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Forum: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: Accounting for the Domestic alongside the International

J. Patrick Rhamey Jr.

Virginia Military Institute, United States

Alexander Lanoszka

University of Waterloo, Canada

Seva Gunitsky

University of Toronto, Canada

Thomas J. Volgy

University of Arizona, United States

Paul Poast

University of Chicago, United States

Joanna Szostek

University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

Bohdana Kurylo

London School of Economics, United Kingdom

Abstract

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to a resurgence in debate over the value of systemic approaches to explaining war. Both scholars and popular media have spent much oxygen and ink debating the merits of arguments that assign causal primacy to NATO expansion, status reclamation, spheres of influence, dissatisfaction with the global order, or alleged multipolarity. However, understanding conflict onset and duration requires both theoretical consistency and the inclusion of domestic causes. Though attempts at engaging both the domestic and international have been relatively sparse in the public discourse of Russia's invasion, efforts to engage both have a long history in international relations (IR) scholarship. This forum seeks to address this problem by uniting the systemic and domestic to capture the causal processes underlying the invasion more fully. Doing so offers both a more thorough accounting of the war and also emphasizes the broader necessity of interdependence between IR and area studies.

Enduring Exclusion of Domestic Causes

J. Patrick Rhamey Jr.

Reactions by scholars to the unfolding events in Ukraine as Russia continues its brutal assault expose flaws in both our theoretical explanations and how we present those explanations to the public. Perhaps the most widely engaged and dominating argument is John Mearsheimer's explanation blaming expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russia, needing to defend its core security interests, could not abide the potential for NATO to expand into its immediate "sphere of influence" and was, therefore, forced to respond.

This explanation has likely received more media attention in academia and the public than any other and has even entered the partisan debate in the United States. Initially popularized by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on social media,[1] the argument persists in a privileged position despite persistent rebuttal, notably by scholars in area studies and comparative politics. Visceral debates within or between fields are nothing new to the social sciences. However, unlike others, the stakes here are likely much greater. Mearsheimer's argument impacts propaganda, policy, and public opinion as the war grinds into its third year with casualties in the hundreds of thousands.

One example of centering Mearsheimer's argument occurred in an introduction to the new editorial board of this journal (International Studies Review 2023). Before offering criticism, it is worth noting that this was clearly not an intentional expression of support nor a promotion of a particular explanation by the authors. Yet, this simple presentation was symptomatic of much broader problems in IR and its response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The editorial characterized the debate surrounding Ukraine as either NATO caused the war, in a position of primacy, or as an alternative, Russia sought to regain lost status. Such a portrayal is, unfortunately, consistent with how the debate often appears in the public sphere, ignoring all other explanations.

Against this backdrop, there are three arguments this forum seeks to put forward:

[1] Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4, based upon an article in *Foreign Affairs* (Mearsheimer 2014).

1. The theoretical debate behind whether "NATO" or "the West" caused the war is not consistent nor representative of IR theory broadly, or of offensive realism specifically.
2. IR theory has a long history of including domestic variables that accurately capture causal linkages across levels of analysis, and doing so offers a more complete explanation of events.
3. Further erosion of the tribalism that persists between IR and area studies is necessary for continued progress and to the benefit of both.

A Tradition of Including the Local in the Global

IR has a long history of including domestic indicators that may complement systemic analyses (Fearon 1998). In so doing, reliance upon area specialists is necessary, as general IR theorists lack the local knowledge necessary to identify domestically relevant inputs on a global scale. Indeed, all the dominant paradigms in IR have evolved to include some inclusion of the domestic. Liberalism, particularly the versions articulated by Moravcsik (1997) or Mousseau (2009), relies on local knowledge of political institutions or economic norms. Constructivists often rely heavily on local identities and histories in their explanations of interstate behavior (e.g., Katzenstein 2005), while even recent evolutions in realism, particularly the neoclassical realist variant (Brawley 2018), rely upon domestic factors like "political regimes, strategic culture, and leader perceptions" (Ripsman 2011). Research that joins general theory with deep local knowledge has important, forward-looking implications for international politics globally (e.g., Ganguly and Thompson 2017).

IR has a long history of relying upon area studies because area studies grants the "closest possible contact with all the factors materially bearing upon" the events IR seeks to explain and functions as a "starting point for examination of theoretical propositions" (Modelski 1961, 143). Indeed, even Waltz (1959), who directed our attention to the primacy of the system, focused heavily on domestic, unit-level variables when explaining the policy choices of individual states (Waltz 1967). One of the great flaws of the "NATO did it" argument is that it approaches this relationship in reverse: beginning with a systemic lens, it then cherry-picks domestic factors in an ad hoc manner in support of the initial narrative, such as the extent of Russian language or identity within Ukraine.

Building on frameworks emphasizing the need to include the domestic in causal explanations of foreign policy while not leaving the systemic behind (e.g., Rosenau 1971), recent research continues in this tradition of seeking to identify cases where unit-level variables salience rises to complement the global (e.g., Kinne and Maoz 2003; Renshon et al. 2023). Such approaches are inherently dependent upon area expertise, and to the extent IR serves a useful role, it is in developing general theories that can unite local contexts in ways that teach us something about politics across borders. If left adrift without a firm foundation in local, unit-level observations, a general theory is susceptible to post hoc distortions of events to fit a narrative, as we have unfortunately observed in many discussions of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Moving Forward: The Interdependence of the Domestic and International

As Lake (2014) argues, an "eclectic" approach focused on explaining "important real-world problems and achieving progress" should be our goal, not refighting the paradigm wars of the

past. Unfortunately, the IR-Ukraine debacle illustrates that even as the paradigms wane in importance (Milner et al. 2023), the "great debates" seem to linger, and perhaps still dominate, our discussions. Thus, Lanoszka outlines the importance of IR and area studies to each other, offering a powerful argument in favor of tearing down the divisions between fields, not just theoretical perspectives. IR and area studies need each other to tackle real-world problems and provide the public and policymakers with a useful, accurate accounting of ongoing events.

Following that blueprint, Gunitsky demonstrates that the usefulness of general theory lies in its consistency and explanatory power, so long as it maintains parsimony rather than degenerating into the ad-hoc incorporation of unrelated causal processes in support of an ideologically motivated narrative. He artfully applies offensive realism, demonstrating that the claim NATO is the antagonist cornering Russia into a reaction is inconsistent with the theory, underscoring the deep flaws in Mearsheimer's argument dominating so much of the Ukraine discourse.

We then shift toward the inclusion of the domestic in our explanations. Volgy, Poast, and Szostek examine the characteristics of states and societies in the lead-up to the invasion. Concepts like state strength, history, and values contribute positively to our understanding of the conflict. Finally, Kurylo situates the division between IR and area studies in relation to the underlying power dynamics within IR. The discipline's built-in tendency to focus on powerful actors to the exclusion of the powerless has marginalized Ukraine's perspective and emerging critical knowledge from the region, while privileging Russo-centric and neorealist accounts in war debates. This echoes observations of area studies decline in IR being more a function of international events and dominating political movements than any theoretical or methodological shift (Busse et al. 2024, 22). Breaking down these divisions to include marginalized voices is necessary to improve the explanatory value of our respective fields.

This forum focuses on the interdependence of general theory and local knowledge to understand discrete events. If we are to inform policy by providing explanations of events that are simultaneously reflective of reality and generalizable across like outcomes, we cannot solely rely upon either systemic theories that ignore domestic variables or the uniqueness of domestic and regional contexts.

Getting Over the Generalist-Area Specialist Divide

Alexander Lanoszka

Given the violence Russian armed forces have visited upon Ukrainian society, especially since February 2022, the stakes involved in academic controversies are low. People neither die nor suffer trauma when IR scholars make choices about which theoretical stances to support or what analytical toolkits to use for understanding empirical patterns. Nevertheless, an intense debate broke out in the academe almost immediately after the first columns of Russian armored vehicles rolled into Ukraine on the morning of February 24th.

