber capabilities to the extent that the US government has been warning its citizens for months of a possible Russian cyber-attack against American targets.⁵⁸ Although both the Russians and Ukrainians have engaged in offensive and defensive cyber campaigns,⁵⁹ the Russians have not been able to properly synchronize their cyber-attacks in support of military operations on the ground, or if they have, the supportive evidence is weak.⁶⁰ The impact on Pakistan's and India's militaries of Russia's incapacity with respect to effectively using its cyber capabilities on the battlefield should be that the two South Asian militaries need to learn from Russian mistakes, so as to effectively use their cyber capabilities in support of their military operations.

Furthermore, one cannot overlook the role that Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) or drones are playing on the battlefield in Ukraine. While Russia has been using the Russian-made Lancet (more popularly known as the Kamikaze) and the Iranian Shahed-136 drones against Ukrainian targets,⁶¹ Ukraine has skillfully employed the Turkish drones named Bayraktar

⁵⁸ Scott Jasper, "The Risk of Russian Cyber Retaliation for the United States Sending Rockets to Ukraine," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/risk-russian-cyber-retaliation-united-states-sending-rockets-ukraine>

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Lt. Gen. Deependra Singh Hooda (Retd.), "Fighting Conventional Wars: Lessons from the Ukraine Conflict," *Delhi Policy Group*, May 16, 2022, <https://www.delhipolicygroup.org/publication/policy-briefs/fighting-conventional-wars-lessons-from-the-ukraine-conflict-3836.html>

⁶¹ Seth J. Frantzman, "Russia uses Iranian drones in strikes in Ukraine – analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, September 17, 2022, <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-717402>.

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TB2, with deadly accuracy.⁶² In addition to combat, both the Russians and Ukrainians have also used drones for surveillance purposes.⁶³

Although Pakistan and India both retained combat and surveillance drone capabilities before the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, they may still want to watch and learn the benefits and risks of using drones in conventional warfare in the 21st century. Since drones offer a cheaper and less risky option, as opposed to manned aircraft, their quantity will likely increase in both Pakistan's and India's inventories. Additionally, drones can also work as deadly missiles. The risk, however, is that if the enemy catches a drone (especially if it is an unsecured commercial drone), it can reveal the location of its operator, and the data about the areas it has traveled.⁶⁴ As with everything else in the world of modern technology, drones also come with costs and benefits.

At present, both Pakistan and India are believed to be using drones for surveillance purposes against each other. It is generally believed that Pakistan is a step ahead of India in terms of utilizing drones on the battlefield to eliminate enemy targets.⁶⁵ It can be a reason why the Indian media run more reports on the drone threat -- both real and imaginary. India is now working to acquire an anti-drone capability, which probably

⁶² Roman Pahulych, "Drone Wars: Ukraine And Russia's Aerial Battle In The Skies Over Donbas," *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, June 14, 2022, [https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-drones-war-russia-donbas/31897991.html#:~:text=Aerial%20drones%20are%20playing%20a,unmanned%20aerial%20vehicles%20\(UAVs\).](https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-drones-war-russia-donbas/31897991.html#:~:text=Aerial%20drones%20are%20playing%20a,unmanned%20aerial%20vehicles%20(UAVs).)

⁶³ Alia Shoaib, "Ukraine strips down captured Russian drone, says it is full of Western parts, CNN reports," *Business Insider*, July 23, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/ukraine-captured-russian-drone-western-parts-2022-7>. Also see citation no. 59.

⁶⁴ Jason Beaubien, "In the Russia-Ukraine war, drones are one of the most powerful weapons," *National Public Radio*, July 30, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/30/1114024870/russia-ukraine-war-drones>.

⁶⁵ Aritra Banerjee, "Pakistan 'Races Ahead' Of India In Drone Technology; Is 4th Country To Deploy UCAVs In Combat Ops," *Eurasian Times*, September 8, 2021, <https://eurasianimes.com/pakistan-races-ahead-of-india-in-drone-technology-is-4th-country-to-deploy-ucavs-in-combat-ops/>.

will prompt Pakistan to acquire a similar capability.⁶⁶ Needless to surmise that the Ukrainian imbroglio has unleashed multiple lessons and parallels for South Asia, especially its two antagonist states, where lessons and even further improvements and innovations may not be out of place.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Russo-Ukrainian war was preceded by a series of significant events in Eastern Europe -- including NATO's expansion eastward -- that left Russia feeling less secure, though its own conquest of Crimea and aggressive policy towards Georgia raised hackles in the West as well. Although Russia's trade and economic interdependence with the West, especially the EU, kept growing almost simultaneously with NATO's eastward expansion, Russia still felt threatened and disrespected over the thought of its closest neighbour Ukraine joining the Western military alliance. Possibly, no amount of economic interdependence with Europe could have prevented Russian troops from crossing into Ukraine. As such, the first and largest casualty of the Russo-Ukrainian War is the cherished liberal line of thinking of promoting open trade to prevent conflicts.

