

The Third Horseman's Ride

How this War in Europe Upsets Global Food Security

Jahangir E. Arasli

"There is no food security without peace, and no peace without food."

– Ertharin Cousin, former Executive Director of the World Food Programme

Drawing on prior Biblical references, the New Testament's Book of Revelation depicts the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This later came to be interpreted as a typology of divine eschatological punishment: pestilence, internecine war, famine, and the death of Hell. The four riders were "given power over one quarter of the earth to kill by the sword and hunger and death, and by the wild beasts of the earth," the text says.

Irrational though it may be to draw coincidental parallels, during 2020-2022 the world was indeed first affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and then by the war in Ukraine (and in wider sense, Europe). Now, it looks as if the third major disaster, famine—which is portrayed in the aforementioned text as "a black horse with a rider upon him" whose divine task is to judge those who have strayed—looms over the world whilst the end of the ongoing war is effectually unforeseeable.

Therefore, this analytic policy brief will examine one of the most far-reaching ripple effects of the European war: the disruption of global food security, especially in the already volatile regions of the world, and the possibility of socio-political instability and even cataclysms stemming from such disruptions.

Fighting in the Granary: Lifelines under Strike

Both Ukraine and Russia, locked in war, are among the top ten global producers and exporters of grains. For instance, taken together, the now-foes provide 28 percent of the

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globally-traded supply of wheat, 29 percent of barley, 15 percent of corn, and 75 percent of sunflower oil. The “breadbasket” of the world, indeed. Let us see how the war affects all this.

Combat operations are presently taking place in an area that covers up to 40 percent of the most fertile “black earth” areas in Ukraine. The normal agriculture activities there are now non-existent because many farmers either volunteered for military service or fled; those that stayed face fuel shortages (gasoline and diesel fuels are being diverted to the military). The sowing season has already come and gone—and the harvest season, most likely, will be lost too.

Furthermore, 90 percent of Ukraine’s wheat exports (which in 2020-2021 yielded 44.7 million tons) proceeds via its seaports. As of mid-May 2022, the Russian army had occupied all ports located on the Azov Sea, while the Russian navy blocked those on the Black Sea coast. Some 80 freighters loaded with grain are stuck in Odessa and nearby ports still held by Ukraine. The existing overland transportation infrastructure is not sufficient to ship the harvested wheat, which is also under the permanent threat of missile strikes. The issue of releasing the available grain is critically important for both Ukraine and its customers. This may particularly explain the ferocity of the air-sea battles in and around the ill-fated Snake Island in the northwestern corner of the Black Sea that followed in the first week of May. Should a Ukrainian military success take place there, it might contribute to lifting to the Russian naval blockade of ports under Ukraine’s control.

Anxiety associated with the far-reaching paralysis of the fourth-largest wheat exporter in the world is rising in the West. As early as March 2022, both U.S. President Joe Biden and his French counterpart, Emmanuel Macron, voiced concerns about potential food shortages caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. A few weeks later, it came to the point that consolidated actual measures became more in demand than statements. In particular, on 12 May 2022 the EU Commission tried to figure out practical ways of extracting 20 million tons of wheat from storage facilities in Ukraine in the next three months—wheat that will otherwise become spoiled. Apparently, no realistic solutions came to light.

Russia is the other side of the same coin. Being untouched directly by the fighting and expecting a record-high harvest this year, the sanctions and export restrictions regime has put the country’s entire agro-sector exports under significant stress. This includes not only grains, but also fertilizers and animal feed critical for livestock raising. Although many countries (such as Brazil and Turkey) continue to legally import these and other Russian commodities, Moscow has increasingly begun to operate in a “gray zone” (as Iran has for more than three decades). The recent attempt to sell seized Ukrainian grain (some 400,000 to 500,000 tons) to Middle East countries via its proxy regime in Damascus is just one example.

Strategic Food Insecurity: Multipliers and Amplifiers

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), within just two months after the onset of the present stage of the conflict, the average food prices in the world increased by 12.6 percent—the highest they have ever been since 1990. According to the FAO’s forecast, prices will continue to rise in the time ahead. Beyond the “closure” of Ukraine and Russia, three other factors influence the trend.

