Analysis of the Russia-Ukraine War Through the Lens of The Four Contemporary International Relations Theories

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With the kick-off of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the world experienced a watershed moment in post-Cold War international relations, heavily challenging assumptions about the current liberal international order, the strength of state sovereignty, and the general nature of great-power competition. Though condemned widely throughout the West, as well as other regions of the globe, as a clear violation of international laws and democratic norms, Russia's invasion is not easily understood through just a singular lens. Within this essay, the historical context of Ukraine and Russia's relations and interactions leading up to the invasion will be examined, followed by an analysis of the war through the four major international relations theories: realism, liberalism, Marxism, and constructivism. This is to better understand and interpret Russia's motivations, as well as the responses to the crisis, from the rest of the world. Each of these theories focuses on distinct factors such as power, institutions, economic structure, and national identity. While analysing all four major schools of thought and weighing their various insights, one might make the case that realism is perhaps the ideal perspective and provides the most effective framework to fully grasp Russia's actions and the reactions of other states alike, most particularly in the context of the global anarchic system lacking a central enforcing authority to maintain "order" and prevent, or attempt to prevent, conflicts such as this.

The tensions between Ukraine and Russia have deep historical roots, with Ukraine positioned between Western Europe and the Russian Empire. In the 20th century, Ukraine was absorbed into the Soviet Union and remained under the control of Moscow until the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The independence of Ukraine following this collapse was seen by many in Russia, especially under Vladimir Putin, as a temporary situation rather than a permanent one. Putin's public statements repeatedly denied the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, calling the country an "artificial creation" (Snegovaya 2022). Relations with post-Soviet Russia soured increasingly as Ukraine moved closer to the West. Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and 2014 Euromaidan protests rejecting pro-Russian leaders and pushing for democratic reforms and integration with the European Union were prominent reasons. These movements signaled to many that Ukraine's political orientation was shifting toward Western institutions, prompting strategic concern in Moscow. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for separatist movements in Donetsk and Luhansk were a glimpse of the 2022 invasion, laying the groundwork for an impending prolonged conflict.

A significant turning point occurred during the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, where it was announced that both Ukraine and Georgia would eventually be joining NATO. To the Kremlin, this announcement represented a direct challenge to its sphere of influence and overally national security. From 2014 to 2021, Ukraine continued deepening ties with the West through military exercises, weapons support from the USA, and the USA-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership in 2021. Putin's regime interpreted this trajectory as a major existential threat, and this culminated in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As Stephen Walt notes, states often form alliances or act aggressively in response to perceived threats, and Russia's

behaviour aligns with this strategic logic of threat balancing (Walt 1987).

The first international relations theory used to examine the Ukraine-Russia war will be realism. Realism, particularly in its structural or neorealist form, offers a robust and multipronged interpretation for Russia's invasion. Realists such as John Mearsheimer believe that the international system is entirely anarchic, with no central authority to enforce rules for other nations to abide by. States prioritise their own survival and seek to maximise their power within a competitive environment. Mearsheimer controversially argued that the West, especially the United States, bears significant responsibility for provoking Russia through NATO expansion and its liberal interventionism (Mearsheimer 2024). From a realist viewpoint, Russia's actions were not irrational at all, but rather strategic. Preventing Ukraine from joining NATO and reasserting its dominance in the immediate vicinity of its borders are central to Russia's long-term survival and influence. Russia's military buildup and invasion were thus seen as preemptive moves orchestrated to rebalance power in Eastern Europe. Kenneth Waltz emphasised that the distribution of power in the system impacts a state's behaviour, and in this context, Russia's effort to reassert its position aligns snugly with the logic of power politics (Art and Jervis 1991).

The global response further reinforces the predictions of realists. European nations, despite having differing views, banded together behind NATO to keep Russia contained. Finland and Sweden's bids to join NATO, as formerly neutral countries, emphasise the realist logic of states balancing against major threats. Additionally, the inability of international institutions such as the United Nations to actually deter or halt Russia's aggression demonstrates the realist argument that such institutions are only effective if supported by powerful states that are acting in their own interests. Furthermore, realism accounts for the decisions of non-Western powers such as China and India, who have been pursuing hedging strategies rather than resorting to moral condemnation, reflecting their geopolitical interests.

The next theory will be liberalism, which presents an alternative perspective primarily founded in values of democracy, a rule-based international order, and economic interdependence. Democratic Peace Theory states that liberal democracies rarely go to war with each other as a result of their shared norms, social values, and institutional checks and balances. Through this theory's lens, the war reflects a massive ideological divide between Ukraine's democratic desires and Putin's autocratic regime. Michael Doyle's interpretation of Kant suggests that peace arises when states end up adopting republican constitutions, form federations (like the EU), and treat citizens globally as equals (Doyle 2010). Ukraine's gradual democratisation and integration into various Western institutions certainly triggered anxiety in Russia, where democratic contagion threatens domestic authoritarian control. As Banerjee and Duflo note, democratic development often creates roadmaps for prosperity and peace, but this process can also provoke backlash from authoritarian states (Banerjee and Duflo 2023).

Liberalism also outlines the importance of institutions. The failure of the United Nations to prevent the invasion of Ukraine, however, underscores the perspective's limitations when faced with power politics. Despite sanctions and condemnation, institutions lacked the ability to

enforce anything. The EU and NATO's support for Ukraine reflects institutional solidarity but not decisive conflict prevention. Regardless, these institutions have played vital roles in providing humanitarian support and long-term reconstruction planning. The response by the European Union, including refugee assistance and economic sanctions, demonstrates the liberalist emphasis on collective action, even if these measures are slow and fragmented.

