UNVEILING REALIST EXPLANATIONS: MEARSHEIMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON WAR IN UKRAINE

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Abstract

The realist explanations surrounding the origins of Russia's war against Ukraine, specifically John Mearsheimer's assertion of western responsibility, have sparked controversy. Realism, including its more specific offensive sub-school, presents a wide range of contrasting interpretations, depending on the actors studied and the characteristics attributed to them. Similar to classical realism, structural realism is based on underlying assumptions about human nature. To elucidate these assumptions regarding the behavior of states and their leaders, the article explores key components of structural theory, such as power differentials, rational interests, and the perception of states as unified actors. It establishes connections between these concepts and fundamental emotions like fear and anger. The article argues that realists should distinguish between the aspirations of states and the individual leaders' pursuit of power and status. Additionally, the consideration of Russian security concerns may reflect the elite's perceived threat of cultural subordination and Putin's personal apprehension about regime stability. Engaging with realist thought is crucial, not only due to its ongoing influence on policy-making, particularly in Russia, but also to prevent the misappropriation of caricatured versions of realist arguments.

Rarely do theorists of International Relations play a prominent role in public discussions concerning foreign and security policy. However, John Mearsheimer consistently manages to do so, despite acknowledging that his views, along with those of other structural realists, are often ignored by the United States' foreign policy establishment. Mearsheimer's analysis of the reasons behind Russia's aggression towards Ukraine has attracted widespread attention beyond academic circles and Washington think tanks. This analysis has garnered both vehement critics and unexpected supporters across the political spectrum. Those on the far-left who oppose American imperialism find solace in Mearsheimer's critique of NATO expansion, while proponents of "Make America Great Again" republicanism are drawn to the isolationist and "might makes right" aspects of his argument (Kennan, 1997). Numerous advocates for Ukrainian sovereignty view Mearsheimer's thesis as a means to rationalize defeatism and make concessions more acceptable, effectively imposing an

undesired settlement on Ukraine that includes acknowledging Russian claims over Crimea and potentially Donetsk and Luhansk. In this interpretation, Ukrainians are seen less as active participants in the unfolding tragedy and more as unfortunate victims of power politics. Similar dismissals are extended to other realpolitik arguments presented by figures like Henry Kissinger or those who reference George Kennan's 1997 caution against NATO expansion. Unfortunately, in certain instances, Mearsheimer's critics may be doing more harm than good, including to themselves. In early March, Anne Applebaum publicly pondered whether the Russians had derived their narrative from Mearsheimer and others. She suggested that American academics had provided the justification for Russian "greed and imperialism (Applebaum, 2022)." This statement caused outrage, with students at the University of Chicago even insinuating in an open letter that Mearsheimer may be receiving financial support from Russia.

According to Adam Tooze, the criticism directed towards John Mearsheimer, a prominent advocate of structural realist theory in international politics, may stem more from liberal frustrations over the West's limited ability to stop Russia's war, rather than from genuine engagement with his argument (Tooze, 2022). These instances of marginalizing academics and restricting Russian media may also indicate a larger threat to democracy and freedom of speech. This highlights a consistent aversion to realism, a point Mearsheimer himself has emphasized. In addition to the debate surrounding military aid for Ukraine and the future of the transatlantic alliance, the controversy surrounding structural realist assessments of the war raises important questions for theory, foreign policy analysis, and the field of international relations as a whole (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). What are the fundamental principles of the realism espoused by Mearsheimer and other structural realists like Stephen Walt? What are its intellectual origins? How does it contribute to our understanding of Russia's invasion of Ukraine? And how might it obscure impartial analysis of the crisis? A tweet by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, citing Mearsheimer's 2014 article in Foreign Affairs as a reason to blame the current crisis on the US and its European allies, raises an additional question: are academics responsible for how their theories are used and potentially misappropriated, or should they at least consider the potential consequences of their ideas? This article can only offer partial answers to these questions. The first section aims to clarify Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine war and compare it to other applications of structural realism, both offensive and defensive. The article then deconstructs some key components of structural realist theory, including power dynamics, rational interests, and the concept of states as unified actors. The concluding sections trace these concepts back to basic emotions of anger and fear, suggesting that structural theory is also based on assumptions about human nature similar to those identified by classical realists.

