

Key points

1. Many commentators have claimed that the Russo-Ukrainian War invalidates or refutes core aspects of realist international relations (IR) theory. However, the opposite is the case: many realists correctly predicted the war, and realism offers a compelling explanation for its causes, while explanations based on liberal IR theory are weak and often inconsistent with the evidence.
2. By focusing on factors like the balance of power and the security dilemma, the realist explanation for the Russo-Ukrainian War emphasizes Russian security concerns in the face of NATO expansion and Western-sponsored regime change. Liberal explanations, by focusing on the internal attributes of states and their decision-makers, instead attribute the war to the pathologies of the Russian government.
3. The dominant liberal narratives regarding the causes of the war are that Russian President Vladimir Putin has always been intent on reincorporating Ukraine into Russia and/or that the democratic example set by post-Maidan Ukraine would threaten President Putin's own autocratic rule at home. Neither of these explanations stand up to scrutiny.
4. For decades, a long list of policymakers, diplomats, and scholars warned against Western encroachment on Russia's borders and cautioned that a crisis like the current war could erupt due to continued NATO enlargement. These predictions are consistent with realist theory and the explanations for the war offered by realists.
5. Liberal IR theory encourages a crusading, messianic, and highly militarized foreign policy that consistently produces outcomes inimical to U.S. interests. Realist IR theory offers a better framework through which to understand international politics and encourages a more prudent foreign policy that defends fundamental U.S. security interests while avoiding unnecessary conflicts with other powers.

Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 revived a perennial debate between realist and liberal theories of international politics, provoked by the divergent explanations each theory offers for the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War, and their implications for how the war should be ended. Realism and liberalism are both diverse theoretical traditions, and neither necessarily produces a one-to-one correspondence with specific policy prescriptions. Nonetheless, realists in the "balance of power" or "structuralist" tradition usually lean toward strategic restraint, while liberals who emphasize regime type and domestic politics often promote regime change in illiberal states as a means of sustaining a U.S.-led "liberal international order."¹

Realists tend to think NATO's post-Cold War eastward expansion and the United States' dismissal of Russian security concerns increased the odds of a violent reaction from Moscow. In contrast, liberals believe the pathological character of the Russian regime and its leader, President Vladimir Putin, caused Russia to invade Ukraine without provocation. Realists, while generally supportive of helping Ukraine blunt Russia's invasion, have also sought to firmly limit American involvement in the war, urging caution in the face of escalatory risks and recommending that a diplomatic settlement be pursued as quickly as possible. Liberals, on the other hand, generally favor backing Ukraine to a total military victory, including the recapture of all territory occupied since 2014 or even the collapse of the Russian regime, and have been far more sanguine about the risks of nuclear escalation.

Some commentators have claimed that the war has refuted core aspects of realist theory, charging that realists were too credulous regarding Russia's stated security concerns, dismissing Ukrainian agency by focusing on great power politics.² These claims are peculiar, given that realists have warned about the ongoing danger of the crisis in Ukraine for years.³ Unfortunately, the debate has taken on an acrimonious and moralistic tone, with prominent realist scholar John Mearsheimer particularly targeted for opprobrium.⁴ With the exception of a few good faith critiques and some responses from realists, the general climate of the debate has been toxic.⁵

On the other hand, liberal explanations for the war have come under relatively little scrutiny. This paper compares realist and liberal theories of international politics. It then reviews some of the most common liberal explanations for the Russo-Ukrainian War—namely, that President Putin has always been ideologically committed to incorporating Ukraine into a new Russian empire and feared a successful democracy next door would undermine his regime at home. Under scrutiny, these explanations are inconsistent with much of the available evidence and are insufficient as accounts of Russian behavior. Instead, as is subsequently argued, the realist argument that the West aggravated Russia's security concerns and provoked a Russian counterreaction remains the more compelling explanation of the war's causes. This explanation relies on basic concepts regarding the balance of power and the security dilemma that are absent from liberal arguments, to the latter's detriment. Finally, the paper concludes with some reflections on why liberalism provides a flawed intellectual basis for American foreign policy, and why realism offers a better framework to guide our diplomacy in the future.

Comparing rival theories of international politics

To navigate and manipulate the world as it first confronts us, we must have some way of grasping it intellectually. Theories do not provide a *description* of reality as we observe it; rather, theories provide an *explanation* for some defined and limited domain of reality in order to make it intelligible. Given the boundless complexity of reality, theories are a tool to help us distinguish relevant from trivial information and to draw causal connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.⁶ Arguments between different theories are not so much about whether certain facts are true or false, but rather about which facts to privilege and which partial truths to emphasize.

Employing some framework of this kind is unavoidable. Policymakers and pundits rarely possess detailed knowledge of international political theories or consciously employ them in a rigorous manner to guide action. Good theories are simple and elegant abstractions, while the realm of action is complex and imperfect. Nevertheless, theoretical ideas developed in scholastic rarefaction gradually permeate the world of policymakers and popular commentators. In the process, they are distorted as in a game of Telephone, yet form an analytical prism through which problems are interpreted, and responses are formulated. As the economist John Maynard Keynes once said, "Practical men who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist."⁷

Modern versions of realism and liberalism come out of longstanding traditions in political philosophy. The term "realism" was used by early scholars like E.H. Carr as a contrast to the "idealism" or "utopianism" typified in the interwar period by Woodrow Wilson, the League of Nations, and the Kellogg-Briand pact, which has since been referred to as "Wilsonianism," or "liberal internationalism."⁸ Therefore, the label of "realism" derives not from a fidelity to empiricism, but rather from a recognition of the central and tragic role of power in international politics and a deep skepticism towards utopian schemes for perpetual peace.

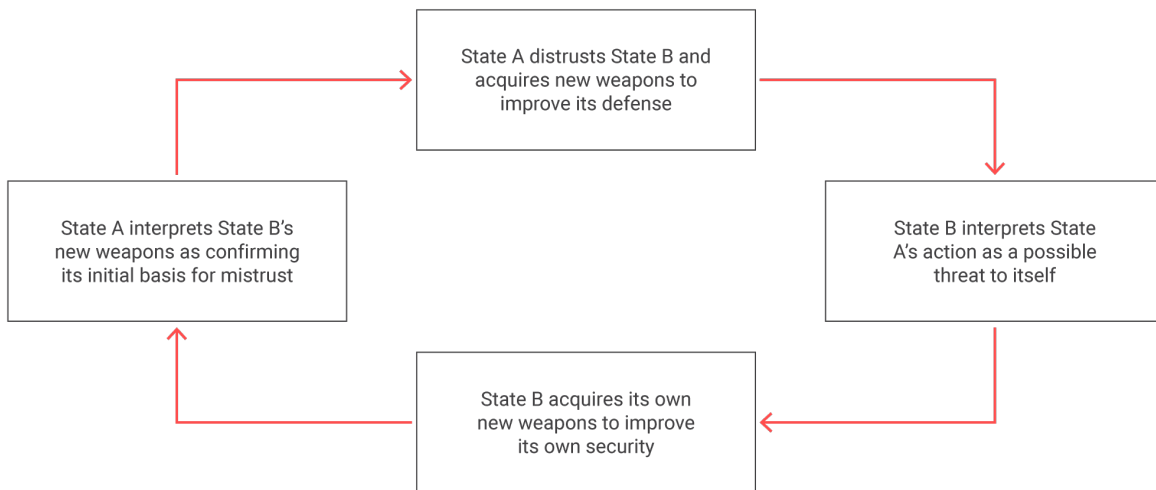
Contemporary realism, often called "structural realism" or "neorealism," focuses on the structural conditions of the international system that constrain and dispose states to act according to recurrent patterns. International



anarchy—the absence of a world government to enforce laws and arbitrate disputes—compels states not to take their security for granted and to operate on a “self-help” basis. Changes in the distribution of power among states generate systems of varying stability and encourage relatively weaker states to coalesce to “balance” against relatively stronger states that might threaten to dominate them.⁹

Uncertainty about other states’ intentions and the difficulty of distinguishing offensive from defensive capabilities encourage states to prepare to defend themselves against the worst. But since this condition applies reciprocally, security measures taken by one state that are purely defensive in intention may nonetheless provoke another state to react in kind. This phenomenon, known as the “security dilemma,” may therefore produce an action-reaction spiral of mistrust, arms-racing, crises, and inadvertent or preventive war.¹⁰

Understanding “security dilemmas”



Uncertainty about other states’ intentions encourages states to balance or defend against capabilities regardless of intent. Security measures taken by one state, even if intended as purely defensive, may nonetheless provoke another state to react in kind. And so on.

Contemporary liberal IR theory is also derived from a broader tradition but is more heterogeneous than realism, consisting of separate, though sometimes interrelated, hypotheses.¹¹ For example, some varieties of liberalism argue that economic interdependence and international institutions are independent forces for peace and order in an otherwise anarchic world. Interestingly, economic interdependence and international institutions have played little causal role in the debates regarding the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War and have instead been treated as elements of a liberal international order that have been exploited or are under assault by illiberal actors like Russia.

On the other hand, the variant of liberal theory associated with the “democratic peace hypothesis” has assumed a central place in liberal explanations for the causes of the war. In its most modest form, the “democratic peace” hypothesis maintains that liberal democracies do not go to war with one another.¹² However, from this initial hypothesis, a bolder claim is often derived—particularly by policymakers and commentators—that liberal democracies are inherently more peaceful than authoritarian states. Realists contend that the democratic peace hypothesis has fatal theoretical and empirical flaws.¹³

Different theories locate their causal mechanisms at different “levels of analysis.”¹⁴ Liberalism is a “unit-level” theory, which is to say, it locates the causes of international phenomena in the internal attributes of states



(units). Structural realism is a “system-level” theory that identifies structural causes—the anarchical organization of units and the uneven distribution of capabilities among units—as a general explanation for recurrent patterns of international phenomena.¹⁵

Unit-level theories, of which liberal theories are one subcategory, focus on the complex domestic and individual factors that influence state behavior and interactions. But unit-level theories cannot provide consistent or coherent explanations on their own. As Kenneth N. Waltz, the *grand seigneur* of structural realism, put it, “If the aims, policies, and actions of states become matters of exclusive attention or even of central concern, then we are forced back to the descriptive level; and from simple descriptions no valid generalizations can logically be drawn.”¹⁶

On the other hand, attempts to explain particular events only by reference to structural factors would be “the opposite of the reductionist error.”¹⁷ Waltz stresses that a theory of international politics is not a theory of *foreign policy*, and that “an international-political theory does not imply or require a theory of foreign policy any more than a market theory implies or requires a theory of the firm.”¹⁸

Systems theories explain why different units behave similarly and, despite their variations, produce outcomes that fall within expected ranges. Conversely, theories at the unit level tell us why different units behave differently despite their similar placement in a system. A theory about foreign policy is a theory at the national level. It leads to expectations about the responses that dissimilar polities will make to external pressures. A theory of international politics bears on the foreign policies of nations while claiming to explain only certain aspects of them. It can tell us what international conditions national policies have to cope with.¹⁹

Waltz clarified the relationship between structural and unit-level factors by explaining that “[s]tructurally we can describe and understand the pressures states are subject to. We cannot predict how they will react to the pressures without knowledge of their internal dispositions.”²⁰ Elsewhere, Waltz makes a similar point: “The first and second images [unit-level causes] describe the forces in world politics, but without the third image [system-level causes] it is impossible to assess their importance or predict their results.”²¹

Assessing unit-level explanations of the Russo-Ukrainian war

Liberal commentators contend that the Russo-Ukrainian War was an act of unprovoked aggression that can be explained solely by reference to pathologies with the Russian state, elite, and/or society rather than a response to a perceived external threat from the West. The main arguments of this type are that the war was motivated by President Putin’s desire to conquer Ukraine and create a new Russian empire or that he feared that the example set by a successful independent democracy in the post-Soviet space could trigger regime change at home.²²

Liberal explanations of the war err in three vital ways. First, Russia’s actions toward Ukraine from 2014 to 2022 contradict the idea that President Putin was always determined to reconquer Ukraine. Instead, President Putin sought the implementation of the Minsk II agreement which would have kept the Donbas region inside Ukraine while obstructing a Ukrainian entry into NATO. Second, President Putin’s views regarding the relationship between Russia and Ukraine appear to be more complicated than generally represented, and parallel a long-standing internal division within Ukrainians’ own national identity. Finally, there is little reason to believe that President Putin is merely fearful of democracy in Ukraine or other post-Soviet states; instead, he most likely fears Western-sponsored regime change.



