The war against Ukraine and the failure of 'great power politics'

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This chapter interrogates the claim that the Russian war against Ukraine represents a 'return' or 'resurgence' of 'great power politics'. It argues that this cyclical temporality, in which the world order is imagined to be returning to, or still locked within, a condition of great power competition inhibits scholars of International Relations (IR) from identifying the features of novelty and transformation in the 21st century world order. The chapter pursues the claim that rather than a world order of attenuated hierarchy – that the concepts of unipolarity, multi-polarity and great power competition all, in different ways, assume – power in the contemporary world order is becoming more diffuse amongst a wider range of actors and this is undermining and reshaping traditional geopolitical hierarchies. Rather than a resurgence of great power politics, the opposite may be occurring: a fragmentation of order in which no state can expect to create the 'spheres of influence' historically associated with a select few dominant powers.

Author final (pre-proof) version: Accepted for publication in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Geopolitics* (2nd January 2024).

The Russian war against Ukraine has exposed the tendency of scholars and practitioners to comprehend our complex and changing world in simplifying cyclical terms. The war has been commonly viewed as a 'return of geopolitics'[1] (Auer 2015; Larrabee 2010; Mead 2014) or as indicative of the 'persistence of great power politics' (Ashford 2023). The realists in International Relations (IR) that contentiously argue that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is a 'backlash' against NATO expansion have become prominent in the Anglo-American public sphere through the course of the war (Mearsheimer 2014; 2022; Walt 2022b; 2022a, see also Ashford 2023; 2021; Ashford and Klein 2022; Desch 2023; Porter 2022; Posen 2022) owing to their rejection of the moral case for supporting Ukraine (on the latter see Kögler 2023, see also Kaldor 2023; Yurchenko 2023). Analysing international order through the lens of raw power politics they argue that liberal illusions led the West to ignore Ukraine's strategic importance to Russia as a so-called 'buffer state' between its security domain and that of an expanding West (Mearsheimer 2014, 5). One irony of the public backlash against this point of view is that the realist paradigm of world politics is experiencing something of a renaissance amongst policy makers. The idea that the world order is fundamentally structured through competition and balancing among the 'great powers' (Walt 2022b) or what Matthew Specter calls 'geopolitical reasoning' (Specter 2022) enjoys a considerable new allure in foreign policy thinking. Even prior to the full-scale invasion of 2022, a clear shift could be discerned in western capitals that combined a securitisation of the economic field with a scepticism towards the use of soft power (persuasion) and an emphasis on hard power instruments (coercion and the threat of coercion).

What I refer to as great power politics is a mode of reasoning about world order that emanates from the realist canon in IR but enjoys a broader hold among the policy-making community beyond the academic discipline. It conceptualises world order through a series of political geographies that are highly centralised and at the apex of which are a select few states. This political (state-centric) and vertical (geopolitical) theory of interstate conflict is not able to explain why Russia has hitherto failed to compel Ukraine to accept a position in its so-called

[1] Users of the 'return of geopolitics' framing include Klaus Welle, the former Secretary General of the European Parliament, the former British Prime Minister, Liz Truss, during her tenure as Foreign Secretary, and the former Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbot.

sphere of influence. Far from a 'return' of great power politics, Russia's failure to assert such dominance may indicate the opposite: a fragmentation of global order in which no state can expect to create the 'spheres' of the type historically associated with a select few 'great powers'.

Building on the work of Mateja Peter (Coning and Peter 2019; Osland and Peter 2021; Peter and Rice 2022) and the PeaceRep network,[2] I define global fragmentation as the diffusion of power amongst a wider range of states, non-state actors and networks.[3] Fragmentation describes the diminished capacity of states to cohere political geographies around their interests (*a la* realism). It may point to the existence of a wider range of power forms, operating through networks encompassing a complex plurality of agents, beyond state-military capacity; and it undermines the monopoly rights that large and/or wealthy states ('great powers') have often claimed on collective security arrangements. In this sense, the Russia-Ukraine War should be seen as part of a wider pattern of failure to use military force to impose territorial control. The chapter revisits the realist canon in IR to pursue this argument on the grounds that it provides the intellectual apparatus that major world capitals are turning to in their foreign policy thinking. First, I critically discuss the geopolitical 'turn' in Russia, the United States and the European Union (EU) drawing out their realist assumptions. Second, I demonstrate the problem that realism has in accounting for the failure of states with asymmetric power advantages to compel changes of behaviour in weaker states, arguing that this points towards a need for a more holistic and relational account of power in the twenty-first century. Third, I offer some preliminary remarks on what the Russo-Ukraine War may reveal about the fragmentation of the global order.

THE NEW 'POWER POLITICS'? A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EMERGING CONSENSUS

The realist argument that Ukraine lies within the Russian sphere of influence, and that a restraint-based US policy would respect this 'reality', has courted particular controversy owing to its explicit denial of Ukraine's right to choose its own security arrangements, as well as the underlying philosophical assumption that smaller states will inevitably be subject to domination by a select few great powers. As Emma Ashford illustrates in her 2023 piece, 'The Persistence of Great Power Politics', realists hold it to be virtually self-evident that the war is a contest over whether Ukraine should assume a position within the Western or Russian sphere of influence:

> One year into the war, this view—that spheres of influence are a thing of the past—is more widely held than ever. The first major war on European soil since World War II is seen by many American and European foreign policy elites, paradoxically, not as a sign that the realities of rivalry and international power politics *are back*, but rather that Western values and security cooperation can triumph over them (Ashford 2023, np, emphasis added).

