Quarterly

THE WIDER VIEW

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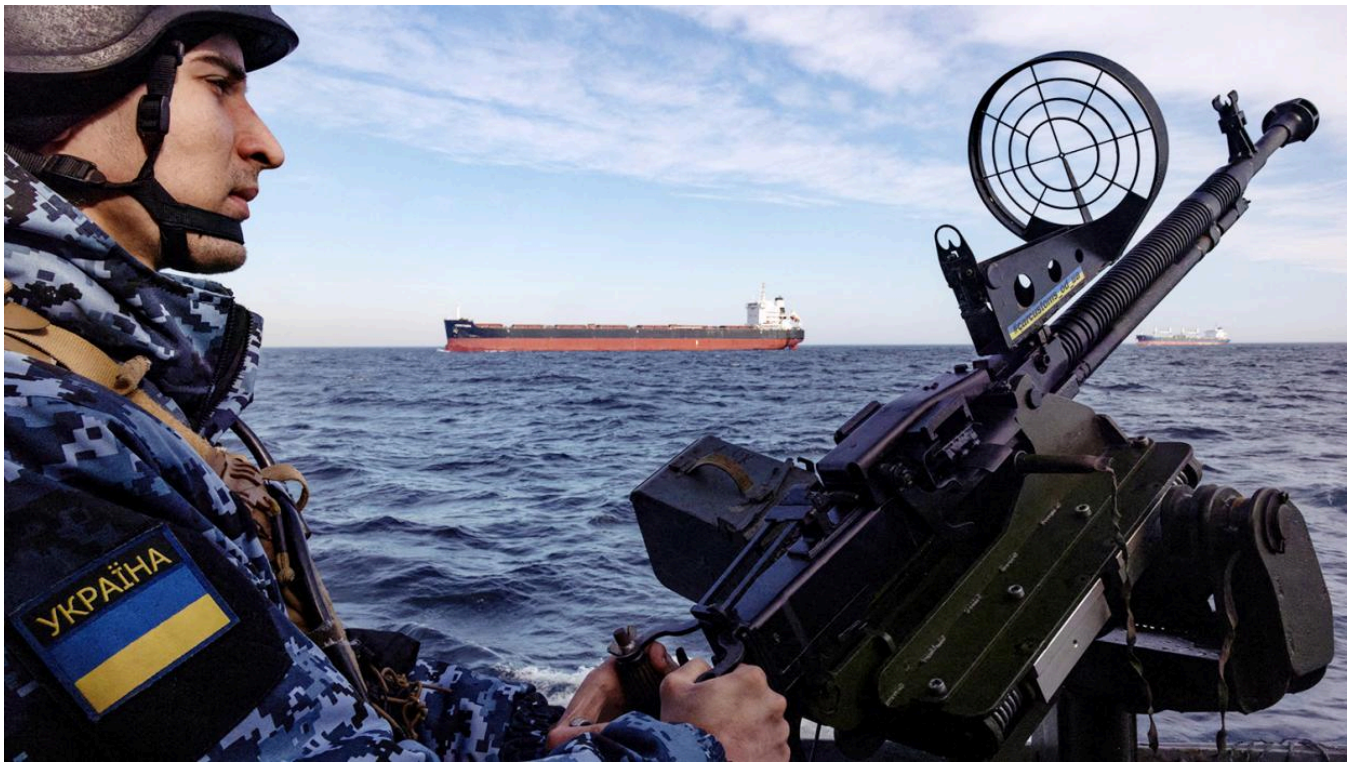
The New Age of Starvation

With Russia's war against Ukraine, the weaponization of food has taken on a new global dimension. Nations need to rethink their approach to food security.

