

# Offensive ideas: structural realism, classical realism and Putin's war on Ukraine

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It is not often that International Relations (IR) theorists occupy a central place in public discourse on matters of foreign and security policy. John Mearsheimer does so regularly, even though he likes to point out that the United States' foreign policy establishment 'does not listen' to him and other structural realists.<sup>1</sup> Mearsheimer's analysis of the causes of Russia's war against Ukraine has nevertheless attracted attention far beyond academic IR and Washington think tanks.

His argument—or, in some cases, a caricature of it—has found fierce critics as well as unlikely supporters across the political spectrum. Far-left opponents of American imperialism are comforted by his criticism of NATO enlargement, while followers of 'Make America Great Again' republicanism see appeal in the isolationist and 'might makes right' elements of his thesis. Many supporters of Ukrainian sovereignty have equated Mearsheimer's thesis with an elaborate way of rationalizing defeatism and making concessions more palatable—in essence, forcing an unwanted settlement on Ukrainians that includes recognizing Russian claims over Crimea, possibly even over Donetsk and Luhansk. Ukrainians, in such interpretations of Mearsheimer, are seen less as a key actor in the unfolding tragedy and more as an unfortunate casualty of great power politics. The same reflexive dismissal applies to other arguments promoted by representatives of *realpolitik*, such as Henry Kissinger,<sup>2</sup> or commentators seizing on George Kennan's 1997 caution against NATO expansion.<sup>3</sup>

In some cases, Mearsheimer's critics might do more harm than good (including to themselves). In early March, Anne Applebaum publicly wondered whether 'the Russians didn't actually get their narrative from Mearsheimer et al.'. American academics, she suggested, 'provided the narrative' to justify Russian 'greed and imperialism'.<sup>4</sup> Students at the University of Chicago joined in the outrage, insinuating in an open letter that Mearsheimer might be on the Russian payroll. As Adam

<sup>1</sup> e.g. in the Question & Answer portion of a 2015 lecture at the University of Chicago: 'Why is Ukraine the West's fault?', 25 Sept. 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrMiSQAGOS4> (at 47:00).

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Bella, 'Kissinger says Ukraine should cede territory to Russia to end war', *Washington Post*, 24 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/24/henry-kissinger-ukraine-russia-territory-davos/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 4 Aug. 2022.)

<sup>3</sup> George F. Kennan, 'A fateful error', *New York Times*, 5 Feb. 1997, <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/05/opinion/a-fateful-error.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Applebaum, Twitter post, 1 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/anneapplebaum/status/1498623804200865792>.

Tooze observes, rage aimed at the most outspoken champion of the structural realist theory of international politics, John Mearsheimer, may be more reflective of 'liberal frustrations over the West's limited power to prevent Russia's war', rather than the product of genuine engagement with his argument.<sup>5</sup> Examples of ostracizing academics (and banishing Russian media) may also be illustrative of a greater risk to democracy and free speech.<sup>6</sup> And they speak to a persistent aversion towards realism, as Mearsheimer himself has been busy to point out.

Apart from a policy debate on the appropriate kind of military aid to be offered to Ukraine and the future configuration of the transatlantic alliance, the controversy surrounding structural realist assessments of the war has raised some crucial questions for theory, foreign policy analysis and the IR field more broadly. What lies at the core of the brand of realism that Mearsheimer and other structural realists, like Stephen Walt, are espousing? What are its intellectual origins? What does it add to our understanding of the reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine? And in what ways might it cloud or obfuscate impartial analysis of the crisis? A tweet by the Russian ministry of foreign affairs on 28 February, pointing to Mearsheimer's 2014 *Foreign Affairs* piece for reasons why the current crisis could be blamed on the 'US and its European allies',<sup>7</sup> raises an additional question: are academics responsible for the use and possible misappropriation of their theories, or should they at least try to account for the possible ramifications of their ideas?