The inconsistency contained in this claim that great power politics is simultaneously *back* (i.e., it went away for a period and returned) and *persistent* (i.e., it never went away) is illustrative of the problem that realist theory has in accounting for the pattern of change and continuity. It directs theoretical attention to continuity even when it is analysing new and potentially novel developments. For realists changes in international order are simply taken as a confirmation of the underlying ontology of world politics in conditions of 'anarchy' (i.e., without a

[2] PeaceRep (the 'Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform') is an international research consortium exploring the changing nature of war and conflict in the 21st century, led by the University of Edinburgh Law School and funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The information and views set out in this publication are those of the author. Nothing herein constitutes the views of FCDO. For more information on PeaceRep see: https://peacerep.org/

[3] This chapter benefited considerably from the feedback of colleagues. My sincere thanks to the attendees at the December 2023 PeaceRep workshop on global fragmentation held at the London School of Economics and Political Science and the July 2023 European Workshops in International Studies workshop, 'Lessons from Russia's war on Ukraine'. All errors are, of course, my own.

superordinate authority). Realists believe that no Russian leader would behave differently because they are sceptical that individual leaders and their ideas impact state behaviour. They claim states simply respond to the external security environment. This poses a problem to their frequent criticism of liberal illusions given that they lack an explanation for why such illusions take hold or how they can become so powerful. The persistence of liberal values in shaping the discourses mobilised by some states therefore becomes reduced to an unexplainable paradox of 'false' thinking, analogous perhaps to the idea of 'false consciousness' in vulgar Marxism.

Due to the highly contentious character of the restraint-based realism perspective those elements of statecraft that embrace realist arguments can be overlooked in the fierce debate over the origins and nature of the war. Indeed, the polarised dispute between 'liberal hawks' (that support military aid to Ukraine's war of self-defence) and 'realist doves' (that back a messy peace to avoid further escalation) (Patman 2023) has not sufficiently considered these elements of convergence. While they argue over the content of what the West's position should be, both sides tend to see the war as primarily a clash of state-based geopolitical alliances. Indeed, what the widely discussed ideas of a 'return of geopolitics', 'great power competition', 'a new era of multipolarity' and 'spheres of influence', all have in common is their depiction of a world of attenuated geopolitical hierarchy, albeit without a single dominant hegemon. Even though the Russo-Ukraine War has demonstrated the difficulties that states with a presumed dominance ('great powers') may encounter when they pursue regime change in another state, the conflict has sparked little discussion over whether the 'great power' concept remains useful;[4] or, if one accepts this idea, whether there is a decline or crisis of great power politics.

The debate among policy makers does not map on directly to the assumptions of realist theory. However, it does contain a tendency towards great power politics, i.e., a view of the world that visualises it as constituted by a series of political geographies that are highly centralised and at the apex of which are a select few states. In this sense, my argument is that while some of the political conclusions of the restraint-based realist school may be out of fashion, their intellectual apparatus is very much in vogue and shaping how decision-makers in large states and blocs see the world. Reviewing the strategic frameworks employed by the EU, the United States (from the Trump to Biden administrations) and the Russian Federation identifies this general tendency (see table 1). The analysis reveals clear differences of formulation and emphasis, but with a trend towards traditional geopolitical thinking based on the pursuit of self-interest, hard power instruments and a focus on power projection overseas.

In the EU, the idea of a return of geo- or power politics involves a purported self-critique of past practice. Europe is depicted as having lost its innocence and thrown off its idealism. This view has perhaps best been captured by the argument of High Representative Josep Borrell that it is time for the EU to 'adjust our mental maps to deal with the world as it is, not as we hoped it would be' (Borrell 2020); and his highly controversial, due to its racist connotations, statement that Europe 'is a garden' surrounded by a 'jungle' that threatens the bloc with 'invasion' (Borrell 2022). Following closely the premise of realist theory, geopolitical competition is seen as having imposed itself on a Europe that now sees 'no alternative' (Bialasiewicz 2023) to a more interest-orientated and coercive posture. Whereas previously the EU had lauded its 'soft power' capacity (European Commission 2016, 4) the 2022 *Strategic Compass* makes only pejorative references to this idea, shifting its discourse to the primacy of so-called 'raw power politics' amid a 'crisis of multilateralism' (European Commission 2022).