In contention was the value of general theory, often anchored in paradigmatic understandings of the world, relative to the value of subject matter expertise that pays close attention to the histories and cultures of particular regions. Simply put, generalists and area specialists clashed over what Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine meant for the study of international politics. The debate over the role of NATO enlargement in Russia's calculations provided the intellectual battlefield for this confrontation. On the one side, a particular group of generalists, often associated with the realist school of thought, argued that NATO enlargement pushed Moscow to

engage in such belligerence. On the other side, area specialists countered that the importance of NATO enlargement is exaggerated, and that the massive escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian War had much more to do with the imperial chauvinism of the key decision-makers involved, not the least of whom were Russian President Putin and the old men around him.

Whose perspective is more valid? Admittedly, I do have a dog in this fight. I have previously written that the impact of NATO enlargement on Russian calculations is often overstated since much of European NATO generally preferred cooperating with Russia to providing meaningful military assistance to Ukraine until 2022 (Lanoszka 2023). My background is Polish. For many like me, the experience of February 24th triggered the intergenerational feelings that harken back to September 1939. The parallels felt too obvious to ignore. With strong familial ties with the region, I am naturally sympathetic to those who take the time to learn difficult languages and develop a deep cultural familiarity with local society.

Yet the divide between generalists and area specialists is a false one. Both sides need each other to complement their strengths and overcome their weaknesses.

The Use and Abuse of General Theory

Leaving aside the controversy regarding NATO enlargement, generalists—whatever their theoretical inclinations—have much to offer. The celebrated political comparativist Seymour Lipset (1993, 121) declared, "[a] person who knows only one country knows no country well." Possessing singular and exclusive knowledge about a country or even a region deprives one of knowing what is, in fact, unique or not. The persistence of nomenklatura ties among Moscow's

political elite might be the result of a single-party communist dictatorship prior to 1991. However, that explanation looks less persuasive when considering how members of the nomenklatura were unable to survive as much and for as long in other post-communist countries. Likewise, the dual shocks of Brexit and Trump's election in 2016 suggested that perhaps scholars of American politics wrongly assume the United States is different from everyone else, ignoring broader trends that contribute to similar populist outcomes on both sides of the Atlantic (e.g., Inglehart and Norris 2016; Lieberman et al. 2019, 472).

General theory can call attention to variables and macro-level patterns that may be easily overlooked. The core insight made by Waltz (1979) in his discussion of systemic theory is that certain properties and behavioral patterns can emerge when different entities come into contact and develop relationships with one another. The attributes of those entities themselves can change through their interactions. Waltz's mistake was to imply that a systemic theory in international politics can only be made in reference to material capabilities. Other scholars thus have developed theories that are no less systemic but emphasize other independent variables that can affect behavior, be they information (Keohane 1984), political interests (Moravcsik 1997), or norms and identities (Wendt 1992)—all of which are operative in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Regarding middle-range theory, which aims to integrate theory and empirical research, the general literature on international conflict identifies a suite of risk factors that make Ukraine and Russia prone to war: their territorial contiguity (Senese 2005); major differences in their political systems (Bennett 2006); and Russia's status as a petro-state (Ashford 2014).

Of course, theory is necessarily a simplification of reality. Many scholars in the social sciences make a virtue out of parsimony, whereby they seek to explain as much of the observed empirical variation with as few assumptions and postulates as possible. The result is that theory can help

researchers identify the core essence of a case despite getting some of the specifics of that case wrong. Putting too much empirical detail into a theory can even be "regressive" if it means incorporating ad hoc observations that betray the purported generality of that theory (Waltz 1997, 916). Indeed, even if the theory does not explain a case well, it is not necessarily wrong *in toto*, especially if its claims are probabilistic rather than deterministic. Hence, John Mearsheimer (2001, 11) is correct when he describes theory as being "a powerful flashlight in a dark room; even though it cannot illuminate every nook and cranny, most of the time, it is an excellent tool for navigating through the dark." Theory is ultimately an explanatory heuristic.

Theory is valuable, but problems lie with how some scholars use it. The emergence of particular schools of thought, or paradigms, arguably has had a pernicious effect on the study of international politics because it led to analytical tribalism. Grand theories have become the basis of partisan co-identification. They become less a flashlight for illuminating a complicated world and more of a flag to brandish in front of one's colleagues in academic debates. Scholars like Mearsheimer, who rightly point out the utility of general theory, have arguably been the most partisan.

That partisanship is unfortunate: no good reason exists for why a scholar must always privilege one grand theory, let alone self-identify with one, when trying to explain something as messy as international politics. That complexity should invite humility and self-reflection. Instead, partisanship intensifies the risk of overfitting the data to suit one's prior theoretical commitments. Unsurprisingly, those less wedded to general theory will become much more skeptical than they need if they believe that other scholars are much more interested in scoring points in their paradigmatic debates than trying to grasp complex empirical phenomena in good faith.

The Use and Abuse of Area Specialization

In contrast to generalists, area specialists focus on the particular. They develop deep, substantive knowledge about their country or region of interest. They acquire language skills and become familiar with their chosen area's politics, history, and culture. This familiarity can even be empathetic insofar as they see political actors as agents in their own right with distinctive backgrounds, values, and motivations. Area specialists are thus attuned to the subtle features of their subject. They are in a much better position than generalists to appreciate the diversity of local experience. This deep substantive knowledge can be very practical, for policy may be more effective if it considers the specific features and contingencies of a regionally-bound issue. Area specialists can supply the empirical detail that ground specific cases in their context.

Area specialization can have relatively high barriers to entry, especially if it means acquiring language skills. Much of North American political science, even in IR, is admittedly very anglophone despite its pretensions to uncover universal truths (D'Aoust 2012; Grondin 2014, 45-46). General theories may themselves be complex and involve much intellectual rigor but learning them does not require the researcher to make themselves as vulnerable as when he or she is abroad. The area specialist might be embarrassed by making inevitable language mistakes, feel alienated from being in an unfamiliar social context, or even experience the danger of doing fieldwork in places marked by censorship, violence, and authoritarian control. General theory has fewer barriers, with the added benefit that advances in computing technology have allowed researchers to construct very large datasets for econometric study at relatively low cost. Area specialization has thus waned, with graduate student training in the social sciences placing

greater emphasis on quantitative analysis and formal modeling at the expense of history, philosophy, and languages (see Shapiro 2005).

Area specialization by itself may not be an unalloyed good, however. One danger is parochialism—that is to say, a tendency to treat one's geographical region as so special that it defies extra-regional comparisons and obviates the need to develop more global understandings of politics. Scholars of American politics are arguably an extreme case of this sort of parochialism. Until recently, historians have written national histories that would be almost hermetically sealed and implicitly assume that social change and economic transformation would be confined within state boundaries (see Clavin 2005). To argue that a subject is unique is to make an empirical point that can only be supported with extra-subject evidence, which inevitably requires using theories at a higher level of generality than what local knowledge might provide.

Another danger that could come with area specialization is arrogance. An area specialist might feel a certain defensiveness when it comes to his or her knowledge, admonishing generalists to 'stay out of their lane' and even alleging that whatever insight general theory could yield for a specific case would at best be banal if true, but almost always misleading or wrong.

Such a flat dismissal of general theory would be inappropriate. Area specialists might have their own prejudices that could prevent them from appreciating the importance of something that a generalist could more easily spot from their higher vantage point. For example, Michael McFaul (2020) argues that Putin has a unique operational code that makes him more conflict-prone than other leaders. Yet autocrats in similar institutional contexts might exhibit the same pathologies, whatever their idiosyncrasies (Weeks 2012). General theory may provide the bigger picture.

A Call for Good Faith

Curiosity should unite both generalists and area specialists. General theory and area knowledge complement one another if researchers genuinely care about getting to the ground truth. As Robert Bates (1997, 169) declared long ago, "[i]t is time to insist upon the pursuit of both rather than upon the necessity of choosing sides."