This article can, at best, offer partial answers to these questions. The first section attempts to clarify Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine war and contrasts it to other applications of structural realism, both 'offensive' and 'defensive'. The article then moves on to deconstruct some of the main components of structural realist theory—including power differentials, 'rational' interests and states as unitary actors. The concluding sections trace these concepts to the base emotions of anger and fear, suggesting that structural theory, too, is premised on the same assumptions about human nature that classical realists identified.

## Situating Mearsheimer's Ukraine analysis within the realist paradigm

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, John Mearsheimer appears to have doubled down on his 2014 assessment of the political crisis in Ukraine,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that the current war, too, was the fault of the West;<sup>9</sup> or at least, that the West is principally but not exclusively responsible. As in 2014,

<sup>5</sup> Adam Tooze, 'John Mearsheimer and the dark origins of realism', *New Statesman*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/john-mearsheimer-and-the-dark-origins-of-realism>.

<sup>6</sup> Mark MacCarthy, *Why a push to exclude Russian state media would be problematic for free speech and democracy*, Brookings, 14 April 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/techtank/2022/04/14/why-a-push-to-exclude-russian-state-media-would-be-problematic-for-free-speech-and-democracy/>.

<sup>7</sup> Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Twitter post, 28 Feb. 2022, [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1498336076229976076?s=20&ct=450X-F03elOvF88Ooz7skg](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1498336076229976076?s=20&ct=450X-F03elOvF88Ooz7skg).

<sup>8</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin', *Foreign Affairs* 93: 5, 2014, pp. 77–127. His thoughts on the causes of the crisis are perhaps even more eloquently formulated in the 2015 lecture mentioned in footnote 1.

<sup>9</sup> Isaac Chotiner, 'Why John Mearsheimer blames the US for the crisis in Ukraine', *New Yorker*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>.

Mearsheimer points to a 'deep cause' for the crisis in Ukraine and 'precipitating causes', including factors pertaining to Russian nationalism, Putin's revisionist world-view and Ukrainian domestic politics. The latter part, on precipitating conditions, is often overlooked in popular characterizations of his argument.

With respect to the deep cause of the crisis (or crises), Mearsheimer's analysis is provocative but coherent. By insisting on a continuing eastward expansion of NATO, the United States and its European allies had needlessly provoked Russia, even backed it into a corner. While it had been too weak throughout the 1990s to prevent western intervention in the Balkans, or to prevent the Baltic states from joining NATO in 2004, Russia drew a hard line after NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit, which promised eventual membership to both Georgia and Ukraine. The rigidity of Mearsheimer's argument remains the exception among IR theorists. Perhaps only Walt has taken a similar position. Before the Russian 'special operation' had even begun, he argued that what was most tragic about it is that it could have been avoided, if not for the mix of 'hubris, wishful thinking, and liberal idealism' displayed by the United States and its European allies.<sup>10</sup>

A more nuanced reading of Mearsheimer suggests that the West's culpability goes deeper than reckless provocation.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the United States and its European allies, after having played a leading role in negotiating the surrender of Soviet nuclear weapons left on Ukraine's territory, failed to provide the country with adequate security guarantees. Repeated promises of NATO membership, on which few members of the western coalition intended ever to deliver, were just one link in a chain of misguided policy decisions that led Ukraine down a primrose path and triggered a Russian response. As early as 1993, he suggested that for Ukraine to keep its nuclear deterrent would be in the long-term security interests of the European continent.<sup>12</sup>

Mearsheimer has been consistent in pointing out the West's responsibility for Ukraine's malaise since 2014. One aspect that remains somewhat unclear throughout the various iterations of his argument is what is driving US plans to turn Ukraine into a western bulwark. The self-evident explanation is that balance of power politics promote the hegemon's aggressive and expansionist tendencies. At other times, however, Mearsheimer seems to suggest that pushing for NATO expansion was a strategic blunder, committed either because the United States had neglected the imperatives of power politics, or because its foreign policy-makers had bought into their own narratives about democracy promotion. Do 'liberal delusions' merely serve as a justification for American empire-building, or are they indicative of an ill-conceived foreign policy agenda?

