

The rationale behind the Russian invasion of Ukraine: all-or-nothing?

 Oğuz A. Turhan^{a*}

^aSaint Petersburg State University, Faculty of International Relations, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation

Abstract

Why did the Russian leader take this course of action despite the risk of a severe armed conflict, which could potentially escalate to nuclear warfare and the prospect of an extreme sanction regime? This article discusses the question through Neoclassical realist lens, utilizing a case-centric, explaining-outcome variant of process-tracing analysis. The objective of the study is to establish a minimally sufficient explanation for the outcome in question. Within this framework, I identify three intervening variables: the foreign policy executive's (FPE) perception of the relative distribution of power; the political culture; and the FPE's extractive capacity. Findings indicate that three factors have played a crucial role in the process leading up to the war: first, the perception of the NATO enlargement as not only a threat to Russia's security, but also as a challenge to its great power status; second, the incompatibility of modern nation-building practices and narratives in Ukraine, coupled with a contrasting interpretation of the concept of sovereignty; third, a diminishing 'window of opportunity', viewed as a strategy within the context of preventive war.

Keywords: Russia, Ukraine, Neoclassical realism, invasion, NATO

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has marked a momentous point in the post-Cold War era, characterized by shifts in global power dynamics, realignment of alliances and transformation of the international order. Undoubtedly, the causes of this war are manifold. Yet, prevalent explanations seem to polarize around two competing arguments; one attributing responsibility to Putin, to his antiliberal views (Person & McFaul, 2022), or imperialist ambitions (Shuheii, 2022); the other pointing to 'the West', referring to its containment strategy through NATO enlargement (Mearsheimer, 2022).

*✉ Oğuz A. Turhan, PhD candidate, Saint Petersburg State University, School of International Relations, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation; email: oguzturhan@yahoo.com.

This study offers an alternative to such a stark dichotomy in explaining Russia's rationale for launching the offensive in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. In pursuing this objective, the study employs a neoclassical realist theoretical framework. Neoclassical realism largely concurs with structural realism, regarding the influence of systemic pressures as primary factors in shaping foreign policy responses. However, it differs from structural realism in its acknowledgment of domestic determinants as intervening variables.

To construct the research design and elucidate the causal mechanisms among variables, I employ a case-centric, explaining-outcome variant of process-tracing analysis. Beach and Pedersen (2013, p. 41) separate the levels on causal mechanisms to macrolevel and microlevel, building on the inquiry of Hedström and Swedberg (1998, pp. 1-31) on social mechanisms. In this design, macrolevel mechanisms denote structural theories, whereas microlevel mechanisms comprise individual or agent-level theories. Situational mechanisms establish causal relationships from the macro- to the micro-level, by identifying the constraints that structures create for agents. Hedström and Swedberg also characterize the causal relationship from the micro- to the macro-level as "transformational mechanisms"; however, the present study concentrates on the structure-to-agent dynamic, rather than the reverse.

The explaining-outcome variant of process tracing encompasses both deductive and inductive methodologies. In this analysis, the focus is on the deductive approach, employed to establish a minimally sufficient account of the outcome in question. This method is instrumental in developing an ideational mechanism, drawing causal inferences from established historical scholarship to provide an explanation specific to the case under examination (Beach & Pedersen, 2013, p. 64-66). It should be acknowledged that this approach inevitably imparts an eclectic character to the research. However, in deductive, case-centric approaches, the primary focus is to ascertain, a priori, which intervening variables moderate the effect of systemic imperatives on the dependent variable (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 118). With reference to a Neoclassical realist literature review of Russian foreign policy, I determine three intervening variables for analysis: The FPE's perception of the distribution of power and perception of their own capacities; strategic culture; and the FPE's extractive capacity.

In accordance with the defined theoretical framework, the study examines official documents, including foreign policy concepts and national security strategy papers, and official declarations of government officials of the respective areas, in English and Russian.

Findings suggest that Putin, as the foreign policy executive (FPE), was initially motivated by three key factors in launching the invasion: first, the perceived decrease in effectiveness of the use of coercive tactics, coupled with a diminishing scope for future maneuvers; second, the perception of the NATO enlargement as not only a threat to Russia's security, but also as a challenge to its great power status;

third, the incompatibility of modern nation-building practices and narratives in Ukraine with the Russian governments' official ideology.

This article consists of six sections: an introduction, theoretical review, literature review and establishing the intervening variables, trajectory of the Russian foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea through a Neorealist baseline, implementation of the intervening variables to analysis, and conclusion.