In the United States, a similar convergence has emerged but with a different discursive frame based on a new era of 'great power competition'. The idea featured in the Obama administration's *National Military Strategy (2015)* (Department of Defense 2015) and became

[4] A significant exception is Phillips O'Brien's *Foreign Affairs* article, 'There's No Such Thing as a Great Power' (O'Brien 2023). Matej Kandrik has a written a critique of the US foreign policy turn, 'The Case Against the Concept of Great Power Competition' (Kandrik 2021) and Tom Long's work on the power of small states is also relevant (Long 2017; 2022).

central to Trump's *National Security Strategy (2017)* (Office of the President 2017). While the Biden administration rejects the ethnonationalism and authoritarianism of 'America first', the national security strategies of the two administrations have only subtle differences of framing and geopolitical posture (see Table 1). These frameworks both invoke a new era of great power competition and establish the goal of a United States victory in this contest; both primarily cast authoritarianism as an external geopolitical threat emanating from Russia and China; and both utilise the classical discourse of American exceptionalism to posit a symmetry between American leadership and the interests of the world's people in democracy and fundamental rights. A 2023 Congressional Research Service report described this new bipartisan consensus around 'great power competition' as a historic shift from America's post-Cold War security doctrine (O'Rourke 2023). Although the 2017 *National Security Strategy* – unlike Biden's – was explicitly realist (Office of the President 2017, 55), and its support for multilateral forums was generally more qualified (ibid, p. 40), it was also peppered with numerous references to liberal values and coalitions – and a second Trump White House seems likely to pursue a more radically far right agenda in its overall foreign policy doctrine. Furthermore, a very notable difference lies in Biden's frequent references to the 'cascading crises of our time' (Biden 2021) such as systemic racism and climate change. Biden's American exceptionalism thus takes on a different form with its claim that only the United States can lead the world out of these crises.

Table 1: The 'turn' to great power politics in Russia, the United States and the European Union

	Russia	United States (Trump)	United States (Biden)	European Union
Self-identity	A 'civilisational state' and a 'unique country-civilisation' Russian world as a geopolitically expansive community based on language and ethnicity Russia as a major 'Eurasian Power' and 'Euro-Pacific Power'	American exceptionalism 'America first' cast as in the interests of 'all those who want to partner with the United States' Liberty, rule of law, democratic system of government	American exceptionalism Liberty, rule of law, democratic system of government American victory in great power competition in the interests of universalism and shared prosperity	Europe as bloc defined by liberal democratic values Interest-oriented foreign policy based on 'defending citizens' and 'projecting values' Towards a 'stronger and more capable' EU in the arena of security and defence
World order framework	Multipolar world order that marks transition away from Western hegemony Against the 'imposition' of a rules based order that favours Western states In favour of 'international law' under the United Nations Charter and including the core principle of states' sovereign equality New centres of economic growth and geopolitical influence	Great power competition 'Principled realism' that posits a central role for power in global politics and promotes 'American' liberal values overseas Authoritarian states as a challenge to US global leadership and the world's democracies More qualified support for 'competing and leading' in multilateral forums	Great power Competition Authoritarian states as a challenge to US global leadership and the world's democracies Cascading crises and 'shared challenges' are not 'secondary' to geopolitics but a part of the contest American is fighting Support for the rules-based international order and multilateralism	'Return of power politics' in a 'multipolar' order A world of 'raw power politics' Support for the rules-based international order and multilateralism Shift from soft to hard power instruments Dangers of the EU's internal fragmentation in the face of 'multi-layered threats' and a crisis of the multilateral order

Sources: Author's own analysis of US (Office of the President 2017; 2022; Biden 2021), Russian (Office of the President of the Russian Federation 2023; Putin 2023) and EU (European Commission 2022) security documents and speeches.

A common feature of the European and American policy debate is a securitisation of the economic field that steps away from trade and financial globalisation (with the aim – at least in formal terms – of creating some form of 'level playing field' for economic competition through multilateral institutions) towards a focus on ensuring supply chain security for European and American production, especially in relation to the industries of the future. This complex and uneasy shift away from neoliberalism brings with it a potential for new distributional conflicts; particularly, in relation to the push to control access to critical raw materials at a price favourable to European and American firms, and a drive for state subsidies from large multinational capital in exchange for green investment and onshoring jobs. These tensions illustrate how prioritising victory in a geopolitical contest with rival powers *and* protecting the universal interests of all are goals that are clearly in potential contradiction.

Russia forms an outlier in this comparison because it starts from a formally weaker position but has advanced a much more radically ethnonationalist, militarist and revanchist agenda. Like the EU, though, and in contrast to the United States, it speaks of a new multipolarity. The origins of the terminology in the transition from bipolarity in the Cold War to the unipolarity of the subsequent era defines the 'poles' as powerful states with security domains. This points to a world of attenuated hierarchy around expansive political geographies but without a single dominating hegemon. In Putin's version Russia is a 'civilisational-state' (Putin 2023, np) with the concept of 'civilisations' deliberately more geographically expansive than the borders of the nation-state. It references a classical sphere of influence encompassing the 'Russian world' as a geographical and linguistic community that constitutes a Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power (Office of the President of the Russian Federation 2023). Much of this overall language and geopolitical posture is highly Orwellian. Putin has even criticised great power or 'bloc-based' politics, arguing that it 'limits individual states' rights and restricts their freedom to develop along their own path, attempting to drive them into a "cage" of obligations' (Putin 2023, np), which could, of course, be read as a criticism of his war on Ukraine. Aside from these contradictions, Russia's war on Ukraine provides an important context to consider the changing nature of power and the tensions in this resuscitation of great power politics *per se*. A commonality of the geopolitical 'turn' by these states/blocs is an underlying sense of lost control with the accumulation of breakdown and crises; and a belief in their abilities to project hard power through force, or the threat of it, in order to restore security and 'order'. There is thus a common faith in their ability to *compel* rivals and weaker states to change their behaviour.