Imperial intentions? The 2014 crisis and the Minsk II Agreement

If President Putin had always been intent on imperial expansion, why didn't he attempt to conquer Ukraine immediately after 2014 when it was much weaker militarily, and the West was far less willing to come to their aid? Why settle for Minsk II when the Ukrainians had been routed on the battlefield by 2015? The Obama administration refused to send weapons to Ukraine and made clear it would not risk a great power war with Russia. Indeed, while still in office in 2016, President Barack Obama grimly concluded that "[t]he fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do."²³ Why didn't Russia invade during the presidency of Donald Trump, whom former administration insiders have claimed shared deep affinities with President Putin?²⁴ If it were true, as many liberals say, that it was not American overreach but American appeasement that encouraged Russia to invade, why then did President Putin wait until U.S. military aid increased and the United States' position became more intransigent?

Judging by its actions from the 2014 Maidan Revolution up to the 2022 invasion, Russia's primary goal was to keep Ukraine in its sphere of influence (and out of the West) but not to incorporate it into a formal imperial entity—let alone to march on Poland or the Baltics. This objective is consistent with Moscow's insistence on implementing the Minsk II agreement. Minsk II was signed in early 2015 by Russia and Ukraine immediately following a series of devastating Ukrainian defeats on the battlefield. The agreement would have kept the separatist regions of the Donbas within Ukraine, but with greater autonomy and representation. The settlement was favorable to Moscow because these regions, seeking to remain close to Russia, would act as a *de facto* veto against Ukraine's aspirations to join NATO or move decisively into the West's orbit.

Russia's actions toward the separatist regions made it clear that its first preference was not to annex the Donbas. While Moscow provided the separatists with direct military support after civil war broke out in the country's east in 2014, it was also clear that Moscow was not in complete control of them. For example, Russia negotiated an agreement in April 2014 with Ukraine, the United States, and the European Union that called on the separatists to disarm. However, the separatists refused to recognize this agreement.²⁵ In May 2014, President Putin called on the separatist regions to delay any referendums on independence, which they also refused.²⁶ Despite the referendums resulting in votes for independence, Russia did not recognize the breakaway republics for another eight years, until February 21, 2022.

Russia's insistence on Minsk II was in line with consistent public opinion in the East favoring greater autonomy within a federalized Ukraine rather than independence, annexation by Russia, or a "unitary" Ukrainian state.²⁷ This also helps explain why, immediately after Maidan, Russia reacted differently to events in Donbas and Crimea—the latter of which Russia annexed in March 2014. On the one hand, Crimea was of greater strategic significance for Russia than the Donbas, and there was little chance that Moscow would allow the Russian naval base at Sevastopol to become a NATO foothold on the Black Sea. But also, unlike the rest of Ukraine, years of polling in Crimea—Ukraine's only ethnic Russian majority region—show consistent popular support for leaving Ukraine, with most polls showing majority support for annexation by Russia if a referendum were to be held, including among ethnic Ukrainians.²⁸

While Minsk II would have maintained Ukrainian sovereignty over the Donbas, the agreement still put Kyiv between a rock and a hard place, making the implementation of the agreement extremely contentious. Had Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko or his successor Volodymyr Zelensky implemented Minsk II, they would have faced significant domestic opposition, and even risked being overthrown or assassinated.²⁹ In January 2021, the Ukrainian Secretary of the National Security and Defense Council, Oleksiy Danilov, stated that the "fulfillment of the Minsk agreement means the country's destruction," and that if "they [the West] insist on the fulfillment of the Minsk agreements as they are it will be very dangerous for our country," specifying that "it could lead to a very difficult internal situation."³⁰ Indeed, two weeks before the invasion, *The New York Times*



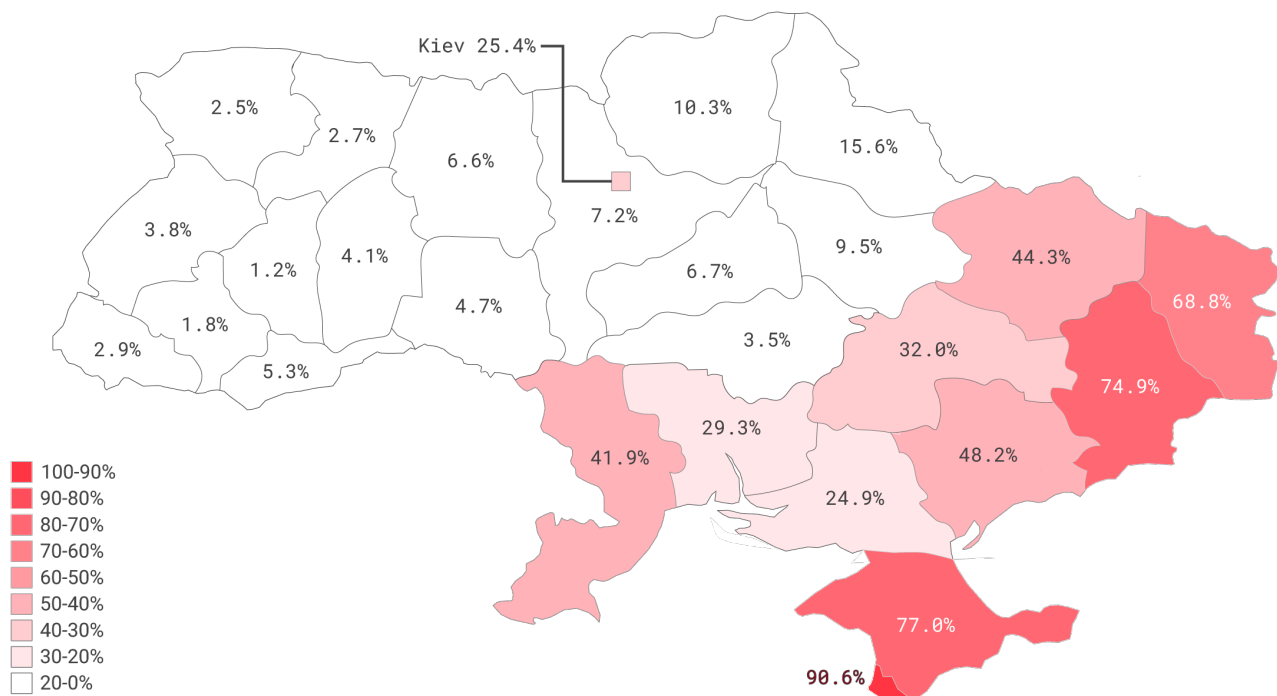
reported that Kyiv was unable to pursue negotiations to avoid war without the risk of President Zelensky being overthrown by far-right paramilitary groups which the government was simultaneously arming.³¹

By 2021, President Putin came to believe that the Minsk process was dead and the situation in Ukraine untenable.³² However, Russian actions from 2014 to February 2022 contradict the notion that Moscow’s first preference was to conquer the Donbas region, let alone all of Ukraine or the rest of Eastern Europe. In shifting from the pursuit of Minsk II to the February 2022 attempt at regime change in Kyiv, Russia sought the same end—to keep Ukraine within the Russian sphere of influence, or at least out of the West’s—but by more radical means.

Ideology and national identity

Like most countries, Russia maintains an exceptionalist self-image based on a somewhat mythical interpretation of its own history.³³ In July 2021, President Putin authored a now-notorious article in which he declared that Russians and Ukrainians were “one people” and depicted ninth century Kievan Rus’ as the cradle of a “Russian” civilization comprising the Eastern Slavs of modern-day Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine.³⁴

Percentage of Ukraine’s population by region that indicated “Russian” as their unique mother tongue



Source: 2001 Ukrainian census; “Ukrainian society 1994–2005: sociological monitoring.” - <http://dif.org.ua/> (in Ukrainian)