If that was true back then, it is doubly true now. Area specialists should not act as gatekeepers; generalists should be more aware of their probable ignorance of local phenomena. Both area specialists and generalists should be open to revising their previously held beliefs when confronted with more data, whether at the macro or micro levels. Both area specialists and generalists inevitably confront some uncertainty in their estimates of causal relationships and their forecasting of future behavior. They should not be too attached to one paradigm, theory, hypothesis, independent variable, or narrative. Everyone is always wrong about something. What we do in the face of being wrong is ultimately what matters.

This call for good faith, admittedly, runs up against human instincts. The stakes involved in intramural academic debates may be low, but they can still excite intense feelings when they relate to a cataclysmic war that has already seen many thousands dead and even more uprooted. However, developing as robust an understanding as possible on such matters of global concern remains imperative. IR scholars would do well to use all the tools at their disposal.

The Tragedy of Offensive Realism

Seva Gunitsky

Imagine a once-powerful state that suffers a sudden decline in reputation and material power. Satraps abandon it to create new states along the imperial periphery, and the country's regional authority shrinks to a shadow of its former self. But after a period of fragmentation and political turmoil, the former hegemon finally finds its footing. Buoyed in part by high energy prices, it begins a period of economic recovery and, in doing so, once again starts to flex its muscles around the neighborhood. Their leader repeatedly talks about rebuilding the once-great empire. The country successfully invades and alters the territorial borders of one neighbor, then another — then re-invades that neighbor again in a major show of force designed to quickly annex a large part of the country.

From the perspective of offensive realism, there is absolutely nothing unusual about this behavior - in this case, obviously, Russia's behavior since the Soviet collapse. The story reflects a basic and supposedly transhistorical truth proffered by offensive realist theory: major states will seek to dominate their neighborhood to the extent allowed by their relative power. When great powers decline, their sphere of influence shrinks; when they recover and rise, this sphere expands. This long-term cycle of imperial breathing has been a constant feature of geopolitics, as documented in realist works like John Mearsheimer's (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. It is also, however, a story nowhere to be found in Mearsheimer's post-2014 explanations for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This puzzling disconnect - the Two Mearsheimers - is the subject of this brief essay.

Few explanations for the Russia-Ukraine War have attracted as much controversy as Mearsheimer's theory. Critics have attacked his argument by showing how emphasizing American-led NATO expansion denies the agency of Eastern European states and ignores the role of key factors like Russian imperialism and Putin's personal grievances. My task here is not

to adjudicate between these knowledgeable external critiques, often offered by area experts who are better informed about the subject than either Mearsheimer or myself (Smith and Dawson 2022; Dutkiewicz and Smolenski 2023; Popova and Shevel 2024). Instead, my goal is to critique the argument on its own terms.

Mearsheimer treats increasingly assertive behavior by a recovering great power as an anomalous puzzle that can only be explained by something outside the scope of structural realism: the utopianism of American liberals. What is especially odd about this move is that it denies Mearsheimer the ability to argue that offensive realism effectively explains Russian behavior as yet another bid for regional dominance after a temporary setback, just as after 1917 and 1945.

For all its documented blind spots, offensive realism may do a decent job of explaining the behavior of aggressive, revanchist states like Russia. If only the theory's popularizer and foremost practitioner would recognize that fact! The most puzzling element of the debate is that the explanation for Russian behavior found in the principles of offensive realism - that opportunistic aggression against weaker neighbors is neither surprising nor unexpected; that it is inherent to how great powers behave everywhere; and that it requires no external stimulus to explain - is completely missing in Mearsheimer's post-2014 explanations. To make the case against liberals, Mearsheimer abandons both the lessons of Russian history and key tenets of his own theory.

To be sure we are applying his theory correctly, we should first ask if Russia qualifies as a great power. According to Mearsheimer, a state falls into that category if it has "sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war" against the most powerful state. As Volgy points out in this forum, there may be some reasons to call this claim into question.

Since 1945, another requirement is the presence of a nuclear deterrent and second-strike capability (Mearsheimer 2001:5). Russia clearly qualifies on this second criterion. Ultimately, we don't have to guess - Mearsheimer explicitly declares Russia a "major power" when discussing the distribution of capabilities in contemporary Europe (Mearsheimer 2001:362). Since the book's publication in 2001, the Russian economy has grown sevenfold, including large increases in military spending. If it counted as a great power according to Mearsheimer in 2001, it is fair to assume that according to Mearsheimer's metrics, it must surely be one today.

If Russia is a recovering great power, is its behavior consistent with the expectations of offensive realism? The answer is again yes. What does Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory predict about the behavior of major powers? One constant is their eternal dissatisfaction: "There are no status quo powers in the international system, save for the occasional hegemon that wants to maintain its dominating position over potential rivals," writes Mearsheimer. "Great powers are rarely content with the current distribution of power; on the contrary, they face a constant incentive to change it in their favor" (Mearsheimer 2001:2).

This constant incentive makes warfare a recurring feature of international politics for offensive realism. Great powers do not need much external prodding from NATO or otherwise to become aggressive: "This unrelenting pursuit of power means that great powers are inclined to look for opportunities to alter the distribution of world power in their favor," writes Mearsheimer. "They will seize these opportunities if they have the necessary capability. Simply put, great powers are primed for offense" (Mearsheimer 2001, 3).

Moreover, offensive realism expects that great powers are especially likely to be aggressive and predatory to weaker states along their borders. "A great power that has a marked power

advantage over its rivals is likely to behave more aggressively," writes Mearsheimer, "because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so" (Mearsheimer 2001, 37).

In this light, Russian invasions of Georgia and Ukraine, just like Soviet invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia, or the countless Tsarist invasions, represent the continuous workings of offensive realist logic through which a strong regional power seeks to dominate its neighborhood, through force if needed. This is something the pre-2014 Mearsheimer had often noted himself. Surveying the geopolitical landscape in 1990 (p. 33), he observed:

> Soviet withdrawal from Eastern Europe does not mean that the Soviets will never feel compelled to return to Eastern Europe. The historical record provides abundant instances of Russian or Soviet involvement in Eastern Europe. Indeed, the Russian presence in Eastern Europe has surged and ebbed repeatedly over the past few centuries. Thus, Soviet withdrawal now hardly guarantees a permanent exit.

A decade later, in *Tragedy*, Mearsheimer (2001, 190) noted that "Russia had a rich history of expansionist behavior before the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917." Describing the empire's four centuries of continuous expansion, he concluded: "There is considerable evidence that Vladimir Lenin, Josef Stalin, and their successors wanted to follow in the Tsars' footsteps and further expand Soviet borders."

Today, these lessons of history appear to have been lost. A continuity that explains Russian behavior by drawing directly on offensive realist theory has been replaced by an ad hoc argument relying on the behavior of utopian American liberals.

During the Cold War, debates raged about who was to blame for starting the conflict between the United States and Soviet Union. To simplify a complex set of arguments, the answers fell into three categories: traditionalists, who blamed the Soviet Union; revisionists, who blamed the United States; and post-revisionists, who blamed not a particular side, but the uncertainty and mutual suspicion created by the anarchy of international politics.

The arguments around the Russia-Ukraine war are now recapitulating these debates, with the question being not who started the Cold War but who re-ignited it. Mearsheimer has taken the equivalent of the revisionist side: America did it. Doing so makes sense as a counterargument to conventional Washington wisdom: Putin did it. But by blaming one state, Mearsheimer has robbed his argument of the strategic context that neorealists themselves correctly emphasize. To explain the conflict, Mearsheimer has moved away from his own past explanations of Russian behavior and thus from the core realist assumption of actors interacting under anarchy. This is especially ironic because Mearsheimer's argument has damaged the reputation of realism-as-theory within the academy and the larger public (Poast 2022).