Ukraine in Mearsheimer's Lens

Positioning Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine crisis within the framework of realism, it becomes apparent that he maintains his stance on the West's involvement and responsibility. Mearsheimer argues that the current war in Ukraine is primarily caused by the West's actions,

specifically NATO's eastward expansion (Chotiner, 2022. He highlights a "deep cause" for the crisis, emphasizing the continuous provocation of Russia by the United States and its European allies. Mearsheimer's argument diverges from other international relations theorists, as he asserts that the West's pursuit of dominance and liberal idealism has led to the current conflict. Additionally, he points out the failure of the West to provide adequate security guarantees to Ukraine, despite its role in negotiating the surrender of Soviet nuclear weapons. Mearsheimer's analysis is not limited to the Ukraine crisis but extends to larger questions of foreign policy, including the motivations behind the West's push for NATO expansion and the potential consequences of such actions. While some scholars argue that Mearsheimer's assessment aligns more closely with his offensive realist framework, others highlight the deviations from traditional offensive realism and the influence of regional power dynamics. Overall, Mearsheimer's analysis suggests that structural factors alone are insufficient to explain the Ukraine crisis, as other precipitating causes, such as Putin's tendencies, Russian nationalism, and fear of regime change, play significant roles. The interplay of motives, power dynamics, and environmental constraints remains a subject of debate within realist theories (Walt, 2022).

Understanding Problem of Power Dynamics

Both schools of thought within structural realism offer explanations for foreign policy within the context of an anarchic international system, where a state's survival is ensured through either power maximization or alliances. Neo-realism, as outlined by Kenneth Waltz, claims to explain broader patterns in international politics rather than the foreign policy of individual states (Waltz, 1996). However, when foreign policy analysis is guided by structural theory, it examines changes in Russia's position and relative power within the state system and derives strategic implications from them. The distribution of power directly influences policy outcomes, regardless of domestic politics or the motivations of individual decision-makers. Despite the seemingly straightforward logic, conclusions drawn by structural realists and the resulting policy recommendations have been far from uniform.

The main determining factor in the argument's direction is which "side" is believed to have embraced the lessons of power politics, and which "side" is seen as disregarding them for ideological reasons. When considering broader patterns in Russian-Western relations, some argue that the United States provoked Russian aggression by neglecting the imperatives of power politics. Others apply balance-of-threat theory to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and assert that Western policymakers failed to recognize how their actions could be perceived as a threat to Russian interests (Bock, 2015) . Some view Russia's actions in Ukraine as a broader response aimed at countering US hegemony, while others argue that American and European leaders had no alternative but to make decisions that alienated Russia in the context of post-Cold War European order. These divergent conclusions and policy recommendations based on structural realism stem from different perspectives on power differentials and the interpretation of shifts in the balance of power.

Russia's power base significantly grew after 1999 due to rising oil prices, even though it experienced a recession during the 2009 financial crisis. Conversely, the United States faced additional costs from prolonged military operations in the Middle East while also dealing with the economic crisis. Different quantitative metrics indicate that Russian relative power increased against that of the US and European states between 1999 and 2016. Some argue that Russia's improved power position influenced its assertive actions, while others suggest that Russia acted out of weakness or desperation to solidify its status and influence, even at a disproportionate cost. These differing interpretations of power differentials contribute to contradictory conclusions.

One common criticism of structural realism is its parsimonious nature, which focuses on a narrow set of variables at the international system level and overlooks historical, cultural, institutional, and personal specificities. The application of western strategic thought templates to the Russian context without accounting for its unique characteristics, the portrayal of Russian foreign policy as an enigma or black box, or the oversimplification of the entire defense-industrial complex are some examples of this criticism. Additionally, some argue that Russian defense and security policies are too peculiar to be rigorously analyzed, but such claims may stem from intellectual laziness or romanticized rhetoric.