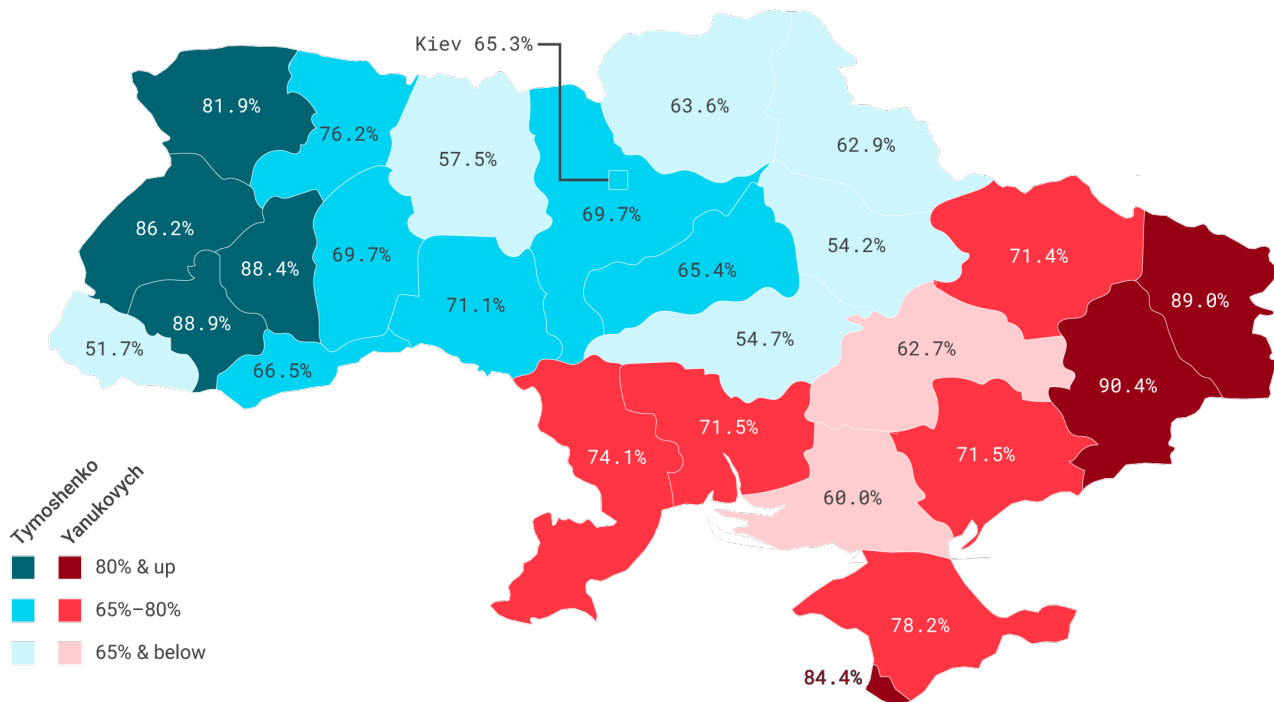
Some commentators have interpreted President Putin’s statement that Russians and Ukrainians are “one people” as the expression of a megalomaniacal belief that Ukraine should not be a separate and independent state—or even that President Putin wishes to “annihilate” Ukrainians as a people.³⁵ After all, when Ukraine was offered NATO membership in 2008, President Putin reportedly stated that “Ukraine is not even a country,” and that the “more significant part [of Ukraine] was given by [Russia] as a gift.”³⁶ And in his February 21, 2022, speech announcing Russian recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway regions, President Putin railed



at length against Vladimir Lenin’s establishment of a separate Ukrainian republic and Nikita Khrushchev’s giveaway of Crimea.³⁷

Looking more closely, however, attributions of the Russian invasion to these alleged ideological causes have often been exaggerated or misrepresented.³⁸ If one takes the above statements as honest reflections of President Putin’s views, then one must also consider statements of his that paint a more complicated picture. For example, in the same July 2021 article, President Putin repeatedly acknowledged Ukraine’s distinct national identity and likened his ideal relationship between Russia and Ukraine as being like that between the United States and Canada (the latter, one might note, is independent despite being firmly within the U.S. sphere of influence).³⁹ Nowhere does he say Russians and Ukrainians, by virtue of being “one people,” should therefore be one state.

Percentage of Ukraine’s population by region that voted for Tymoshenko or Yanukovich in the 2010 presidential election



Source: Central Election Commission of Ukraine (CEC)

In fact, far from simply being an imperial delusion in Moscow, polling before the war showed that many Ukrainians agreed with some version of President Putin’s sentiment that Russians and Ukrainians had a shared historical and cultural identity. For example, following President Putin’s article in July 2021, one Ukrainian poll found that 41 percent of respondents agreed that “Russians and Ukrainians are one people belonging to the same historical and spiritual space,” including over 60 percent of respondents in the east.⁴⁰ Indeed, even President Zelensky, a native Russian speaker, reportedly told a Donetsk newspaper in 2014 that “we cannot be against the Russian people, because we are one people.”⁴¹ Keeping in mind that eastern Ukraine had been a part of Russia from the seventeenth century until the 1990s (nearly twice as long as California has been a part of the United States following its annexation from Mexico), it should not be surprising that a significant number of Ukrainians, especially in the eastern and southern regions, maintained a loyal Ukrainian civic identity while simultaneously possessing a long-standing Russian cultural identity.⁴² It is, therefore, an indication of just how



badly the 2022 Russian invasion has misfired that even historically Russian-speaking regions of Ukraine have likely been turned against Moscow for generations to come.⁴³

The complex issue of Ukrainian national and cultural identity was central to the Maidan Revolution, the civil war in the Donbas, and Russia's subsequent interventions. As the roots of the Russo-Ukrainian War lie at least partially in an intra-Ukrainian civil war, any resolution of the former must also address the latter. Perhaps, by uniting Ukrainians against the Russian invaders, Russia's war may have had the ironic effect of resolving some of these divisions among Ukrainians, however contrary that may have been to Moscow's intentions.

Democracy, color revolutions, and Western intervention

Despite numerous "color revolutions" over the past two decades, arguments that Russia invaded Ukraine because President Putin fears democracy overlook the fact that the only countries Russia invaded in the post-Soviet space are the two countries promised NATO membership in 2008: Georgia and Ukraine. If President Putin were merely fearful of democracy or popular revolutions in nearby countries, why didn't he invade Georgia in 2003, Ukraine in 2004, Kyrgyzstan in 2005 or 2010, Moldova in 2009, or Armenia in 2018? Why, in the 2008 war with Georgia, didn't he destroy their democracy, install a strongman, or conquer the country? Why would he remain formally allied with democratic Armenia, which is locked in a bitter struggle with autocratic Azerbaijan?

Furthermore, it is not plausible to claim either that Ukraine has experienced a radical flourishing of democracy after the Maidan Revolution of 2014, or that President Putin would thus feel compelled to crush it due to risk of popular overthrow. First, according to several indices measuring democracy and regime type, there was no significant change in Ukrainian democracy after the Maidan Revolution. Ukraine is alternatively characterized as an "anocracy," a "hybrid regime," "partly free," a "defective democracy," or somewhere between an "electoral democracy" and an "electoral autocracy."⁴⁴ According to Transparency International, Ukraine has consistently been the most corrupt country in Europe after Russia.⁴⁵ Viktor Yanukovich, the president overthrown by the Maidan Revolution, was—for all his corruption and thuggery—elected in what international observers agreed was a free and fair process.⁴⁶ After an internationally-brokered agreement with the opposition to hold early elections and institute reforms, President Yanukovich was forced to flee by threats of violence and removed from office by a parliamentary vote that failed to meet the constitutional requirements.⁴⁷ Moreover, the EU Association Agreement President Yanukovich rejected and that catalyzed the Maidan protests was not supported by a majority of Ukrainians at the time, with an equal number instead supporting joining the Eurasian Customs Union with Russia.⁴⁸ In 2021, the Zelensky government arrested the country's two most prominent opposition leaders, Viktor Medvedchuk and Petro Poroshenko, on charges of high treason while, coincidentally or not, their parties were leading President Zelensky's in the parliamentary polls.⁴⁹

Secondly, the Kremlin seems to have little reason to fear that the Russian public is clamoring for liberal democracy. According to the internationally-respected Levada Center—widely regarded as the last independent polling firm in Russia—while only 18 percent of Russians prefer "the current system," a mere 16 percent prefer "the Western model of democracy," and 49 percent prefer "the Soviet system."⁵⁰ Only 22 percent of Russians agree that "under no circumstances can all authority be given to one person," while 49 percent agree that "our people constantly need a 'firm hand.'"⁵¹ Pro-democracy Russians were also reportedly uninspired by the example of post-Maidan Ukraine.⁵²

This is not meant to disparage Ukraine's democratic aspirations (after all, revolutions and democratic transitions are uneven and protracted processes) or ordinary Russian citizens. It is simply to say that the "cause" of the 2022 invasion so many analysts point to does not even appear to exist.



What President Putin likely fears, therefore, is not his democratic neighbors *per se*, but Western-backed regime change both in Russia and on its doorstep.⁵³

While the Maidan Revolution was undoubtedly driven by organic popular grievances, the U.S. State Department openly inserted itself into the events of 2013–2014. In December 2013, then-Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland—currently the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs and a former U.S. ambassador to NATO—gave a speech stating that “[t]he Euro-Maidan movement has come to embody the principles and values that are the cornerstones for all free democracies,” and that since 1991, the United States had invested over \$5 billion to “ensure a secure and prosperous and democratic Ukraine.”⁵⁴ Two days earlier, Assistant Secretary Nuland and then-U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine Geoffrey Pyatt visited the Maidan encampment to hand out baked goods to demonstrators. In early February 2014, weeks before the Yanukovich government was overturned, a recorded phone call was leaked to the press where Assistant Secretary Nuland and Ambassador Pyatt seemed to be hand-picking members of the successor government.⁵⁵

In addition to the U.S. State Department, organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy (NED)—a non-governmental organization almost entirely funded by the United States government—have been deeply involved in color revolutions and protest movements all over the world, including the Orange and Maidan Revolutions in Ukraine, and the mass demonstrations in Russia in 2011.⁵⁶ The NED is the primary organ for U.S. efforts to “promote democracy” abroad, providing funding, training, and other support to opposition groups in foreign countries, sometimes contributing directly to regime change.⁵⁷ According to *ProPublica*, “[t]he National Endowment for Democracy was established by Congress, in effect, to take over the CIA’s covert propaganda efforts” after the agency received public scrutiny of its propaganda activities in the 1960s and 70s.⁵⁸ In a 1991 article in *The Washington Post* sub-headlined, “The New World of Spyleless Coups,” NED co-founder Allen Weinstein told David Ignatius, “A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.”⁵⁹

In September 2013, two months before the Maidan protests began, NED President Carl Gershman wrote that “Ukraine is the biggest prize” in the contest between the EU and the Eurasian Customs Union, going on to say that the association agreement “should be seen not as an end in itself but as a starting point that makes possible deeper reforms and more genuine democracy.”⁶⁰ The NED provided nearly \$2.9 million in grants to almost 60 programs in Ukraine in 2013.⁶¹ In the same article, Gershman stated, “Russians, too, face a choice, and Putin may find himself on the losing end not just in the near abroad but within Russia itself.”⁶² It comes as no surprise that the NED was later effectively banned in Russia or that Gershman interpreted this as a “crackdown on civil society.”⁶³

Under scrutiny, the domestic-level explanations offered for the Russian invasion prove to be incomplete, misleading, or directly contradicted by the available evidence. From a realist perspective, these shortcomings are unsurprising. Without understanding the international security environment in which Russian perceptions and decisions were formed, we cannot gain a full account of the deep causes of the conflict. The international view requires an assessment of the balance of power and its effect in shaping Moscow’s perceptions of threats to its own security. This, in turn, requires a sober recognition of the role played by the United States and its European NATO allies.

