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Dr. Yogendra Kumar Verma
Professor, Department of Law,
Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

The Russia-Ukraine conflict: Violations of international law and the future of global order

Dr. Yogendra Kumar Verma

Abstract

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, which began in 2014 and intensified with Russia's 2022 invasion, has resulted in severe humanitarian and geopolitical consequences. This article examines Russia's actions through the lens of international law, emphasizing the critical role of these laws in maintaining global peace and security. The paper begins by outlining the foundational principles of international law, particularly the United Nations Charter's prohibition on the use of force and the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty. It further explores the Geneva Conventions under International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and the ongoing investigations into potential violations by all conflict parties. The article provides a detailed analysis of Russia's justifications for its actions in Ukraine, scrutinizing the claims of self-defense and the protection of civilians in Donbas. It argues that these justifications do not meet the standards of international law and discusses the concept of anticipatory self-defense, which lacks recognition in legal frameworks. Additionally, the paper discusses the implications of Russia's violations, including potential sanctions and accountability mechanisms, and the challenges posed by Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council. The future of international law is considered, highlighting the need for reform and stronger enforcement mechanisms to address the limitations exposed by the Ukraine conflict. The conclusion underscores the importance of upholding international law to prevent future aggression and calls for a strengthened legal framework to ensure global stability.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine conflict, international law, united nations charter, territorial integrity, international humanitarian law

1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict, which began in 2014 and escalated with Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, has had devastating consequences, resulting in significant loss of life, widespread displacement, and extensive destruction of infrastructure^[1]. This conflict has destabilized the region and posed severe challenges to international peace and security.

International law plays a crucial role in maintaining global peace and security by establishing norms and principles that govern the behavior of states. It sets out rules that prohibit the use of force and protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states, thereby preventing conflicts and promoting peaceful resolution of disputes^[2].

This paper aims to analyze how Russia's actions in Ukraine constitute a violation of core international law principles, particularly the prohibition on the use of force. By examining the legal framework and the specific actions taken by Russia, this paper will demonstrate the breach of international law and the implications for global order^[3].

2. The Framework of International Law

A. The United Nations Charter and the Prohibition on the Use of Force

The United Nations Charter is a cornerstone of international law, particularly in its regulation of the use of force. Article 2(4) of the Charter explicitly prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. This prohibition is a fundamental principle designed to ensure peace and stability in international relations^[4]. The significance of this article lies in its role in curbing aggressive actions by states and promoting the peaceful resolution of disputes.

Several cases decided by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) highlight the importance of this prohibition. In the "Nicaragua v. United States" case, the ICJ held that the U.S. had violated international law by supporting armed groups in Nicaragua and laying mines in its harbors, underscoring the principle that states should refrain from the use of force^[5].

Correspondence
Dr. Yogendra Kumar Verma
Professor, Department of Law,
Patna University, Patna,
Bihar, India

Exceptions to the Prohibition

There are limited exceptions to the prohibition on the use of force, primarily self-defense under Article 51 of the UN Charter. This provision allows a state to use force in response to an armed attack until the Security Council takes measures to maintain international peace and security^[6]. The ICJ's ruling in the "Oil Platforms" case (Iran v. United States) emphasized that any act of self-defense must be necessary and proportionate to the armed attack^[7].

B. The Principle of Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty

Territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of international law, enshrined in the UN Charter and other international agreements. Territorial integrity refers to the inviolability of a state's borders, while sovereignty pertains to the supreme authority of a state over its territory and independence from external interference^[8]. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military intervention in Ukraine are clear violations of these principles. The annexation was conducted through a disputed referendum and military occupation, directly contravening the principle of territorial integrity. Similarly, Russia's ongoing military actions in Ukraine represent a breach of Ukraine's sovereignty^[9].

C. International Humanitarian Law (IHL)

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) comprises rules that, in times of armed conflict, seek to protect those who are not participating in the hostilities and to restrict the means and methods of warfare. The core principles of IHL are codified in the Geneva Conventions, which set out protections for civilians, prisoners of war, and the wounded and sick^[10]. The ICJ, in the "Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons," affirmed the applicability of IHL even during armed conflicts, emphasizing the necessity to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants and to avoid unnecessary suffering^[11].

