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RUSSIA AND UKRAINE WAR THROUGH THE LENS OF NEOREALISM: A DUAL-SIDED SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:
This study examines the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine through the lens of neorealism theory. While adhering to the framework of neorealism, the study questions the analysis presented by two prominent proponents of the theory-John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt. Both scholars justify Russia's actions in declaring war on Ukraine but fail to adequately acknowledge the legitimate security concerns of the United States and its allies. This position contradicts the central tenets of neorealism. Contrary to their argument, this study posits that the actions taken by both Russia and the United States and its allies are justifiable and defensible within this framework. It concludes that the ongoing war would not be concluded through recognising Russia's concerns alone, but rather by creating a security architecture that accounts for the strategic fears and interests of all major actors involved.

Keywords: Neorealism, Russia, Ukraine, war

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Introduction

The devastating war between Russia and Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, following a Russian offensive that President Putin framed as an effort to "demilitarise and denazify" Ukraine. In his speech, as quoted by Mearsheimer (2020), Putin stated: "It is not our plan to occupy Ukrainian territory... But Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine", referring to the United States and its NATO allies allegedly advancing toward Russia's borders to undermine its power.

However, Russia's decision remains highly contested, with scholars debating the underlying causes of the ongoing war. On one hand, some argue that the democratization wave in Ukraine alarmed Putin's administration, as it posed a serious threat to his authoritarian grip on power. According to this view, the invasion was a reaction intended to halt the spread of liberal democracy and reassert authoritarian control (Person & McFaul, 2022).

From a neorealist perspective, however, Russia's actions are seen as a rational response to a perceived existential threat. The decision by the United States and its allies to move toward integrating Ukraine into NATO is regarded as a severe threat to Russia's national security (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2022).

This article adopts neoliberalism as the most appropriate theoretical lens to analyse the ongoing war in Ukraine and challenges the arguments put forward by prominent neorealist scholars Mearsheimer and Walt. A major flaw in their thesis is that it legitimises only Russia's security concerns while neglecting those of the United States and its allies. Furthermore, these scholars largely overlook Russia's ambition to dominate Eurasia and restore imperial influence, despite it posing a significant threat to Western security interests, including those of the United States.

In light of this, the study aims to address this gap by critically examining the shortcomings in the neorealist explanations of the war and offering a more balanced interpretation rooted in neorealist theory.

Neorealism Theory

Neorealism theory emerged from Kenneth Waltz's influential book *Theory of International Politics*, published in 1979. In this work, Waltz sought to refine classical realism by addressing its shortcomings, particularly concerning the factors responsible for driving states into persistent power struggles

(Fore, 1995). Waltz's theory shares several assumptions with the core tenets of classical realism. Although both theories accept the anarchic nature of the international system, they diverge on the causes of war and conflict. Classical realism posits that such conflicts arise from human nature. One of the leading proponents of realism, Hans Morgenthau (1948), emphasised that the power-seeking behaviour of states is rooted in the inherently selfish and egoistic nature of individuals, particularly political elites involved in foreign policy decision-making.

In contrast, Waltz (1993) argued that war and conflict are inevitable due to the anarchic structure of the international system-defined as the absence of a central authority with a monopoly on the use of force. Thus, unlike classical realists who focus on human nature, Waltz emphasised the structural and material conditions of the international system as the key drivers of state behaviour (Smith & Yuchshenko, 2021). In this light, Mearsheimer (2001) observed that although classical realists acknowledged the anarchic nature of international politics, they placed insufficient emphasis on structural constraints within the system.

Neorealist theorists further argue that sustained cooperation among states is unlikely, as trust is difficult to establish in an anarchic environment. States may choose to cooperate temporarily when facing shared security challenges or when unilateral efforts prove insufficient (Waltz, 1993; 2014; Mearsheimer, 2001). Since the international arena functions as a self-help system, where no central authority exists to manage state interactions or address security concerns, states are compelled to prioritise their own survival. In such a system, Mearsheimer (2001) noted that it becomes nearly impossible for a state to be certain about the intentions of others.

Neorealism comprises two dominant strands: defensive realism and offensive realism. Defensive realism, associated with Waltz, advises states against accumulating power beyond what is necessary for their security, warning that excessive power could provoke counterbalancing efforts by rival states and thus endanger national security. According to this view, states should aim to maintain sufficient power to ensure survival, but not to the extent that it disrupts the international balance.

