Book Review: Russia and Ukraine: An Undeclared World War

Buffer Zones, Energy Weapons, and the Return of Great Power Politics[1][2]

Abdallah Abdel-Ati Al-Naggar[3]

In February 2022, when Russian forces entered Ukrainian territory, many observers sought to understand the seemingly sudden outbreak of Europe's largest military conflict since the II. World War. However, as Prof. Atef Moatamid demonstrates in his well-researched study, *Russia and Ukraine: An Undeclared World War*, this conflict is not a rupture but the explosive culmination of deep-seated geopolitical tensions – *exactly like tectonic plates grinding beneath the earth's surface* - that have been building for over three decades, if not a full millennium.

Few scholars possess Moatamid's qualifications. A professor at Cairo University, geographer and translator who earned his doctorate from St. Petersburg in 2001, he served as Egypt's Cultural Counsellor in Moscow during the 2014 Crimea crisis. This unique experience provides him with what most Western analysts lack: an insider's understanding of Russian strategic thinking, scholarly distance, and an Egyptian perspective attuned to the Global South's delicate balancing act between Moscow and Washington.

Across eleven chapters Moatamid traces the geographical, historical, and cultural roots of today's crisis. Drawing on Russian, English and Arabic sources, Moatamid reveals how geography has always shaped - and still shapes - the fate of nations caught between Europe and Asia.

Historical Depth and Geographical Determinism

Moatamid's narrative begins not in 2022, nor in 1991 with the Soviet collapse, but in 988 CE, when Rus' emissaries arrived in Constantinople seeking an alliance with Byzantium. This millennium-long perspective reveals patterns invisible to those focused only on contemporary events. The author traces how the Slavic peoples who would become Russians emerged within a geographical crucible contested by successive waves of Scythians, Sarmatians, Goths, Huns, Khazars, and Mongols, each leaving an imprint on Russian political culture and strategic consciousness.

---

[1] DOI: 10.12700/jceeas.2026.6.3.475

[2] Atef Moatamid. *Russia and Ukraine: An Undeclared World War*. (Originally published in Arabic). Cairo: Dar El Shorouk, 2024. 264 pp. ISBN: 9789770938782.

[3] Researcher, Associate Professor, Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), and the Africa Research Institute (Doctoral School for Safety and Security Sciences, Óbuda University), Budapest, Hungary. Original workplace: Academy of Scientific Research & Technology; ORCID: 0000-0002-9646-6643; Abdallah.abdel@btk.elte.hu.

Moatamid's account of Kievan Rus'[4] is especially revealing, highlighting the irony that modern Russia and Ukraine share a common origin in medieval Kiev. He notes that the capital of present-day besieged Ukraine was once the cradle of Russian civilisation, a historical complexity that Putin has exploited to justify his claims that Russians and Ukrainians constitute "one people". However, Moatamid also illustrates how this shared heritage conceals centuries of divergence, as Ukraine became a corridor between competing civilisations while Muscovy (the Grand Principality of Moscow) developed its own imperial trajectory.

The author's geographical perspective is clear in his analysis of how Russia's landlocked position prompted centuries of expansion towards warm-water ports. From Ivan the Terrible's 16th-century conquests to Peter the Great's founding of St. Petersburg and Catherine the Great's advance to the Black Sea, Russian leaders pursued what Moatamid describes as a policy of "swallowing enemies" rather than simply defending borders. Russia built ring after ring of buffer zones to protect its heartland: Finland shielded St. Petersburg from the north, the Caucasus blocked Turkey and Persia to the south, and Central Asia prevented British advances from India. Ukraine is the most critical of all, situated between core Russia and NATO's eastern edge.

Energy as Weapon: The Gazprom Factor

One of the book's most original contributions concerns its extended analysis of energy geopolitics, particularly the role of Gazprom, Putin's strategic instrument. The numbers are really staggering; Gazprom produces nearly 20% of global natural gas output and accounts for 25–40% of Russia's budget revenues. European dependence on Russian energy averaged 30% before 2022, with some Eastern European states relying on Russian gas for 90–95% of their needs. Germany alone depended on Russia for 32% of its energy consumption. As Moatamid pointedly notes, Western research institutes calculated that in the first fifty days of the 2022 war, Europe paid Russia €50 billion for gas (€1 billion/day). As Egyptian journalist Talaat Ismail observed in his *Al-Ahram*[5] review (7 March 2024): "Europe funds the Russian war against Europe […] Putin kills European peoples with European peoples' money".

The author examines how Russia weaponized energy dependence, especially through incidents in January 2006 and 2009 when Gazprom cut gas supplies to Ukraine during severe winters, causing widespread shortages across Europe. Rather than simple economic disputes, these were calculated demonstrations of Russia's ability to "freeze entire European countries with the push of a button". Russia's construction of the Nord Stream pipelines through the Baltic Sea and TurkStream through the Black Sea served to encircle Ukraine, reducing its geopolitical value as a transit corridor while tightening Moscow's energy grip on Europe.

For postcolonial nations wary of great power politics, this perspective carries

[4] Kievan Rus' (9th–13th c.): first East Slavic state ruled by Varangians from Kiev, the shared cradle of Russian/Ukrainian civilizations.

[5] The most well-known and popular Arabic-language daily in the Arab World.

particular weight. Egypt has navigated complex energy politics, developed its Eastern Mediterranean gas fields while balancing relationships with multiple powers. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has disrupted global energy markets and food supplies, with severe consequences for import-dependent African nations. Moatamid's examination of how Russia leveraged energy dominance offers hard lessons about the geopolitical vulnerabilities created by resource dependence, lessons applicable far beyond Europe's borders.