Michael Werz



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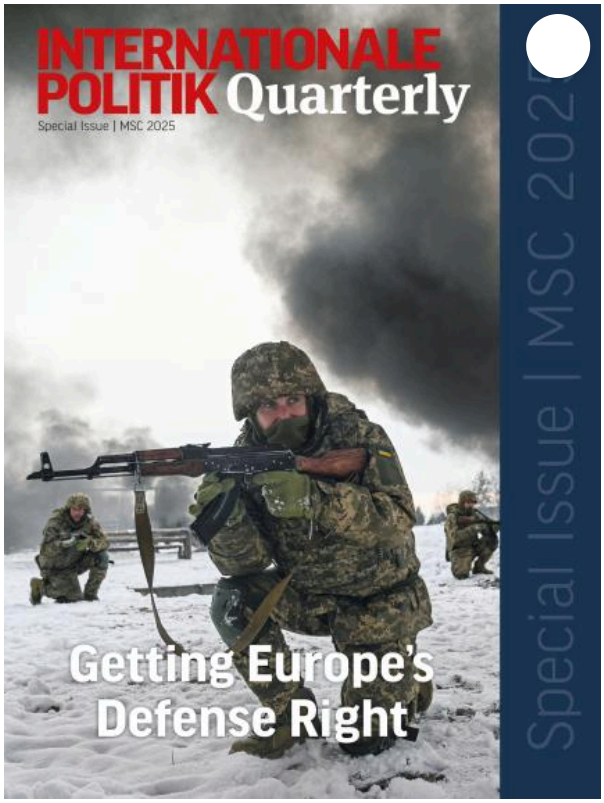

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Historically, the fertile Ukrainian black soil, rich in humus, phosphorus, and ammonia compounds, was the site upon which a central innovation of modern power politics took place. The soil, known in Russian as *chernozem*, rests on calcareous sediments and enables enormous agricultural yields thanks to its high moisture retention capacity. This part of the Eurasian steppe belt has therefore long been a geopolitical bargaining chip.

It didn't take long for Moscow to realize that the occupation of the wheat-rich region and the port of Odessa would be a key step toward expanding Russia's sphere of influence. In the 18th century, Russian ruler Catherine the Great sent over 100,000 soldiers to the Black Sea region to secure the economic foundations of the Russian Empire by exporting wheat to more developed Europe. The French Revolution, the rise of Napoleon, and France's subsequent military campaigns turned Odessa into a hub of the international grain trade—immeasurable quantities of goods were shipped on Greek ships to Livorno, London, and Liverpool to feed the war-hungry Europeans. Even today, the opulent opera house in Odessa bears witness to the immense wealth amassed by the continental trade flows.

A century and a half later, during World War II, Herbert Backe, state secretary in the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture, developed a Nazi war strategy of starvation against the Soviet Union. Once again, the black earth of Ukraine became geopolitical terrain—the Backe Plan provided for the supply of food in the territories occupied by the Wehrmacht to German troops and to the German Reich. Just 400 kilometers from Luhansk in Ukraine, German soldiers cut off all food supplies during the 872-day siege of Stalingrad (today again Volgograd) and caused the deaths of 1 million civilians.

Catherine the Great's military expedition and Backe's bureaucratic plan of starvation were characteristic of different eras, but they followed a similar logic: land seizure for the purpose of consolidating the tsarist claim to omnipotence and land seizure as part of the fascist delusion of "*Lebensraum* (living space) in the East." The consequences of both strategies were dramatic: a new topography of the land and an unleashing of unimaginable violence. As barbaric as the consequences were, they were limited by regional immediacy. Only those who were within range of the tsarist or Nazi armies or lived along traditional trade routes of medium range were affected.

Global Markets, Global Hunger

This equation no longer applies in the age of globalized trade networks and ubiquitous crisis communication. International food trade flows increased tenfold between 1913 and 1970. The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was driven in particular by new, high-yielding plant varieties, modern agricultural technology, and the increased use of fertilizers and pesticides. Developing countries such as India and Mexico, and later Brazil, became players on global markets.