Structural causes and interactions: Russian security concerns and the “security dilemma”

Realists advance a different explanation for the war, primarily focused on Russian security fears in the face of NATO expansion and the prospect of Ukraine officially joining or playing host to NATO forces. The collapse of the Soviet Union left the United States as the only great power in the system. In the absence of external



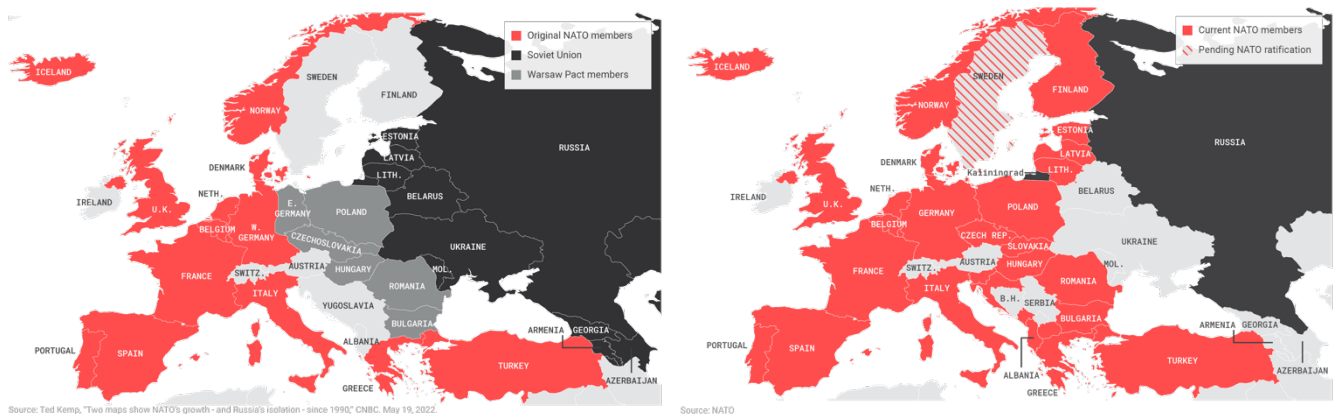
constraints, the United States expanded its sphere of influence to an unprecedented extent while seeking to tailor the internal policies of far-flung states to American preferences, often through force. It is impossible to explain Russian behavior over the past three decades outside of this context.

NATO expansion: A predictable provocation

In an anarchic world, even a nuclear-armed power like Russia cannot take its security for granted; it must hedge against uncertainty. This means maintaining significant conventional capabilities to meet a multitude of potential security threats, and insulating itself from proximate threats by using its economic, military, and political power to influence the states around it.

Given its extraordinary size, lack of natural borders, and proximity to several potentially threatening states or alliances, Russia has historically sought to maintain buffers on its frontiers in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central and Northeastern Asia. The Russian Empire and Soviet Union exerted direct control over these regions, but the fall of the Soviet Union severely circumscribed Russian power. While Russia has reestablished itself as a great power over the past two decades, its ability to maintain a sphere of influence has been limited, at most, to its immediate periphery within the post-Soviet space.

Europe's major military alliances in 1990 (left) vs. 2023 (right)



Since 1990, NATO (in red) has expanded and now includes several states that share borders with Russia, while the Soviet Union dissolved, along with the Warsaw Pact.

NATO is the most powerful military alliance in world history, led by the most powerful state in world history, with forward-deployed troops and military infrastructure, underwritten by thousands of nuclear weapons and a first strike nuclear doctrine. It encroached ineluctably for three decades all the way up to Russia's borders. One does not have to be a "madman" in the Kremlin to see why this would make the Russian leadership nervous. NATO expansion was not the only catalyst for the Russo-Ukrainian War, but it was the sharpest external threat to Russia and the main driver of the deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations over three decades.

In 1997, George Kennan, the intellectual architect of the policy of containment during the Cold War, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* stating:

[E]xpanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era. Such a decision may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.⁶⁴



In a subsequent interview, Kennan made another prediction with remarkable prescience: “Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then [advocates of NATO expansion] will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are—but this is just wrong.”⁶⁵

Numerous other policymakers and experts made similar predictions about the effects of NATO expansion. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry nearly resigned over the issue.⁶⁶ Jack Matlock, the penultimate ambassador to the Soviet Union who oversaw the end of the Cold War, testified before Congress in 1997 that the decision to expand NATO “may well go down in history as the most profound strategic blunder made since the end of the Cold War.”⁶⁷ A raft of senior diplomats and congress members vigorously opposed the decision.⁶⁸

At the 2008 Bucharest Summit, NATO’s pledge that Ukraine and Georgia would someday join the alliance was a bridge too far for Moscow. President Putin reportedly “flew into a rage.”⁶⁹ U.S. policymakers predicted the adverse Russian reaction. In his memoir, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates recalled his thoughts at the time:

Trying to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO was truly overreaching. The roots of the Russian Empire trace back to Kiev in the ninth century, so that was an especially monumental provocation. Were the Europeans, much less the Americans, willing to send their sons and daughters to defend Ukraine or Georgia? Hardly. So NATO expansion was a political act, not a carefully considered military commitment, thus undermining the purpose of the alliance and recklessly ignoring what the Russians considered their own vital national interests.⁷⁰

Any ambiguities were dispelled by clear and repeated messages from Moscow both before and after the declaration. Two months before Bucharest, then-Ambassador (and current CIA Director) William Burns cabled back from Moscow that:

Foreign Minister Lavrov and other senior officials have reiterated strong opposition, stressing that Russia would view further eastward expansion [of NATO] as a potential military threat. NATO enlargement, particularly to Ukraine, remains “an emotional and neuralgic” issue for Russia, but strategic policy considerations also underlie strong opposition to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia [. . .] Not only does Russia perceive encirclement, and efforts to undermine Russia’s influence in the region, but it also fears unpredictable and uncontrolled consequences which would seriously affect Russian security interests.⁷¹

And in a now-famous memo to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Burns warned that:

Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite (not just Putin). In more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin’s sharpest liberal critics, I have yet to find anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests.⁷²

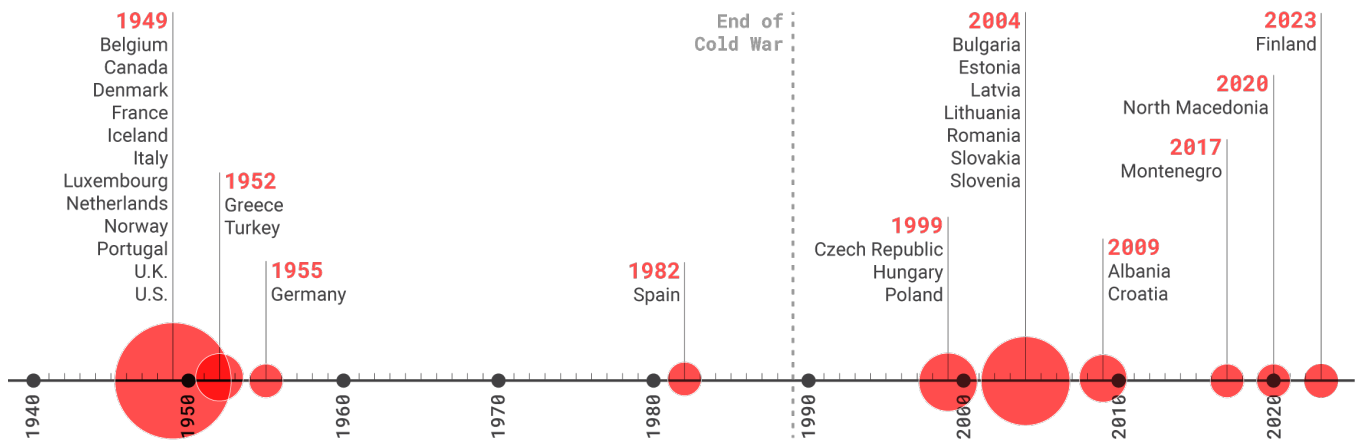
Only four months after the Bucharest summit, Russia enforced “the brightest of all red lines” in a war with Georgia. American support for Georgia’s NATO aspirations likely led Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to believe that the United States would back Tbilisi in a standoff against Moscow over the separatist enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indeed, U.S. and Georgian troops participated in joint military exercises only weeks before the war. On August 7, Georgia launched an artillery assault on the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. Russia immediately intervened, with some in the West fearing an imminent annexation of the whole country. Within days, the Russians forced a Georgian surrender, pulled out, and recognized the independence of the two breakaway regions on the precedent of the U.S. recognition of Kosovo.⁷³



It is important to observe the specific geographic priority in Russia’s response to a possible Ukrainian entry into NATO. Following the 2008 Bucharest Summit, President Putin declared, “If Ukraine joins NATO, it will do so without Crimea and the eastern regions.”⁷⁴ Burns had specifically predicted that holding the possibility of Ukrainian NATO membership would “create fertile soil for Russian meddling in Crimea and eastern Ukraine.”⁷⁵ Burns further noted that:

Experts tell us that Russia is particularly worried that the strong divisions in Ukraine over NATO membership, with much of the ethnic-Russian community against membership, could lead to a major split, involving violence or at worst, civil war. In that eventuality, Russia would have to decide whether to intervene; a decision Russia does not want to have to face.⁷⁶

Timeline of NATO expansion



Source: NATO

The security dilemma: Arms racing and spiraling mistrust

As a part of NATO’s expansion, new military infrastructure and forward-deployed forces also contributed to a security dilemma dynamic between Russia and the United States. Russia increasingly viewed American actions with distrust and saw manifold confirmations of its worst-scenario fears, while Russian countermeasures convinced many in the United States of Moscow’s inherently aggressive designs.

Moscow perceived the United States’ unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, the INF Treaty in 2019, and the Open Skies Treaty in 2020 as an erosion of strategic stability and crisis management mechanisms. NATO’s installation of MK 41 anti-ballistic missile systems in Poland and Romania produced fears repeatedly expressed by Moscow that the installations could be quickly converted into offensive batteries capable of launching Tomahawk cruise missiles with minutes-long flight times to Russian targets.⁷⁷ In a 2016 interview, President Putin told the filmmaker Oliver Stone:

Why do we react so vehemently to NATO’s expansion? We are concerned with the decision-making process. I know how decisions are made. As soon as a country becomes a member of NATO, it can’t resist the pressure of the USA. And very soon anything at all can appear in such a country—missile defense systems, new bases, or if necessary, new missile strike systems. What should we do? We need to take countermeasures, meaning, to aim our rocket systems at the new facilities which we consider to be threatening us. The situation gets tense.⁷⁸



The ABM Treaty remained a sore spot for President Putin. In the summer of 2021, President Putin unexpectedly interrupted an internal meeting about the economy to lament the end of the treaty, at one point stating, “We tried to partner with the West for many years, but the partnership was not accepted, it didn’t work.”⁷⁹

In a December 2021 article for *Foreign Policy*, Anatoly Antonov, the Russian Ambassador to the United States, wrote that “When we express concern about [NATO expansion, the end of ABM and INF treaties, and missile installations], we are told, in effect: ‘Just trust us.’”⁸⁰ The Russians, however, felt that the United States had already broken multiple diplomatic promises over the years, leading them to conclude that further American assurances were worth little. Infamously, the Russian leadership believed that the United States violated an assurance given to Mikhail Gorbachev not to expand NATO “one inch eastward” in exchange for German reunification in 1990.⁸¹ But this was not the only case. For example, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later reflected that when NATO exceeded its United Nations (UN) mandate in Libya in 2011, a vote on which Russia had abstained, the Russians “firmly believed they had been deceived,” and “[c]onvinced they had been tricked, the Russians would subsequently block any such future resolutions, including against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.”⁸²

An April 2022 *War on the Rocks* interview with founder Ryan Evans, Counselor to the Secretary of State Derek Chollet confirmed the United States dismissed Russian security concerns as expressed in a December 2021 draft treaty. Evans referred specifically to the security dilemma:

[Evans:] I’m a little struck by the refusal to even talk about the issue of NATO expansion with the Russians [. . .] Do you think if this offer was made that it just would have led nowhere, so there was no point in making it, is that why? Or was it just in defense of the principle of NATO expansion, even though we had no plans to let Ukraine into NATO?