In contrast, offensive realism, championed by Mearsheimer (2001), holds that states are inherently power-maximising actors. Mearsheimer argued that the ultimate goal of states is not merely to maintain security but to accumulate as much power as possible to secure their survival. He contended that,

in a world without a central authority to protect states from one another, great powers are primarily concerned with ensuring their own survival and will therefore seek to dominate others. Because states can never be certain of each other's intentions, they are driven to accumulate power to guard against future threats.

In conclusion, neorealism posits that, as long as the international system remains anarchic with no central authority possessing a monopoly on the use of force to guarantee state survival, states will be compelled to prioritise power accumulation. Offensive realists advocate for maximising power to potentially achieve hegemony, while defensive realists caution against overreach that could threaten the status quo. This structural interpretation of international relations contrasts sharply with classical realism, which attributes state behaviour to the inherently flawed and power-hungry nature of human beings.

Causes of the War

There are many factors, ranging from socio-linguistic, economic, cultural, political, and power dynamics, that are responsible for the eruption of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine. These factors can be analysed from three frames of reference: historical identity politics, Western accusations against Putin's behaviour, and the enlargement of NATO and the EU. While the latter two frames have received significant attention since the war began, the first factor has been relatively underexplored.

Historical Identity Politics

The historical roots of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine can be traced back over a millennium (Zeb & Habibullah, 2017). Historically, the region now known as Ukraine came under the control of different state actors, including the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Hungary, and Russia. Following the establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a large portion of Ukraine was under its control in 1569. However, from the middle of the 17th century to the end of the 18th century, it was controlled by Russia since the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth slipped into crisis (Mick, 2024).

Although Ukraine declared independence in 1918 following the Russian Communist Revolution, the Red Army soon reabsorbed it into the Soviet Union in 1921. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Ukraine, the

second most populous and economically significant Soviet republic after Russia, gained its independence. Nevertheless, Ukraine maintained deep-rooted social, cultural, and religious ties with Russia (Knispel, 2022). In light of this, Putin said that even though different foreigners controlled Ukraine, the "common spiritual values… make us a single people" (Mick, 2024).

Despite the overwhelming support for independence in the 1991 referendum, in which nearly 90% of voters backed the move, Ukraine became sharply divided along ethno-linguistic lines, especially after the 1994 presidential election (Pop-Eleches & Robertson, 2018). This division was further exacerbated following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, which led to a strong movement promoting anti-Russian „Ukrainization" (Henken, 2020). Michael Keating (2001), in his influential book *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-sovereignty Era*, argues that nations emerging from larger states must develop mechanisms to address the nostalgia and identity of populations with lingering ties to the former state. However, the rise of ethno-nationalism in Ukraine left little room for accommodating those who maintained cultural or emotional connections to Russia.

Due to this identity crisis, political alignment in Ukraine became divided between groups supporting closer ties with Moscow and those advocating European integration. For example, a significant protest known as the Maidan Revolution erupted when then-President Viktor Yanukovych rejected an EU association agreement in favour of closer ties with Russia. The protests, supported by the United States, ultimately led to Yanukovych fleeing the country in February 2014 (Menon & Ruger, 2020). Shortly afterwards, Russia intervened militarily in Crimea under the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking citizens. Crimea was formally annexed in March 2014, and further regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson – were annexed in September 2022.

From the perspective of Russian nationalists, Ukraine is difficult to accept as a fully separate state (Knispel, 2022). Beyond shared language and religion[1], Ukraine also holds economic and strategic importance. Before the Soviet

[1] However, this shared cultural and religious identity has been significantly crippled, mainly after Russia invaded Crimea in 2014 and became worse after a full-scale invasion in 2022. For example, the *Seventeenth National Survey: Identity. Patriotism* revealed that a significant decline in those Ukrainians who endorse Russian as an official language, from 27% in 2014 to just 3% in 2022 (Kartunova et al., 2025).

collapse, Ukraine was a key contributor to the USSR's agricultural output, defence industry, and nuclear arsenal, including the Black Sea fleet. These strategic and cultural factors compelled Russian nationalists to assert control over Ukraine. Reid (2022) argues that identity issues are central to Putin's motivations. Putin's irredentist sentiment was evident when he claimed that Ukraine is not merely a neighbouring country, but "an inalienable part of our own history, culture, and spiritual space", and called it "ancient Russian territory" (Knispel, 2022). Therefore, from this perspective, both identity and strategic considerations are significant causes of the war.