The limited evidence to support this analysis contrasts to the emphatic nature of the strategic doctrines. Hard power is rarely used in the singular, i.e., without other power forms. The EU has used coercive instruments very effectively to keep refugees outside of its borders, for example, but in a manner that generates volatility with downstream risks for the bloc. Even this policy area – which illustrates the falsity of a naively liberal Europe that tragically loses its geopolitical 'innocence' – involves a mix of mechanisms, and not *just* the use of coercion. If EU states were to meet serious resistance, they do not have the option of compelling changes of behaviour by external parties with the use of military power – and this calls into question the new popularity that such realist language has assumed in European foreign policy strategizing.

THE REALIST ACCOUNT OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION: A CONCEPTUAL CRITIQUE

What the above analysis indicates is a persistence of thinking in the language and terminology of great powers among practitioners. It is somewhat ironic then that realists postulate the 'persistence' (Ashford 2023) of a structural condition of great power competition, while complaining about the role that liberal ideas continue to play in statecraft. It may be tempting

to reverse this analysis by arguing that great power thinking constitutes a kind of 'false' thinking. Yet, this would also be an error. For the imaginary of great power politics does indeed animate the thinking of many states – and it was surely a factor in the warped reasoning that drove Putin's personal decision to go to war. While realists complain about the persistence of liberalism, it is actually the continued role of great power politics plays in the *thinking* of practitioners of statecraft that makes it harder to dismiss realism as a theory. Actors like the Biden administration, which both advance the idea of a return of great power competition and reject the notion that they can impose a peace settlement on Ukraine of the type advocated by the restraint-based realist school (Walt 2023), are indeed caught in a contradictory position. There is after all a logic to the realist view (Sayers 2022) that the best way for the United States to prioritise victory over China is by pivoting back to Asia and insisting Ukraine strikes a deal. In other words, there is a clear tension between democracy and the idea of great power politics.

As a caveat to this critique it must be acknowledged that there is no agreed 'realist perspective' on the Ukraine war, and neither should structural realism, or the closely related 'restraint-based' framework, be taken as representative of all realisms (Edinger 2022; Smith and Dawson 2022).[5] However, with some notable exceptions,[6] realism as a school of thought does tend towards asserting analytical primacy to a select few great powers. Realism captures the imagination of policy makers, in part, because it constructs a vision that is tempting for states and governments with formally high advantages in power capacity to believe in. It offers a determinate theorisation of the idea that they have a major stake in outcomes far beyond the territorial borders that formally 'enclose' their sovereign domain. My argument is not therefore that states and governments with asymmetric power advantages do not behave as if they had a capacity to use coercive force to change the behaviour of other states – they evidently do often *act as if this is true* – but that they tend to encounter significant problems when they do so. Furthermore, these difficulties may illustrate something about the changing structure of world politics. Accordingly, revisiting realism has a broader relevance beyond the academy. It may reveal, as I want to suggest here, the type of intellectual apparatus that is being drawn on in the turn to great power politics and the problems states will face when 'implementing' such logics.

In broad terms realism arrives at asserting the centrality of great power politics through the following assumptions and steps. At its core realism is a theory that analyses how the logics of 'anarchic' (i.e., lacking a superordinate authority) international systems function. Realists share the view that the existence of multiple states raises a general *problématique* of power and security for all states (Walt 2010, 2). The absence of a subordinate authority (i.e., anarchy) means that states become acutely concerned with threats from – and competition with – other states. Above all, the unequal distribution of power between states becomes a critical factor in driving the incentives that shape how states respond to these external threats. As states with large concentrations of power have a greater capacity for competition – and consequently are a greater threat to others – they have a fundamental importance for the system. These 'great powers' dominate the global order and drive its behaviour; for 'what makes one great power

[5] Classical realists, for example, incorporate the individual agency of the leaders of states into their conceptualisation – something that is potentially more inclusive of accounting for the ideological motivations behind the Russian invasion (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016).Factors such as the ideas and values of autocrats can be incorporated into classical realism, a clear attraction given the role ideology has played in Russia's drive for war in Ukraine (Pavlova and Romanova 2012; Smith 2016; Smith and Dawson 2022). In terms of the broader realist community of intellectuals, figures associated with American neo-conservatism have increasingly followed Robert Kagan and identified as realists over the last ten years. They see this as consistent with providing military aid to Ukraine and a broadly 'hawkish' foreign policy stance (Kagan 2014; 2022). This is the direct opposite, of course, of the realist advocates of a restraint-based American policy, illustrating the diversity of the field.

