

Analysing the Russo-Ukrainian War through Realist and Liberal Lenses

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Introduction

On the 24th of February 2022, the Russian military began missile and artillery attacks on major Ukrainian cities after Russian President Vladimir Putin authorised what he described as a “special military operation”, allowing Russian soldiers to begin an invasion of Ukraine that has displaced millions of people, devastated vital infrastructure, plunged the country into a state of emergency which appears to have no end in sight. Journalists, academics, scholars, political commentators, international bodies like the UN, world leaders and the public at large were shocked at this development. Many political analysts and theorists (like John Mearsheimer and Jessica Berlin) debated the causes, present impacts and future implications of this war. Both realists and liberals analysed the conflict from their particular lens in an attempt to explain the various political developments that led to this conflict. This commentary attempts to examine both realist and liberal viewpoints on the matter.

Keywords: Realism, The Cold War, NATO and Russia

Realism is essentially an approach to international relations that emphasizes the role of the state, national interest, and power in world politics and that aims to understand conflict and the prevention of conflict by securing a balance of power on each opposing side so as to enable all great powers to deter the great powers from starting a conflict since when both sides are evenly matched, they have less to gain and much more to lose from attacking each the other. Realism has played a significant role in the academic study of international relations since the end of World War II. Realists have always claimed to offer the most detailed explanation of both state behaviour and the conditions (notably the balance of power between states) for ameliorating the inherent destabilizing elements of international affairs. For realists, anarchy in the international sphere is a fact of life that cannot be mitigated, owing to the fact that there is no international authority that can enforce global norms or international law upon individual nation states to make sure peace between states is maintained. Since the only deciding factor is the level of power, must look out for itself without expecting any significant intervention from international bodies. Realists shun the notion of an ideologically driven set of universal morals, arguing that both ideology and morals are simply not as relevant as state power and national interest. (Bell, 2023), (lecture notes). Realist explanations for the Ukraine invasion draw upon the events of the cold war, NATO, the Warsaw Pact and political developments in eastern Europe in the latter half of the 20th century.

The post WWII status of the world was bipolar, with the United States and the Soviet Union having emerged as the global superpowers after the conflict who sought to establish and secure their own power and influence. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) was established by the United States and her allies as a defensive military alliance against the Soviets in order to deter any expansionist ambitions harboured by the latter. Similarly, the Soviets built up the Warsaw Pact, an alliance between the communist countries of eastern Europe, many of whom were occupied by the Soviets after the second world war. Over the course of the Cold War, the two sides engaged in many proxy conflicts(for eg, Vietnam, Korea ,etc.) but largely refrained from directly attacking one another's spheres of influence due to the fact that both sides had a plentiful arsenal of nuclear weapons and all out war would mean mutually assured destruction. The collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 marked the end of this status quo, the world shifted to a unipolar status with the United States being the sole uncontested superpower left. (lecture notes) The present conflict is examined in this context, as realists argue that this is nothing more than the end result of decades of paranoia and frustration on the part of the Russians due to continued American military involvement on the European continent and above all, the continuation and expansion of the NATO alliance to include countries that had previously been a part of the Warsaw Pact and thereby the Soviet sphere of influence like Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to name a few.

The Russian Federation's relationship with the West since the end of the Cold War has been ambivalent, with strong cultural and economic ties developing(Russia becoming the major supplier of natural gas to Europe being one particular example) even as distrust continued in the security sphere as more former Eastern bloc states went on to join both the European Union and NATO(which, contrary to all conventional wisdom, remained intact and functional despite the common looming threat of the Soviet Union having disappeared). Russia has remained preoccupied with the alignments of countries on all its borders, and clearly harbours concerns regarding their allegiances (for eg, Russia's continued insistence on a sphere of influence and maintenance was explicitly emphasised in a speech by President Dmitri Medvedev in 2008, who defined Russia's interests in the region as "privileged". The speech was made after the five-day war with Georgia over two breakaway regions that had been supported by Russia since the 1990s. It was therefore clear that "privileged" interests meant that Russia insisted on maintaining the right to use force to secure its interests). The collapse of the Soviet Union was cast as a national humiliation for Russia, which increased the Russian sense of insecurity by leaving many states that had historically been under its influence outside of this sphere, in addition to diminishing Russian power overall on the world stage. (Olga Oliker, 2015) In his 2014 article titled "Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's Fault," Pisciotta (2018) asserts that the Ukraine crisis can be attributed to the failure on the part of the West to uphold a commitment to refrain from expanding NATO into eastern Europe after the fall of the USSR. As a whole, he blames NATO enlargement, EU expansion and "democracy promotion" i.e. supposed attempts to subtly encourage dissent among the Russian masses. (Berebon, 2023). These policies are seen to have carelessly disregarded and downplayed Russia's fundamental strategic interests without caring for the consequences or for the way these actions may be perceived in the Kremlin, which have contributed to the emergence of a "security dilemma" in the region, (Mearsheimer, 2014) The gradual shift in attitudes throughout the former USSR republics, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine(manifest in their desire to join NATO), is perceived to have resulted in a security issue for Russia. Echoing previous scholars like George Kennan, many Western scholars had previously argued that Russian (and Soviet) expansionism was driven by the need to secure borders against rivals and invaders from the west, since Russia and the USSR tended to view the greatest threats as those on their periphery. In doing so, they categorized this as primarily defensive and hence, unjustly compromised. (Olga Oliker, 2015)