Both the academy and the public sphere have unwittingly been arguing about two incompatible and mutually exclusive Mearsheimers: the 2001 Mearsheimer of *Tragedy*, who focuses on anarchy and uncertainty as the structural source of global conflict, and the post-2014 Mearsheimer of *Liberal Illusions*, who instead sees American liberalism as the domestic source of that conflict. Even as the New Mearsheimer has eclipsed the Old, it may be helpful to recall the actual arguments that brought its most important popularizer such prominence. The great tragedy of offensive realism is that in the process of seeking blame for the war, Mearsheimer has left his own theory behind.

The Salience of Domestic Political Processes and the Russia-Ukraine War

Thomas J. Volgy

There are many questions about the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine that are enticing to answer but require the passage of time and more rigorous evidence. My focus here is on only one aspect of the invasion: the spectacular failure of the Russian military to take Kyiv at the war's commencement. That failure raises two important concerns regarding how IR scholarship approaches interstate conflicts. The first is about state strength;[1] the second concerns the effects of political shocks on foreign policymaking.

Russian Military Failure and the Assessment of State Strength

From a realist perspective there is little doubt that on the eve of the invasion there appeared to be an overwhelming imbalance favoring Russian coercive capabilities. Russia's active military forces outnumbered that of Ukraine by more than four to one, its aircraft by seventeen to one, and its military spending by nine to one (Figure 1). The relative imbalance in gross domestic product (GDP) was even greater: Ukraine's share of the dyad's GDP was approximately six percent (Figure 2). On these conventional measures Russia enjoyed an overwhelming imbalance in 2022, leading many observers to predict a swift Russian victory. Yet its initial military operation was an unmitigated disaster.

How can we explain Russia's great failure at the onset of the conflict? While realists tend to assess the relative strength of adversaries, other scholars have made a strong case that domestic

political dynamics and political structures can facilitate or retard the effective utilization of state capabilities. Selectorate theory (e.g., Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003, Morrow et al. 2008) suggests that policymakers, depending on calculations based on the size of the state's selectorate and the minimum winning coalition, may not invest in or deploy sufficient strength in war if political survival can be maintained through private goods, even if wars are lost. Scholars who focus on autocratic elite replacement suggest similar domestic effects. For Talmadge (2015) it is the type of threat environment (external versus domestic threats) faced by autocracies that drives choices regarding military organizational practices, "coup proofing" their militaries, but impairing conventional war fighting capabilities. Chiozza and Goemans (2011) argue that the fear of certain types of irregular transfers of power in autocracies impacts both decisions to engage in interstate conflict and engaging in it efficiently. These and other works[2] highlight the salience of domestic political structures and processes that translate raw capabilities into actual usage.

I suggest that underlying these works is the broader notion that military and economic capabilities are mediated by the extent of state control over corruption (an aspect of private goods provision) and by governmental effectiveness. It is only by considering these two factors that one gains a valid assessment of a state's *actual* strength (e.g., Thompson et al. 2023, Chapters 6 and 7; Volgy 2023).

No wonder then that conventional measures overestimated Russian strength at the start of the war as scholars (and policymakers) failed to account for the pernicious effects of corruption and inefficient bureaucracies inside the Russian Federation. There is both anecdotal[3] and systematic evidence for both phenomena constraining Russia's ability to conduct its military

operations. Figure 3 compares Russia with China and the United States on the World Bank's index of governmental effectiveness immediately prior to the outbreak of the war. The efficiency of the Russian government pales in comparison to the other two major powers.[4] Figure 4 provides a similar comparison for Russian control over corruption: it is endemic[5] and is likely to have severely constrained the utilization of military expenditures and equipment.

The extent of corruption and inefficient governance in the Russian Federation had been documented prior to the invasion (e.g., Shlapentokh 2003, Dawisha 2014, Beliakova and Perlo-Freeman 2018, Anderson 2023). After 2008 the Kremlin engaged in reforms designed to reduce corruption[6] and to increase the efficiency of its armed forces, yet there is not much evidence that either effort had succeeded prior to the start of the invasion.

The actual *impact* of corruption alone on extant military capabilities is astounding. Some Russian officials indicate that anywhere from twenty to forty percent of the military budget has been stolen (Barany 2023, Newman 2022); others (Norwegian Defence Research Establishment 2005) estimate that fifty percent of the defense budget had disappeared). Thus, domestic corruption may have halved Russian military capabilities,[7] making its offensive thrust into Ukraine highly problematic.[8]

The Impact of Political Shocks

The failed march on Kyiv taps into another preoccupation of scholars: conditions under which policymakers may engage in fundamental changes to their foreign policies. Policymakers seldom create major policy change unless confronted with a political shock to the status quo. By political shock, I refer to an *unexpected* event that occurs *suddenly*, is perceived as *unique*, and creates a *major disruption* to extant political or economic conditions (Gordell and Volgy 2022).

The invasion of Ukraine did not meet these criteria since it was widely anticipated by both parties (Volgy and Gordell 2023); yet the colossal failure of Russian policymakers to achieve their objectives in the early days of the war did. As a political shock, it suggests two consequences for policymakers. First, in authoritarian systems, a shock of this magnitude often leads leaders to further curtail civil liberties, critical analysis, and dissent (Gordell and Volgy 2022). This appears to have occurred (Human Rights Watch 2023, The Economist 2023).

Second, a political shock *may* open a policy window for the Kremlin to question the status quo and change policies, including an end to coercive actions toward Ukraine. Yet, this is far from an automatic consequence, requiring strong advocacy by, and tolerance of, policy entrepreneurs both inside and outside of government (Rasler 2000, Volgy and Gordell 2023). However, it appears that the crackdown on dissent and criticism essentially neutered the role of policy entrepreneurs (Barany 2023), further highlighting the claim in the literature that political shocks may be a necessary but insufficient condition for fundamental policy change.

What about Ukraine?

Issues about governmental effectiveness, control over corruption, and the role of political shocks are also relevant for Ukraine. While both Ukraine and Russia ranked low on control over corruption and governmental efficiency, the passage of time has favored Ukraine. Figures 5 and

6 compare the two states on both dimensions for 2015 and 2021, immediately preceding the invasion. Russia's governmental effectiveness index dramatically *decreased* between 2015 and 2021, while Ukraine's somewhat improved. Meanwhile, there has been a sharp increase in Ukraine's control over corruption (Figure 6): by 2021, its control over corruption score was more than forty percent higher than Russia's.

Could such changes on the part of Ukraine been precipitated by the political shock of Russia's takeover of Crimea and the Donbas in 2014? In 2015, Kyiv engaged in fundamental changes to its armed forces, combating corruption, appealing to civil society for additional resources, and increasing its military efficiency (Barany 2023). These changes likely made a difference when Ukraine was on the defensive, especially since 2015 it had worked on defensive tactics (Schmitt and Cooper 2023). However, going on the offensive successfully necessitates substantially greater unit cohesion and coordination across military units and thus requires substantially greater governmental effectiveness. Unsurprisingly, Ukraine's counteroffensive yielded limited success. Likewise, Russia's most recent offensive has made only incremental gains (as of this writing) despite having increased its troop strength to over 500,000, and sending large waves of fighters at Ukrainian defenses in what has been described as a "meat grinder" for its troops (Barnes, Schmitt and Santora 2024).[9] What the future holds may still depend in large part upon domestic political dynamics, not only within Ukraine and Russia, but also within the states supporting Ukraine.

[1] I focus on state strength rather than power; the latter requires strength along with a variety of other considerations, whereas state strength is a crucial ingredient for states engaging in coercive foreign policies.

[2] See also Weeks 2011. There are, of course, additional perspective on successful war fighting, including the interaction between material capabilities and war aims (Sullivan 2011, see also her review of the literature for other predictors of victory).