Climate change. The climatic deviations of 2022 multiply profoundly the negative precipitants of the European war. A scorching heat wave and draught hurt India right now. Similarly, the oddly hot spring in western Europe and the emerging deficiency of irrigation water are also upsetting harvest perspectives. In the U.S. Midwest, up to 60 percent of the region’s winter crop is at risk due to the infamous “dust bowl effect,” while other parts of North America (i.e., in the northern parts of the U.S. and the corresponding parts of southern Canada) are suffering from excessive rainfall. Moreover, abnormally heavy rains will affect one-third of China’s winter crops sowings, and the soy harvest in South America will also be lower than usual.

Government policies. Countries are hedging their food assets and supplies in the expectancy of a looming global deficit. India—one of the leading exporters of wheat (13.5 percent of global output)—was initially eager to intervene into the markets opened by the absence of Russia and Ukraine. However, due to the crisis brought on by heat and draught, on 13 May 2022 India revised its ambition and restricted all new wheat exports. In the same manner, Indonesia—the leading exporter of palm oil, the cheap product of choice for impoverished people in Asia—has banned the export of this product, sending its global price up by 50 percent (although this ban was lifted a month later, ostensibly due to Western political pressure). Other notable states revising their agricultural export policies are China and Kazakhstan. Countries that are not agriculturally self-sufficient but have cash on hand, like the Gulf Cooperation Council states, are rushing to buy foodstuffs everywhere to buttress their emergency strategic resilience stockpiles.

Factor of distance. The European war has altered the distances of food export-import operations. There may be enough agricultural production available in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, and Australia. However, they are located far away from the countries of the “Non-Integrated Gap”—a term coined by American military geostrategist Thomas P. M. Barnett to denote those countries where the benefits of globalization’s connections (e.g., network connectivity, financial transactions, media flows) have not yet penetrated. By any metric, this includes the poorest countries in Africa and Asia, which are crucially dependent on the import of food in exchange for their mineral resources. According to United Nations, 45 Least Developed Countries receive 35 percent of their wheat imports from Ukraine and Russia. Currently, the extended transportation leg, coupled with increased fuel prices, inevitably precipitate the rising cost of agricultural commodities such as wheat, rye, corn, soy, oats, barley, and sugar, whose prices have increased between 30 to 80 percent. This means that many developing countries that depending on

food imports will need to spend even more money they don't have to avoid the onset of a potentially severe crisis that could result in malnutrition or even famine.

Thus, in addition to the effects of the European war, three other factors (climate change, states putting their own interests ahead of those of others, and reshaped supply chains) are in play. Taken together, they constitute the perfect storm of increased misbalances and shortages on the global food market. That state of affairs is likely to produce landslide effects in the social, political, and security domains.

Areas of Concern: A Glimpse

The coastal areas of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, the Horn of Africa, parts of the Silk Road region, and South Asia are amongst the areas most exposed to the approaching food crisis. It is already possible to chart a map of actual and potential flash-points shaped by global food supply shortages.

Since early May, social protests have gripped many cities in Iran. The major complaint is the rise of prices for bread, flour, and other foodstuffs. Consequences have included looting and the indiscriminate use of force by the government. A similar story is developing in Sri Lanka and is characterized by street violence, extrajudicial killings, and a crackdown by security forces. Both affected countries have state-run economies and provide subsidized food to their respective populations. Not surprisingly, when prices go up, citizens turn against regimes.

Beyond that, several other nations are in the immediate risk zone. Take Egypt, whose population is made up of over 100 million people, one-third of which lives below the poverty line. Egypt is the world largest net-importer of wheat (13 million tons per year), 85 percent of which is supplied by Russia and Ukraine (as well as 75 percent of sunflower oil imports). Most Egyptians spend the largest share of their incomes on food, including price-subsidized bread. The armed forces—the de-facto ruling power in the country—control the trade. Spiraling prices (they have increased by more than 40 percent so far) form the real preconditions for major social and political disorders, akin to those that produced the Arab Spring. No doubt, the Islamist underground is watching this developing dynamic closely. Lebanon, which is chronically unstable both economically and politically—and even more so since the August 2020 Beirut port disaster, is another obvious candidate for a social eruption. So are Yemen and Libya, both of which are, in addition, affected by civil wars that have gone on for a decade or more. India, Pakistan, Tunisia, Somalia, Sudan, the Philippines, and some other countries are also part of this potential risky zone. Food shortages may also produce unrest and instability in unexpected places, like some of the Central Asian countries. In one, the government just imposed strict nation-wide bread rationing, for example.