The conflict in Ukraine has prompted investigations into potential IHL violations by all parties involved. Allegations include attacks on civilian infrastructure and indiscriminate shelling, which are being scrutinized under IHL frameworks^[12].

3. Russia's Violations of International Law

A. The Illegality of Russia's Use of Force

Russia has attempted to justify its invasion of Ukraine by invoking reasons such as self-defense and the protection of civilians in the Donbas region. However, these justifications fall short under international law. The principle of self-defense, enshrined in Article 51 of the UN Charter, permits the use of force only in response to an armed attack. Russia's claim of self-defense lacks substantiation as there was no armed attack by Ukraine against Russia^[13].

Moreover, the argument of protecting civilians in Donbas does not meet the threshold for the use of force. International law, including the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, mandates that any intervention to protect civilians must be authorized by the United Nations Security Council. Unilateral use of force under the guise of humanitarian intervention is not permitted^[14].

The concept of anticipatory self-defense, which refers to the use of force in anticipation of an imminent armed attack, is

not widely recognized in international law. The ICJ in the "Nicaragua v. United States" case emphasized that self-defense is justified only in response to an actual armed attack, not merely a perceived threat^[15]. Thus, Russia's invasion cannot be legitimized under the doctrine of anticipatory self-defense.

B. Violations of Territorial Integrity and Sovereignty

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its military intervention in eastern Ukraine constitute clear violations of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. The principle of territorial integrity, enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, prohibits any forcible actions altering international borders. The ICJ's judgment in the "Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua" case reaffirmed the illegality of foreign intervention in a state's internal affairs^[16].

The annexation of Crimea was facilitated through a disputed referendum conducted under military occupation, which the international community widely condemned as illegitimate. This act directly contravenes the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. Similarly, Russia's ongoing military presence and support for separatist groups in eastern Ukraine further undermine Ukraine's sovereignty^[17].

Russia's actions also breach the Budapest Memorandum of 1994, wherein Russia, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, assured Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear arsenal. By violating these commitments, Russia has disregarded its international obligations under this treaty^[18].

4. Consequences and Responses

A. Legal Implications of Russia's Violations

Russia's violations of international law in Ukraine carry significant legal implications. These violations open the door for potential sanctions and accountability mechanisms. Under international law, states can face a range of consequences for unlawful actions, including economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and legal proceedings before international courts^[19]. For instance, the United Nations and various countries have imposed sanctions targeting Russian individuals, companies, and sectors of the economy in response to the annexation of Crimea and military activities in Ukraine^[20].

Accountability mechanisms also include potential proceedings before international courts such as the International Criminal Court (ICC). The ICC can investigate and prosecute individuals for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The ICC has already opened an investigation into the situation in Ukraine, examining alleged crimes committed by all parties^[21].

B. The Role of International Institutions

International institutions play a crucial role in addressing the conflict and seeking to uphold international law. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and the International Court of Justice (ICJ) are central to these efforts. The UNSC is responsible for maintaining international peace and security, and it has the authority to impose measures such as sanctions or authorize the use of force to address breaches of peace^[22]. However, the effectiveness of the UNSC is often hampered by the veto power of its permanent members, including Russia.

The ICJ provides a forum for states to resolve disputes

based on international law. The ICJ's rulings in cases such as "Nicaragua v. United States" and "Georgia v. Russia" highlight the court's role in adjudicating matters of state responsibility and the use of force^[23]. In the current context, Ukraine has filed a case against Russia at the ICJ, alleging violations of the Genocide Convention. The ICJ's provisional measures ordered Russia to suspend military operations, though compliance with such orders remains a challenge^[24].

C. Challenges in Holding Russia Accountable

One of the primary challenges in holding Russia accountable for its actions in Ukraine is its veto power in the UNSC. As a permanent member, Russia can block resolutions aimed at condemning its actions or imposing sanctions, thereby limiting the UNSC's ability to take decisive action^[25]. This has led to calls for reforming the UNSC to address the issue of veto power and enhance the body's effectiveness in crisis situations.

Additionally, while international legal proceedings can highlight violations and call for accountability, enforcing these rulings is another significant challenge. States with significant geopolitical influence, like Russia, may resist compliance with international court decisions, making it difficult to achieve tangible outcomes solely through legal means^[26].