1. A Neorealist baseline and a neoclassical realist filter

In structural realism, the principle of anarchy, along with the states' will to survive constitute a sufficient ground for the emergence of the balance-of-power politics (Waltz, 1979, p. 121). In this sense, balance is a consequence of states' constant concern about their security whereas power is a mere instrument to achieve this end. Balance in international politics is a dynamic phenomenon. The elements that destabilize an equilibrium might have been already embedded into the system, or vice versa; the structural forces in a disequilibrium may well produce the required conditions for the formation of equilibrium. In this respect, Waltz (2000) writes "As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power" (p. 28). It is important to note the difference between power as in the 'balance-of-power' and power as in the 'pursuit of power'. The former pertains to an equilibrium of sum-total distribution of capabilities of major actors in the system, whereas the latter implies the capabilities a state aspires to attain. In structural realism, the concept of power is predominantly defined in terms of a state's capacity. Gilpin (1981, p. 13), for instance, delineates it as the sum of a state's military, economic, and technological capabilities.

Structural realism posits that systemic factors underlie the formation of the foreign policy of states. The system generates certain stimuli for states to react, thus constraining the range of foreign policy preferences. States may choose not to adopt policies which do not completely match the structural pressures, because "structures shape and shove; they do not determine the actions of states" (Waltz, 2000, p. 24).

Although Waltz (1979) acknowledges that the balance of power theory does not explain specific actions, such as "why State X made a certain move last Tuesday" (p. 121), its foundational axioms enable one to draw inferences about the likely behaviour of a state in similar situations. In the context of the 2022 attack, the balance of power theory might indeed predict an exacerbation of tensions, encompassing scenarios from limited confrontations and heightened use of coercive instruments to potential nuclear escalations and intensifications in geopolitical rivalry. However, the theory does not intrinsically explain the onset of war in the specific manner observed. To elucidate how systemic imperatives translate into the given outcome, it is essential to incorporate specific explanatory variables.

Neoclassical realism emphasizes the role of structural pressures among primary actors in the system as independent variables in shaping foreign policy. The

analysis also incorporates a set of unit-level factors as intervening variables, such as perception of relative power (Wohlforth, 1993), “decision makers’ perceptions and domestic state structure” (Rose, 1998, p. 152); “cognition, strategic culture, state-society relations, and domestic institutions” (Lobell et al., 2009, p. 67); “elites’ preferences and perceptions of the external environment, elites’ preferences and perceptions that ‘matter’ in the policy-making process, the domestic political risks associated with certain policy choices, and the variable risk-taking propensities of national elites” (Schweller, 2004, p. 169), strategic ideas (Kitchen, 2010) etc.

The Neoclassical realism's assimilation of domestic factors often leads to its classification as reductionist by adherents of other theories. Some liberal scholars (Legro & Moravcsik, 1999) and structuralist realists (Walt, 2002, as cited in Rathbun, 2008) maintain that neoclassical realism incorporates domestic variables in an *ad hoc* manner. Rathbun (2008, p. 307) asserts that neoclassical realism would certainly be *ad hoc* if its only function were to correct the explanations that neorealism provides where actors’ choices do not correspond to structural pressures. Neoclassical realism, however, is more than that; it breaks down ‘the black box’ of the state, starting from a structural level of analysis and shows: first, why sometimes states do not follow the systemic imperatives; second, what consequences they suffer when the systemic imperatives are ignored by decision-makers (Rathbun, 2008, p. 317).

As intervening variables in various neoclassical realist theoretical and empirical researches, domestic factors overlap depending on the issues under consideration in each analysis. In works by different researchers, the same intervening variables may indicate different notions. This can be attributed to many factors, such as the character of the relevant research question, the level of analysis and period under consideration, or the authors’ interpretation of the structure-state connection. Furthermore, intervening variables may serve different purposes. For instance, Ripsman et al. (2016) postulate a ‘soft positivist’ epistemology by referring to complexities stemming from ‘human subjectivity’ and ‘the difficulty in experimentation in social sciences’. Politics, decision-making processes and social sciences, overall, are not as measurable as natural phenomena, thus a hard positivist epistemology does not exactly fit. Notwithstanding, Ripsman et al. regard theory-testing as a fundamental feature, which infers observation and inquiry of certain patterns in international politics.

2. Explaining Russian foreign policy through neoclassical realism

Building on the context of Russia’s relations with the West, in her pre-Crimean research, Kropatcheva (2012) delves into an inquiry of consistency and predictability in Russian foreign policy from a Neoclassical realist perspective and concludes that Russian foreign policy is consistent and predictable; however, “Western politicians and some analysts have often failed to recognize the clear signals their Russian counterparts were sending them” (pp. 37-38). She identifies the

primary motivations driving the Kremlin's foreign policy as the desire to maintain its security and sovereignty and aspiration to enhance its material capabilities and status/prestige (Kropatcheva, 2012). Notwithstanding the author's clear emphasis on Neoclassical realism, these factors are quintessential neorealist independent variables. Additionally, in the study, the failure to perceive signals from the system or from other actors is more related to the foreign policies of the Western counterparts of Russia, rather than to Moscow itself.