Since the invasion, lecture clips and articles by theorists like John Mearsheimer have been widely shared on social media platforms. Mearsheimer, (a proponent of offensive realism) argued and exposed more people to the rhetoric that it was in fact, the United States and NATO who were to blame for the conflict in Ukraine, due to their policy of "pushing" former eastern bloc countries who were once part of the Soviet sphere of influence to join an alliance that was explicitly created to counter the Soviet Union. This approach had its proponents who defended Putin's actions or in some way accepted these arguments; and opponents who rejected them

entirely. This brings us to some liberal – oriented explanations for what exactly sowed the seeds for this conflict.

Russia, Ukraine and Internal Developments

The central focus of liberalism is to construct a world order with an emphasis on democracy, human rights, the importance of international treaties enabling the functioning of international institutions, free trade and commerce between states; and to ultimately endeavour to establish and enable peaceful cooperation between states. Liberals do not consider states to be the only important actors in international relations, but believe that various non-state actors like international institutions can also play an essential role in international politics. Unlike realists, liberals place great value in ethics, progress and social learning as major concerns of international politics and interactions between states. This focus on cooperation, as well as an attempt to understand and conceptualise the internal political developments in the region and place them in their context was significant to the liberal response to the conflict. (Ravi Shankar Raj, 2023)

Liberals were largely outraged at the idea that NATO was at fault for the Ukraine crisis and blamed the realists for completely disregarding the fact that Ukrainians (like other Eastern European members of the alliance) had been actively seeking NATO membership to safeguard themselves and their own security from Russian interference and meddling, and did not in fact, need to be “pushed” into doing so. They argued that the Baltic states, Poland, Romania, Croatia, Czechia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, etc, had joined the alliance of their own free will and this characterization of Eastern Europeans as helpless victims of a western agenda and clueless pawns in a great geopolitical game with no agency of their own was deeply condescending, patronizing and disrespectful. Ukraine itself first applied for membership in 2008, only declaring it as a priority in 2014 after the invasion and annexation of Crimea on Putin’s orders. (Kostelka, 2022)

In order to explain this conflict, liberals place much more emphasis on internal developments within Russia and its domestic political situation and the idea that a democratic, free, secure and prosperous Ukraine would pose a symbolic and ideological threat to the kleptocratic, autocratic system in Russia. One example people often point to is the Maidan Revolution in 2014 when Ukrainians took to the streets protesting the decision of the Russian backed then-president Viktor Yanukovich not to sign an agreement that would have established closer connections between Ukraine and the European Union. As the protests in Kyiv’s Independence Square, or Maidan, continued into 2014, the government began a brutal mass crackdown over the demonstrators through violence and intimidation but the size of the protests only grew in reaction and quickly turned into what was termed “the revolution of dignity.” More than simply a demand for closer

relations with the European Union, the protests to the injustice, corruption and nepotism that had taken hold of the post-Soviet political climate in Ukraine. Ukrainians took to the streets to denounce the country's endemic corruption, from the widespread corruption in the Yanukovich administration, to everyday bribery and petty theft that plagued law enforcement and bureaucracy at the local level. Civil society activists and NGOs played an incredibly important role in organizing the protests and spreading awareness among the public. Ukraine's independent media—including *Ukrainska Pravda*, *Nashi Groshi* (Our Money), and *Slidstvo.info*—also played a key role in exposing the corruption that eventually galvanized the public and people onto the streets in November 2013. The brutal government crackdown that followed these initial protests galvanized the existing supporters and encouraged more to join. This momentum, further propelled by the killings of February 20 and 21, led to the removal of ex-president Yanukovich from power. This ushered in a new era for Ukrainian civil society as one of optimism, hope and a newfound patriotism; judicial reforms and amendments, fair elections as well as the Ukraine–European Union Association Agreement, which entered into full force in 2017 and guaranteed Ukrainian citizens the right to enter EU countries without a visa for up to 90 days, which also ushered in discussions of possible EU membership in the future. (Kozyrev, 2019)