The Russo-Ukrainian war manifests significant impact on a variety of issues and sectors in South Asia. For instance, after the Russo-Ukrainian War broke out, the international community's attention and much-needed resources have been diverted from Afghanistan to Ukraine. As a result, Afghanistan has now been relegated to the back seat, while the international community tries to put resources—both civilian and military—at Ukraine's disposal. As such, the upcoming winter in Afghanistan presents aid organizations with their meager resources an enormous challenge to ensure no one stays hungry or starved. Harsh weather conditions in Afghanistan can eventually force more Afghans to seek asylum outside the country. If Afghanistan remains unstable, none of its South Asian neighbours will feel secure.

⁶⁶ "India alleges Pakistan could attack through giant drones," *Global Village Space*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/india-alleges-pakistan-could-attack-through-giant-drones/>.

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Most South Asian economies have already taken a hit from food, fuel, and other commodity price hikes. Sri Lanka has already defaulted on its loan payment,⁶⁷ and as a result of the economic crisis, it witnessed a government collapse in July, whereas the IMF revived Pakistan's loan program in late August 2021 to help the country forestall a dire predicament.⁶⁸ The Russo-Ukrainian War will likely keep driving the food, fuel, and commodity prices up, especially in the winter causing more uncertainty and discomfort across all the South Asian states.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has also helped unmask some interesting foreign policy decisions in South Asia. Four (Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives) out of eight SAARC member states voted against Russia at the UN, while the remaining four member states (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) abstained. Thus, Russia found no diehard supporters in South Asia. It would be interesting to see the foreign policy choices of Bhutan, Nepal, and the Maldives, should Russia emerge as a victorious party to the Russo-Ukrainian War, though one cannot predict any radical retribution.

Out of SAARC's eight member states, two of its largest members—Pakistan and India—have fought multiple wars since their independence. As both sides have not reached an agreement on the root cause of their differences, namely the Kashmir issue, and both remain acutely suspicious of each other, the Russo-Ukrainian War offers several lessons in terms of utilizing modern technology on a 21st century battlefield, while making sure that civilian casualties remain minimum. One area where both Pakistan and India will have to take a closer look is the use of drones by both Russia and Ukraine in synchronization with other military equipment and hardware aimed at outmaneuvering the enemy.

⁶⁷ Peter Hoskins, "Sri Lanka defaults on debt for first time in its history," *BBC News*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-61505842>.

⁶⁸ "IMF Approves Latest Tranches of Loan Program for Pakistan," *Gandhara Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, August 29, 2022, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-imf-approves-tranches-loan-program/32009580.html>.

The Impact of Russo-Ukrainian War on South Asia: An Afghan ...

The first lesson to learn from the Russo-Ukrainian War is that trade and so-called regional integration and connectivity will not prevent future wars, especially when a country's security interests are threatened. Trade might be used as a confidence building measure between conflicting parties, but it is a tool that will most likely not produce the desired result if the root cause of the conflict is not addressed. As such, those who are advocating for more trade between Pakistan and India with an eventual objective to de-escalate tensions, may keep the above point in mind.

This paper is not arguing that there should be no trade between Pakistan and India. At present, there is a decent level of commercial activity happening between the two countries, with Pakistan importing goods worth US\$ 300 million annually from India, but exporting less than US\$3 million annually.⁶⁹ The paper, however, advises that without addressing the root cause of the Indo-Pak problem, trade will not be helpful in breaking the logjam. In fact, trade between Pakistan and India will most likely be one of the first casualties of a deteriorating relationship.

As can be seen in the Russo-European crisis—a direct result of the Russo-Ukrainian War—trade and economic interdependence did not prevent Russia from invading Ukraine. Any country that believes in economic integration and interdependence, without securing its security interests first, will prevent wars and run the risk of compromising its security interests. After all, trade and economic interdependence did fail to prevent World War I.

Moreover, South Asia should move towards genuine economic self-reliance, which can come in handy during such global crises. It is

⁶⁹ Data on India's and Pakistan's bilateral trade, *The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC)*, accessed September 13, 2022, [https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/pak#:~:text=Bilateral%20Trade%20by%20Products,%23permalink%20to%20section&text=\(%2434.8M\).-,During%20the%20last%2025%20years%20the%20exports%20of%20India%20to,exported%20%242.42M%20to%20India0](https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/ind/partner/pak#:~:text=Bilateral%20Trade%20by%20Products,%23permalink%20to%20section&text=(%2434.8M).-,During%20the%20last%2025%20years%20the%20exports%20of%20India%20to,exported%20%242.42M%20to%20India0).

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important for South Asia, especially Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, to invest in becoming self-sufficient with respect to producing wheat and other essential grains. After achieving self-sufficiency in grain production, the focus for all South Asian countries, especially Afghanistan and Pakistan, should also be to invest in clean and renewable sources of energy to break out of dependence on other countries for fuel. Switching fuel suppliers from the Middle East to neighbouring countries does not offer a lasting solution, either. Instead, South Asia should focus on nuclear, wind, hydro, and solar-powered sources of energy. Taking the aforementioned measures will help South Asia in the future to weather the storm in a more prepared manner, should another interstate war outside, or even within the region, break out. ■