Mearsheimer's account of the Russian invasion and its precedents may be the most prominent realist interpretation, but it is not the only possible one.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Stephen M. Walt, 'Liberal illusions caused the Ukraine crisis', *Foreign Policy*, 19 Jan. 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/>.

<sup>11</sup> The author would like to thank Michael C. Williams for pointing this out during a discussion of a draft version of this paper at the 2022 ISA annual convention.

<sup>12</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'The case for a Ukrainian nuclear deterrent', *Foreign Affairs* 72: 3, 1993, pp. 50–66.

<sup>13</sup> Emma Ashford has been an authority on realist applications to foreign policy. She reflects on different realist interpretations of the Russia–Ukraine war in an appearance on the Ezra Klein podcast: 'A realist take on how

Mearsheimer refers to himself as a structural realist.<sup>14</sup> Yet his realism differs markedly from the structural realism first formulated by Kenneth Waltz in his landmark *Theory of international politics*.<sup>15</sup> While both Waltz and Mearsheimer trace state behaviour to the security incentives imposed on them by an anarchic international system, the two theorists arrive at different policy recommendations. The reason, this article argues, lies mainly with theorists' different implicit assumptions pertaining to the nature of humans and, by extension, states.

Both authors consider international politics to be an arena defined primarily by the activities of great powers, but Mearsheimer supports Waltz's assertion that structural realism also has relevance for smaller powers.<sup>16</sup> Mearsheimer further introduces a distinction between global and regional hegemons.<sup>17</sup> These nuances might explain why Mearsheimer's brand of realism has attracted more popular appeal for analysts of foreign and security policy than Waltz's.

Mearsheimer wrote the definitive textbook on offensive realism. However, it has been questioned how well his analysis of the Ukraine crisis corresponds to the version of realism laid out in *The tragedy of great power politics*. In a series of tweets, his University of Chicago colleague Paul Poast argues that Mearsheimer's take on Ukraine more closely corresponds to his 2018 text, *The great delusion*, which was not representative of offensive realist thought.<sup>18</sup> Poast reminds us that Mearsheimer's offensive realism—as he himself acknowledges—is rooted in the ideas of G. Lowes Dickinson, particularly his 1916 monograph *The European anarchy*.<sup>19</sup> Trying to understand the causes of the ongoing First World War, Dickinson suggested that because they existed in a condition of anarchy, states would inherently seek 'supremacy' over one another. Crucially, however, according to Dickinson, anarchy is not an abstract *deus ex machina*—a catch-all category to explain the occurrence of international conflict—but merely describes the root condition which gives rise to the causal mechanism, based on 'mutual fear' and 'mutual suspicion' that precipitate conflict. States, in other words, strive to dominate other states not because the structure compels them to but because they are afraid and suspicious.

The difference may seem trivial but is important, as later interpretations of anarchy—among which we might count the defensive realism of Kenneth Waltz or Stephen Walt's *Origins of alliances*, which seem to suggest that war happens simply because there is nothing to prevent it—is that Dickinson's understanding

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the Russia–Ukraine war could end', *New York Times*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/18/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-emma-ashford.html>.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. in this short video appearance, in which Mearsheimer introduces his understanding of structural realism and its policy implications, and describes himself as a 'structural realist, like Ken Waltz': John J. Mearsheimer, 'Structural realism', *The Open University introduction to International Relations*, 3 Oct. 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXl1Dh6rD18>.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (New York: McGraw–Hill, 1979).

<sup>16</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), p. 403, n. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, p. 40.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Poast, Twitter post, 4 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/profpaulpoast/status/1511075001897693188>; John J. Mearsheimer, *The great delusion: liberal dreams and international realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> G. Lowes Dickinson, *The European anarchy* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

of anarchy actively promotes aggressive behaviour and military intervention. According to Poast, Mearsheimer built on this logic and placed a focus on regional domination. With the Monroe Doctrine and the United States' dominance over the North American continent in mind, Mearsheimer suggested that the only way for a state to survive was to dominate its region of the world.