By contributing to the neoclassical realist study of Russian foreign policy, in parallel with Kropatcheva's (2012) analysis, Becker et al. (2016) conclude that Moscow's use of indirect coercive measures against Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries led the Western leaders to underestimate Russia's subversive potential which resulted in a sub-optimal policy of "limited regime of economic sanctions and rhetorical condemnation of Russian actions" (p. 128). In addition, Becker et al. argue that, in pursuit of its national interests, Russia has crafted "nationalistic, geopolitical and Western/liberal" discourses. Although the authors do not corroborate this claim with sufficient evidence in their study, it is plausible to assume that, to a certain degree, Russia, strategically employs political rhetoric to achieve its foreign policy goals. It is essential, however, to assess the extent to which such rhetoric plays a defining role in shaping Russian foreign policy. The main flaw in Becker et al. study lies in their portrayal of Russia's strategic employment of narratives, economic strategies, and coercive tactics as a divergence from traditional realist expectations. The authors claim that employing a neoclassical realist framework allows them to reconcile this deviation.

The significant role of decision-makers, defined in the study of Ripsman et al. (2016, p. 61) as the foreign policy executive (FPE) in the context of Russian foreign policy, is appropriately acknowledged in some scholarly papers. For instance, Romanova and Pavlova (2012) aptly note that, in the case of Russia, the executive powers regarding foreign policy have been consolidated under the president and the FPE has almost become a synonym for president Putin. Apart from the foreign policy executive, Romanova and Pavlova discuss two more 'neoclassical filters' in terms of Russian foreign policy; first, the identity issue of Russia, whether it is a part of the Western civilization or is endowed with its individual Eurasian identity; second, Moscow's predicament of keeping a balance between economically advantageous deals with the western countries while perceiving a constant threat to national interests from those western opponents. On the first issue, through an analysis of the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, the authors conclude that Russia does not regard itself as a part of the West but expects an equal role in relations, and on the second, they demonstrate the persistent convergence between Russian strategic and economic interests and expectations as a chronic problem, highlighting it as an incessant challenge in Russian foreign policy (Romanova & Pavlova, 2012).

Smith's (2020) analysis of the US-Russian relations adopts a comparative approach, specifically juxtaposing the period from 2003 to 2018 with the initial

phase of the Cold War, from 1947 to 1962. With the help of the neoclassical realist theory, Smith formulates a four-dimensional framework, alternately adjusting the focus on structural, ideological, psychological, and technological variables. He concludes that the current era “bears little resemblance to the Cold War” in terms of structural, ideological and technological aspects, nonetheless, the psychological dimension of the bilateral relations plays a more definitive role in the current context, exhibiting characteristics reminiscent of the Cold War (Smith, 2020).

Elias Götz’s (2016; 2019) adjusted neoclassical realist theory delivers a concise and explicit model of neorealist baseline and intervening variables. Regional hegemony preserve their spheres of influence due to certain realist inferences, such as the anarchic nature of international politics, the unpredictability of other actors, self-help as a fundamental principle of survival and the role of geography in power projection (Götz, 2016, p. 303). In such circumstances, a regional hegemon, aiming to keep extraterritorial powers out, would most likely employ various soft and hard power instruments vis-à-vis small-power states. This approach serves to prevent an adversary expansion in its own sphere of influence. Consequently, the FPE of a regional hegemon primarily hinges on two key aspects: firstly, extractive capacity, i.e., the ability to mobilize resources; secondly, autonomy – the extent to which the FPE takes decisions against the backdrop of potential objections from other societal actors (Götz, 2019, p. 6).

Götz and Staun (2022) use a similar approach to neoclassical realism and focus on the role of strategic culture in explaining Russia's attack on Ukraine. Their study offers a credible answer to the counterfactual question: Would Russia have attacked Ukraine if someone other than Putin had been president? The authors concur that any Russian leader would be inclined to employ highly assertive means against Ukraine, given the consistent indications of Russian strategic culture (Götz & Staun, 2022). It should be noted that, however, the authors employ an expansive definition of the strategic culture concept, applying it to various factors, such as the threat perception of the NATO expansion and the sense of great power status.

In the context of the Russian strategy, particularly within its perceived sphere of influence, the overarching critique of neoclassical realism for its seemingly ad hoc nature is noteworthy (e.g. Narizny, 2017; Wivel, 2005). Ideally, neoclassical realist approaches should start with a structural realist foundation, followed by the incorporation of intervening variables to construct explanations; however, sometimes, these attempts result in idiosyncratic interpretive narratives. Given that, an outcome-explaining inquiry should focus on such phenomena, where systemic theories underperform. It is also crucial that such research should employ a minimal number of explanatory variables to avoid redundancy.