Western Accusations against Putin

The second frame of reference focuses on Western accusations that Putin is acting as an imperialist, reminiscent of Stalin, Lenin, or the tsars, with a mission to restore a powerful Russian empire (Rubel & Hossain, 2022; Kotkin, 2022). Scholars argue that Putin's resentment over the collapse of the Soviet Union drives his expansionist agenda. Additionally, they claim that the emergence of democracy in Ukraine poses a threat to Putin's authoritarian rule, potentially inciting democratic aspirations among the Russian population.

Person and McFaul (2022) asserted that Putin deliberately frames the U.S. and the West as existential enemies to consolidate public support and undermine the possibility of liberal democracy within Russia. From this liberalist viewpoint, Putin's intervention in Ukraine is not primarily a security concern, but an attempt to suppress democratic progress. Despite Putin's claims that NATO expansion poses a threat, scholars argue this is a pretext, since Ukraine does not meet NATO membership criteria (Person & McFaul, 2022). Therefore, from this perspective-aligned with liberal theory, Putin bears full responsibility for initiating the war to preserve his authoritarian rule and prevent the spread of democracy (Walt, 2022).

NATO and EU Enlargement

The third frame of reference is inextricably intertwined with NATO and the EU's march towards, particularly, Eastern Europe. The move that the United States and its allies have taken to enlarge NATO eastward and absorb former Warsaw Pact nations such as Poland, Hungary and the Baltic states is aimed at fostering democracy, boosting economic prosperity, maintaining regional

stability and extending protective architecture to vulnerable eastern European nations through shielding them from potential threats (Bukhari et al., 2024). Likewise, the EU's encroachment towards Central and Eastern Europe is intended to foster democracy, economic integration, and maintain regional stability.

Liberal interpretations have championed this move. However, realist scholars argue that the West failed to acknowledge Russia's legitimate security concerns. According to this view, the U.S. and its allies have been steadily expanding their influence through NATO and EU enlargement, particularly in Eastern Europe, which has a pernicious impact on Russia's security (Walt, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2022; Kocho-Williams, 2022). Thereby, Russia has been forced to annex Crimea in 2014 and invade Ukraine. In light of this, Mearsheimer (2022) and Walt (2022) justified Russia's response to contain the Western-backed move to integrate Ukraine into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Rejecting the claim that Putin's aim is imperial conquest, Mearsheimer (2022) emphasises the geopolitical threat posed by Ukraine's alignment with the West. Citing Putin's speech on February 24, 2022, Mearsheimer notes that Putin explicitly stated: "It is not our plan to occupy Ukrainian territory.... But Russia cannot feel safe, develop, and exist while facing a permanent threat from the territory of today's Ukraine". According to this interpretation, Russia's actions are driven by a perceived existential threat due to the West's encroachment, particularly efforts to transform Ukraine into a Western stronghold.

Why do Russian Leaders Have a Wary Eye Look at the Development in Ukraine?

There is widespread opposition to Russia's aggressive actions against the territorial integrity of Ukraine. On one hand, President Putin has been accused of waging war against Ukraine to preserve his grip on power, with the claim that the fear of democratic development in Ukraine is a key factor prompting the invasion. From this perspective often associated with liberal internationalism, the situation in Ukraine poses a threat not to the national interests of Russia per se, but to the authoritarian nature of Putin's regime.

On the other hand, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been justified as a legitimate response to what is perceived as an existential threat to Russia's national security, primarily due to the encroachment of Western institutions, most notably NATO, toward Russia's borders (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2022; Van Evera, 2022). This perspective aligns with neorealist theory. Given that

this study focuses on neorealism, this section will elaborate on the argument that views the situation in Ukraine through the lens of vital national security concerns.

Proponents of realism argue that the efforts made by the United States and its allies to bring Ukraine into NATO's orbit have directly precipitated the ongoing crisis. NATO was originally established in 1949 to counter the Soviet threat and halt the spread of communism in Western Europe. Once the Cold War ended and the Soviet threat subsided, many expected NATO's relevance to diminish (Barany, 2006). However, rather than dissolve, the alliance expanded both in scope and membership-growing from 16 members during the Cold War to 30 by 2020 (Menon & Ruger, 2020). This eastward expansion, along with EU enlargement, increasingly threatened Russia's sense of national security (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2022).