[3] Journalists reported that fuel for the invasion was stolen in Belarus, personnel carriers were driven on tires unable to handle the load, high quality flak jackets never materialized, air and ground capabilities were uncoordinated, etc. (see Massicot 2023, Schwirtz et al. 2022, 2023, Shinkman 2023).

[4] The World Bank ranked the Russian Federation 122nd on governmental effectiveness among all states.

[5] Transparency International ranked Russia at the start of the war as the 136th most corrupt state, tied with Angola, Liberia and Mali; the World Bank Index ranked Russia 177th.

[6] Beliakova and Perlo-Freeman (2018) actually distinguish between "unauthorized" vs. "authorized" corruption practices, the former which may be prosecuted.

[7] Consistent with reports regarding non-military projects: more than half of the spending on the Sochi Olympics disappeared; the Russian side "spent" more than three times the amount on the Nordstream pipeline per kilometer than did the German side (Dawisha 2014: 314).

[8] It is difficult for soldiers to fight on empty stomachs or to drive equipment lacking fuel: "Russian soldiers…go hungry because senior officers have stolen their food, or…pocketed the funds…used to buy rations. Russian tanks…run out because fuel bought with state funds and provided to commanders has been diverted to civilian users [who] buy it at a discount… (Anderson 2023:167)."

[9] And Russian efficiency may not have increased. As an illustration, its glider bombs have been accidentally hitting its own territory (Ilyushina and Khurshudyan 2024).

Seeking NATO's Protection Against a Revanchist Russia

Paul Poast

While the Russo-Ukraine War was not inevitable, it was foreseeable.[2] The tense history between the two nations was well known (c.f. Laba 1995),[3] and Russian mobilizations on the Ukraine-Russia border throughout 2021 exemplified the type of actions that underpin sincere threats to use force (c.f. Slantchev 2011). Most importantly, elites in Ukraine and other post-Soviet Republics long warned that a resurgent Russia would eventually seek to aggressively reclaim control of their countries. Indeed, President of the European Commission, Ursula von de Leyen, publicly apologized on behalf of Western officials who long questioned such fears: "To our friends in Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and to the opposition in Belarus. We should have listened to the voices inside our Union – in Poland, in the Baltics, and all across Central and Eastern Europe. They have been telling us for years that Putin would not stop" (ERR News 2022).

Despite warnings of Russian revanchism, some analysts placed blame for the war squarely on Western countries generally and NATO specifically. Most notably and prominently, John Mearsheimer maintained that Russia's aggression against Ukraine, going back to its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, was in response to NATO's encroachment into former Soviet territory, something Russian officials had opposed since the 1990s (Mearsheimer 2014). In what follows, I draw on the experience of the Baltic states to show that a common concern within Eastern Europe following the end of the Cold War was a resurgence of Russian aggression. This fear, in turn, was the driver of NATO's far-eastern expansion into the Baltic states in 2004, as well as promises of eventual NATO entry for Ukraine and Georgia in 2008. Far from the West

[2] A Teaching, Research, and International Policy (TRIP) survey conducted between December 2021 and January 2022, showed that fifty-six percent of the international relations experts polled expected Russia to use military force against Ukraine in 2022 (Blanes et al 2022).

[3] As Popova and Shevel (2023) write in their recent book, dating back to Ukraine's independence in 1991, Ukraine and Russia had different conceptions of the causes of the Soviet collapse, namely Ukraine believed they would be accepted as a European nation state while Russia didn't fully accept that possibility.

imposing NATO membership on former Soviet Republics, those states pushed for NATO membership. In other words, rather than Russia attacking Ukraine because it could become a NATO member, Ukraine sought NATO membership out of fear of a Russian attack.

The Desire for NATO Expansion

Since accession to NATO requires unanimous consent, it is unsurprising that the motivations among the existing NATO members to expand eastward were quite varied (Goldgeier and Shifrinson 2020). These ranged from preventing a unified Germany from becoming militarily revanchist (Sarotte 2021), discouraging Eastern European states from pursuing nuclear weapons (Smith 2004), assisting newly independent states in establishing democratic systems of government (Poast and Chinchilla 2023), and ensuring that European Union (EU) expansion did not result in uncontrolled security obligations (Sayle 2019). As a large bureaucracy with its own identity, NATO may also have sought growth to perpetuate its existence (McCalla 2016).

While the countries seeking NATO membership after the Cold War may also have held a variety of motivations for doing so, protection from Russia was critical. This was especially evident in the former Soviet Republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Indeed, it was built into Lithuania's constitution that they would not seek membership into any organization Russia dominated, such as the newly formed Commonwealth of Independent States. Anticipating Russian revanchism, the three Baltic states saw NATO membership as the best means of achieving this security aim. As bluntly stated by Raivo Vare, a member of Estonia's governing cabinet during the early 1990s, "The only real possibility is NATO" (Poast and Urpelainen 2018,

132). Indeed, Lithuania went so far as to submit a Letter of Intent in 1994 to NATO seeking membership despite there being no established norm of doing so.

Underpinning these actions was the belief that it was only a matter of time before Russia was again aggressive. Evidence justifying this belief abounded, such as Russia being slow, even reluctant, to remove its soldiers from Baltic territory following the Soviet Union's collapse (Stoner 2020, 130), as well as the "January events" of 1991 whereby Moscow attempted military crackdowns in Latvia and Lithuania to prevent full independence. As Gunitsky describes above, Russia was weak, but once it gained sufficient power, it would seek to do what major powers do: dominate its region (Mearsheimer 2001).

The Baltics had the staunch support of an existing NATO member, Denmark, who sought to use their cause to step past its "footnote" status during the Cold War. In an April 1989 speech, then-Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen noted that small states like Denmark could take an active role in international affairs if "they show ingenuity and drive" (Poast and Urpelainen 2018, 137). To that end, Denmark served as a broker, helping the Baltic states take measures to enhance their attractiveness as NATO allies.

The Baltic experience contrasts sharply with that of Ukraine. Like the Baltic states, there was a window of opportunity to bring Ukraine into NATO. But unlike the Baltic states, Ukraine never had a "patron": there was no Ukrainian equivalent of Denmark. Moreover, other Central and Eastern European states regularly pushed back on Ukrainian efforts to join European institutions. For instance, after Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia established the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in the early 1990s, Ukraine sought to join but was rebuffed. Then Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk remarked, "a triangle is an excellent geometrical figure,

but a quadrilateral is an even better one" (Poast and Urpelainen 2018, 197). In response, Hungarian President Josef Antall expressed reservations: "I am not sure that it would be a sensible thing to expand such a small regional formation because this cooperation might lose its framework, its clear content, and its efficiency" (Ibid). However, CEFTA did expand, just with Slovenia instead of Ukraine. Ukraine continued to be on the outside looking in throughout the 1990s and 2000s, even after NATO's "big bang" expansion of 2004, in which seven countries, including all three Baltic States, joined.

Despite these setbacks, NATO membership did eventually become a possibility for Ukraine, as well as fellow former Soviet Republic, Georgia. At the April 2008 Bucharest summit, the NATO allies agreed that "these countries will become members of NATO" though acknowledging that much work remained before membership could be secured (NATO 2008). Four months later, Russia invaded the South Ossetia province in northern Georgia, sparking the "five day" war that killed over 250 Russian and Georgian soldiers, total. The war and subsequent territorial control by Russia of the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may have thwarted Georgian NATO membership (Coffey and Mrachek 2022) since countries with active territorial disputes cannot join the alliance according to the conditions laid out in the Membership Action Plan process for entering NATO (1999). But in reality, the territorial dispute between the two countries long preceded 2008. Russia had devised plans to invade Georgia as far back as 2006, and the war began when Georgian forces launched an operation on August 7th to take control of Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia (Kofman 2018). In other words, the two neighbors were poised for a major conflict for years prior to 2008 (Kernen and Sussex 2012). At best, the possibility of Georgia finally gaining NATO protection may have contributed to the timing of the war, but not its goals or causes.