Drawing on the post-Cold War Russian foreign policy scholarship and on the neoclassical realist literature review, this study hinges upon three intervening variables for analysis: The FPE’s perception of the distribution of power, political culture, and the FPE’s extractive capacity.

The FPE's perception of power distribution assumes that the actors' perception of the power dynamics might not match the power distribution within the system. The perception of power distribution, functioning as an intervening variable, serves to assess the situation and react in a manner akin to the 'window of opportunity' concept. This concept denotes a period when "a state's relative strength is about to decline, or is in decline" (Van Evera, 1999, p. 74).

Building upon the work of Elkins and Simeon (1979), political culture is understood in this study, as a system of symbols, which delineates the range of acceptable alternatives available to the FPE. The Russian political culture, especially after the Cold War, can be encapsulated in its self-identification as a great power. The politically contentious concepts, such as 'sphere of influence' or 'sovereignty' are intricately Russia's interpretation of its status as a great power. For example, Clunan (2009, pp. 155-175) analyses the post-Cold War Russian foreign policy, framing sovereignty in terms of security and power. It should be noted that such a power-centric approach to sovereignty inevitably leads to criticism, regarding Russia's instrumentalization of its dual approach to sovereignty (Deyermond, 2016).

Extractive capacity, as slightly modified from Taliaferro's (2006) concept, refers to the extent of a state's ability to extract and mobilize resources. A high degree of extractive capacity is an enabling factor for the Russian FPE, allowing not only to circumvent domestic constraints, but also to effectively redistribute state resources in response to the severe economic sanctions, which have intensified since 2014.

3. Understanding Russian foreign policy and the post-Crimean deadlock

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian foreign policy has experienced significant transformations. According to Tsygankov (2010), the most central factor influencing the Russian decision-makers is the country's relationship with 'the West'. This argument, undoubtedly, holds merit, given that Russia, as a modern state, emerged on the periphery of Europe in the 18th century and rapidly integrated into the European security structure. Consequently, the primary critical threats and opportunities for Russia emerged within Europe. Similarly, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the ideological opposite of the West, hence again shaping Moscow's interests and perception of threats in the context of its relations with the West.

Following the Cold War, Russian foreign policy mostly exhibited a cooperative orientation until 1996. The 1993 Foreign Policy Strategy document explicitly acknowledged that "Russia, in its dealings with Eastern European countries, had discarded the imperial arrogance and self-centeredness characteristic of the former USSR, and, instead embraced principles of equality and mutual benefit". The strategy articulated Russia's objective to establish favourable relations with the United States, aiming for a strategic partnership, with the perspective of

building an alliance. However, it also emphasized “the necessity to forestall any recurrence of American imperial policies, in order to prevent the United States from becoming the sole great power” (Yeltsin, 1993).

The Clinton administration’s decision to enlarge NATO in 1995 made a major shift in Russian foreign policy and prompted a strategic reassessment. As early as 1996, Yevgeniy Primakov, then Russian foreign minister, enunciated four conditions for cooperation within the emerging ‘multipolar world’: First, prevention of the old enmity of the previous era, i.e. averting NATO expansion; second, abandoning the notion of ‘guiding and guided’ in international politics; third, ‘democratization’ of economic relations between states, denunciation of coercive economic measures such as economic sanctions; last, strengthening the coordination of the international community in conflict resolution, arms reduction and international assistance (Primakov, 1996). The 1997 Russian National Security Concept evaluated a possible NATO enlargement arrangement without the authorization of the UN Security Council as a source of destabilization in the world (Yeltsin, 1993).

Since the early 1990s, the relationship between Russia and ‘the West’ has been marked by a series of ups and downs. Moscow appears to believe that none of the frameworks it has proposed has been realized. The erstwhile ‘Common European Home’ aspiration has gradually turned into intense animosity between both sides in less than two decades. As Richard Sakwa (2021) argues, the Russian vision of a “Common European Home” was fundamentally at odds with the Western notion of “Europe whole and free” from the outset. The former proposed a Greater Europe where independence and sovereignty of each nation would be respected, whereas the latter was premised on a selective spread of the Western order to the post-communist of Europe. Casier (2021) argues that the 2014 Ukraine crisis was a consequence of the disintegration of the European post-Cold War security order. This security framework faced a systemic crisis as the principal actors upholding the ‘structures and practices’ gradually undermined these foundational principles, leading to the erosion of order. The outbreak of the war in 2014 can be interpreted as a consequence of what Gilpin (1981) described as a *systemic change*, which “entails changes in the international distribution of power, the hierarchy of prestige, and the rules and rights embodied in the system” (p. 42).