Earlier, both the United States and the Soviet Union had used food aid as a political tool to gain influence in developing countries. In a January 1919 diary entry, Cary Grayson, personal assistant to US President Woodrow Wilson, transcribed the following statement by his boss: "Bolshevism is advancing further and further west, has overrun Poland and is poisoning Germany—it cannot be stopped by force, but it can be stopped by food." During the Cold War and after, food was used as a weapon many times, from the Nigerian civil war (1967-70) with food blockades and starvation tactics, to the Bosnian war (1992-95) and the destruction of agricultural infrastructure during the siege of Sarajevo.

Market Concentration

When the World Trade Organization (WTO) began to dismantle trade barriers in 1995 and the financial crisis in Asia ended, international trade volumes of basic commodities such as wheat, maize, rice, and soy tripled again, resulting in an enormous concentration of markets. Today, only a handful of countries feed a large part of the world. The expansion of commodity trade has had monumental consequences: Trade chains and supply routes on a previously unimagined, global scale have linked far-flung regions via the umbilical cord of food.

Last year, international agricultural and food trade amounted to around $1.7 trillion, with exports from emerging economies accounting for more than a third. Four of the five largest grain trading companies (Cargill, Continental, Louis-Dreyfus, and Andre) are owned by a handful of European and American families and are therefore subject to far fewer comprehensive transparency obligations than listed companies. In addition, corporate control and monopolies over seeds and fertilizer is a strategic risk in and of itself.

However, food is not a luxury that humanity can do without. Wheat, soy, and maize are existential goods that are particularly worthy of protection; the uninterrupted flow of commodities can become a matter of

life and death. A world market for perishable goods is a logistical and chronological challenge and thus provides options for using food as a strategic long-range weapon. World market prices and fragile trade routes allow interventions in conflicts from a long distance, not by means of rapid-fire rifles and artillery shells, but through price manipulation, port blockades, and the supply or withholding of vital carbohydrates.

Hunger as a Weapon in a Globalized World

Parallel to this first internationalization of the threat of famine, the starvation of military and political opponents has been repeatedly used as a means of modern warfare. The English language has found the term "weaponization of food" for this deadly endeavor. Current examples include Somalia where the militias use food as a means of recruitment and suppression to gain tactical advantages, and Israel's blockade of aid supplies to the completely destroyed Gaza Strip in response to Hamas' horrific October 7, 2023, massacre. Starving the enemy is part of military calculations almost everywhere.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, launched in February 2022, symbolizes a geographical and economic breach of tradition because, unlike the examples highlighted above, the conflict has had enormous effects on food security in distant regions of the world. The Russian attacks have been comprehensive, strategic, and ruthless. The Kremlin has targeted the entire agricultural infrastructure in Ukraine, bombing grain silos and seed factories, railroad lines and ports, while also mining agricultural fields.

The innovations are manifold: Speed, scope, and geopolitical effects allow food to be used as a weapon in a new kind of asymmetric warfare. What Russia has been doing, in effect, is taking hostage starving people from East Africa to Asia. Those affected are often thousands of kilometers away from the actual battlefield and uninvolved in the conflict itself. The weaponization of food in Russia's war against Ukraine has had massive economic consequences, too. The Russian blockade of the port of Odessa, which Ukraine managed to break eventually, was a military echo of Catherine the Great, in a negative inversion: Within a few months, goods worth over $100 billion had accumulated in the port of Odessa.

Russia's war has highlighted the concentration of international grain, oil, and fertilizer markets. Until 2022, Ukraine and Russia were among the world's largest food producers: 29 percent of wheat, 17 percent of corn, and 80 percent of sunflower oil used to be produced in these two countries. And while the Russian military engaged in the destruction of agricultural infrastructure and the blockade of Black Sea ports hampered exports, the sanctions against Russia, rightly imposed by Ukraine's international supporters, further fueled increases in commodity prices.

The effects have been enormous. According to figures from the World Food Program, a total of 51 million tons of grain were exported from Ukraine's seven Black Sea ports in the eight months before the Russian invasion. The speed with which the integrated markets reacted to the attack is also remarkable. Within a few days, grain prices experienced the most dramatic rise since the 2007 recession, with prices for wheat futures jumping by 70 percent in March 2022.