Structural realist explanations, by emphasizing material power and the structure of the international system, highlight the causal relevance of great powers like the United States and NATO while downplaying the role of other actors and the diversity of their motives. This overlooks the EU's significant role in both triggering and potentially resolving the 2014 crisis, powerful EU member states with their distinct economic and security interests, various factions within American politics, and separatist groups in Ukraine. Instead of objective power differentials, what matters most is how a state perceives its relative power position. Putin may have been emboldened by a combination of circumstances that weakened Russia's competitors, including the United States' recent setbacks and European political changes brought about by Brexit, leadership transitions, and domestic challenges.

Analyzing Rational Objectives and Actions

Determining the interests and rational objectives presents a challenging problem. The nature of realism in international relations has earned the reputation of the 'stuff happens' theory due to its inherent indeterminism (Guzzini, 2017) . However, the analyst and their target audience play a significant role in shaping the outcomes. Structural realism tends to provide answers not only when things go wrong but also when a conflicting party benefits from a risky behavior, even if it seems self-defeating.

When comparing the current invasion by Russia to the Ukraine crisis of 2014, the latter was more favorable for structural realism. The annexation of Crimea during that time was strategically successful, swift, efficient, and bloodless. It created a fait accompli that lacked a unified Western

response and resonated with domestic audiences in Russia[1]. However, the current invasion is a strategic disaster, with advance warning from American intelligence services, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Russian soldiers, pariah status on the global stage, economic damage, polarization of Russian public opinion, and the exile of many intellectuals. In hindsight, the annexation of Crimea appeared to be a 'rational' move for Putin, but it is difficult to interpret his 2022 invasion in the same way.

This assessment blurs different concepts of rationality. It is important to determine if we are judging the rationality of the Russian leadership's decision based on the information available at the time or their ability to adapt their actions with new information. Putin's refusal to negotiate may seem irrational considering the long-term costs to Russia. On the other hand, Russia's withdrawal from western Ukraine, without the desired military successes, does not align with the behavior of a deluded warlord.

Furthermore, we need to question the rationality of Putin's objectives themselves, as argued by Dale Copeland. If Putin believed that preventing Ukraine's westward orientation was necessary for reasons like avoiding humiliation, maintaining power, or preserving 'Russian' civilizational values, and he believed he could quickly take control of the country (even if this belief itself is considered evidence of irrationality), then his decision might have been rational. Miscalculation of the military operation's likely success does not necessarily indicate irrationality. Even Putin's seemingly extreme rationale that he would rather see Ukraine completely destroyed than fall to the West might be rational in his frame of reference, where Western encroachment is seen as the destruction of both Ukraine and Russia. However, a more comprehensive understanding of rationality questions not only if Putin's means were suitable for achieving his ends but also if his ends made sense in the first place. This perspective of rationality provides limited insights and challenges policy evaluation in the absence of presumed objectives.

Assuming that Copeland is correct in stating that most realists understand Putin's actions as understandable due to his declining geopolitical position vis-à-vis NATO and the perceived firepower advantage of the Russian army, they take Putin's ends for granted and question his means. However, assessing this is challenging, as the costs and risks associated with a course of action cannot be known in advance. Whether Putin was right to assume that the consequences of invading Ukraine in 2022 would be negligible based on his previous experiences in 2008 and 2014 is uncertain.

Framing Putin's actions as a geostrategic gain or loss raises additional complexities. Instead of asking why Putin attacked Ukraine, which frames his choices as a strategic gamble, it is essential to consider the widespread perception among Russian elites that Crimea was still considered part of Russia. To Putin, Crimea and Ukraine were his to lose. This perception influences his decisions, as

research suggests that political operatives tend to have a bias towards negative information. The fear of losses motivates leaders more than the possibility of gains. Thus, a Russian president who fears losing the preferred status quo is more driven to take action.