In order to maintain its influence in the region, Moscow established such organizations as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (Sakwa, 2019). According to Dragneva and Wolczuk (2016), Russia has leveraged the historically formed economic dependencies of the post-Soviet countries, particularly Ukraine, in a pursuit of these integration projects, which were inherently intended to maintain Moscow’s control and forestall a foreign actor gaining influence in this region.

For Putin, Crimea has never been Ukrainian and, during the post-Soviet era, it was just an accommodation with Ukraine in order to create and maintain a

cooperative atmosphere in the post-Soviet space. Putin's statements about Crimea should be examined within its political context. On August 30, 2008, he declared "Crimea is not a disputed territory and Russia has officially recognized the borders of Ukraine. We have concluded all negotiations regarding the borders, and any questions about Russia's objectives in this matter are provocative... We did not have any objectives here [South Ossetia], either" (RIA Novosti, 2008).

In a similar vein, prior to Kosovo's declaration of independence, Putin addressed the issue at a press conference on February 18, 2008: "If someone takes a bad, incorrect decision, it does not mean that we should act the same way. But, of course, it would be a signal to us, and we would respond to the behaviour of our partners in order to ensure that our interests are protected. If they believe they have the right to promote their interests in this way, then why can't we?" (Putin, 2008)

In terms of grand strategy, Russia has failed to create a viable alternative to the West. Thus, Putin took up the challenge of asymmetric defence of Russian national interests abroad and the establishment of a more distinct foreign policy, to some extent by emphasizing the traditional Russian values. 'The civilizational turn' of Russian foreign policy started after the election of Putin for the third term but has deepened after 2014 (Tsygankov, 2019, p. 232).

There is a widespread notion among some analysts that a key motivation behind Putin's war against Ukraine and the extensive subversion campaign against Western countries is the perception of liberal ideas and democracy as a threat to his regime. This point of view further suggests that the current national interests defined by the Putin regime are totally incompatible with those of the Western countries (Marten, 2015; McFaul, 2020). While the role of leaders in defining strategic goals is indeed a critical aspect of the argument in this paper, an exclusive focus on the leaders' personal beliefs or psychological profile risks reductionism.

In critical cases, leaders tend to prefer expedient measures over those oriented towards elections (Dueck, 2014, p. 145). In most cases, foreign intervention would be the exact opposite of an election-oriented move, however, Russia's annexation of Crimea serves as an exception, Putin's popularity reached all-time highs and stayed over 80 percent until mid-2018 (Levada, 2021). However, the surge in popularity following the annexation was neither an unforeseen consequence, nor a thoroughly thought-out plan. Instead, from the outset, it was seen by Moscow as an expected, yet a non-game-changing factor. The annexation has brought about other factors affecting the domestic situation in Russia. For instance, the economic sanctions introduced by the US and EU have started to take their toll on Putin's support (Alexseev & Hale, 2020, p. 12), albeit moderately until 2022. However, the chief determinant of Russia's approach to Ukraine was not Putin's domestic expectations or popularity, but a combination of systemic pressures, strategic considerations and material capacities.

Structural realism, especially as articulated by Mearsheimer, suggests that Russia commenced the invasion of Ukraine in order to prevent the latter's potential

accession to NATO. This perspective contends that, since the mid-90's, NATO has growingly become a threat to Russian security and its vital interests (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 50). In the context of post-Crimean Russian politics, Mearsheimer (2014) emphasized that “great powers are always sensitive to potential threats near their home territory” ().

Starting with the Clinton administration, the US decision-makers' persistence on NATO expansion has been a crucial issue in the Russian foreign policy discourse. The central contradiction in the argument between Russia and the US/NATO is that the former regards international politics through the prism of balance-of-power politics, in which states “at minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination” (Waltz, 1979, p. 118). In addition, the Russian political culture has historically developed against a background of great-power politics.

Great-powers seek domination in certain regions, as Mearsheimer (2001) put it, it is “the best outcome a great-power can hope for is to be a regional hegemon” (p. 41). Moscow's disregard for Ukrainian sovereignty is premised on the notion that great-powers may have some ‘privileged’ relations in certain regions, that is, in the case of Russia, the post-Soviet space. Yet, the Russian sphere of influence did not gain recognition as a notion from its Western counterparts. In 2009, the then U.S. Vice President Joe Biden declared that the U.S. “does not recognize [...] any spheres of influence.” (NBC, 2009). Drawing a parallel with the Eastern Partnership initiative of the EU, in 2009, Sergey Lavrov asserted that Russia was unjustly being accused of having spheres of influence while the EU was expanding its own sphere (Pop, 2009).

