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## War In Ukraine Impacting Food Supplies

While the ongoing rise in food prices in the United States is primarily being driven by inflation, the continuing war in Ukraine may soon contribute to a food crisis that will not be confined to the United States and its anemic economy. No event has greater potential for the disruption of orderly economic activity than a major war, especially a war involving belligerents whose economic output includes crucial exports such as food and energy. Already widely acknowledged is the effect that the Russia-Ukraine war is having on global energy supplies, given Russia's pivotal role in oil and natural gas production. And while Putin's role in rising gas prices has been exaggerated by a Biden administration eager to shirk responsibility for its own disastrous policy decisions, it cannot be altogether discounted, especially among European nations only recently dependent on Russia for the bulk of their energy needs.



AP Images

Less well known are the roles of both Russia and Ukraine in global food production, particularly grains. Russia and Ukraine are (or were) among the top five global exporters of corn, barley, and sunflowers, and together account for roughly one-third of the world's entire grain production. Both nations are also major exporters of cheap fertilizer. As the *New York Times'* Jack Nicas observed, "for the global food market, there are few worse countries to be in conflict than Russia and Ukraine."

### Global Ramifications

A large proportion of the food and fertilizer exports from these two nations goes disproportionately to a region of the world already critically vulnerable to food supply disruptions: Africa. For example, Nigeria — Africa's most populous country and also the world's fourth-largest importer of wheat — gets one-quarter of its entire supply from Russia and Ukraine. Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania, and Cameroon all receive an average of more than 40 percent of their wheat imports from the two warring nations. Even the UN's World Food Program gets one-half of its entire wheat supply — much of which ends up in needy African nations — from Ukraine alone.

Adding to the deepening crisis, much of Africa was already enduring food shortages before the first shots of the war were fired, because of soaring prices and crippled global supply chains in the wake of the Covid pandemic. Because Ukraine and Russia traditionally have been able to supply fertilizers and foodstuffs more cheaply than the likes of the United States or Canada, they have long found an eager market in Africa. And with the increasing intricacy and peacetime efficiency of modern-day global



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supply chains, Africans have come to prefer wheat-based products — which rely on a grain not cultivatable over much of the continent — over products made from traditional local foodstuffs such as millet and cassava.

Not only food and fertilizer shortages, but also skyrocketing energy prices threaten to further disrupt food supplies in Africa, by rendering large-scale mechanized farming economically nonviable. The response of local governments and central planners in many African countries has been to promote a return to smallholder farming of local products. Unfortunately, like everywhere else in the world, populations in Africa have adjusted to the reality of abundant imported food, with all of the systems that make it possible: mechanized farming equipment, fertilizer, and the rapid global movement of goods, all of which have been thrown into jeopardy by the one-two punch of pandemic followed by major war.

While more widespread food shortages and famine in Africa have not yet appeared, the prospect becomes more likely as the Russia-Ukraine war moves into the spring and possibly summer, preventing crops from being planted and harvested at normal peacetime levels.

Nor is Africa the only part of the world facing a possible food shortage this year. Much the same that has been said of Africa with respect to Russian and Ukrainian food imports can be said of the nations of the Middle East, from Turkey to Iran. Tiny Lebanon, which imports 80 percent of its wheat from Ukraine, announced the day after the war started that it had enough wheat stockpiles to last one month. Now, more than two months into the war, the situation in Lebanon, which has little arable land and relies crucially on food imports to feed its population of 6.8 million, has deteriorated alarmingly, with many people selling household belongings in order to purchase and stockpile food. And the inflation crisis roiling the American economy is small potatoes compared to Lebanon, where food prices have already risen by 1,000 percent.

As far away as southeast Asia, major countries such as Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and the Philippines all import more than 40 percent of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine; with a combined population of 620 million, these four countries alone account for a significant percentage of the world's entire population, whose collective food supply stands to be severely disrupted in coming months, thanks to the ongoing conflict in eastern Europe.

China, too, stands at the cusp of a major food crisis, owing to factors both external and internal. In addition to being a major importer of food and energy from Russia and Ukraine, China has crippled its own productive capacity thanks to its manic “zero Covid” policy, which has prompted the authorities in Beijing to lock down an entire province, Jiling, where a huge proportion of Chinese foods are produced. This, on top of immense destruction of crops and cropland in last year's epochal flooding, which delayed the planting of as much as one-third of China's entire wheat crop, does not bode well for China's food supply in the near future. In a rare admission of failure, Tang Renjian, China's agriculture minister, warned that “this year's seedling situation can be said to be the worst in history.”