In response to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and the annexation of Crimea, prominent neorealist scholar John Mearsheimer published an article titled „Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin" in Foreign Affairs. In the article, Mearsheimer contends that by expanding NATO toward Eastern Europe, especially by seeking to transform Ukraine into a pro-Western outpost, the West provoked a predictable and defensive reaction from Russia. He maintains that Western attempts to "westernise" Ukraine posed a severe threat to Russia's national survival. However, under what Mearsheimer calls the „prevailing Western wisdom", Putin was instead portrayed as an aggressive imperialist (Mearsheimer, 2014). NATO and EU expansion, he argues, were strategies intended to diminish Russian power (Walt, 2022).

Although there were attempts at improving Russia-West relations after the Cold War, the West consistently failed to recognise Russia's concerns. The U.S. and its allies acted unilaterally in international conflicts such as those in Iraq, Iran, and the former Yugoslavia without consulting Russia, contributing to growing mistrust (Lukin, 2014). According to Mearsheimer (2001), in the absence of a central authority in the international system, the anarchic nature of international politics makes trust between states inherently fragile and difficult to maintain.

Relations significantly deteriorated in 2008 when the U.S. proposed an action plan to offer NATO membership to Ukraine and Georgia. Russia responded forcefully by invading Georgia, signalling that any further NATO expansion into its perceived sphere of influence would be seen as a direct threat. Despite

this warning, the West continued to support the westernisation of Ukraine, even facilitating the ousting of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych in 2014. Russia responded by annexing Crimea, and Mearsheimer (2014) predicted that a full-fledged war between Russia and Ukraine was increasingly likely.

The ongoing war, from a neorealist perspective, was therefore precipitated by the West's reluctance to acknowledge and respect Russia's legitimate security concerns-particularly NATO expansion and the lack of assurance that Ukraine would remain neutral (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2022).

Neorealists argue that NATO and EU expansion are the primary catalysts for the current conflict. In an anarchic international system, where no overarching authority exists to guarantee security, states are compelled to prioritise their survival. As Mearsheimer (2001) emphasised, states cannot be certain of others' intentions. From this standpoint, NATO's open-door policy for Ukraine and Georgia convinced Russia that the alliance posed a severe threat to its survival (Mearsheimer, 2022; Walt, 2022). In response to NATO's actions, President Putin warned that efforts to induct Ukraine and Georgia into the alliance would provoke consequences, stating, "We will respond appropriately to such steps, which pose a direct threat to Russia" (Osborn, 2018).

Mearsheimer (2022) also challenges the liberalist argument that Putin's invasion was motivated by imperial ambitions or fear of democratisation in Ukraine. He states: "There is no evidence in the public record that Putin was contemplating, much less intending, to put an end to Ukraine as an independent state and make it part of greater Russia when he sent his troops into Ukraine on February 24th". This view is echoed by Stephen Walt (2022), who contends that flawed liberal theories and NATO's overreach made the war almost inevitable.

Neorealists also caution that the war could escalate to the use of nuclear weapons if Russia perceives an existential threat. They argue that the U.S. and its allies aim to weaken Russia by heavily arming Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2022). As Kenneth Waltz (1993) warned, a state may resort to using nuclear weapons if it believes its survival is at stake. Walt (2022) further warned that "unwisely expanding NATO beyond reasonable limits" has dangerous consequences.

Therefore, from a neorealist perspective, the most viable solution to the ongoing conflict is to abandon the liberal internationalist narrative, recognise Russia's core security interests, and ensure Ukraine's neutrality. This would require the U.S. and its allies to provide a formal guarantee that Ukraine will not be inducted into NATO-an assurance that Putin has indicated would

cause him to de-escalate (Kocho-Williams, 2022). Ultimately, the anarchic structure of the international system makes war and conflict an inherent feature of global politics.

The Blind Spot of Mearsheimer and Walt's Thesis

The thesis that attributes the eruption of the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine solely to the United States and its allies' decision to incorporate Ukraine into NATO and EU enlargement suffers from a significant flaw. This perspective advanced by Mearsheimer (2022) and Walt (2022) undermines the core assumptions of neorealism by legitimising only Russia's security interests while downplaying the security concerns of the United States and its allies.