[Chollet:] We talked about NATO by saying that NATO is a defensive alliance. NATO is not a threat to Russia. NATO is not poisoning its forces offensively, to do anything offensive against Russia . . .

[Evans:] Well, you’ve studied the security dilemma, you’re, you know . . .

[Chollet:] The reason why we had NATO forces on the eastern flank, which started in 2014, was because of Russia’s initial invasion of Ukraine, I mean so, this is the reverse logic . . .⁸³

Chollet appears to be saying that NATO, conversely, beefed up its eastern front for fear of Russia. However, if this was justified, why wouldn’t Russia be at least as justified in fearing NATO expansion? As Jervis argued, the security dilemma cannot be altogether avoided (hence the dilemma), but it can be mitigated.⁸⁴ By not attempting to do so, the United States was negligent. It is notable, in light of Waltz’s description of the security dilemma as “measures that enhance one state’s security typically diminish that of others,” that Russia repeatedly emphasized the indivisibility of security and insisted that NATO and Russia should “not strengthen their security individually [. . .] at the expense of the security of other Parties.”⁸⁵

The immediate leadup to war: Ukraine’s deepening security ties with the West

It is frequently claimed that Ukraine’s accession to NATO was a dead letter after 2008 and there were no subsequent moves toward Ukrainian security integration that might provoke a Russian response. Yet not only did Ukraine’s security ties to the West deepen during this period, but the year immediately leading up to the Russian invasion saw a significant acceleration of the country’s role as a *de facto* ally of the West and a parallel disintegration in U.S.-Russian relations.⁸⁶



Timeline of events leading up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

2020	Nov	<p>November 3: Joe Biden elected U.S. President</p> <p>November 22: U.S. withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty</p>
	Dec	
2021	Jan	<p>January 15: Russia announces withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty</p> <p>January 25: Biden holds a confrontational call with Putin</p>
	Feb	<p>February 1: Zelensky asks why Ukraine is not a NATO member</p> <p>February: President Biden says that “the days [of] the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions [...] are over”</p> <p>February 16: Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba urges NATO to accept Ukraine</p> <p>February 19: Viktor Medvedchuk, leader of Ukraine’s pro-Russian opposition party and a personal friend of Putin’s, is sanctioned by Kyiv in a move “calculated to fit in with the U.S. agenda”</p> <p>February 21: Russia announces large-scale military exercises on Ukrainian border</p>
	Mar	<p>March 17: Biden calls Putin a “killer”</p> <p>March 18: Russia withdraws its U.S. ambassador in response to Putin’s comment</p> <p>March 24: Kyiv states its intent to retake Crimea</p>
	Apr	<p>April: Russian military buildup continues on Ukrainian border despite formal end to exercises</p>
	May	
	Jun	<p>June 14: NATO summit in Brussels reaffirms 2008 decision “that Ukraine will become a member of the Alliance”</p> <p>June 16: Biden and Putin meet at Geneva to discuss arms control, but the Ukraine situation goes unresolved. Putin reaffirms Ukraine as a “red line,” alleges the U.S. is trying to “contain” Russia</p>
	Jul	<p>July: NATO holds “Operation Sea Breeze” joint military exercises with Ukraine in Black Sea, and Russia responds with live-fire exercises</p> <p>July 12: Putin publishes an article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”</p>
	Aug	
	Sep	<p>September 1: Zelensky visits White House, and Biden states he is “fully committed” to “Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations”</p> <p>September 20: U.S. and Ukrainian militaries participate in “Rapid Trident 21” exercises to “enhance interoperability” between Ukrainian forces and “allied and partner nations”</p>
	Oct	
Nov	<p>November 10: Washington and Kyiv agree to “Charter on Strategic Partnership”</p>	
Dec	<p>December 17: Moscow releases draft treaties demanding Ukraine not enter NATO, an end to NATO expansion, and removal of forces and weapons from NATO’s eastern flank</p>	
2022	Jan	<p>January: U.S. holds negotiations with Russia but rebuffs Moscow’s draft treaty demands</p>
	Feb	<p>February 18-20: Shelling increases in the Donbass</p> <p>February 21: Russia formally recognizes the separatist republics in the Donbass</p> <p>February 24: Russia invades Ukraine</p>

Seeking to contrast himself with President Donald Trump, President Joe Biden struck a more combative posture toward Russia during his 2020 campaign. Soon after his inauguration in January 2021, President Biden held a contentious call with President Putin.⁸⁷ In early February, President Biden declared that “the days [of] the United States rolling over in the face of Russia’s aggressive actions [. . .] are over.”⁸⁸ On February 1, President Zelensky



appealed to the Biden administration, asking, “why is Ukraine still not in NATO?”⁸⁹ On February 16, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba reiterated the question in an article for the hawkish and influential Atlantic Council.⁹⁰ On February 19, Viktor Medvedchuk, the leader of the pro-Russian opposition party leading in the polls and a personal friend of President Putin’s, was sanctioned by the Zelensky government. According to President Zelensky’s former national security advisor Oleksandr Danyliuk, the decision “was calculated to fit in with the U.S. agenda,” and was “conceived as a welcome gift to the Biden Administration.”⁹¹ Days later, Russia announced large-scale military exercises on the Ukrainian border.

In a March 17 interview, President Biden stated that President Putin was a “killer”; the next day, Russia recalled its ambassador from Washington, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov responded that President Biden “definitely does not want to improve relations with us, and we will continue to proceed from this.”⁹² On March 24, Ukraine released a new military strategy declaring that the country planned to retake Crimea.⁹³ The Russian exercises had concluded by the beginning of April, but the military buildup continued on the Ukrainian border.

At its summit on June 14, NATO reiterated “the decision made at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that Ukraine will become a member of the Alliance with the Membership Action Plan (MAP) as an integral part of the process.”⁹⁴ On June 16, President Biden and President Putin met in Geneva, where despite productive negotiations on arms control, the Ukraine issue went unresolved with “Russia [reaffirming] its view that the country’s bid for NATO membership represents a red line, while the U.S. [. . .] restated that the alliance’s doors remain open for its membership.”⁹⁵ At a press conference afterward, President Putin stated that the United States sees Russia as an enemy and that “the publicly announced goal of the United States” was to “contain” Russia.⁹⁶

As the Russian buildup continued over the summer and fall, the United States and NATO conducted multiple joint military exercises with the Ukrainian armed forces designed to “enhance interoperability”; the Russians conducted live-fire exercises in response.⁹⁷ When President Zelensky visited the White House in September, a “Joint Statement on the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Partnership” was released stating, “[w]e are committed to Ukraine’s implementation of the deep and comprehensive reforms necessary to fulfill its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations,” as well as declaring “Ukraine’s status as a NATO Enhanced Opportunities Partner.”⁹⁸ In November, Foreign Minister Kuleba and Secretary of State Antony Blinken signed a “Charter on Strategic Partnership,” that again reaffirmed the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration that Ukraine would someday become a member of NATO.⁹⁹

In December, the Kremlin released two draft treaties demanding that Washington agree not to bring Ukraine into NATO, and that NATO cease further eastward expansion and remove weapons systems and troops from its eastern flank.¹⁰⁰ As Counselor Chollet conceded, the White House did not seriously consider meeting Moscow’s demands; the Russians were rebuffed.¹⁰¹ Three weeks before the invasion, President Putin complained that Russia’s concerns regarding NATO were being ignored, and one week prior to the invasion, he warned German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, “[w]e need to resolve this question now.”¹⁰² From February 18 to 20, there was an increase in shelling reported on both sides of the contact line in the Donbas.¹⁰³ On February 21, President Putin recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics, and Russia invaded Ukraine three days later.

This sequence of events strongly suggests a causal relationship between NATO-Ukraine security cooperation throughout 2021 on the one hand, and the Russian decision to intervene in early 2022 on the other. In the decades to come, historians trawling through the archives may discover new information that radically changes our interpretation of the motives and drivers for the war. However, under conditions of incomplete information in the present, theory is a necessary tool to rely on. The available information regarding the prelude to the February 2022 invasion is quite consistent with what realist theory would lead us to expect: that Russia and NATO were caught in an escalating security spiral that Russia ultimately attempted to resolve through military action.



Counterarguments

There are several common counterarguments to the realist explanation for the Russo-Ukrainian War. First is the objection that NATO is a defensive alliance posing no threat to Russia; second, that Russia has been indifferent to Finland and Sweden's application for NATO membership; and third, that the crisis in Ukraine is over the issue of EU membership, not NATO membership. These counterarguments are easily answered.

First, the argument that NATO is a defensive alliance ignores the well-known ambiguity in distinguishing between offensive and defensive capabilities and intentions at the heart of the security dilemma. To deter aggression against Europe, NATO maintains massive offensive capabilities, including its nuclear forces and doctrine. Moreover, two of NATO's major combat missions were offensive operations against states that had not attacked a NATO member: Serbia in 1999 and Libya in 2011. In both instances, the interventions contributed toward regime change. In the case of Serbia, there are numerous parallels with the Russian invasion of 2022, including the contravention of international law, bombing of civilian infrastructure, use of cluster munitions, and "rewriting the borders of Europe."

Second, while Moscow initially gave a threatening response to Finland and Sweden's NATO applications, the difficulties Russian forces faced in Ukraine, and the security assurances offered to Finland and Sweden by the principal NATO countries in the interim made it unthinkable that Russia would respond by risking a general war with NATO. Russia has, however, made clear that if NATO deploys significant forces and weapon systems in the new member states of Finland or Sweden, it would be perceived as a threat.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, while Moscow is hardly pleased that Finland has decided to overturn decades of neutrality, no one doubts that the particular relationship between Russia and Ukraine made the latter issue more sensitive for the Russian leadership.