[6] Ned Lebow, a 'neoclassical' realist, advances the hypothesis that anticipates Russia's failure to conquer Ukraine could overtime come to strengthen institutions and reinforce 'the norm against war and territorial conquest' (Lebow 2022, 132).

behave differently from another is its power relative to others' (Walt 2017, np). Insofar as order can arise in a system of anarchic competition it is constituted by 'balancing' the great powers.

The most well-known realist thinkers have largely agreed on how power – and thus *great* power - should be defined. Realists tend to see 'the components of national power' as a series of concrete state attributes (Morgenthau 1985, 152) with differences of position largely formulaic, rather than substantial. John Mearsheimer talks about the 'specific assets or material resources' that a state has in its possession (Mearsheimer 2001, 57). Kenneth Waltz referred to the 'capabilities' of a states such as the 'size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence' (Waltz 1979, 131). If a state's power capacity is defined through such factor endowments, which are, in turn, distributed across the system very unevenly, then those with much more of its than others – i.e., the great powers – are assumed to both dominate the international order and have a 'sticky' quality, i.e., they are difficult to dislodge from this position. Small and medium states must simply adapt to a world order dominated by great powers. Waltz even argued, in 1979, that only eight states could be considered 'consequential' for the balance of power since the 1648 Peace of Westphalia (ibid). For realists the material concentration of power in space thus serves to perpetuate it in time. While they see the relative distribution of power capacities among states as either critical (structural realism) or important (classical realism) to their behaviour in conditions of anarchy, they do not see power itself as a relational phenomenon (Baldwin 2016, 129–30), and this very 'fixed' view of power capacity may go some way to explaining why realists presume continuity, rather than change, in the expectations they have for world order.

The realist view of power can be considered distinctively 'anti-sociological'[7] in the following sense. Rather than locating states within societies (and their interactions with other such societies) realism reverses such a procedure by subordinating the social world to the state. The metric of power capacity is territorially and geographically confined and thereby explicitly 'methodologically nationalist' (Chernilo 2011); for the capabilities of a state are given by its internal attributes, and not its web of connections with other states and societies. Great powers may enter into coalitions that lead to aggregated improvements in their power capacity, but such interactions with other states and societies are assumed to be non-dynamic for the purposes of the metric. They do not qualitatively change the capabilities that determine great power capacity. This view of power is therefore highly geographical, political (state-centric) and vertical/hierarchical in its fundamental conception – with the freedoms and security of small states held to be inherently precarious in this order. Waltz argued, for example, that there was no difference between the world ushered in with the United Nations Charter and its concept of sovereign equality to the balance-of-power arrangement in Europe after the Napoleonic Wars (Waltz 1979, 164–65). Both are held to be functions of delicate compromises between great powers, which smaller states have no choice but adapt to. The sphere of influence is therefore critical to how realists see great power competition to be geographically ordered. The strong force compliance by the weak, creating a zone of control that other powers are 'afraid or unwilling to challenge' (Ashford 2023, np). For realists the sphere of influence is nothing more or less than 'a mere fact, an assertion of geography and power' (ibid). The vision of the world that realists conjure is consequently critically predicated on great powers having the *capacity to compel* weaker states to comply, either through the actual use of force or by the threat of it.

It might be asked, then, if these assumptions did not pertain, what would the world look like? How might a world be ordered in which the capacities of great powers to dominate – as singular states stood atop of geopolitical spheres of influence – were no longer assured? One answer to this falsifiability question is that states with formally high asymmetric power

[7] Lebow is also an important exception here: '[T]he causes of war and the responses of others to the use of force are shaped by society. The causes, frequency, and outcomes of wars cannot be studied in a social void' (Lebow 2022, 112).

capacities (in realism's own terms i.e., with various factor endowments) may struggle to enforce changes of behaviour and policy in weaker states and, accordingly, create spheres of strategic influence. In this sense, realism must entail the premise that great power politics 'works', insofar as states with asymmetric power advantages can be expected to assert a significant level of control on developments outside their own territory. Even if they see great power conflict as 'tragic' (Mearsheimer 2001), i.e., an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the uneven distribution of power among states, the theory requires an overall structure of domination to persist in which the strongest geopolitical entities are, to use Waltz's (1979, 131) term, the 'consequential' actors. Realists do recognise that 'great powers sometimes act in terrible and foolish ways when they believe their core security interests are at stake' (Walt 2022b, np), and that these actions may also be antithetical to their own interests, generating new forms of insecurity and unintended consequences. The theory does not therefore require great powers to always succeed in using threat and force to carve out spheres of influence and control. Still, in aggregate terms, for the world to be dominated by great powers, each with their spheres of influence, it must be the case that these states can ensure meaningful political outcomes in their specific geographical/security domains more often than not. This may include questions of peace negotiation, where great powers are assumed to dictate terms, even if this does not involve the active mobilisation of force or threat. The latter is the key assumption of the 'Great-Power Peace Plan' that sees Russia and Ukraine as clients of China and the United States, respectively:

> An agreement jointly mediated by the United States and China would also be more likely to endure, as Moscow and Kyiv would be less likely to renege on a deal arranged and blessed by their *principal patrons* (Walt 2023, np, emphasis added).