Does this suggest that the prospect of NATO membership at least played some role in the timing of Russia's actions against Ukraine? That is possible, especially Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. Sensing that Ukrainian membership was imminent, Putin may have fallen into the "better now than later" logic that underpins preemptive and preventive uses of military force (Levy 2011). But this does not mean that Russia was behaving defensively. Indeed, if such logic did underpin the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent fomenting of separatist fighting in eastern Ukraine, then there would have been no reason for Russia to take action in 2022. Ukraine was already in an active territorial dispute, which runs counter to NATO's stated membership criteria. Even without such formal criteria, an active territorial dispute against a nuclear power likely would have given several of the existing thirty members reason not to ratify such an accession. A better explanation is that late 2021 and early 2022, marking 30 years since Ukraine gained independence from the Soviet Union, was long enough in Putin's mind for Ukraine to exist as a sovereign democratic state that he long since wished to control (Sarotte 2022).

The NATO Counterfactual

Many IR and regional experts predicted that Russia would once again become aggressive towards its neighbors. Some saw the early 1990s as the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) and, hence, a change in the long history of Russia controlling or directly occupying its neighbors. But key figures within Eastern European states never bought that line. When Russian President Boris Yeltsin remarked in 1995 that "The flames of war would spread across Europe if NATO came to our door", they believed him (Poast and Urpelainen 2018, 1), not because they thought Russia

feared NATO, but because they knew what key Russian policymakers knew: entry into NATO would eliminate Russia's ability to control, dominate, or occupy its Eastern neighbors. Far from NATO expansion eastward provoking Russia to attack, it was the Eastern European states that pulled NATO and its blanket of protection over themselves to deter Russian aggression. Yet only a few, the Baltic states, did. Others, such as Ukraine and Georgia, were left out and eventually suffered, as many expected.

Ultimately, the debate over the role of NATO expansion in the onset of the War in Ukraine rests on counterfactual thinking: if NATO had not expanded following the Cold War, would Russia not have become revanchist (Martin 2018)? However, it is ultimately difficult to disentangle if NATO's existence prevented a true "Back to the Future" scenario of major war breaking out and engulfing Europe (Mearsheimer 1990) or fomented conditions that undermined Russian-Western relations (Goldgeier and McFaul 1990). What is clear is that a Russian invasion of Ukraine was a plausible outcome under a host of alternative histories absent NATO. Western leaders might be criticized for not doing more to address what was long seen as a potential conflict between Russia and a fledgling democracy, but they should not be blamed for provoking Russia to do what many expected Russia to do anyway: become revanchist.

Ukrainian Agency and Russian Fiction

Joanna Szostek

Full-scale war between Ukraine and the Russian Federation began on February 24, 2022. However, relations between Kyiv and Moscow entered a state of conflict eight years earlier,

when the Revolution of Dignity produced an abrupt change in Ukraine's political leadership, followed shortly by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbas. To explain why Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it is necessary to consider the politics of Ukraine and Russia over the eight preceding years – to understand why attempts to resolve the conflict failed and why Russia ultimately resorted to military escalation.

My contribution here highlights the importance of policies Ukraine pursued to defend itself from Russian influence, eliciting hostility from the Russian leadership. Ukraine sought to distance itself from Russia, politically, economically, and culturally, in the conviction that this would reduce Russia's threat to its sovereignty, national identity, and territorial integrity. Russian President Vladimir Putin regarded Ukraine's distancing as a threat to Russia and the Russian people (as he imagined them) because the boundaries of "Russia" and the "Russian people" in Putin's imagination are delineated more by dubious historical narratives than by internationally recognized state borders (Ortmann 2023). The invasion of 2022 occurred after Russia's leadership concluded that the erosion of (imagined) Russia by Ukrainian distancing could not be reversed by any means other than massive force, other approaches having failed (Arel and Driscoll 2023:194). Although no single argument can be sufficient to explain the war, and more complete explanations must begin further back than 2014 (D'Anieri 2023), I argue here that Ukrainian defensive distancing from 2014 onwards, and the "imagined" Russia in which Putin believes, are necessary explanatory factors that are too often missing or misconstrued in accounts that privilege systemic theories of war onset.

In 2014, following the Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine held a presidential election on May 25th and a parliamentary election on October 26th. The electoral landscape differed markedly from previous Ukrainian elections because polling places could not operate in occupied Crimea and

parts of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The disenfranchisement of over five million voters in these regions was a major factor undermining the electoral fortunes of political forces that traditionally favored close ties with Russia (Herron et al. 2015; D'Anieri 2022). Petro Poroshenko became president on a platform of Euro-Atlantic integration, reforms, and defense of Ukrainian territorial integrity, while parties that campaigned for Euro-Atlantic integration and reforms formed a parliamentary coalition with a constitutional majority. As Shevel writes (2015:161), Russia's actions in Crimea and Donbas ironically "contributed to the emergence of the most pro-Western legislature in post-Soviet Ukrainian history", because they simultaneously disenfranchised Russia-friendly voters and increased anti-Russian sentiment among Ukrainians who could vote. Despite the challenging context, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observers described the 2014 presidential vote as "a genuine election… with a respect for fundamental freedoms in the vast majority of the country" (OSCE/ODIHR 2014b:1) and the parliamentary election as "an amply contested election that offered voters real choice" (OSCE/ODIHR 2014a:1). It is worth stressing that the victory of political forces that favored Euro-Atlantic integration came about not due to Western "democracy promotion" or the West "installing" its preferred government (Mearsheimer 2014) but due to Ukrainians freely casting their votes in an electoral landscape transformed by Russian aggression.

With the president and parliament broadly aligned in their initial priorities, Ukraine implemented numerous policies to secure the country against Russian threats. Economically, a major step was the signing of the EU–Ukraine Association Agreement, which facilitated the redirection of Ukrainian trade away from Russia and toward the European Union (Boyko, Nes, and Schaefer 2023). Poroshenko said the Association Agreement would protect Ukraine from Russian political blackmail (Ukrainian Government News 2015) and help it secure Ukrainians' civilizational

choice in the "family of European nations" (Ukrainian Government News 2014). The prospect of integration with NATO was described in similar terms: EU membership and NATO membership were considered milestones of Euro-Atlantic belonging that would protect the Ukrainian state. In February 2019, Poroshenko signed a constitutional amendment that committed Ukraine to seeking full EU and NATO membership. It should be noted, however, that neither the EU nor NATO were keen to offer Ukraine firm membership prospects (Kuzio 2017; McCarthy 2022).

Besides Euro-Atlantic integration, defensive distancing from Russia under Poroshenko included significant legislative changes in domestic policy areas. Ukraine adopted laws on decommunization which ordered the removal of Soviet symbols from public space and the replacement of Soviet-related geographic names (Zhurzhenko 2022). A new law on education boosted use of Ukrainian across the school system, limiting Russian-language instruction to specific subjects at secondary and elementary schools (Shandra 2017). Further legislation restricted the distribution of Russian- and Soviet-origin cultural products (films, TV shows, pop music, books) and promoted the production of Ukrainian-origin, Ukrainian-language alternatives (Olzacka 2023). Restrictions on Russian TV broadcasters were introduced from March 2014, and access to Russian news sources became progressively more limited in the years that followed (Szostek and Orlova 2023). A further important development was the "Tomos of autocephaly" that Poroshenko secured for the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, signed by the Patriarch of Constantinople in January 2019, which officially recognized the independence of the Ukrainian church from the Moscow Patriarchate (Auplat 2020).