Finally, the EU agreement turned down by President Yanukovich in 2013 that sparked the Maidan protests was not simply economic; it also included clauses for "convergence on foreign and security matters with the aim of Ukraine's ever-deeper involvement in the European security area."¹⁰⁵ As discussed above, it was not only the single formal institution of NATO, but Ukraine's general exit out of Russia's sphere of influence and into the West that President Putin sought to prevent. Moreover, Russia's intervention in 2014 was not caused by the EU deal itself but by the overthrow of President Yanukovich's government in the Maidan Revolution. As the democratically elected president of Ukraine, President Yanukovich was within his rights to accept or reject whatever trade agreement he wanted, especially given the equal split in support for each trade deal amongst the Ukrainian population.¹⁰⁶

Conclusion: The purposes of theory

Given the morally charged environment in which the debate over the Russo-Ukrainian War has played out, it is worth considering an historical analogy (other than Munich in 1938). President John F. Kennedy was wise not to attack Cuba during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, yet Nikita Khrushchev was nonetheless reckless in installing missiles in Cuba, knowing that by doing so the Soviets would trigger a "neuralgic" reaction in Washington and provoke a dangerous crisis. The fact that Cuba, which had been a *de facto* colony of the United States until the 1959 revolution, was a sovereign country that by right could form alliances with any country it liked, including the Soviet Union, doesn't alter a dispassionate retrospective assessment of the crisis' origins or the conduct of the principal actors.

By a similar logic, an analyst can recognize that Russia's preventive war against Ukraine has been a costly miscalculation, uniting a defiant Ukrainian nation and producing a dangerous confrontation with a more powerful West, while also acknowledging that by encroaching upon what Russia perceived as its core security



interests, United States' policy contributed towards a Russian reaction which took its final and bloody form in February 2022. By doing so, the West has also encouraged Russia's *entente* with China, a monumental strategic setback for the U.S. Analysts, strategists, and decisionmakers must engage in a sober and honest acknowledgment of past mistakes to learn hard-won lessons and avoid similar outcomes in the future.

This task also requires a critical reassessment of the intellectual foundations and assumptions on which American foreign policy is made. Theory is purposive; it is a tool enabling scholars and practitioners to identify and evaluate the causes, constraints, and incentives that drive actors and events to better pursue desirable future outcomes.

Liberal theory treats authoritarian governments as more warlike than liberal democracies and therefore tends to regard the internal government of authoritarian states as *a problem to be solved*. As the self-appointed "leader of the free world," the United States has long possessed a strain of ideology that regards America as the champion of a universalizing mission to "make the world safe for democracy."¹⁰⁷ For example, former U.S. Ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul once argued that "[d]emocracies do not attack each other," that "[t]he purpose of American power, therefore, must be to enlarge the community of democratic states and democratic citizens around the world," and that "to promote liberty requires first the containment and then *the elimination* of those forces opposed to liberty, be they individuals, movements, or regimes."¹⁰⁸

Realists regard the utopian attempt to transcend the tragic vicissitudes of international anarchy as a cure worse than the underlying malady. While liberal hegemony seeks to remake the world in its own image, realism seeks to navigate and manipulate the world as it is.

Liberal hegemony allows no room for a *modus vivendi* between different types of governments. It promotes the notion that liberal states must be in a constant state of hostility with all other forms of government.¹⁰⁹ Until the millenarian goal of universal democracy is reached, the armed prophets of liberal hegemony do not offer a world of perpetual peace, but perpetual war. No state can sustain such an endeavor for long. The Thirty Years' War helped convince the leaders of seventeenth century Europe that wars to determine the confessional allegiances of foreign states could only lead to mutual ruin, and that sovereignty, *raison d'état*, and the balance of power must instead be prioritized. Our goal must be to forever avoid a similar learning experience—for in the nuclear age, any such lessons gained would automatically be rendered moot.

Realist theory leads us to expect that Russia will seek to maintain a benign environment on its borders and use force, if necessary, to pursue what it perceives as its security imperatives as long as it can do so. No matter how well-intentioned or inadvertent, attempts by the U.S. and its Western partners to expand their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe at the expense of Russia will be met by resistance from Moscow, thus creating the risk of a broader and more direct confrontation between nuclear powers. Less powerful states caught in the middle, like Ukraine, receive no favors from the West by being offered empty promises of security guarantees or being instrumentalized as a cat's paw to bleed Russia.

Russia and Ukraine are bound (or perhaps condemned) to be neighbors. Therefore, an arrangement must be forged, allowing both countries to conduct their relations with each other and the larger world without being locked into a permanent stand-off. The optimal compromise for all parties would be for Ukraine to become an armed neutral, capable of deterring future Russian aggression while also diminishing Russian fears of future Western encroachment. Ultimately, the outcome of the Russo-Ukrainian War can only be decided by the principals, but as both the leader of NATO, the main backer of Ukraine, and the nuclear counterpart to Russia, the U.S. has both the right and the obligation to help enable a durable peace, rather than a perpetual conflict.



Endnotes

¹ For definitive statements of restraint from a structural realist perspective, see Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), and Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 159–192. For examples of liberal theory informing American grand strategy, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “The Case for Deep Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 4 (July/August 1995): 90–102; G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012): 7–51. In practice, some liberal arguments are often married to arguments found in “hegemonic stability theory,” which suggests that a single hegemon—e.g., the United States—is necessary to underwrite international stability. See, for example, Stephen D. Krasner, “State Power and the Structure of International Trade,” *World Politics* 28, no. 3 (April 1976): 317–347; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Also see discussions about “balance of power” versus “hegemonic” realism in Stephen G. Brooks, “Dueling Realisms,” *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 445–477, and Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, *Causes of War* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 38–50.

² For example, Tom Nichols has said that “[t]his should be the final defeat of realism as a school of thought that explains anything.” Anne Applebaum has stated that “nations [. . .] do not, as some academics have long imagined, have eternal interests or permanent geopolitical orientations, fixed motivations or predictable goals.” George Packer has asserted that “the war has reduced [realists’] position to rubble.” Tom Nichols, interviewed by David Rothkopf and Rosa Brooks, “The Doomsday Episode,” May 3, 2022, *Deep State Radio*, podcast audio, <https://thedsnetwork.com/the-doomsday-episode/>; Anne Applebaum, “The Impossible Suddenly Became Possible,” *The Atlantic*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/putins-war-dispelled-the-worlds-illusions/623335/>; George Packer, “A New Theory of American Power,” *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/12/american-foreign-policy-in-wartime/671899/>.

³ Ross Douthat, “They Predicted the Ukraine War. But Did They Still Get It Wrong?” *New York Times*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/opinion/ukraine-russia-invasion-west.html>; John Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 5 (September/October 2014): 77–89; John Mearsheimer, “Why is Ukraine the West’s Fault?,” University of Chicago, September 15, 2015, 1:14:15, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMISQAGOS4>.

⁴ Anne Applebaum, “Now wondering if the Russians didn’t actually get their narrative from Mearsheimer et al. Moscow needed to say West was responsible for Russian invasions,” Twitter, March 1, 2022, 6:38 AM, <https://twitter.com/anneapplebaum/status/1498623804200865792>.

⁵ For examples of good faith recent critiques of realism, see Mike Mazarr, Twitter thread, March 2, 2022, 4:03 PM, <https://twitter.com/MMazarr/status/1499128333828775938>; Daniel W. Drezner, “Can Realism Explain the War in Ukraine?,” *Washington Post*, March 3, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/03/can-realism-explain-war-ukraine/>; Adam Tooze, “John Mearsheimer and the Dark Origins of Realism,” *New Statesman*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/john-mearsheimer-dark-origins-realism-russia>; Mike Mazarr, Twitter thread, June 14, 2022, 6:47 PM, <https://twitter.com/MMazarr/status/1536842713345187841>; Paul Poast, “A World of Power and Fear: What Critics of Realism Get Wrong,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-06-15/world-power-and-fear>. For responses to critics see John J. Mearsheimer, “The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis,” *The National Interest*, June 23, 2022, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/causes-and-consequences-ukraine-crisis-203182>; Stephen M. Walt, “Why Do People Hate Realism So Much?,” *Foreign Policy*, June 13, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/13/why-do-people-hate-realism-so-much/>; Emma Ashford, “In Praise of Lesser Evils,” *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 5 (September/October 2022): 211–218.

⁶ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979), 1–13.

⁷ John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (1936; repr., New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 383.

⁸ E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (1939; repr., New York: Perennial, 2001).

⁹ See Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

¹⁰ John H. Herz, “Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 2, no. 2 (January 1950): 157–180; Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 58–113; Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics* 30, no. 2 (January 1978): 167–214.

¹¹ “There is no canonical statement of liberalism,” according to prominent liberal theorist Michael Doyle, “Liberalism and World Politics,” *American Political Science Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1986): 1,152. For an overview of the liberal tradition in international politics, see Mark W. Zacher and Richard A. Matthew, “Liberal International Theory: Common Threads, Divergent Strands,” in *Controversies in International Relations Theory: Realism and the Neoliberal Challenge*, ed. Charles W. Kegley, Jr. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 107–150. Some liberal scholars have attempted to put liberalism on a more solid theoretical footing, with mixed results. See Andrew Moravcsik, “Taking Preferences Seriously: A Liberal Theory of International Politics,” *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 513–553.

¹² For classic statements of the democratic peace hypothesis, see Michael W. Doyle, “Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1983): 205–235; Bruce Russett, et al., *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); John M. Owen, “How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 87–125.

¹³ For critiques of the democratic peace hypothesis, see Christopher Layne, “Kant or Cant: The Myth of the Democratic Peace,” *International Security* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 5–49; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 6–13; Christopher Layne, “Shell Games, Shallow Gains, and the Democratic Peace,” *International History Review* 23, no. 4 (December 2001): 799–813; Sebastian Rosato, “The Flawed Logic of Democratic Peace Theory,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (November 2003): 585–602; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 194–204.

¹⁴ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); J. David Singer, “The Level-of-Analysis Problem in International Relations,” *World Politics* 14, no. 1 (October 1961): 77–92; Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 13–31. Analytic divisions of this kind are common across disciplines; for example, historian Fernand Braudel differentiated between historical timescales at the level of events, conjunctures, and the *longue durée*, or what he elsewhere called individual time, social time, and geographical time. See Fernand Braudel, “History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée,” “History and Sociology,” and “The Mediterranean and



the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II: Extract from the Preface," in *On History*, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3–5, 25–54, 64–82.

¹⁵ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 60–101.

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 65.

¹⁷ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72.

¹⁸ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72. Also see Waltz, "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 6 no. 1 (Autumn 1996): 54–57.

¹⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72. Elsewhere, Waltz states, "The most satisfying way would be to provide a single theory capable of explaining the behavior of states, their interactions, and international outcomes. Unfortunately, no one has even suggested how such a grand theory can be constructed, let alone developed one. Someone may one day fashion a unified theory of internal and external politics. Until that day comes, the theoretical separation of domestic and international politics need not bother us unduly. Economists get along quite well with separate theories of firms and markets." Waltz, "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy," 57.

²⁰ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 71.

²¹ Waltz, *Man, the State and War*, 238.

²² For only a few versions of these arguments, see Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 95–139; Anne Applebaum, "The Reason Putin Would Risk War," *The Atlantic*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/putin-ukraine-democracy/621465/>; Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 2 (April 2022): 18–27; Fiona Hill and Angela Stent, "The World Putin Wants," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 5 (September/October 2022): 108–122.