This formulation is revealing of how realists can struggle to render the great power concept consistent with concrete developments. In 2022 Stephen Walt referred to Russia as a 'great power' (Walt 2022a) but just one year later he reduces the country to the status of a Chinese client state (Walt 2023).. In its content Walt's peace proposal echoes the partition plans and protectorates of the late imperial era, suggesting a re-drawing of borders while admitting this would face 'resistance from some if not most Ukrainians' (ibid, np). How power is imagined to function – highly centralised, political (state-centric) and geographical – in this thinking shapes the nature of the peace. As realists focus on the hierarchical relations between the great powers and subordinate states their assumptions do not permit analysis of the 'from below' dimensions that would be necessary to render a peace negotiation legitimate and thus sustainable on the ground. While Walt recognises such a peace process is quite un-likely his explanation for why this is the case focuses on the politics of the United States, and not Ukraine (ibid). The problem of illegitimacy is passed over owing to the premise that the patrons will be able to impose some form of compliance on their respective clients. Legitimacy is not recognised as a dimension of the power constellation (Reus-Smit 2014) which shapes the concrete outcomes that are possible.

Realists have anticipated the line of critique that states with asymmetric advantages are not always successful in their ability in turning formal capacities into effective outputs. This is why Mearsheimer rejects the definition of power associated with Robert Dahl that states "A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do" (Mearsheimer 2001, 57). He quite reasonably argues that this definition logically implies that any victory by a state which has been presumed to be weaker in a conflict with one presumed to be stronger would mean that the former are definitionally 'stronger'. For Mearsheimer the possibility of the stronger being defeated by the weaker must instead be explained by 'non-material', contingent factors such as strategy, morale, or resolve that 'sometimes profoundly affect outcomes' (Mearsheimer 2001, 60). While this may be persuasive as a critique of a more rigid interpretation of Dahl, it seems notable that to resolve the tension between (a) a definition of power as the material assets or capabilities of a state and (b) the recognition that these formal

strengths may not always be decisive, Mearsheimer introduces contingent factors that are entirely external to the substantive logic of the theory. For the core of the theory to hold though it must be the case that the small number of states with asymmetric power advantages in the world order (the 'great powers') are effective in mobilising power on as many occasions as may be necessary to maintain their spheres of influence. If they are frequently unable to do so, then it does not follow (as the Dahlian definition of power may imply) that they become definitionally weaker to their adversaries. It rather points to the need for a more holistic and relational account of the asymmetries of power that are reshaping the contemporary global order.

The war in Ukraine demonstrates the need for a complex reading of what advantages in traditional power capacities such as industrial capacity and military strength may confer to the states that hold them. Judged by the size of the material capacities it has at its disposal Russia is the much stronger side but has struggled to leverage these effectively to give it a decisive advantage in the war. At the time of writing (December 2023) there is considerable uncertainty over the future of Western aid but even if one assumes that it continues at an approximately similar level this does not 'level up' Ukraine to approximate Russia's power capabilities. So, it does not follow from the presently attritional character of the war that the sides are evenly matched. Ukraine's relatively successful defence may instead reveal something about the specific forms of power it has mobilised. Mary Kaldor (2023, 2) argues that the war illustrates the now familiar problem that states have in translating overwhelming military superiority to deliver what Thomas Schelling called 'compellence': the active mobilisation of force or the threat of force to bring about a change in behaviour or policy by another party (i.e., to *compel*) (Schelling 2008, 69–70).[8] Material and ideational forms of power shape this dynamic. At the material level the transformation of military technology has created a secular tendency over time for 'all forms of military technology' to become more 'accurate and lethal', which leads to an advantage of defence that makes it harder 'to use military force as an instrument of control' (Kaldor 2023, 2). This advantage of defence may help explain why, according to Ned Lebow, after 1945 the aggressor has an 80 per cent failure rate, i.e., has been defeated in 4 out of 5 wars (Lebow 2022, 112; see also Lebow and Valentino 2009). Even in wars where overwhelming military force has been effective the victors have encountered the problems of ideational power in 'winning the peace'. In Iraq, the United States was unable to translate its military victory into a political one that reshaped the polity in the manner that its pre-invasion aims had envisioned.

The case of Ukraine's hitherto effective resistance to the full-scale invasion also illustrates how the material and ideational may become blurred and intertwined. Support for the Ukrainian war effort has gone alongside a very active civil society mobilisation of volunteers and networks creating self-help systems that interact with the state to mobilise and distribute resources to protect societal cohesion and social infrastructure. This 'civic spirit' has become a material factor for the Ukrainian war effort (Cooper 2022, 7–8). This mobilisation blurs humanitarian and military aid and is highly transversal, crossing national borders and providing a means for Ukrainian refugees to continue to support the war effort (Czerska-Shaw and Jacoby 2023). Ukrainian citizens raise money directly for the armed forces through public platforms like Come Back Alive[9] that have emerged as significant actors in the security field. This provides a flavour of the types of power that Ukraine has been effectively mobilising. Rather than power reflecting a fixed set of attributes and capacities *a la* realism they point to the fluid nature of such capacities. Important in this regard is Schelling's argument that any given power capability does not bestow a 'universal advantage' and could in principle become a liability (cited in Baldwin 2016, 54). Power must therefore be conceptualised as a highly context