Russia also claims that the Cold War ended on a Western promise that, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO “guaranteed that it would halt all of its deployment of troops beyond Germany” (Putin, 2007). Conversely, Sarotte's (2021) study presents a different view, indicating that Russian decision-makers were not only aware of the United States' intention to expand NATO, but also, they sought to join the Partnership for Peace programme. The Russian objection to NATO expansion was less about security concerns, and more about domestic considerations, particularly how an enlargement excluding Russia might portray President Yeltsin as weak in the face of upcoming elections (Sarotte, 2021, p. 201-202). Besides, the expansionist argument emphasized the sovereignty of the NATO members and candidate states, insisting that enlargement “would threaten no one” (NATO, 1995). Fast-forwarding to the current impasse, the divergence in these interpretations of sovereignty serves as the focal point of the failure of the Minsk II agreement. According to the provisions of the agreement, Kyiv was obligated to implement a constitutional reform with a key decentralizing principle until the end of 2015 (Minsk II, 2015). However, from the Ukrainian perspective, undertaking such a reform would undermine its sovereignty and could also impede Kyiv's ability to

implement the Association Agreement with the European Union, which was signed in 2014 (Allan, 2020).

4. Putin's motives for the 'special military operation' in Ukraine

To ensure a parsimonious theoretical framework, it is not only necessary to explain *how* systemic imperatives initiate a causal process leading to the dependent variable through intervening variables, but also to ascertain *whether* the absence of these mediating factors would result in a different outcome from the systemic imperatives. In the empirical terms of this study, this question can be formulated as follows: Is the differential growth of power to Russia's detriment in the international system sufficient to explain the cause of Russia's attack on Ukraine?

In the context of the Cold War's end, this question exposed realist theories to certain critiques. For example, Ned Lebow (1994, p. 262-263) contested the distribution of power argument within realist theories, asserting that, as a declining hegemon, the Soviet Union should have initiated a preventive war to retain its sphere of influence towards the end of the Cold War. A central argument within structuralist realism posited that nuclear weapons had provided the Soviet Union sufficient security to enable its retrenchment and focus on developing its economy and technology (Waltz, 1993, p. 50-52). However, Wohlforth (1993, p. 263-268) asserts that the integration of Soviet retrenchment within the realism framework requires the incorporation of non-systemic variables, such as the perceptions of decision-makers.

Mearsheimer contends that Ukraine's potential NATO membership and the broader NATO expansion significantly contributed to Russia's decision to launch an attack on Ukraine, with Russia perceiving NATO as an existential threat (Mearsheimer, 2022). This perspective may suggest a direct causal line between the systemic imperative to Russia's military actions, rendering intervening variables redundant. Yet, Mearsheimer, too, implicitly employs intervening variables in his analysis. Smith and Dawson (2022, p. 181) point out the presence of such domestic variables as ideology in Mearsheimer's works.

Mearsheimer also employs extractive and mobilization capacities to explain Moscow's responses to previous instances of the NATO enlargement. Accordingly, given the poor condition of its military forces, Russia was unable to pursue a revanchist strategy in Eastern Europe (2022). It should also be noted that Mearsheimer's Offensive Realism diverges from Waltz's strictly structural approach by incorporating geography as a structural modifier (Toft, 2005, p. 388-389). However, Offensive Realism still closely aligns with structural realism when compared to neoclassical and postclassical realist theories.

Russia's incrementally growing assertiveness in the post-Soviet space is deeply associated with its perception of distribution of power among major international actors. Russia has been losing ground and undergoing a relative decrease in power since the end of the Cold War. In the words of Robert Gilpin (1981):

As a consequence of the changing interests of individual states, and especially because of the differential growth in power among states, the international system moves from a condition of equilibrium to one of disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is a situation in which economic, political, and technological developments have increased considerably the potential benefits or decreased the potential costs to one or more states of seeking to change the international system. (p. 14)

By undertaking an invasion against Ukraine, in the face of a military conflict possibility with NATO and undeterred by the introduction of an extreme sanction regime ‘from hell’ (Madhani et al., 2021), Russia ran the risk of a decrease in its relative position for the sake of recovering its great power status. In other words, President Putin opted for an *all-or-nothing* approach. Such an action fits ‘the balance of interests’ theory of Randall Schweller, yet it seems to fall between two types of categories in his theory, which are ‘the lions and the wolves’. The lions strive to maintain the status quo for their ‘self-preservation, relative positions and prestige’, whereas the wolves take even reckless risks to make gains and to change the status quo (Schweller, 1994). Roy Allison (2020) argues that Russia is not a status quo power and has instrumentalized its legal discourse to pursue revisionist aims in international politics, especially against the Western countries. Yet, in the context of US-Russian relations, Washington strikes as no less revisionist than Moscow because of its expansionist strategy and, in fact, it is Washington’s recurrent defections that have set off a revisionist spiral and “pushed a security-seeking state Russia to respond” (Sushentsov & Wohlforth, 2020).