²³ Barack Obama, interviewed by Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

²⁴ See for example Fiona Hill, "The Kremlin's Strange Victory," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (November/December 2021): 36–47.

²⁵ Thomas Grove and Aleksandar Vasovic, "Ukraine Separatists Reject Diplomatic Deal to Disarm," Reuters, April 18, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-ukraine-crisis/ukraine-separatists-reject-diplomatic-deal-to-disarm-idINKBNOD40C220140418>.

²⁶ C.J. Chivers and David M. Herszenhorn, "Separatists Defy Kiev and Putin on Referendum," *New York Times*, May 8, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/world/europe/ukraine.html>.

²⁷ "Dynamics of Ukraine's Attitude Toward Russia and Russian Population's Attitude Toward Ukraine," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, June 27, 2013, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=177&page=1&y=2013&m=6>; "How Relations Between Ukraine and Russia Should Look Like?: Public Opinion Polls' Results," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, March 4, 2014, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=236&page=1&y=2014&m=3>;

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"Attitude to the Unitary State and Separatism in Ukraine," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, May 22, 2014, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=319&page=2&y=2014&m=5>.

²⁸ Razumkov Center, "Crimea: People, Problems, Prospects," *National Security & Defence* 104, no. 10 (2008): 19–22, https://web.archive.org/web/20160420233809/http://razumkov.org.ua/eng/files/category_journal/NSD104_eng.pdf; Crimea Development and Integration Program-United Nations Development Program, "Quarterly Monitoring Report: Socio-Economic Development of Crimea," October-December 2009, 15, https://web.archive.org/web/20140502000238/http://www.undp.crimea.ua/img/content/file/monitoring_ru_2009_10-12.pdf; Crimea Development and Integration Program-United Nations Development Program, "Quarterly Monitoring Report: Socio-Economic Development of Crimea," October-December 2010, 62, https://web.archive.org/web/20140415042714/http://www.undp.crimea.ua/img/content/file/monitoring_ru_2010_10-12.pdf;

Crimea Development and Integration Program-United Nations Development Program, "Report on Monitoring the Socio-Economic Situation in the Context of the Implementation of the Strategy for Economic and Social Development of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea for 2011–2020," October–December 2011, 17–18, <https://web.archive.org/web/20140502005021/http://www.undp.crimea.ua/img/content/Strategy%20Implementation%20Monitoring%20Report%20%28October%20to%20December%202011%29%285%29.pdf>.

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Broadcasting Board of Governors/Gallup, "Newsgathering and Policy Perceptions in Ukraine," April 2014, 28–30, <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/media/2014/06/Ukraine-slide-deck.pdf>; GfK, "Social and Political Attitudes of the Residents of Crimea," January 16–25, 2015, 7–8, https://web.archive.org/web/20150204163358/https://www.gfk.com/ua/Documents/Presentations/GfK_report_FreeCrimea.pdf;

John O'Loughlin, Gerard Toal, and Kristin M. Bakke, "To Russia With Love," *Foreign Affairs*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2020-04-03/russia-love>. For an opposing view to recent poll results, see Ukrainian Minister for Foreign Affairs Dmytro Kuleba, "The Peril of Polling in Crimea," *Foreign Affairs*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2020-04-21/peril-polling-crimea>, which includes a reply by O'Loughlin, Toal, and Bakke.

²⁹ When President Poroshenko agreed to reforms providing greater autonomy for the eastern regions, far-right demonstrators clashed with police, throwing grenades which killed multiple national guardsmen and left 140 wounded. "Ukraine crisis: Third Death after Kiev Anti-autonomy Rally," *BBC News*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34112881>. Subsequently, President Poroshenko not only dragged his feet on implementation but also attempted to outflank the political opposition by advancing legislation contrary to Minsk II. Andreas Umland, "Poroshenko's Line, the Minsk Agreement, and the Special Status for the Donbas," *VoxUkraine*, February 2, 2016, <https://voxukraine.org/en/poroshenkos-line-the-minsk-agreement-and-the-special-status-for-the-donbas-en/>; Fred Weir, "Politics Over Peace? Critics Say Ukraine's President Sidelining Minsk Accords," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 29, 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2018/0129/Politics-over-peace-Critics-say-Ukraine-s-president-sidelining-Minsk-accords>. In 2019, Volodymyr Zelensky beat President Poroshenko with over 70 percent of the vote on a platform promising to improve relations with Russia, but quickly found his peace plan obstructed by open insubordination and threats from far-right paramilitaries. Dmitry Yarosh, a co-founder of the fascist organization Right Sector and a commander in the Ukrainian Volunteer Army, told the Ukrainian paper *Obozrevatel* that "implementation of the Minsk agreements is the death of our state," that if Zelensky pursued them "we would have



to raise an uprising,” and that Zelensky “would lose his life” and “will be hanged on some tree in Khreshchatyk if he betrays Ukraine.” Lilia Ragutskaya, “Yarosh: If Zelensky Betrays Ukraine, He Will Lose Not His Position, but His Life,” *Obozrevatel*, May 27, 2019, https://incident-obozrevatel-com.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/ocr/ocr/dmitrij-yarosh-esli-zelenskij-predast-ukrainu-poteryaet-ne-dolzno-zhizn.htm?_x_tr_sl=uk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp. When President Zelensky signed onto the “Steinmeier Formula” to disengage military forces and hold elections in the Donbas in late 2019, he was personally met with open disobedience by the fascist Azov Battalion and faced mass demonstrations by their political arm, the National Corps. Associated Press, “Far-right Groups Protest Ukrainian President’s Peace Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-10-14/ukraine-protest-zelensky-peace-plan>; Oksana Grytsenko, “‘I’m Not a Loser’: Zelensky Clashes with Veterans over Donbas Disengagement,” *Kyiv Post*, October 28, 2019, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/im-not-a-loser-zelensky-clashes-with-veterans-over-donbas-disengagement.html>.

³⁰ Yuras Karmanau, “Ukraine Security Chief: Minsk Peace Deal May Create Chaos,” Associated Press, January 31, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-russia-france-germany-europe-d9a2ed365b58d35274bf0c3c18427e81>.

³¹ Andrew E. Kramer, “Armed Nationalists in Ukraine Pose a Threat Not Just to Russia,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/world/europe/ukraine-nationalism-russia-invasion.html>.

³² President Putin says this more or less explicitly in his notorious article. Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians,” July 12, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

³³ On the mythical character of many of these cultural and historical notions, and a prediction of their possible resurgence in post-Soviet Russia, see Edward L. Keenan, “On Certain Mythical Beliefs and Russian Behaviors,” in *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 19–40. For a historical account of “the Russian Idea” interpretation of Russian culture and identity, see Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 22–55. For discussions of the influence of ideology on contemporary Russian politics and foreign policy, see Stephen Kotkin, “Russia’s Perpetual Geopolitics,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 2–10; Igor Zevelev, *Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2016), https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/161208_Zevelev_RussianNationalIdentity_Web.pdf. For a critical account of the influence of “the Russian Idea” on Western analysis of Russian culture see Ana Siljak, “Nikolai Berdiaev and the Origin of Russian Messianism,” *The Journal of Modern History* 88, no. 4 (December 2016): 737–763.

³⁴ Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

³⁵ For an overblown interpretation of this kind see Timothy Snyder, who states “In a long essay on ‘historical unity,’ published last July, [President Putin] argued that Ukraine and Russia were a single country, bound by a shared origin. His vision is of a broken world that must be restored through violence. Russia becomes itself only by annihilating Ukraine.” Timothy Snyder, “The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War,” *New Yorker*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war>.

³⁶ Mikhail Zygar, *All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 153–154.

³⁷ Vladimir Putin, “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” February 21, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828>.

³⁸ As Marlene Laruelle, one of the preeminent specialists on Russian nationalism notes regarding President Putin’s 2014 speech justifying the annexation of Crimea: “Putin’s use of the term [*ruskii*] in his 2014 speech belongs to [. . .] an ancient historical theme that stipulates that Eastern Slavs in their three modern national manifestations (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians) come from the same cradle, Kievan Rus’. Historically speaking, Kyiv is indeed a *ruskii* land, whereby *ruskii* is understood in the original sense of Eastern Slavs, not the modern Russian state. President Putin’s message was thus directly aimed at the revival of this imperial *longue durée* in the hope that Ukraine would not leave Russia’s sphere of influence and become “absorbed” into the European world.” Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist?: Unravelling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 147. For a brief rebuttal of traditional “Third Rome” ideas as explanations for the war, see Matthew Lenoe, “Some Observers Mistakenly Blame Putin’s Invasion on an Old Doctrine,” *Washington Post*, April 6, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/04/06/some-observers-are-mistakenly-blaming-putins-invasion-an-old-doctrine/>.

³⁹ See the following quotations, for instance: “We respect the Ukrainian language and traditions. We respect Ukrainians’ desire to see their country free, safe and prosperous.”; “Things change: countries and communities are no exception. Of course, some part of a people in the process of its development, influenced by a number of reasons and historical circumstances, can become aware of itself as a separate nation at a certain moment. How should we treat that? There is only one answer: with respect.”; “Just have a look at how Austria and Germany, the USA and Canada live next to each other. Close in ethnic composition, culture, in fact sharing one language, they remain sovereign states with their own interests, with their own foreign policy. But this does not prevent them from the closest integration or allied relations. They have very conditional, transparent borders. And when crossing them the citizens feel at home. They create families, study, work, do business. Incidentally, so do millions of those born in Ukraine who now live in Russia. We see them as our own close people.”; “Russia has never been and will never be ‘anti-Ukraine’. And what Ukraine will be—it is up to its citizens to decide.” Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians.”