What was Russia's response to Ukraine's defensive distancing? Throughout Poroshenko's presidency, the Russian leadership focused principally on (a) undermining the Ukrainian government and supporting political forces that might replace it (Hurak and D'Anieri 2022), and

(b) pursuing changes to Ukraine's constitutional order that would restore Russian influence (Allan 2020). Russia promoted the legitimacy of the so-called "people's republics" in Donbas, while maintaining them via undeclared military intervention (Arel and Driscoll 2023). It particularly wanted Kyiv to implement the political points of the Minsk II agreement, which were intended to subordinate Kyiv using "a constitutional Trojan Horse that would give the Kremlin a lasting presence in Ukraine's political system" (Allan 2020:12).

Moscow's decision to escalate militarily followed evidence that this "hybrid" approach was not achieving its goals. Pro-Russian candidates remained sidelined after the 2019 Ukrainian elections. New president Volodymyr Zelenskyy was less antagonistic towards Russia than Poroshenko in rhetoric but gave no more ground on autonomy for the so-called "people's republics" (Moshes and Nizhnikau 2022). In early 2021, Zelenskyy imposed sanctions on Putin's main political ally in Ukraine, Viktor Medvedchuk, and shut down several TV channels associated with Russian influence. Putin accused Ukraine of purging its political environment of forces that wanted good-neighborly relations with Russia and began to refer to Ukraine as an "anti-Russia project." This
"project" referred to the alleged formation of an "ethnically pure Ukrainian state, aggressive towards Russia", which Putin likened to the use of weapons of mass destruction because it would allegedly cause the number of Russian people to decrease "by hundreds of thousands or even millions" (Russian Government News 2021).

Why did Putin consider Ukraine's distancing from Russia to be a problem so grave that it merited the costs of a full-scale invasion? Putin's own explanation of Russia's motives on February 24th began with a diatribe that mixed complaints about NATO expansion with claims that the West had tried to "utterly destroy" Russia. He then stated that the issue was not so much

NATO but the emergence of a "hostile anti-Russia… fully controlled from the outside", in territories which he described as "our [Russian] historical land". He described the "anti-Russia" as a threat to the "very existence of our state", before claiming that the "special military operation" would protect people who had been facing "genocide perpetrated by the Kiev regime" (Russian Government News 2022).

It is vital to recognize that Putin's explanation of the invasion contains gross fictions. Ukraine was never "fully controlled from the outside". The government in Kyiv never perpetrated "genocide" (Fortuin 2022). Putin's speech indicates that the decision to invade was rooted in a profoundly distorted perception of the world promoted for years by Russian state propaganda and internalized by the Russian leadership. Within this distorted world, Ukrainian agency is not recognized. Nor is Ukraine's right to independent statehood because the borders of Ukraine are deemed a historical accident separating different parts of eternal Russia, while most Ukrainian citizens are deemed eternally Russian – whether they identify as such or not, and most do not (Kulyk 2018). The realities of Ukrainian agency and identity pose an existential threat to Putin's "imagined" Russia, and in a sense, the full-scale invasion was a response to that threat. But it was not a response to any physical threat to the Russian Federation, which, as Putin himself highlighted on February 24th, remains "one of the most powerful nuclear states" and quite capable of deterring attacks.

Why, then, have some commentators uncritically accepted Putin's claims that "NATO expansion" threatened and provoked Russia into launching the invasion, disregarding the context of distortion in which the claims are embedded? Critiques of this phenomenon point to ignorance about Ukraine among IR theorists (Motyl 2015) and "epistemic superimposition" – the selective reading of empirics to match theoretical claims (Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023). These

problems in IR co-exist with similar ignorance and selective reading of empirics among some academics on the far left, across multiple disciplines, who blame the war on "US imperialism", a position derived from a contested interpretation of Marxism more than scrutiny of evidence (University and College Union 2023).

A particularly frustrating flaw in NATO-centric commentaries is their tendency to efface Ukrainian agency. Mearsheimer's false claims about the West "installing" Ukraine's government have already been mentioned. But even some more measured realists have suggested that it was primarily American and European cooperation with Ukraine which "rattled" the Kremlin (Götz and Staun 2022), ignoring other distancing policies adopted by Ukraine's government that infuriated the Kremlin no less; they also insufficiently problematize the falsehoods in Russia's discourse of "vulnerability".

Thankfully, it is not difficult to find analysis that highlights Ukrainian agency in rejecting Russian domination and recognizes the fictions in Russian state discourse. Recent literature encompasses debates and arguments about the causes of Russia's invasion, which are substantiated more robustly than punditry blaming "NATO expansion" (Mälksoo 2022; Popova and Shevel 2023). A key question is how widely read such literature will become among IR theorists unfamiliar with Ukraine and to what extent it will inform their analyses. The *International Studies Review* (ISR) editorial (2023) that prompted this forum suggests a problematic lack of awareness in IR vis-à-vis the scholarship with regional expertise. It is worth repeating the call already made elsewhere (Dutkiewicz and Smoleński 2023:11) for the knowledge produced within area studies to be "more valued institutionally and consulted by theorists."

IR from the Margins: A Ukrainian Perspective

Bohdana Kurylo

The contributions to this forum have led us in diverse yet potentially fruitful directions, all converging on a shared argument: the necessity of integrating domestic and international factors in analyses of the Russia-Ukraine war (2014-present). We contend that this integrated approach is essential to fulfilling the objectives enshrined in the ISR (2023) editorial, aptly titled "In Pursuit of Global, Theoretically Informed Research." Alas, a great deal of ink has been spilt in both popular and academic venues that is often neither truly global nor theoretically consistent. Building upon the other contributions in this forum, I seek here to dissect the issues permeating much of the IR debate surrounding the Russia-Ukraine war. The ISR editorial itself serves as an illustrative example of some of these issues, offering a lens through which to critically assess the broader discourse. I thereby inquire into how certain ways of theorizing might inadvertently contribute to constructing the world of international politics that, in some corners, permits Russia's colonial war of conquest against Ukraine. My perspective is informed by my Ukrainian background and my academic position at the intersection of critical IR and area studies.

One key issue that emerges from this examination is the framing of temporality in discussions of the war. The editorial, for instance, introduces the topic by describing Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as a "shock" that disrupted the global order. This characterization, while seemingly innocuous, contributes to shaping the politics of time in the context of the war. As such, many newly published IR works on the war start the countdown in 2022 rather than in 2014, when Russia occupied Crimea and invaded the Donbas. The definition of temporality should be taken seriously because the focus on the spectacular moment of invasion obscures the root causes and

its aftermath. Yet, the preceding moments to the 2022 invasion have important consequences for explanation, as discussed by Szostek, Poast, and Volgy above.

Further, presenting the 2022 invasion as an unanticipated shock conceals the embeddedness of Russia's violence in the contemporary global order, as Poast enumerates. Rather than viewing Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine as extraordinary, we must recognize that it was enabled by a global status quo in which Russia's belligerence was consistently unpunished. It was a consequence of Western signaling acceptance of leaving Ukraine on its own to combat Russian imperialism. The full-on invasion was consistent with the international politics that preceded it, integral to which was the hierarchy between great powers and weaker states, as well as colonizing powers and their subjects.

The editorial goes on to discuss the way IR scholars differ on "the motivations that led to this intervention" (Ibid.). Formulating the research question as written organizes knowledge production about the war based on a predominantly Russian-centered epistemic frame. The assumption is that if Russia is the aggressor (or "intervenor"), then theirs is the standpoint to be examined to uncover the motivation behind the aggression. However, motivations are rarely formed in a vacuum but rather in relation to others and within a specific context. The invasion likely took root in prior events, discourses, and relationships involving multiple actors.

The relational nature of motivations means that Russia should not be viewed as a discrete entity with a pre-defined identity and a straightforward logic of action, as a theoretically consistent articulation of offensive realism might grant it. Gunitsky's application of offensive realism is well-crafted but also betrays the theory's flaw in the consistency of its application. Why Ukraine? Why February 2022? In order to fully comprehend Russia's actions, it is necessary to

understand the role that the subjugation of Ukraine has historically played in Russia's self-understanding and how the purposeful self-emancipation of Ukraine has destabilized Russia's neo-imperial power. Therefore, Russia and Ukraine need to be studied in tandem to more fully capture how their relations are characterized by the ways their identities have been transformed through interaction with one another.