Misfortunes never come singly. The critical factor associated with food shortages is water scarcity. In 2022, longstanding disputes over water resources have tended to be ag-

gravated. On 26 April, the Iranian president blamed Israel for depriving the Palestinian territories of potable water. On 10 May, the Iranian foreign minister turned his attention to Turkey, accusing Ankara of ecology degradation caused by Turkish dam construction works on the tributaries of the Tigris River. This produced rhetorical commotion between Ankara and Tehran. Indeed, last year western parts of Iran saw farmers' riots caused by water shortages, which in turn led to a bad harvest. In light of the currently developing protests in Iran, the aforementioned statements may be seen as an attempt by Tehran to divert popular discontent.

Be that as it may, the fact of the matter is that the Middle East's ecosystem is eroding—and not just due to climate change, but also because of technological factors. Syria, Iraq, and nowadays Iran all blame Turkey: their claim is that the building of dams and reservoirs on the Turkish parts of the Tigris and Euphrates is a main culprit of the dearth of water, which in turn increasingly precipitates bad crops and dust storms. To understand the problem's significance, it is enough to recall that the 2009-2010 draught and crop failure in Syria caused a mass migration of the country's rural population into cities, where no jobs were available. This situation served as an incendiary fuse initiating an uprising that in turn became a bloody (and ongoing) civil war just a year later. Given the aforementioned conditions present in the Levant, it is safe to project a similar development regarding the trilateral Ethiopia-Egypt-Sudan dispute over the Nile water (in 2020, Ethiopia completed construction on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which is projected to become fully operational by 2027, and will negatively affect downstream water flow).

The general point is this: water scarcity produces food shortages, which in turn generate domestic political and socio-economic turbulence and interstate tensions through the domino effect.

Strategic Implications

Several geo-economic and geopolitical implications derive from the above.

- The world economy that still has not recovered from the impact of the pandemic is the principal victim of the European war. The World Bank has already revised its forecast for global economic growth in 2022 from 4.1 to 3.2 percent. It would be surprising if it is not further revised downwards.
- The food and agriculture segment of the world economy is one of the most affected by the conflict over Ukraine. The primary reason is the partial exclusion of Russia and Ukraine from production and logistic chains, which has produced scarcity in the global marketplace. Furthermore, spiking fuel prices make foodstuffs more costly due to the symbiotic interdependence between the food and the energy sectors. The climate change wild card is also an influencing factor.

- The scale of the food emergency menace is striking. According to UN estimates, some 1.7 billion people in 81 countries, especially in Africa and the Middle East, are in the potential risk zone of hunger. Official German government estimates tell us that up to 300 million people (or 5 percent of the global population) may soon face the direct threat of famine. Some forecasts project that by the end of 2022 some 10 million “boat people” fleeing hunger and the resulting upheavals will land on the shores of the European Union. If those predictions turn out to be correct, the disaster may be of Biblical proportions.
- The cumulative impact of food and water shortages coupled with other effects may yield initial fatal fallouts within the next few months: social riots, political instability, reciprocal violence between citizens and states, and even the collapse of some states in the developing world.
- The increasingly hungry mega-slums of the Global South may turn into ticking time-bombs, susceptible to the influx of all kinds of radical ideologies. Organized extremist forces—such as Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State—could take over the agenda of spontaneous protests, as did the Bolsheviks in 1917. “The Arab Spring on steroids” is not an impossible scenario in the emerging environment.
- Manipulating food shortages for maximal gain is proving to be an effective asymmetric weapon in the context of the European war, which is being fought not only on the battlefield but in the hybrid domain as well. Potentially, Russia could achieve a greater effect by having recourse to the “weaponized” threat of hunger than by its tanks and missiles. No one should dismiss the depressing possibility that the Kremlin is considering the option of dragging out the war in order to trigger greater troubles in Western backyards and coerce a policy correction towards Russia. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres suggested on 16 May 2022 that the Western-led sanctions and export restrictions regime against Russia could be relieved in exchange for the release of Ukraine’s grain into world markets, which suggests that such speculation is not baseless. The UN has also proposed to lift sanctions against Belarus’ fertilizer industry if Minsk allows the transiting of Ukraine’s wheat via its territory.

The manifold consequences of the worldwide food crisis will cause long-lasting effects—until the worldwide distress initiated by the European war settled and the entire global system restructured. The core problem is that there is no understanding of who would perform that mission, much less how. Meanwhile, a perfect storm is arising, and the Third Horseman of Apocalypse is nearing.