Although Russia does not comfort the characteristics of a status quo power, its efforts to preserve its vital interests, relative position and prestige could arguably present it as a ‘lion’, in Schweller’s terms. On the other hand, Moscow’s risky strategies, as in the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the annexation of Crimea, and, finally, the invasion of Ukraine cast it in the role of ‘wolf’. In this respect, to draw a parallel between Sakwa’s (2019) “neo-revisionist” definition, that Moscow “does not attempt to create new rules or to advance an alternative model of the international system but to ensure the universal and consistent application of existing norms”, it can be concluded that, in the post-Cold War period, Russia’s role as a great power has become increasingly ambiguous. To preserve its status, Moscow relies on its permanent member seat in the UN Security Council and on its nuclear arsenal. Simultaneously, it seeks Western nations’ recognition of its great-power status while striving to project an intimidating image.

Considering these factors, one rationale for Putin starting the so-called military operation is related to his assumption that the Russian armed forces could swiftly conclude it, as it happened in the war against Georgia in 2008. In this context, Putin’s decision to attack can be characterized as a preventive war strategy, as described by Levy (2011, p. 89), rather than as a singular and reckless impulse. In

accordance with this logic, it can be argued that Russia's pre-emptive action was a consequence of the ineffectiveness of efforts aimed at coercing Ukraine and the West into compliance. As a result, Putin, who has been recognized for his effective use of coercive diplomacy, both militarily and economically (Tkachenko, 2019), initiated the so-called 'special military operation' in order to uphold the credibility of the coercive tactics he had previously employed. This situation can be viewed as a consequence of the prolonged tensions in Eastern Europe. Driedger's (2023) study illustrates that, over time, there has been a significant increase in risk acceptance within Russian foreign policy.

During the protracted escalation since 2014, Ukraine has improved and readjusted its military to new standards. From 2014 until February 2022, Ukraine secured \$2.7 billion worth of military assistance from the U.S. (Yousif, 2022) including anti-tank missiles, radar and short-range air defense systems. The diplomatic deadlock during the escalation increased the likelihood of a new conflict. By the end of 2021, it was clear for Moscow that the further enhancement of the Ukraine army had gradually made a Russian operation harder. In terms of the FPE perception, the 'window of opportunity' was shrinking and, as Ukraine received more assistance, it was seen as potentially complicating Russia's military capabilities to achieve a swift victory.

By rapidly accomplishing the strategic objectives, including taking Kyiv, neutralizing the Ukrainian military infrastructure and 'liberating' Donbas would give Moscow a strategic advantage not only over Ukraine, but also against the broader 'anti-Russian coalition'. Putin anticipated that a quick and decisive victory would compel the US and the EU to negotiate an agreement encompassing all the key issues for Moscow, such as security assurances from NATO, a neutral status for Ukraine, lifting the sanctions against Russian entities, etc.

A supporting argument regarding the Russian perception of power and extractive capacity can be found in the research of Maria Snegovaya (2020). As the revenues from oil exports increase, the Russian foreign policy becomes more assertive. At the beginning of both the Soviet-Afghan War in 1979 and the Russian-Georgian War in 2008, oil prices were quite high for the relevant periods (\$101 and \$105, respectively) (Snegovaya, 2020, p. 6). Meanwhile, oil prices at the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine were higher than \$99 a barrel, the highest since October 2014. On the downside, Snegovaya's study finds no strong association between the aggressive presidential rhetoric and NATO expansion, economic growth slowdown or prevailing sentiment among citizens, which leaves room for further exploration.

An official motive for the attack, as articulated by Putin himself, was described as 'demilitarization' (Putin, 2022). This argument closely aligns with the intervening variables identified in this study, the FPE's perception of change in the distribution of power and the Russian political culture. The disputed 'not one inch eastward' promise has been a central argument of Russian foreign policy since the

mid-1990s. Yet, given the circumstances after the Russian armed forces' incursion into Ukraine, it is beside the point whether such a promise has been made. As Edinger (2022) aptly notes, "the problem with NATO now appears to be not what it is but what it has come to present" (p. 1890).

To conceptualize through counterfactual reasoning, if Moscow had been able to retain its erstwhile sway over the post-Soviet countries, foreign powers would have had more costs and fewer motives to intervene. The post-Soviet space, however, has long been gradually losing its cohesion. Economic interconnectedness in the region has diminished. The share of trade within the Commonwealth of Independent States has decreased almost twice from 1994 to 2016 (Deák, 2019, p. 137). Russia's influence over the post-Soviet space has decreased in many spheres, such as: economy, security and foreign policy, media and the use of the Russian language (Busygina & Filippov, 2021). Dmitri Trenin (2011, p. 13) characterizes Russia's position as 'post-imperium', which he defines as 'a fairly prolonged exit from the imperial condition'. It is evident that Russia has been unable to forestall socio-political disintegration among post-Soviet states, thereby falling short of meeting the criteria necessary for a regional hegemon.