NATO Expansion and the Psychology of Humiliation

Moatamid devotes considerable attention to NATO's eastward expansion, which he identifies as perhaps the most important cause of the current war. He documents how, following German reunification in 1990, Western leaders allegedly promised Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand "one inch eastward", a promise that, whether verbal or implied, was systematically broken. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary joined NATO in 1999; the Baltic states in 2004; Albania and Croatia in 2009; Montenegro in 2017; North Macedonia in 2020; and, most provocatively, Finland in 2023 and Sweden in 2024 in direct response to the invasion of Ukraine.

The author persuasively argues that Russian perceptions of betrayal and humiliation fueled revanchist nationalism. The 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia, Russia's traditional Balkan ally - carried out despite Russian opposition and in violation of UN Security Council authority - particularly wounded Russian pride and served as a dress rehearsal for what the West might do to Russia itself. These humiliations accumulated during the chaotic Yeltsin years (1991–1999), when Russia experienced economic collapse, oligarchic plunder, and geopolitical marginalization.

Putin's rise to power in 2000 marked a decisive turning point. As Moatamid observes, Putin, who witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, launched a systematic campaign to restore Russian power and dignity. He crushed the Chechen insurgency, subdued the oligarchs, reasserted state control over energy resources, and rebuilt military capabilities. The 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea represented escalating challenges to the post-Cold War order. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was *the logical culmination of decades of accumulating resentment and revanchism.*

An Egyptian and African Perspective

Unlike most Western accounts, Moatamid writes from his Egyptian perspective and his sensitivity to how non-Western nations view this conflict. This perspective is not merely academic detachment but informed by lived experience. Egypt, like much of the Global South, finds itself caught between competing powers it did not create. For Egypt and much of Africa, the Russia-Ukraine war has imposed severe costs despite the geographical distance. Disrupted grain exports from Ukraine and Russia - both major suppliers to African markets - have driven food price inflation and threatened food security across the continent. Egypt, which imports more than 80% of its wheat, has

been particularly vulnerable.[6] Sanctions against Russia have complicated African nations' economic relationships and forced uncomfortable diplomatic choices. Many African states abstained in UN votes condemning Russian aggression, reflecting not necessarily support for Moscow but rather a desire to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid entanglement in what they perceive as fundamentally a great power conflict.

Moatamid's book helps African readers understand the deeper forces driving this war without requiring alignment with either side's narrative. His so-called "geographical interpretation" emphasizes structural factors - landlocked powers seeking sea access, the enduring logic of buffer zones, energy dependencies, and the clash between expanding and contracting empires - that transcend simplistic morality tales. This perspective resonates with postcolonial nations that have learned to view great power competition with skepticism, recognizing that the interests of ordinary people often diverge sharply from the ambitions of distant capitals.

Style, Strengths, and Limitations

Moatamid writes with clarity, making complex analysis accessible even to non-specialists. The book's structure, moving chronologically from medieval origins through imperial expansion, Soviet collapse, and Putin's restoration project, provides readers with essential context often missing from journalistic accounts. The author effectively uses direct quotations from Putin and Zelensky to convey the psychological dimensions of the conflict. All these elements add value to the scientific contribution compiled by Moatamid.

That said, the book is not without limitations. While Moatamid strives for analytical balance, his account sometimes accepts Russian grievances too uncritically. NATO expansion certainly contributed to Russian insecurity, but the book gives insufficient attention to why Eastern European nations sought NATO membership – namely, their historical experiences of Russian domination and their desire for protection against the aggression Russia has now demonstrated. The book also lacks field interviews or sufficient direct Ukrainian viewpoints, weakening Kyiv's representation of its sovereignty and hopes for European integration. The voices of Ukrainians themselves, and their aspirations for sovereignty and integration with Europe, occasionally recede behind the great power framing.

Additionally, while the geographical and historical analysis is thorough, the book offers less guidance on potential resolutions or future trajectories. Published in 2024 as the war continues with no end, - despite peace initiatives including Trump's unsuccessful mediation attempts in 2025 and 2026 - readers might have benefited from more sustained engagement with possible endgames, negotiation frameworks, or scenarios for post-war reconstruction and reconciliation.

[6] For more details on the impact of the war on Egypt, see: Zoltán Prantner, Abdallah Abdel-Ati Al-Naggar: Economic and Political Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on Egypt. Cairo: Historical Kan Periodical, 16(59), 2023, 272–281.

Why this book matters?

Despite the aforementioned reservations or above explained limitations, *Russia and Ukraine: An Undeclared World War* reshapes how we understand Europe's gravest crisis in generations. Prof. Atef Moatamid combines scholarly rigor with accessibility, deep knowledge of Russian history and culture with critical distance, and geographical analysis with attention to human agency and psychological factors. His Egyptian perspective enriches the discourse, reminding us that this conflict resonates far beyond Europe's borders, affecting food security, energy markets, and geopolitical alignments across the Global South. This war will leave its mark on the future for decades, and neither Russia, Ukraine, nor Eastern Europe will be as they were before.

For scholars, policymakers, and informed citizens seeking to understand how we reached this dangerous moment and what it means for the international order, Moatamid's study provides an indispensable guide. This book deserves readers far beyond the Arab world, anyone wrestling with the return of great power rivalry should read it. Moatamid leaves us with an uncomfortable question: Was this war inevitable, inscribed in Russia's geography and historical memory? The book suggests a disturbing truth: perhaps it was.