The realist explanation of the war has been fiercely criticized for what Dutkiewicz and Smolenski (2023, 625) term "epistemic superimposition" – that is, the methodological and epistemological error of "overlaying (inherently) simplified theories onto unique socio-historical circumstances because they are a priori assumed to hold." One of the repercussions of privileging theory over empirics in IR analyses is a systematic misrepresentation of the role of the West in the war. The current focus on the West as the central actor causing the war's onset fails to see that the West's weakness, not strength, allowed the war to escalate. Further, viewing Russia as a rational, responsive actor, this approach rationalizes Russia's conduct as legitimatized by Western attempts to wrest Ukraine from Russia's sphere of influence (Motyl 2015). As Poast and Szostek describe, the motivation behind this movement away from the Russian sphere of influence lies with Ukraine, not the West or Russia.

While the realist perspective has been critiqued, alternative explanations often fall into similar traps of oversimplification. The editorial presents another view, stating that "with equal vigor" other scholars have argued that "the invasion can be attributed to President Putin's desire to restore and bolster Russia's prestige and standing as a global power" (ISR 2023, 1). Although this approach more readily incorporates domestic factors into the international analysis, it still relies on a simplistic image of Russia that lacks grounding in its history, culture, or politics. This exemplifies a recurring pattern within IR: the tendency to center a rational, unitary Russia in

analyses of the war, whereby this “Russia” is little more than a construct of the IR theorist’s mind. A more nuanced approach would open our conception of Russia to reformulation by (post)colonized subjects (Ukrainians, Georgians, Qazaqs, Chechens, Estonians, and many more nations), potentially revealing a Russia quite different from the one central to systemic IR fictions.

Further, debate on these topics is rarely as theoretically consistent as Gunitsky’s application above. Instead, “Russia” and “Putin” are often used interchangeably as with the editorial’s above reference to prestige and standing, even by the systemists who place no weight on domestic political causes. If one seeks to understand Russia, it is assumed to be enough to understand Putin. Yet, had the editorial been open to the empirical knowledge generated by Ukraine studies, for example, it might have found it more appropriate to address the argument about the imperialistic mindset deeply embedded in Russian society (Oksamytna 2023).

The location of agency and power unite both of the above-mentioned cognitive frames. One assigns agency to a NATO that provoked Russia, whereas the other grants it almost exclusively to President Putin in its presentation. In both cases, agency and power are seen to reside with great powers or other “powerful” actors representing them. Ukraine is of interest only as a victim in a perceived proxy war – a stage upon which “the powerful” conduct their politics. Consequently, portrayals of the war akin to the editorial contribute to constructing an IR fixated upon the actions of “the powerful” and denying agency to “the powerless” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Thus, while the editorial seeks a global research outlook, its map of the world seems to be missing Ukraine as an independent nation (Khromeychuk 2022).

But it is not only the active role of Ukraine that is occluded; what is likewise missing from much of the IR debate on the war is concern with the impact of the war on the lives of ordinary Ukrainians, who are the direct targets of Russian colonial genocide. The editorial, for example, mentions that "the effects of the invasion have reverberated across the global order, contributing to disruptions in essential commodities" (International Studies Review 2023, 1). However, before accounting for "widespread inflation and hobbled economic growth," some reflexivity should be exercised on the priorities set in IR scholarship, causing the perspective of Ukrainians and their experience of suffering to be the last considered.

How can we, IR scholars, understand the war through the experiences of those affected by it and without reinforcing unequal power structures within the discipline and the world at large? It may be time to rethink the primacy given to the global and reassert the importance of the local, for one cannot exist without another. A consistent theme throughout this forum's contributions is that deep contextual knowledge not only provides greater accuracy in accounting for the invasion's onset but can also serve as an antidote to the colonial predicament of IR knowledge production generally. Without empirically driven, area-specific research, "fast scholarship" on the war in IR risks lapsing into reproducing discourses that benefit the oppressor (Koch 2016, 810). Devaluing empirical knowledge by neorealist security theorists, in particular, speaks not to some innocent obtuseness but an intentionally adopted "defense strategy" that seals their theorizing from criticism (Ibid.). As I argue elsewhere, ignorance about Ukraine "is a deliberate, conscious decision, and its consequences must not be treated as apolitical" (Kurylo 2023, 694). Therefore, IR would benefit from more empirically informed work guided by the commitment to engage with, and listen carefully to, our research subjects in local contexts.

A marriage between critical IR and area studies may give rise to new horizons in the scholarship on the Russia-Ukraine war. As such, the ultimate flaw of the editorial and the state of IR theory it represents is that the research agenda lacks diversity and intellectual pluralism. Excluded from the discussion is the plethora of emerging critical approaches, including feminist, decolonial, and postcolonial, contributions to the study of the war (Hendl et al. 2023; Makarychev & Nizhnikau 2023; Mälksoo 2023 among many others). According to Burlyuk and Musliu (2023, 5), "had IR been more receptive and humbler to have listened to and (critically) engaged with feminist and critical knowledge coming from Central and Eastern Europe on Russian affairs and Russia's continuous policies towards its neighbors, the IR community would have appeared less shocked" about the invasion. Through this omission, the editorial reflects extant hierarchies within the discipline that not only sideline critical approaches but also marginalize scholars from the region within traditional and critical IR alike (O'Sullivan and Krulišová 2023).

As key stakeholders in academic discourse, editorial boards play a significant role in shaping the discipline's conversations. They possess and exercise considerable influence in defining and circumscribing what counts as legitimate knowledge in the discipline, selectively giving voice to certain actors while potentially overlooking others. The unavoidably political nature of IR scholarship necessitates reflexivity on the part of academics about the political lenses through which they interpret local contexts and on the part of editors concerning whose voices they choose to empower. As a Ukrainian scholar, I would feel more at home in IR had there been a more concerted movement in defense of Ukrainians' right to self-determination and against those who deny it.

Concluding Comments

J. Patrick Rhamey Jr.

No approach can capture every causal variable and still provide a sensible explanation of an event, either to academic or public audiences. Theories that unnecessarily oversimplify international politics also do us little good. Therefore, speaking of events in terms of causal recipes that include both domestic and systemic variables will provide a more accurate understanding that is more easily communicable to the public and policymakers.

Monocausal theories present a real danger to contemporary foreign policy debates. Take, for example, Graham Allison's (2017) *Thucydides's Trap*, which borrows only half the power transition causal mechanism while ignoring Organski's (1958) many references to the primacy of the domestic. This reduction of a complex causal recipe to a single, systemic variable leads to poor analysis[4] and public perceptions of conflict inevitably, illustrated, for example, by the incorporation in the United States's National Defense Strategy of "great power competition" (The White House 2017). Similarly, the impact of Mearsheimer's story of a Russia merely reacting to NATO expansion goes well beyond the pages of ISR. Despite a dearth of theoretical consistency or empirical support, it has impacted America's increasingly partisan environment, likely contributing to the widening gap between political parties on approval of NATO and Ukraine aid. Additionally, IR as a field is mischaracterized by this narrow explanation of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, leading dangerously to dismissal in some corners of the field.

[4] See DiCicco (2018).

Certainly, we cannot render explanations so detail oriented as to make them unintelligible, but simple additions to our understanding of the world rooted in local knowledge can provide more reasonable, comprehensible explanations. Why was Russia's initial invasion a failure, despite its alleged strength and assumed position as a major power? Because of its domestic political weakness and corruption. Why did Ukraine choose to move away from Russia? Because of Russia's history of revanchism and a domestic desire for liberal democracy. With the Ukraine case as a backdrop, we hope we have argued effectively for the continued theoretical interdependence of the systemic and domestic so that we might provide more complete and accurate explanations of the events unfolding around us.

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