Status Concerns and the Paradox of Power

A renewed engagement with classical texts reveals that political realism encompasses more than detached calculations of power. Morgenthau highlights the significance of pursuing prestige to strengthen a state's power base, whether it's in support of maintaining the status quo or imperialistic endeavors (Morgenthau, 1985). Status concerns, particularly the consequences of perceived denial of status, provide a valuable dimension to understanding Russian foreign policy. While it may not offer a comprehensive explanation on its own, this concept sheds light on various aspects of Russian behavior. Ukraine's role becomes accentuated as a determinant of Russia's position as a regional hegemon, as smaller states within the region are expected to defer to Russia's foreign policy preferences. When these expectations are frustrated, some form of "angry" reaction ensues. Anger towards the West and its perceived disregard for Russia's social status can be comprehended through the lens of status resentment. Furthermore, status sheds light on how Russian leadership viewed the use of military force in Ukraine, considering it a "necessity" rather than a reckless gamble. However, arguments based on status face challenges, including the difficulty of resolving status conflicts due to the intangible nature and stickiness of status, as well as the seeming inconsistency of Russian foreign policy primarily directed towards the West despite actions that provoke outrage from those they seek recognition from. These issues are not only relevant to explaining Russia's invasion of Ukraine but also its annexation of Crimea, support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, invasion of Georgia, and backing of despotic regimes like that in Syria. They also touch upon whether the use of force reinforces or contradicts a state's claims to status (Forsberg, 2014). According to Nicholas Onuf, military capability, as a crucial measure of standing, should not be treated as an asset to be expended for other interests like security, as its depletion adversely affects a state's standing. This suggests that military power can enhance status only when it is not utilized. To unravel the status paradox, Morgenthau's distinction between prestige aimed at supporting the state's power base and the pursuit of prestige for personal glory, neglectful of national interests, proves insightful. Similar distinctions can be found in Mearsheimer's work on selfish and strategic lying, as well as in Morgenthau's exploration of the interplay between a leader's personality and foreign policy, highlighting how nationalism can serve as a means for individuals to fulfill their emotional needs through the state. The status paradox can also be examined by accounting for perceptual differences regarding the impact of certain behaviors on status. Jonathan Renshon's conceptualization of status integrates material factors and perceptions, showcasing how conflictual behavior can be aimed at enhancing status. This perspective offers an alternative view of Moscow's calculation in Crimea as far from irrational. Forsberg and Pursiainen present a similar interpretation, noting that displays of anger often convey superiority, determination, effectiveness, and can increase a politician's domestic popularity in Russia. Renshon's argument draws on social-psychological perspectives and general IR theory, particularly Robert Gilpin's proposition that the most prestigious states in the international

system are those that have recently successfully used military force or economic power. For contemporary Russia, resorting to force to assert itself in the absence of significant economic output might appear expedient. The issue of anger resulting from status denial manifests in different forms and promotes different types of action. Putin's contempt for the Western model, the Ukrainian government, and those who oppose him is indicative of a self-perceived superior position in the social hierarchy. Contempt is more problematic than other forms of anger as it leads to more aggressive action tendencies and negates empathy, which is crucial for successful diplomacy and finding compromise solutions. Affective experiences do not directly predict future behavior, but they shape the legitimacy of policy moves. Considering the hierarchy of affective concerns may offer insights into the policy choices of Russian leaders (Onuf,, 1989).

Perception of Threat and Fear

A literal interpretation of structural realist theory might indicate that threats are objective occurrences that arise from attempts to alter the balance of power. Misinterpretations of threats or what may be perceived as threatening by the other side are attributed to systemic vagueness or ineffective communication. However, theoretical advancements have introduced modifications and exceptions to this simplistic logic. When affective, cognitive, or social-psychological factors are given importance in the theory, the assumption of political actors' decision-making processes becomes problematic. Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, for instance, introduces the concept of "hostile intentions" to explain outcomes in international politics that cannot be adequately explained solely by balance of power analysis (Walt, 1987). By deconstructing the relationship between power and state behavior, these additions to structural theory not only modify but also challenge the straightforward logic presented by Kenneth Waltz.