Mastanduno (2019) suggests that, after the Cold War, as the new and only global hegemon, the US offered Russia and China the possibility of integrating to the international order under different terms. According to this perspective, Russia was expected to be a minor partner in "America's hegemonic order". However, due to its political culture, which is deeply rooted in a sense of great power identity, Moscow rejected such conditions and pursued its own agenda (Tkachenko & Koyl, 2020).

The last FPE motive for the invasion suggested in this study bears upon the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations, to be more precise, upon Putin's perception of Ukraine. Allegedly, in 2008, in Bucharest, Putin told president George Bush that Ukraine had never been a genuine state and that a significant part of its territory had been given as a gift by Russia (Allenova et al., 2008). According to his version, the Bolsheviks created Ukraine as an accommodation to nationalist groups so as to ensure the rule of the former within Soviet nativization policies. However, after the Soviet Union dissolution, the US and the EU urged Ukraine to limit cooperation with Russia to the utmost and some Ukrainian politicians undertook this task (Putin, 2021). In other words, Putin's version is that Ukrainian nationality has been deliberately distorted in order to break off the Russian-Ukrainian relations irreversibly.

Robert Jervis (1976) suggests four variables that determine the extent to which an event influences the decision-makers' perception: "...whether or not the person experienced the event first-hand, whether it occurred early in his adult life or career, whether it had important consequences for him or his nation, and whether he is familiar with a range of international events that facilitate alternative perceptions" (p. 239). By reference to that, although some points have a greater impact than others, all the factors mentioned are, to an extent, attributable to Putin's views. On that

account, one of the initial objectives of the so-called special military operation, as put by Putin (2022), that is, ‘denazification of Ukraine’ has a specific undertone: it pertains to an idiosyncratic interpretation of recent history, particularly in the context of the encompassing political culture. Notwithstanding the cultural closeness and kinship, there has been a notable difference in political sentiment between Russians and Ukrainians since the independence of Ukraine (Bremmer, 1994). The efforts of Ukraine to create a nation-state have been, from the outset, perceived by Putin as sowing dissent within Russians and Ukrainians. In this sense, the reasoning of describing the Ukrainian government as Nazi rests on providing a pretext for incursion to establish a pro-Russian or at least a ‘neutral’ regime in Kyiv.

Conclusions

The course of the war in Ukraine unfolded substantially contrary to Moscow’s expectations. The underlying causes of this requires further research. The argument in this paper holds that, during the post-Cold war era, Russia has failed to meet the requirements necessary for maintaining its regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space, consequently jeopardizing its great-power status, which is a definitive characteristic of the Russian political culture. To maintain its influence in the region and to counter the influence of foreign powers, as well as to keep up with the great power competition, the Kremlin has focused on its strengths, i.e. – hard power measures, such as armed force and economic coercion. In this sense, within the framework of preventive war, Russia’s assertive policies may be considered a strategy rather than a reckless reaction.

In the 1990’s, as a declining power with limited capacity, Russia was unable to prevent the NATO enlargement process, yet still perceived it as an affront to its prestige. While Russia pursued to establish cooperative relations with Western countries and to expand its outreach, it simultaneously bolstered its military, economic and technological capacities. Such a behaviour is closely aligned with the tenets of realism. Given this background, it was foreseeable that the conflict of interests concerning Ukraine’s possible accession to NATO would not conclude in Moscow’s favour. Furthermore, the growing Western military support to Ukraine, following the Biden administration’s assumption of office and diminishing prospects of implementation of the Minsk agreements, resulted in a diplomatic deadlock.

In the context of Ukraine’s historical affinity to Russia, as understood within the Russian political culture, Kyiv’s aspiration to join NATO was perceived by Putin as an act of betrayal. According to this version of history, supporters of ‘Nazism’ and ‘anti-Russia project’ ascended to power through a coup d’état in 2014 and continuously distanced the country from Russia. Determining whether this historical interpretation is based on facts or was entirely fabricated for the purposes of propaganda requires a different study underpinned with a relevant theoretical

framework. Nevertheless, irrespective of its authenticity this interpretation has played a significant role in shaping the political dynamics.

In conclusion, while acknowledging the tragic nature of warfare, it is an undeniable reality. The task of social scientists is to analyse the causes of wars with utmost objectivity, without justifying the belligerent actions or policies of any involved parties. This endeavour, hopefully, will foster a broader understanding, paving way to a more peaceful and stable global landscape.

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