This massive pivot away from Russia and towards Europe was not unnoticed in the Kremlin, especially since Yanukovich, an explicitly pro-Russian politician, had been ousted. After this movement; counter-Maidan, pro-Russian protests began to sweep Ukraine's Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (collectively known as the Donbas region) and eventually, armed separatist militias seized control of key government buildings and proclaimed the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics as separate states, leading to conflict with the Ukrainian government. In the midst of all the chaos, Russian troops seized and (after a referendum which was not recognised by Ukraine or any western power) formally integrated Crimea into Russian territory, lending a heavy blow to the Ukrainians. The separatist militias in the Donbas were also supplied with Russian ammunition and other supplies, and the fighting forces included not just local volunteers, but also increasing numbers of Russian nationals and persons with a history of long residence in Russia. "Many of these fighters had served in the Soviet and/or Russian armed forces and intelligence services, others had close ties to extreme nationalist circles in Russia". (Fischer, 2019) Cossack units also took part in the fighting. The turbulent years of 2014 and 2015 caused a dramatic economic collapse on both sides of the conflict. Much of the industrial equipment and infrastructure in the areas of fighting was damaged, looted or destroyed. Supply chains were disrupted, and had often broken down completely, and trade had all but ceased. The banking system had collapsed over the chaos and the region was cut off from the international financial transaction system. It is estimated that the region's economy shrank by about two-thirds in 2014. Russia made no secret of its support of violent separatism in the Donbas, going so far as to try and integrate the economies of these regions into its own territory by providing wages, pensions and social security to the regions in 2015 and providing close to \$1 billion aid annually,

alongside taking on 70-90% of the budget of the area; as estimated by the International Crisis Group in 2016. After extensive discussions with allies like the United States, Germany and France with the EU-headed Normandy Format, President Petro Poroshenko signed the Minsk Agreements under extensive military pressure. “They comprise two documents negotiated in September 2014 and February 2015 in Minsk and provided for an immediate ceasefire, decentralisation in Ukraine, including a special status law for the contested areas; a buffer zone along the Ukrainian-Russian border the release of all hostages and illegally detained persons; a Ukrainian amnesty law; continuation of a national dialogue; measures to improve the humanitarian situation in the Donbas; local elections in the contested areas, under Ukrainian control and international observation; the withdrawal of illegal armed units from Ukrainian territory; a reconstruction programme for the Donbas; and guarantees of personal security for participants in the talks.” (Fischer, 2019) the Minsk Agreements have never been fully implemented owing to their extremely controversial nature in Ukraine as well as disagreements regarding the sequencing of political and military measures, especially since Moscow was not treated as a party to the conflict in the agreements. To this day, no clear and permanent solution has been implemented due to the extenuating circumstances.

Analysts also point towards statements made by Putin where he denies the very legitimacy or even the existence of Ukraine as a sovereign state or as an independent cultural entity as indicative of megalomania being(at least in some capacity) the real motives behind his actions. For example, a few days before the Ukraine invasion, Putin clearly expressed his belief that Ukraine never had “real statehood,” and said it was simply a part of Russia’s “own history, culture, spiritual space.” (Federation, 2022)After the invasion, he even went so far as to compare himself to Peter the Great, likening the former’s expansionist wars to forge the Russian Empire to his own military ambitions; claiming that the duty to “reclaim and strengthen” the empire had fallen to Russia once more. (Rainsford, 2022)

Conclusion

As we can see, these two countries have an extremely intricate, complex contemporary history. While the realists hold NATO and the west at large responsible for encroaching on what they see as Russia’s rightful claim to its own sphere of influence as a great power, liberals emphasize the sovereign status of Ukraine (and Eastern Europe at large) and their ability to determine the fate of their own nation and people without owing any debt of obedience to the Kremlin or needing anyone else to show them the correct path forward. While studying the internal political developments of the region, one can conclude the issue is too multifaceted to be explained only through the lens of NATO membership or spheres of influence. Conflict in this region is intimately linked to the political tensions that have simmered for years, as Russia has shown its

own lack of respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty since before the first tanks ever crossed the border from Russia to Ukraine on the 24th of February, 2022.

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