On the other hand, fear plays a significant role in offensive realist explanations, as emphasized by Mearsheimer. This highlights an essential point made earlier by Robert Jervis: while states and their political commentators may perceive their own actions as benign, others may perceive them differently. Both Jervis's spiral model and Mearsheimer's offensive realism are rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system and the fear it instills in states. Consequently, these frameworks provide insights into studying the international system and the outcomes resulting from specific configurations, taking into account psychological mechanisms like fear. In Jervis's model, the subjective perception of a threat is more important than the objective nature of the threat itself. Therefore, understanding how individual leaders develop certain fears becomes crucial. Similarly, Mearsheimer's reference to precipitating causes implies that the interpretation of certain actions by leaders on both sides is what truly matters in international politics (Jervis, 1976). While significant shifts in the balance of power are rare, the constant condition of the international system, which is anarchy, necessitates considering how certain moves are interpreted.

Freyberg-Inan connects the emotion of fear directly to realist theory, suggesting that the pursuit of power, when viewed through the lens of fear, is not an end in itself but a means to survival. Thus,

assertive foreign policy actions can be seen as reactive strategies driven by the fundamental motive of fear, rather than proactive strategies motivated by a desire for power and domination. When considering the Ukraine crisis, it may be more suitable to explain Putin's actions through his fear of democracy rather than solely focusing on his fear of NATO expansion. Without accounting for changes in Russian threat perceptions, the central part of Mearsheimer's explanation, fear of NATO expansion, lacks substance. Realists like Mearsheimer raise a valid point by highlighting how certain actions taken by the West may have appeared threatening to Russia. For example, NATO's non-compliance with mutually agreed boundaries, its 1999 extraterritorial war despite Russian protests, and the deployment of ballistic missile defense systems in Eastern Europe (Freyberg-Inan, 2004).

However, it is debatable whether Russians, including Putin and his closest advisors, genuinely believe that a land invasion by NATO is a realistic possibility. Initially, Russians viewed NATO as a relic of the Cold War, and the potential enlargement was not seen as a significant threat. Some analysts attributed the initiative to organizational inertia rather than deliberate hostility. Even with the recent enlargement, NATO forces stationed on the Russian border do not pose a credible deterrent. The issue with NATO seems to lie in what it represents rather than what it actually is. Former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov suggested that enlargement was not primarily a military problem but a psychological one. The growth of NATO in post-Cold War Europe symbolized Western accomplishment and Russian defeat. Furthermore, the North Atlantic alliance is now associated with a perceived assault on Russian values and cultural sovereignty, extending beyond military threats to include cultural influences, economic pressure, and political (Galeotti, 2016).

Conclusion

The invasion of Ukraine by Russia can be attributed to a complex interplay of structural factors and the aggressive tendencies of its leader. It is evident that both sets of variables contributed to the situation. Scholars like Mearsheimer, who follow the structural realist perspective, argue that structure alone does not provide a complete explanation. Instead, precipitating factors specific to the case often play a significant role. The analysis of the Ukraine crisis by Mearsheimer has sparked a vigorous debate, revealing some common misunderstandings in both academic and public discussions of realist theory.

One such misunderstanding is misinterpretation. Mearsheimer presents a coherent argument that places Western responsibility for the crisis in Ukraine. This perspective is commendable, as few other scholars in international relations have been willing to make that argument and stick to it. However, a deeper examination reveals that while the United States' efforts to align Ukraine with the West were the root cause, other factors such as economics, demographics, and Putin's vision of Russian-Ukrainian unity also contribute to the explanation.