[8] Schelling distinguishes 'compellence' from 'deterrence' which is designed to disincentivise another party from taking a hypothetical action (Schelling 2008, 69–70)

[9] https://savelife.in.ua/en/

dependent phenomena, the fluidity of which means that liabilities can transform into assets – and vice versa (Baldwin 2016, 114–15). This rings true of some developments in the Ukrainian case. The groups operating in the Ukrainian armed forces that have differing political colourations, like the Kastus Kalinouski Regiment (KKR) of Belarusian volunteers (Biziukova and Bystryk 2023), presently illustrate the potency of the networks mobilising to support Ukraine's war of national liberation but could become a source of weakness in the future; if, for instance, Kyiv signed an armistice agreement that was unpopular and these networks resisted the agreement in some form, potentially imperilling civilian control of the armed forces. The explicit analysis of the Belarusian volunteers – that they first win in Ukraine and then overthrow the regime 'at home' – underlines the potential for spill over effects regionalising the war (ibid) and could *a la* Schelling create unintended consequences harmful to Ukraine's regional position. It also shows how networks operating transversally across borders (and with some degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the Ukrainian state and its allies) are shaping the conflict – contradicting the widely held realist view that the war is exclusively interstate and geopolitical.

The features normally associated with non-conventional wars – such as a proliferation of non-state actors with the ability to mobilise force – are thus present in Ukraine in a 'hidden' form. These networks constitute 'multiple, non-hierarchical, and relational' (Baldwin 2016, 54) capacities that Ukraine is currently utilising but which could become a liability in the future. This problematises realism's narrowly geographical, state centric and vertical concept of power by demonstrating the importance of transversal, or partially non-hierarchical, forms. Building on this analysis, the final section offers a short sketch of an alternative account of world order.

THE CRISIS OF 'GREAT POWER POLITICS' IN A NEW PHASE OF GLOBAL FRAGMENTATION

Rather than great power politics ('return of geopolitics'. 'multipolarity', 'spheres of influence') the Russian war against Ukraine illustrates a process of fragmentation in the global order. By fragmentation I *do not* mean a form of disorder involving a breakdown of legitimate rules-based authority within individual states – which is how the concept has traditionally been utilised in the conflict studies literature (Dowd 2015; Pearlman et al. 2012). But an analytical framework that analyses the local and the global in their interconnection. This usage draws on the relatively recently scholarship in International Relations and Conflict Studies that is exploring how the fragmentation trend occurring at the level of global governance is interacting with local actors in societies experiencing intractable violence (Peter and Rice 2022; Osland and Peter 2021). This work starts form the observation that there has been a multiplication of intervening powers in conflict and post conflict settings. Avoiding the deductive schemas typical of great power thinking this scholarship has instead argued that in conflict setting we can observe 'a 'fragmentation of international actors and diversification of styles of engagement' (Peter 2021). In this empirically orientated lens fragmentation emerges as an inductively generated conceptual description of a 'messy' constellation of contending external actors and parties present on the ground. One effect of this is to challenge the monopoly position that western/northern states (particularly through the P5 on the United Nations Security Council) have often claimed over collective security. Transitions and transformation in world order are thus recognised as deeply embedded with conflicts that are subject to international 'attention' and attempts at peacekeeping and conflict resolution (Peter 2019). A hitherto un-explored implication of this work is that it moves decisively against the notion of spheres of influence as an organising logic for global politics. Not only would the majority of the world's states not

place themselves in the security domain of a 'great power' but in conflict settings there is a notable absence of the static hierarchies that the concept of spheres of influence postulates.[10]

Building on this work we might argue that rather than a type of disorder fragmentation should be conceptualised primarily as a diffusion of power amongst a wider range of states, non-state actors and networks that undermines the monopoly rights that large and/or wealthy states have often claimed on collective security. Against the conception of great power politics – and its various iterative forms – in my reading fragmentation describes the diminished capacity of so-called 'great powers' to cohere political geographies around their interests (*a la* the imaginary of realism). It implies the existence of a wider range of power forms, operating through networks, beyond state-military capacity. While the process of power diffusion in the world order has often been understood through the rubric of multipolarity – including in the literature on global fragmentation (Peter 2019; Osland and Peter 2021) – this terminology needs to be reconsidered to capture the dynamics that we can observe in contemporary world order.

