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# The True Costs of War — Beyond the Battlefield

INDIAN EXPRESS

14 March 2026

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# The True Costs of War — Beyond the Battlefield

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GS2

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The Indian Express

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Modern conflicts impose costs far beyond direct military spending — on global food chains, climate, development, and diplomacy. How should India calibrate its foreign policy posture in an era of persistent great-power conflict?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

As the Russia-Ukraine war enters its fifth year and the Gaza conflict continues, a growing body of economic and humanitarian data reveals that the true costs of modern warfare extend far beyond military budgets — cascading into food security, energy markets, climate action, and global development financing, with disproportionate impact on the Global South.

## THE VISIBLE COSTS: MILITARY SPENDING

Global defence expenditure crossed **\$2.44 trillion in 2023** (SIPRI data), the largest single-year jump since the Cold War. The war in Ukraine alone has cost:

**Russia:** ~\$211 billion in direct military expenditure (2022-24 estimated)

**Ukraine:** infrastructure damage assessed at **\$500+ billion** (World Bank-led rapid damage assessment)

**NATO members:** committed to spend at least **2% of GDP** on defence; several have exceeded this

Yet defence budgets capture only the tip of the iceberg. The true costs of war operate through multiple channels that rarely appear in military balance sheets.

## HIDDEN CHANNEL 1 — FOOD SECURITY

### The Global Grain Shock

Russia and Ukraine together account for approximately **30% of global wheat exports** and **80% of sunflower oil exports** before the 2022 war. The disruption of Black Sea shipping lanes caused:

- Global wheat prices spiked by **60%** in early 2022

- 45 countries** classified food insecure by the UN World Food Programme (WFP) in 2022-23

- Sub-Saharan Africa and Middle East import-dependent nations worst hit

The **Black Sea Grain Initiative** (brokered by UN and Turkey in July 2022) temporarily allowed Ukrainian grain exports, but Russia withdrew from the deal in July 2023 — reimposing price pressures.

**India's exposure:** India is a net food exporter for most commodities but imports edible oils significantly. India banned wheat exports in May 2022 to protect domestic supply.

## HIDDEN CHANNEL 2 — ENERGY MARKETS

The European energy crisis triggered by Russia's war in Ukraine demonstrated how petroleum and gas markets can cascade into industrial output, inflation, and household welfare:

Indicator	Impact
European natural gas prices	Rose ~10x at peak (Aug 2022); TTF benchmark €340/MWh vs historical ~€20
Global oil prices	Brent crude briefly touched \$139/barrel (Mar 2022)
India's crude import bill	Elevated in 2022-23; India pivoted to discounted Russian Urals crude
Inflation in advanced economies	Driven partly by energy; Fed raised rates to 5.25-5.5% by 2023

**India's strategic response:** India purchased Russian crude at a **significant discount** (~\$20-30/barrel below Brent in peak months), boosting refinery margins. India became one of Russia's largest oil customers in 2022-24, accounting for ~35% of Russia's seaborne crude exports.

This pragmatic decision was criticised by Western allies but saved India significant foreign exchange and helped contain domestic fuel inflation.

## HIDDEN CHANNEL 3 — CLIMATE FINANCE DIVERSION

Wars drain the fiscal space needed for climate action:

**Germany**, the world's largest climate finance contributor, had to divert billions to defence

The **\$100 billion/year** climate finance pledge (made by developed nations in Copenhagen 2009) remained unmet through the war years

**Ukraine's reconstruction needs** will require hundreds of billions — much of which will compete with climate and development finance

The war has also set back global **methane reduction** commitments — Russia's gas infrastructure leaks and battlefield emissions are substantial but poorly measured.

## HIDDEN CHANNEL 4 — DEVELOPMENT FINANCE SQUEEZE

Wars crowd out international development investment:

**ODA (Official Development Assistance):** Several donor nations diverted ODA budgets toward Ukraine aid

**IMF and World Bank resources** were stretched between Ukraine support packages and low-income country debt relief

**Debt distress in Global South:** Sri Lanka, Zambia, Ghana, Pakistan — while some crises predate the war, high commodity prices and rising interest rates (driven partly by war-linked inflation) accelerated sovereign defaults

## HIDDEN CHANNEL 5 — HUMAN CAPITAL AND DISPLACEMENT

**Ukraine:** over **10 million** people displaced internally or as refugees by 2023

**Gaza conflict:** 1.9 million displaced within Gaza (UNRWA data); humanitarian crisis in MENA region

**Health systems:** destroyed or overwhelmed; generational health costs not captured in GDP metrics

**Child education:** UNESCO estimated **5.5 million** Ukrainian children's schooling was disrupted

The **UNDP Human Development Report** has flagged that conflicts are the single largest driver of reversal in HDI progress globally.

## INDIA'S POSITION — STRATEGIC AUTONOMY TESTED

India has navigated the Russia-Ukraine war through a policy of **strategic autonomy**:

Abstained from UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia (procedural vs. substantive)

Continued trade with Russia, especially energy and fertilizer

Maintained defence procurement from Russia (S-400, legacy systems)

Simultaneously deepened engagement with the West (Quad, I2U2, etc.)

This balancing act has been successful economically but faces increasing pressure as the war prolongs and Western allies demand firmer positions.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

**Prelims:** SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute), Black Sea Grain Initiative (2022), IMF, World Bank, UNDP HDI.

**Mains GS-2:** “India’s policy of strategic autonomy in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war — evaluate its merits and limitations.”

**Mains GS-3:** “How do prolonged conflicts affect global food security and energy markets? Examine India’s vulnerabilities and responses.”

**★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGE PEDIA**
**GLOBAL DEFENCE SPENDING:**

- 2023 global military expenditure: \$2.44 trillion (SIPRI)
- NATO 2% GDP target: adopted formally at 2014 Wales Summit
- Ukraine reconstruction estimate: \$500+ billion (World Bank, 2023)

**FOOD SECURITY IMPACT:**

- Russia + Ukraine share of global wheat exports: ~30%
- Sunflower oil exports: Russia + Ukraine = ~80% globally
- Black Sea Grain Initiative: signed July 2022; Russia withdrew July 2023
- WFP: UN's food assistance agency; HQ Rome; WFP won Nobel Peace Prize 2020

**ENERGY CRISIS DATA:**

- European TTF gas benchmark peak: ~€340/MWh (August 2022)
- Brent crude peak: ~\$139/barrel (March 2022)
- India's Russian crude: India became top buyer in 2022-24 (~35% of Russia's seaborne exports)
- US Federal Reserve rate: raised to 5.25-5.5% (highest since 2001)

**DEVELOPMENT IMPACT:**

- ODA: Official Development Assistance — aid from OECD-DAC members
- OECD-DAC: Development Assistance Committee; monitors aid flows
- Countries in debt distress (war-era): Sri Lanka (2022), Zambia (2023 deal), Ghana (2023)

**INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY:**

- S-400 Triumph: Russian air defence system; India signed \$5.43 billion deal in 2018
- CAATSA: US law threatening sanctions on S-400 buyers; India was granted a waiver
- Quad: India, USA, Australia, Japan — strategic grouping in Indo-Pacific
- I2U2: India, Israel, UAE, USA — economic cooperation group

**OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:**

- Russia-Ukraine war began: 24 February 2022
- Ukraine war front line: ~1,100 km by mid-2024
- SIPRI HQ: Solna, Sweden; founded 1966
- UN Peacekeeping: India is consistently one of the top troop-contributing countries

Sources: Indian Express, SIPRI, World Bank, UNDP

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