5. The Future of International Law

A. Potential Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War on the International Legal Order

The Russia-Ukraine war has profound implications for the future of the international legal order. The blatant violations of fundamental principles such as sovereignty and the prohibition on the use of force challenge the effectiveness and credibility of international law. The conflict highlights the limitations of existing legal mechanisms to deter aggression and enforce compliance^[27]. For instance, the ICJ's order in the "Ukraine v. Russia" case, demanding a halt to military operations, underscores the challenge of enforcing legal decisions when powerful states are involved^[28]. The war could potentially erode respect for international norms if such violations go unchecked, leading to a more unstable and fragmented international system.

B. Need for Reform or Strengthening of International Law and Enforcement Mechanisms

The conflict underscores the urgent need for reform or strengthening of international law and its enforcement mechanisms. One key area is the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). The current structure, with the veto power held by the permanent members, often leads to paralysis in the face of serious breaches of peace, as seen in the UNSC's inability to take decisive action against Russia^[29]. Reforming the UNSC to limit or abolish veto power in cases of mass atrocities or aggression could enhance its effectiveness. The ICJ has played a crucial role in adjudicating disputes, but its authority is limited by states' willingness to comply with its rulings. Strengthening the ICJ's enforcement capabilities, perhaps through greater integration with other international bodies or sanctions for non-compliance, could improve adherence to international law^[30].

C. Potential Solutions to Address Limitations and Loopholes Exposed by the Ukraine Conflict

Addressing the limitations and loopholes exposed by the Ukraine conflict requires comprehensive reforms. One potential solution is enhancing the role of regional organizations in conflict resolution and enforcement of international law. For example, the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) could be empowered to take more active roles in preventing and responding to violations^[31].

Another solution is the development of new international legal instruments or frameworks to address hybrid warfare and non-traditional forms of aggression, which have been prominent in the Ukraine conflict. These frameworks could provide clearer guidelines on state responsibility and enhance mechanisms for accountability^[32].

Additionally, there is a need for stronger international criminal justice mechanisms to hold individuals accountable for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The ICC's investigation into the Ukraine conflict is a step in this direction, but greater international support and cooperation are necessary to ensure the effectiveness of such efforts^[33].

6. Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has underscored the devastating consequences of violations of international law, particularly the principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter. This paper has examined Russia's actions in Ukraine through the lens of international law, highlighting the critical importance of maintaining global peace and security by adhering to these principles. Specifically, Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territory starkly contravene the prohibition on the use of force, as detailed in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, and have been shown to lack justification under accepted exceptions such as self-defense.

In analyzing the framework of international law, this paper elucidated the significance of the UN Charter and its prohibition on force, the principles of territorial integrity and sovereignty, and the core tenets of International Humanitarian Law. It also addressed the limited exceptions to the use of force and the insufficiency of Russia's claims of self-defense and anticipatory self-defense. The illegal annexation of Crimea and military interventions in eastern Ukraine were highlighted as clear violations of Ukrainian sovereignty, further compounded by the breach of international agreements like the Budapest Memorandum.

The legal implications of Russia's actions include potential sanctions and the activation of accountability mechanisms, such as proceedings before the International Criminal Court. However, the effectiveness of these measures is challenged by geopolitical realities, notably Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council, which hampers decisive international action. Despite these challenges, international institutions like the ICJ play a vital role in adjudicating disputes and reinforcing international norms, even though their enforcement capabilities need strengthening.

The conflict also prompts a broader reflection on the future of international law. It reveals the necessity for reforming and reinforcing international legal and enforcement mechanisms to address the limitations and loopholes exposed by the crisis. Potential solutions include

empowering regional organizations, developing new legal frameworks to address hybrid warfare, and enhancing international criminal justice mechanisms to ensure accountability.

In conclusion, the Russia-Ukraine war serves as a stark reminder of the importance of upholding international law to deter future aggression and maintain global peace and security. Strengthening the international legal framework is imperative to prevent such conflicts and ensure a stable, rules-based international order. As the global community grapples with these challenges, it is crucial to reflect on the significance of these principles and engage actively in efforts to reinforce them. Only through collective commitment and action can we hope to create a more just and secure world.

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