⁴⁰ “Socio-Political Attitudes of the Population (July 23–25, 2021),” Rating, July 27, 2021, https://ratinggroup-ua.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/ocr/ocr/ukraine-obschestvenno-politicheskie_nastroeniya_naseleniya_23-25_izulya_2021.html?_x_tr_sl=uk&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp. The poll was quickly challenged by some on the grounds that it included two propositions in one question, see Kvitka Perehinets, “Poll Shows 41 percent of Ukrainians Agree with Putin’s ‘One Nation’ Claim, but Question was Tweaked,” *Kyiv Post*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/poll-shows-41-of-ukrainians-agree-with-putins-one-nation-claim-but-question-was-tweaked.html>. However, if the Rating poll is to be discounted on this basis, then a poll from the same time by the Razumkov Center often cited as a refutation of this sentiment among Ukrainians would also have to be rejected, as it contains three such propositions in one question, as well as being quite different in content from President Putin’s “one people” statement. The Razumkov poll found that 70.4 percent disagreed and 12.5 percent agreed with the statement that “that there was no historical basis for the notion of a Ukrainian nation separate from the Russian one and could not be, and the separation of Ukrainians and Belarusians as separate peoples was the result of Soviet national policy.” “Evaluation By Citizens of Ukraine of the Main Theses of V. Putin’s Article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians (July–August 2021),” Razumkov Center, August 11, 2021, https://razumkov-org.ua.translate.googleusercontent.com/translate/ocr/ocr/napriamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia-otsinka-gromadianamy-ukrainy-golovnykh-tez-statti-v-putina-pro-istorychnu-iednist-rosiian-ta-ukraintstv?_x_tr_sl=auto&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp. For an example of a citation of the Razumkov poll, see Andrew Wilson, “Russia and Ukraine: ‘One People’ as Putin Claims?,” Royal United Services Institute, December 23, 2021, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/russia-and-ukraine-one-people-putin-claims>. An earlier Ukrainian poll found that 51.1 percent of respondents agreed that Ukrainians and Russians are “fraternal peoples,” including 87.1 percent in the east and 60.5 percent in the south. “Half of Ukrainians



Consider Russians to be a Fraternal People,” *Ukrainska Pravda*, December 16, 2016, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2016/12/16/7130036/>. As late as February 2022, a CNN poll found that 28 percent of Ukrainians agreed they and Russians were “one people,” including 45 percent in the east and 30 percent in the south. Richard Allen Greene, “Exclusive CNN Poll: Half of Russians Say it Would be Right to Use Military Force to Keep Ukraine Out of NATO,” *CNN*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2022/02/europe/russia-ukraine-crisis-poll-intl/index.html>.

⁴¹ Igor Kulik, “In 2014, Zelensky in Donetsk Argued that Russians and Ukrainians are One People,” *Strana.ua*, archived July 1, 2021, accessed December 26, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210701120848/https://strana.ua/news/341407-zelenskij-nazyval-rossijan-i-ukraitsev-odnim-narodom-v-2014-hodu.html>.

⁴² For Ukraine’s struggle with its national identity, see Anatol Lieven, *Ukraine and Russia: A Fraternal Rivalry* (Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, 1999); Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 1–25, 50–80, 238–256; Nicolai N. Petro, “Ukraine’s Ongoing Struggle with its Russian Identity,” *World Politics Review*, May 6, 2014, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/ukraine-s-ongoing-struggle-with-its-russian-identity/>; Nicolai N. Petro, “The Tragedy of Ukraine,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, January 17, 2019, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/the-tragedy-of-ukraine/>; Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Ukrainian Voices?,” *New Left Review*, November/December 2022, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii138/articles/volodymyr-ishchenko-ukrainian-voices>.

⁴³ Greg Miller and Catherine Belton, “Russia’s Spies Misread Ukraine and Misled Kremlin as War Loomed,” *Washington Post*, August 19, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/russia-fsb-intelligence-ukraine-war/>; “How Ukrainians See Relations Between Ukraine and Russia,” Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, August 1, 2022, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1127&page=1&t=3>.

⁴⁴ Indeed, most show Ukrainian measures of democracy peaking during Viktor Yuschenko’s presidency from 2005–2010. These indexes—including Polity V, Freedom House, Economist Intelligence Unit, Varieties of Democracy, and Bertelsmann Transformation Index, among others—have been compiled for interactive and visual comparison by Bastian Herre, Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, “Democracy,” *Our World in Data*, accessed December 29, 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/democracy>.

⁴⁵ “Corruption Perceptions Index,” Transparency International, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2021/index/ukr>.

⁴⁶ Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *Ukraine Presidential Election, 17 January and 7 February 2010: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report* (Warsaw: April 28, 2010), <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/9/67844.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine*, 89, 94. Removal of the president required rulings by both the constitutional and supreme courts, and then an impeachment in the Rada with three-fourths approval, or 338 out of 447 votes. The courts did not make rulings before the Rada convened for impeachment. The votes to remove President Yanukovich were 10 fewer than the required three-fourths threshold, but the Rada moved to remove him anyway.

⁴⁸ “Which Way Ukraine Should Go: Which Union Should Join?,” Kyiv International Institute for Sociology, November 26, 2013, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=204&page=1&y=2013&m=11>.

⁴⁹ “Rating of Parties in the Elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine,” Kyiv International Institute for Sociology, February 11, 2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1007&page=1&y=2021&m=2>; “Dynamics of the Rating of Parties in the Elections to the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine and Candidates in the Election to the President of Ukraine,” Kyiv International Institute for Sociology, December 13, 2021, <https://www.kiis.com.ua/?lang=eng&cat=reports&id=1077&page=2&y=2021&m=12>; Natalia Zinets, “Ukraine Sanctions Kremlin Ally Medvedchuk, Says Will Take Back Fuel Pipeline,” *Reuters*, February 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-sanctions/ukraine-sanctions-kremlin-ally-medvedchuk-says-will-take-back-fuel-pipeline-idUSKBN2AJ280>; Natalia Zinets, “Ukraine Advances Treason Case Against Kremlin Ally,” *Reuters*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/ukraine-advances-treason-case-against-kremlin-ally-reports-say-2021-05-11/>; “Ukraine Accuses Former President Poroshenko of Treason,” *Reuters*, December 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-accuses-former-president-poroshenko-treason-2021-12-20/>.

⁵⁰ “What Do Russians Think Russia Should Be Like?,” Levada Center, October 5, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2021/10/05/what-do-russians-think-russia-should-be-like/>.

⁵¹ “The State and Citizens,” Levada Center, March 19, 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/en/2020/03/19/the-state-and-citizens/>.

⁵² Leonid Ragozin, “Putin No Longer Feels a ‘Democratic Ukraine’,” *Al Jazeera*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/1/30/putin-no-longer-feels-a-democratic>.

⁵³ Benjamin Denison, “Where U.S. Sees Democracy Promotion, Russia Sees Regime Change,” *Russia Matters*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/where-us-sees-democracy-promotion-russia-sees-regime-change>.

⁵⁴ Victoria Nuland, “Remarks at the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation Conference,” U.S. Department of State, December 13, 2013, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/2013/dec/218804.htm>.

⁵⁵ “Ukraine Crisis: Transcript of Leaked Nuland-Pyatt Call,” *BBC News*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26079957>.

⁵⁶ Michael McFaul, “‘Meddling’ in Ukraine: Democracy is Not an American Plot,” *Washington Post*, December 21, 2004, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A15131-2004Dec20.html>; Michael McFaul, “Ukraine Imports Democracy: External Influences on the Orange Revolution,” *International Security* 32, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 45–83; Denison, “Where the US Sees Democracy Promotion, Russia Sees Regime Change.”

⁵⁷ See, for example, the open role of the NED in helping to overthrow Slobodan Milosevic: Roger Cohen, “Who Really Brought Down Milosevic?,” *New York Times Magazine*, November 26, 2000, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/home/20001126mag-serbia.html>; Michael Dobbs, “U.S. Advice Guided Milosevic Opposition,” *Washington Post*, December 11, 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/12/11/us-advice-guided-milosevic-opposition/ba9e87e5-bdca-45dc-8aad-da6571e89448/>.

⁵⁸ “The National Endowment for Democracy Responds to Our Burma Nuclear Story—And Our Response,” *ProPublica*, November 24, 2010, <https://www.propublica.org/article/the-national-endowment-for-democracy-responds-to-our-burma-nuclear-story>. According to veteran investigative journalist Robert Parry, the NED was established—along with other nominally independent organizations like Freedom House—on the initiative of then-CIA director William Casey in the early 1980s to pursue foreign “democracy promotion” and domestic “perception management,” both of which the CIA had engaged in before a wave of Congressional inquiries into the intelligence services, including the Church and Pike Committees. See Robert Parry, “A Shadow U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Consortium News*, February 27, 2014, <https://consortiumnews.com/2014/02/27/a-shadow-us-foreign-policy/>; Robert Parry, “CIA’s Hidden Hand in ‘Democracy’ Groups,” *Consortium News*, January 8, 2015,



<https://consortiumnews.com/2015/01/08/cias-hidden-hand-in-democracy-groups/>. Also see David K. Shipler, "Missionaries for Democracy: U.S. Aid for Global Pluralism," *New York Times*, June 1, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/06/01/world/missionaries-for-democracy-us-aid-for-global-pluralism.html>; Joel Brinkley, "Iran Sales Linked to Wide Program of Covert Policies," *New York Times*, February 15, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/02/15/world/iran-sales-linked-to-wide-program-of-covert-policies.html>.

⁵⁹ David Ignatius, "Innocence Abroad: The New World of Spyleless Coups," *Washington Post*, September 22, 1991, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1991/09/22/innocence-abroad-the-new-world-of-spyleless-coups/92bb989a-de6e-4bb8-99b9-462c76b59a16/>.

⁶⁰ Carl Gershman, "Former Soviet States Stand Up to Russia. Will the U.S.?" *Washington Post*, September 26, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/former-soviet-states-stand-up-to-russia-will-the-us/2013/09/26/b5ad2be4-246a-11e3-b75d-5b7f66349852_story.html.

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⁶³ Carl Gershman, "Russia's Crackdown on Civil Society Shows the Regime's Weakness," *Washington Post*, July 28, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/putins-fear-of-civil-society/2015/07/28/3d873d0a-3569-11e5-8e66-07b4603ec92a_story.html.

⁶⁴ George F. Kennan, "A Fateful Error," *New York Times*, February 5, 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>.

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⁶⁶ Julian Borger, "Russian Hostility 'Partly Caused by West', Claims Former U.S. Defence Head," *Guardian*, March 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/09/russian-hostility-to-west-partly-caused-by-west>.

⁶⁷ Jack F. Matlock, Jr., "I Was There: NATO and the Origins of the Ukraine Crisis," *Responsible Statecraft*, February 15, 2022, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/02/15/the-origins-of-the-ukraine-crisis-and-how-conflict-can-be-avoided/>.

⁶⁸ Richard T. Davies, "Should NATO Grow? A Dissent," *New York Review of Books*, September 21, 1995, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1995/09/21/should-nato-grow-dissent/>.

⁶⁹ Zygar, *All the Kremlin's Men*, 153.

⁷⁰ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 157–158.

⁷¹ Ambassador William J. Burns, "Nyet Means Nyet: Russia's NATO Enlargement Redlines," Wikileaks Diplomatic Cable: 08MOSCOW265_a. February 1, 2008. https://web.archive.org/web/20220225001758/https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08MOSCOW265_a.html.

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¹⁰⁷ For example, Elihu Root, the Secretary of State and of War at the turn of the twentieth century, once said: “To be safe democracy must kill its enemy when it can and where it can. The world cannot be half democratic and half autocratic.” Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk said during the Vietnam War that the “United States cannot be secure until the total international environment is ideologically safe.” Both are quoted in Layne, “Kant or Cant,” 46. As one character in the Stanley Kubrick film *Full Metal Jacket* says, “We are here to help the Vietnamese, because inside every [Vietnamese] is an American trying to get out.”

¹⁰⁸ Emphasis mine. Michael McFaul, “The Liberty Doctrine,” Hoover Institution, April 1, 2002, <https://www.hoover.org/research/liberty-doctrine>.

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