The failure of the Russian effort to *compel* a set of change in Ukraine's security obligations (and – by extension – overthrow its democratically elected government to ensure this) should shape how we understand the logics and modalities of contemporary world order. Since November 2022 (and at the time of writing) the war has assumed an attritional character with neither side making breakthroughs. This is despite Russia not fighting on its own territory and holding a very substantial material advantage. By one estimate, in 2023 alone, Russia spent $120 billion on its army and military-industrial complex (Grozovski 2023, np). Russia has also mobilised vast numbers of soldiers – and at great human cost. According to a US Defense Intelligence estimate in December 2023, Russia had suffered 315k military casualties (killed or injured) since the start of the full-scale invasion, some 87% of its 2021 armed forces personnel (Landay 2023, np). The same source estimates that Russia has lost around two thirds of its 3,100 pre-invasion battle tanks (ibid). By comparison, in 2024, Ukraine plans to spend $48 billion on the war, which would effectively direct all domestic tax revenues to the war effort and come to around 20 per of its GDP (Harmash 2023, np). This is around twice as much in per capita terms as the Russian side but still dwarfed in absolute terms. In short, the balance of capacities between the two sides remains highly asymmetric in material terms, despite the supply of Western military, humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine. Russia's very effective use of mined fortifications with a depth of around 500m to defend its lines, as well as its advantage in artillery fire, is a sign of the role that low grade technologies are playing in a war in which defence has the advantage (Jones, McCabe, and Palmer 2023, np). If this poses a steep challenge for either side to make a breakthrough, it also draws attention to the way in which military and economic resources cannot be easily translated into seizing territory. Even if Russia were to win the conventional war, it would then require a vast occupation force, perhaps on the scale of the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan, that would almost certainly face stiff partisan resistance.

What emerges then is a story that should serve to complicate prevalent understanding of asymmetric (or 'great') power capacities. It shows how for states conducting interventions in foreign territories advantages in material capacities confer an advantage, especially in relation to the ability to destroy people and infrastructure on a very wide scale, but this should not be equated with political control of territory (Kaldor 2023). As Russia's advantages are evident when it comes to the traditional realist metrics of power capacity its inability to draw on these to create a vertical hierarchy across an expansive geography (sphere of influence) points to the need for a framework that allows for a context-dependent and relational view of power. The potential for such a conceptualisation lies not only in capturing the 'civic spirit' – the networks that combine material and ideational forms of power and mobilisation – that have

[10] The drawing of camp-based geopolitical distinction between liberal and authoritarian states has also been deconstructed by this work, highlighting for example the role of the 'war on terror' in eroding agreement on the application of 'human protection' principles in peacekeeping (Peter 2023).

animated Ukraine's resistance to the Russian invasion. It also may serve to offer a more concrete calibration of the types of power that Russia *does* effectively mobilise. It might be argued that prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia had proven highly adept in orientating itself strategically to a situation of global fragmentation defined as a diffusion of power amongst a wider range of states, networks and non-state actors. The Russian state's use of 'authoritarian conflict management' (Lewis, Heathershaw, and Megoran 2018) was suitable to a situation marked by a breakdown of a 'policing' orientated global governance framework. Russia cultivated patron-client relations that while asymmetric did not entirely override the agency of their clients, and combined identity-based solidarities with corrupt incentives (Arel and Driscoll 2023; Gueudet 2023). Unlike the full-scale invasion these forms of power projection were (a) often opportunistic and pragmatic; and (b) drew extensively on 'horizontal' relations of transnational bargaining in which local actors were able to assert a degree of agency. Like on the Ukrainian side, these networks that traverse national borders form part of the power capacities of the Russian state but illustrate the de-centred forms through which it is constituted. As the Wagner rebellion showed, they could also transform into a liability for internal stability.

CONCLUSION

The fragmentation of global order rules out the kind of spheres of influence associated with great power politics. Instead of geopolitical blocs around ideological families the twenty-first century global order is multi-layered and fluid in its affiliations. Rather than a multipolar world this could be referred to as a 'non-polar' one in which asymmetries of power do not tend towards the construction of bloc-based alignments. A 2023 report on public opinion surveys which included a number of major non-Western states described this as the emergence of an '*à la carte* world' where states form a multitude of different, fluid and issue-based coalitions (Garton Ash, Krastev, and Leonard 2023). The dramatic similarity in the scale of isolation the United States (over Gaza) and Russia (over Ukraine) has experienced in the UN General Assembly may also be an indicator of the emergence of this non-polar order – not least because the very small core of 4 to 10 states supporting their positions bear no relationship to geography. It might equally serve to illustrate that, understood as a diffusion of power, global fragmentation is not *ipso facto* antithetical to normative and rules-based outcomes and may even be helpful in isolating those guilty of either supporting or undertaking acts of aggression. It might further be argued that, rather than fragmentation, it is flawed attempts at the centralisation of power across expansive geographies (great power politics) that actually threatens the cohesion of the global system.

The turn to great power politics in western capitals is therefore built on the contradiction that the world these states are facing – indeed, are entangled with – is marked not by the centralisation of power but its diffusion. While the power asymmetries and capacities that these states hold are real, they largely do not take the form of an ability to compel changes of behaviour through the threat of force but involve a more complex register of ideational and material elements. Within the context of this power diffusion these powers become, ironically, more, not less, dependent on multilateralism. Finally, the argument I have presented here is analytical not normative but may be useful to calibrate progressive policies more effectively around changing logics of power. Fragmentation may render great power politics less potent but is also creating new and different reactionary possibilities – analysing these without the lodestone of 'great power' reasoning can clarify the coalitions needed for democratic outcomes.

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