The list of countries crucially dependent on Russian and Ukrainian food imports extends far beyond Africa, the Middle East, and the populous countries of east and southeast Asia. Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Mongolia, for example, import virtually all of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine.

David Beasley, former Republican governor of South Carolina and now director of the World Food Program, whose earnest, bearded face is familiar to anyone who has navigated Facebook-sponsored ads, is worried about far more these days than the war and famine in Yemen. As Beasley, who is now on



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the ground in Ukraine, told NPR's Ayen Bior:

This is just catastrophe on top of catastrophe. Because guess where the Ukrainian farmers are right now; they're on the front lines, fighting for the freedom of their country. Before the Ukrainian War, we were already seeing a spike in fuel costs, food costs, shipping costs. And just when you think it couldn't get any worse, boom, Afghanistan, and then boom, Ukraine.

Beasley is an active presence on Twitter, using the platform to warn anyone paying attention of the looming food catastrophe. On May 2 he tweeted, "Food needs to move in and out of #Ukraine. Ports MUST reopen. Millions if not billions of lives are at stake and we are running out of time — the world demands it." The following day, he added, "Before #Ukraine, it was already tragic: I was cutting rations for millions in starving countries. Then war drove farmers into the battlefields, shut down supply chains and closed ports across the Black Sea region. This is a collision course to catastrophe." Beasley, whose organization supplies food rations to 125 million people a day, is acutely aware of the razor's edge on which the world food supply now rests, and of the "perfect storm" of factors that may yet occasion a global humanitarian catastrophe unrivalled since World War II.

The situation in Ukraine is not entirely bleak, with many farmers doing their best to plant, especially in areas of the country not ravaged by active conflict. Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky has been imploring farmers to plant as much as they can, and not only for humanitarian motives: Ukraine's economic survival depends on its ability to continue producing and exporting food. Ukraine, at least, may be able to get at least a part of its expected harvest this year. However, as Beasley's remarks imply, that will depend on the availability of Black Sea shipping ports, since Ukraine does not have enough railways to ship the needed levels of exports overland. Moreover, Ukrainian farmers are finding fuel for their tractors and other equipment in dangerously low supply, it having been diverted to the war effort. Russia, meanwhile, may not be able to export any of its produce, owing to heavy trade and financial sanctions blocking exports, as well as a possible need to divert former exports to feed its own hard-pressed population.

## **Problems at Home**

How will all of this affect the United States? For one major agricultural product, American farmers are already feeling the pinch: fertilizer. Russia, the world's largest producer of fertilizer, accounts for 15 percent of the global supply — upon which world crops (including American) crucially depend in order to sustain levels of production sufficient to feed modern populations. Absent fertilizer, food yields would immediately drop far below sustainability levels. Yet that is precisely what may happen in the United States and the entire food-producing world this year, following the sudden and total halt of Russian fertilizer exports. Not only that, many fertilizer manufacturers outside of Russia have been scaling back production in the face of skyrocketing fuel costs. As a result, American farmers are without fertilizer to enhance crop productivity, including crops such as alfalfa and soybeans that are primarily used to feed cattle. One Iowa farmer told *The New York Times* in late March that, despite preordering this year's fertilizer in anticipation of rising prices, his order had not yet arrived, endangering this year's entire crop.

Nor is the situation any better in countries outside the United States that contribute to the American food supply. Canada is in much the same straits, while Australia is at full export capacity already, and



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Argentina is being forced by internal woes to severely limit exports.

While it still seems unlikely that America will face real starvation as a result of so much worldwide chaos, significant food shortages and crippling prices appear very much to be in the offing, thanks to a veritable witch's brew of pandemic after-effects, the war in Ukraine, flooding in China, and, as always, debilitating mismanagement and outright malfeasance by governments, including our own. Thanks to the Covid pandemic, the American and world economies and food supply were already on tenterhooks, but the election of Joe Biden and his corps of incompetents has made an already bad situation incalculably worse. Inflation was already out of control, and supplies of many goods already critically distorted, before the first Russian missiles began falling on Kiev; now America is starting to feel the real consequences of electing bad leadership in troubled times. In time, of course, chains of production and supply will recalibrate to new realities. But in the meantime, the potential cost of these mostly man-made calamities may be severe for everyone.

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