Another liberalist pillar is economic interdependence, and this failed to deter the conflict. Despite Europe's dependency on Russian energy and Russia's deep integration into global markets, the war erupted. However, liberalism does partially explain Ukraine's resilience and the global support it received in the wake of the invasion. Aid flows, refugee protections, and diplomatic solidarity display how liberal norms mobilise action when under threat. That said, liberalism is less effective when it comes to explaining why economic ties failed to prevent Russia's hostilities or why some democratic nations still hesitated to support Ukraine, at least in a robust manner. In this context, liberalism's strength seems to lie more so in its explanation of international cooperation post-invasion rather than in the deterrence of Russia's aggression itself.

Next, we have Marxism, whose perspective is focused heavily upon global capitalist structures, class conflict, and imperial hegemony. Dependency theory suggests that the peripheral states are systematically exploited by the core powers (Dos Santos 1970). While Russia is not exactly a classic "peripheral" state, it often casts itself as a victim of Western economic and ideological domination, portraying itself as a counter-hegemonic force. The expansion of NATO and the EU into Eastern Europe, from the eyes of Marxists, mimics neocolonial expansion. This view was echoed in Hugo Chávez's G-15 speech, where he condemned Western-dominated globalisation as "exploitative" (Chávez 2004). Russia's invasion, in this frame, is an attempt to resist US-led imperialism and assert autonomy in a unipolar world dominated by Western finance and military power.

Marxism heavily critiques highlight class dynamics within Russia. The war shifts the public focus from their inequalities, elite corruption, and economic stagnation. Meanwhile, Western arms manufacturers and energy sectors have benefited from prolonged conflict, which serves to reinforce the Marxist claim that capitalism fuels war to obtain profits. The sanctions regime tends to disproportionately harm ordinary citizens while still preserving elite networks, in Russia and the West alike. Multinational corporations often adapt to sanctions, maintaining supply chains that sustain oligarchic systems. Furthermore, Ashok Bardhan's analysis of financialisation and globalisation points to systemic contradictions that can lay out fertile grounds for geopolitical instability (Bardhan 2009). As Western economies tend to suffer under the weight of inequality and debt, conflicts such as the Russia-Ukraine war can emerge as valves, of sorts, to relieve the pressures of economic frustrations. Thus, Marxism reframes the war as not simply political, but also as deeply embedded in global capitalist dysfunction, with the interests of the ruling classes on either side manipulating the outcomes. The redirection of public funds toward military spending during wartime also reflects the systemic prioritisation of the elites' interests over social welfare, which is a hallmark critique in analysis from the Marxist perspective.

Constructivism emphasises the role of ideas, norms, and identities in determining the behaviour of a state. Alexander Wendt's claim that "anarchy is what states make of it" points to the notion that state interests are not truly fixed, but rather are socially constructed (Wendt 1992). When it comes to the case of Russia and Ukraine, national identity is quite central to understanding the rationale behind the states' behaviours and foreign policies. Putin's rhetoric displays Ukraine not as an independent nation but instead as part of a shared Slavic heritage, a "Russian World." This identity-driven narrative legitimises Russia's aggression under the veil of of cultural protection. Russia's rejection of both NATO and EU expansion is also partly symbolic: a rebuff of Western liberal identity and values, which Putin's regime views as both decadent and dangerous.

Additionally, constructivism explains Ukraine's national consolidation. In fighting back against the invasion so viciously, Ukrainians have strengthened their shared identity rooted in sovereignty, democracy, and European values. Global support for Ukraine, ranging from flag displays to refugee assistance, can be interpreted as normative alignment with these ideals. Ian Hurd believes that legitimacy, rather than coercion or material incentives, will generally drive compliance with international norms, which is an idea reflected in the widespread diplomatic backing for Ukraine's sovereignty (Hurd 1999). This said, constructivism is still limited when it comes to forecasting material responses. While it helps in explaining the motivations and symbolic dimensions, it fails to account for predictive power in a world where military capacity and strategic calculation often determine outcomes. Irregardless, it reveals how narratives such as the "clash of civilisations" or post-Cold War "civilisational geopolitics" continue to shape the perceptions of this war in both Russia and Western nations alike, which further entrenches hostilities. The diverging interpretations of sovereignty, intervention, and self-determination between East and West serve to reinforce constructivist claims that identities and norms are not universal, but instead are social constructs and will be contested in an international political setting.

Each of these four theoretical approaches is effective in its own right when it comes to understanding the causes and consequences of the Russia-Ukraine war alike. Liberalism reveals the ideological precursors of the conflict and the values and principles of global support for Ukraine. Marxism presents a structural critique of global inequalities and capitalist war-making. Constructivism explains how narratives and identities mold conflict and resistance, and how legitimacy operates in practice. And yet, realism remains the most empirically grounded and explanatory framework for this brutal war. Of the four perspectives, it best accounts for both the proximate causes, those being NATO expansion, Russian security concerns, as well as the patterns of global reaction rooted in balance-of-power calculations. It also recognises the simple limitations of liberal institutions and the persistence of great power competition. Great powers act first and foremost out of self-interest and a desire to maximise their own security within an anarchic global environment, as suggested by Mearsheimer and Walt. As such, Russia's actions, while violent and certainly condemnable, were unfortunately also predictable within the realist paradigm. The West's response, which was focused much more on containment rather than

normative appeals, further supports this notion. Not only does realism explain what happened, but it also explains why it continues to unfold in the way that it does, with little to no regard for institutional norms or economic integration. Nonetheless, the inclusion of liberal, Marxist, and constructivist insights serves well to enrich the analysis of the war, showing that even hard-power conflicts are intertwined with norms, institutions, and various global structures. Theories don't compete in isolation; they simply highlight differing aspects of complex international realities. Understanding this complexity is essential for putting together nuanced and effective responses to global crises such as the Ukraine-Russia war.

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