Misapplication is another issue that arises in the discourse surrounding realist theory. There is a

prevailing notion that international relations theory provides straightforward and uniform lessons for interpreting crises like the war in Ukraine, leading to clear policy responses. Liberal theory, for example, tends to view Russian foreign policy as a product of Putin's authoritarian rule, advocating for a firm stance against his revisionist agenda. Social constructivists argue that the state of Russian-Western relations and the representation of their interests are shaped by shared ideas and values, emphasizing the importance of identity formation and norm diffusion. On the other hand, structural realists are often criticized for deflecting blame from Russia and blaming the West without adding much value to the analysis.

However, it is important to recognize the variations within realism itself. Even within structural theory, there are contrasting explanations, especially when applied to the aspirations of East European states to join NATO. It is questioned whether Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine crisis aligns with the theoretical postulates outlined in his work "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." An alternative interpretation suggests that Russia's regional hegemonic ambitions were anticipated, and most countries at risk had managed to join NATO by the time Russia became powerful enough to take aggressive action. Therefore, the blame should not fall on the West for expanding NATO, but rather expanding it further and more rapidly could have potentially prevented the tragedy in Ukraine.

Misperception is another factor to consider. A better understanding of Russia's security concerns and how Russian officials perceived actions by the United States and European states might have prevented the annexation of Crimea or the subsequent invasion. It is crucial for analysts to consider the multitude of causal forces that shape a foreign policy. As Eliot Cohen points out, some observers tend to overlook the influence of individual leaders' personalities due to their belief in structural causes and forces, which can be highly unrealistic. The writings of Jervis on the security dilemma remind us that it is not the actual changes in the balance of power that matter most, but rather how leaders perceive them.

Viewing Russian foreign policy through the lens of realist thinking, rather than realism itself, can be helpful. Since 2014, Russian foreign policy has solidified around a realpolitik approach that emphasizes regional dominance and draws from geopolitical theory and narratives of Eurasianism (Dugin, 1999). This orientation is less compromising than before, considering liberal values and democratic development not only as deceptive strategies but as a threat to cultural uniqueness. Putin seeks to establish a counter-concept that safeguards Russian sovereignty and cultural self-determination, an ideology that still resonates with many of the country's ruling elite.

There are also misgivings associated with realist ideas in public discourse and scholarship. Realism faces significant opposition, particularly within universities, where disapproval of this perspective is widespread. Stephen Walt argues that realists, including Mearsheimer, face renewed animosity for their unpopular truths regarding the Ukraine crisis. Investigating the reasons behind this aversion towards realism could offer valuable insights for the discipline to engage in introspection

(Mearsheimer,2002).

It is crucial to remember that the primary purpose of theory, including structural realism, is not to endorse aggression but to enhance our understanding of the consequences of power politics, even in tragic situations. Morgenthau acknowledged the moral significance of political action, recognizing the frequent clash between good morals and the requirements of successful political action. Realism should not make politics appear morally more satisfying than they truly are or downplay the demands of moral principles.

One may argue that now is not the time to assign blame to actors who bear little responsibility for the suffering inflicted on civilians. It is also important to acknowledge the agency of Ukrainians who have bravely united the world in condemning the Russian attack. Despite opposing Mearsheimer's conclusions, one can still appreciate his ability to pinpoint weaknesses and inconsistencies in the foreign and security policies of the United States and its European allies, ultimately contributing to the strengthening of the Western position.

When studying the possible causes of Russian foreign policy, it is essential to recognize that there is rarely a single truth or a singular explanation. The intervention in Ukraine in 2014 and Putin's current actions cannot be reduced to a single factor like geopolitics, domestic power struggles, ideology, or personal whims. Instead, they stem from a combination of these and other elements. Russian philosophers of science have described the phenomenon of "konyunktura," which encompasses the ways researchers adapt to the prevailing political regime or intellectual environment. Dismissing analytical eclecticism as a mere "laundry list" explanation should caution against the fallacies of dominant narratives.

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