A global chain reaction followed. Many countries limited or stopped their food exports. In one of the most extreme examples, Serbia immediately ceased all exports of wheat, corn, flour, and cooking oil. Other Central and Eastern European countries restricted cereals imports and exports (undermining EU unity). India, Turkey, Indonesia, and Argentina took similar measures.

Fertilizer shortages were another consequence of Russia's invasion. Before the war, Russia produced around 25 percent of the world's raw materials for fertilizers, the export of which was restricted by the Kremlin. This further exacerbated the crisis, as almost half of the world's population rely on food produced with the help of fertilizers. All of this happened in an era during which regional climate crises, particularly in South Asia and North Africa, were already leading to food price increases, further complicating efforts to combat hunger in fragile states from Afghanistan to Haiti.

These epochal changes on the global food market were felt everywhere. The WTO estimated that global trade only grew by 3.4 percent instead of 4.7 percent in 2022 as a result. The disruption to shipping routes for Ukrainian exports and the sanctions against Russia have led to a restructuring of global trade flows in base metals, mineral oils, and agricultural production.

The Kremlin's political calculation is simple: Any upheaval in the international system distracts democratic states. The public and ethical pressure to provide aid ties up already limited political and economic resources. In Vladimir Putin's cynical view of the world, mass killings are political investment capital—whether terrorist warfare in Ukraine or causing famine in Lebanon, Sudan, Venezuela, Malawi, or Zambia. Exacerbating existing risks, Russia's war against Ukraine has contributed significantly to the fact that more than 730 million people worldwide are facing hunger in 2025, including a fifth of the African continent's total population. 2.8 billion people cannot afford healthy food, and the 2024 edition of the Global Hunger Index lists 36 nations where the threat is acute.

A New Notion of 21st Century Security

Anyone who believes they can close their eyes to the political, strategic, and security dimensions of food security is under a dangerous illusion: Hunger is being manipulated into an instrument of war from a distance—taking people hostage who live far away and increasing the already enormous scope of a regional conflicts.

The Russian regime's manipulation of global food security requires a prudent and well-informed expansion of traditional military security concepts that embrace more complex crisis scenarios. This process is not about the militarization of development policy, but about the recognition that human and hard security threats are not siloed. Rather, food supplies, agriculture production, trade routes, climate change, regional differences, and military conflicts are interrelated, making food security is one of the arenas of raw power politics.

In other words, two-dimensional conflicts are a thing of the past; the new challenge is to learn to play the three-dimensional chess game of international security policy in the 21st century. Geopolitical hunger shockwaves are the first brute lesson. The task now is to draw the right institutional and political

conclusions from the recent experiences in order to cushion and absorb the enormously complex regional and global consequences of the crisis.

As a part of this rethink, leaders must consider possible deterrence strategies. For example, more sustainable and resilient trade structures for essential goods, their special protection under international law and the laws of war, and the outlawing of the strategic use of food as a weapon are important steps. An international agreement that prohibits the weaponization of food would be an important starting point. Models for such protections already exist: UN Security Council Resolution 2417 from 2018 prohibits the use of hunger as a weapon of war. Making export restrictions on important food and fertilizer products more difficult is also an important goal. This would reduce the risk of panic buying and food hoarding by both individuals and isolationist governments.

However, this change in global security policy must also take place institutionally: The ministries for economic cooperation and development in industrialized countries such as Germany, Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States should analyze the security policy dimensions of food security more closely. There is a clear need for integrated strategies. The same applies to the development banks, particularly the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

At the same time, both national and multilateral institutions must disincentivize thinking and working silos. The experience of Russia's war against Ukraine gives multilateral organizations and wealthy countries a new political imperative: In addition to important ethical considerations, there are also well-understood self-interests in a stable global order. Today's fragile global food system and the intensified strategy of the weaponization of food have increased the risks. And these new risks create new responsibilities.

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