The central tenet of neorealism asserts that, in an international system defined by anarchy – where no central authority exists with a monopoly on coercive power – states are compelled to ensure their own survival, often by countering the power of peer competitors (Waltz, 1993). This assumption implies that it is not only Russia's security interests that matter; the United States and its allies also have legitimate security concerns regarding the situation in Ukraine.

However, Mearsheimer (2022) and Walt (2022) appear to dismiss the security concerns of the West, which contradicts the fundamental premise of their own theoretical framework. What is particularly striking is that in his 2001 work, Mearsheimer himself argued that, due to the anarchic nature of the international system, states cannot be certain about the intentions of other states. As a result, when a peer competitor's power increases, rival states will act to contain or dismantle that power to maintain the balance.

This logic, ironically, justifies the actions of the United States and its allies in responding to the resurgence of Russian military and economic strength since the early 2000s, though Mearsheimer himself denied it. Russia's ambitions to exert influence over the Eurasian region and its growing military and cyber technology capabilities are a vital security concern for the West. Owing to military development and the ability to launch devastating military operations, a senior U.S. official labelled Russia as a 'near peer adversary' (Cunningham, 2022). From a neorealist perspective, the expansion of NATO, particularly the effort to include Ukraine, can be seen as a strategic move to curb Russia's growing influence, which poses a significant threat to Western interests. Conversely, this expansion is understandably perceived by Russia

as a threat to its own national survival. Therefore, both sides' actions are defensible within the neorealist framework.

Conclusion

While it is undeniable that Mearsheimer and Walt have made compelling arguments by highlighting how the actions of the United States and its allies contributed to an existential threat to Russia, they fall short by failing to equally acknowledge the legitimate security concerns of the West. It is indeed the case that Russia's ambitions to exert influence over the Eurasian region and growing military capabilities equally pose a countervailing threat to Western security.

From a neorealist standpoint, the actions of both Russia and the United States-along with its allies can be justified. The West's push to expand NATO and the EU into Eastern and Central Europe can be interpreted as a preemptive effort to contain Russia's power-an approach summarised by the adage, "Do the do before the do does you".

In contrast to Mearsheimer and Walt's arguments, which emphasise only Russian interests, a more balanced neorealist analysis suggests that the current crisis can only be resolved by acknowledging and addressing the security interests of both sides. Lasting peace will not be achieved by recognising Russia's concerns alone, but rather by creating a security architecture that accounts for the strategic fears and interests of all major actors involved.

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WOJNA ROSYJSKO-UKRAIŃSKA W ŚWIETLE NEOREALIZMU: DWUSTRONNA PERSPEKTYWA BEZPIECZEŃSTWA

Streszczenie

Niniejsze badanie analizuje trwającą wojnę między Rosją a Ukrainą przez pryzmat teorii neorealizmu. Opierając się na jej założeniach, autor kwestionuje analizę przedstawioną przez dwóch wybitnych przedstawicieli tej teorii – Johna Mearsheimera i Stephena Walta. Obaj badacze uzasadniają działania Rosji wobec Ukrainy, jednak nie uwzględniają w wystarczającym stopniu uzasadnionych obaw dotyczących bezpieczeństwa Stanów Zjednoczonych i ich sojuszników, co pozostaje w sprzeczności z kluczowymi założeniami neorealizmu. W przeciwieństwie do ich argumentacji, niniejsze badanie wskazuje, że działania podejmowane zarówno przez Rosję, jak i przez Stany Zjednoczone oraz ich sojuszników mogą być uznane za uzasadnione i możliwe do obrony w ramach paradygmatu neorealistycznego. Wnioskiem badania jest stwierdzenie, że zakończenie trwającego konfliktu nie będzie możliwe wyłącznie poprzez uznanie obaw bezpieczeństwa Rosji, lecz wymaga stworzenia architektury bezpieczeństwa uwzględniającej strategiczne lęki i interesy wszystkich kluczowych aktorów międzynarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: neorealizm, Rosja, Ukraina, wojna

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Naod Hailu Gebreyohannis – niezależna badaczka zajmująca się studiami nad pokojem i bezpieczeństwem, polityką tożsamości, dyplomacją i stosunkami międzynarodowymi.