The Soviet Union tried to implement a similar model, although the cost of maintaining its empire ultimately proved too high, hastening its collapse. Any efforts at resurrecting the Russian 'empire' were subdued, because Russia, for much of the two decades following the Soviet collapse, simply lacked the power to dominate its 'near abroad'—until around 2008. During all that time, the fear of Russian reassertion, however, never subsided—especially in the countries of eastern Europe that had, in one form or another, lived under the Russian yoke for centuries. Knowing that Russia, once it had the power, would seek to regain regional dominance, countries to its east and south-east did the one thing offensive realism would dictate in such a situation: they rushed to join NATO.

According to Poast and others, Mearsheimer's assessment of the Ukraine crisis does not correspond to his own offensive realist logic, or at least fails to take into account the role of east European states as a crucial determinant of a shifting balance of power in the region. If anything, offensive realism would suggest that NATO should have expanded sooner. Had Ukraine already had article 5 guarantees then, Crimea would not have been annexed in 2014 and Ukraine would not have been attacked in early 2022. It may also be worth challenging the counterfactual scenario, which appears to underlie Mearsheimer's argument.<sup>20</sup> Walt put it more explicitly, even before the Russian invasion began: had NATO not been expanded, 'Russia would probably never have seized Crimea, and Ukraine would be safer today'.<sup>21</sup> That, however, is merely an assertion. Had NATO not been enlarged in 2004 and passed the Bucharest declaration in 2008, who is to say that Russia would not have attacked Georgia and Ukraine?

According to the logic outlined in *The tragedy of great power politics*, neither the Bucharest summit declaration nor any later statements of intended NATO expansion should have made a difference to Russia's assessment of its security situation. Moscow should have already factored in America's expansionist intentions, irrespective of any benign or aggressive signals Washington was sending. Similarly, a logic based purely on balance of power considerations tells us only why Russia was *able* to attack Ukraine (because it was finally powerful enough), while the main thrust of Mearsheimer's explanations consists of reasons why it was *willing* or determined to attack (because an alleged coup in Kyiv and NATO expansion had provoked it).

As Mearsheimer himself might acknowledge, structural factors present necessary but not sufficient causes to explain the Ukraine crisis. What he refers to as 'precipitating causes' might play a more important role in carrying his argument

<sup>20</sup> As argued by Jan Smoleński and Jan Dutkiewicz, 'The American pundits who can't resist "Westspaining" Ukraine', *The New Republic*, 4 March 2022, <https://newrepublic.com/article/165603/carlson-russia-ukraine-imperialism-nato>.

<sup>21</sup> Walt, 'Liberal illusions caused the Ukraine crisis'.

than titles or straw men versions of his statements suggest. Among these are Putin's 'authoritarian and thuggish tendencies',<sup>22</sup> Russian nationalism,<sup>23</sup> Putin's non-recognition of Ukrainian statehood,<sup>24</sup> 'fascist' groups in Ukraine,<sup>25</sup> and, perhaps most importantly, Putin's aversion to an agenda of 'democracy promotion' and fear of regime change.<sup>26</sup> In a June 2022 lecture, Mearsheimer also spends much time detailing how a series of questionable moves by Volodymyr Zelensky prompted Russian aggression.<sup>27</sup>

More broadly, he makes assumptions—some explicit, some implicit—about the characters of the main players. The United States, in this interpretation, was hell-bent on both dominating its hemisphere and denying any rising challengers equal claims to their own regions of the world. Those motives were the result of systemic imperatives, but also what Kenneth Waltz referred to as 'socialization pressures'—which were self-perpetuating, because the American foreign and defence policy communities had institutionalized their state's imperialistic agenda.

While the introductory section of Mearsheimer's *The tragedy of great power politics* takes up Waltz's conception of the international system, in which the primary objective of states is to survive,<sup>28</sup> the remainder of the volume departs from that parsimonious logic and introduces assumptions pertaining to the capability and motives of states. Most importantly, great powers are deemed to be inherently aggressive and expansionist. Never certain about the intentions of potential rivals, which might resort to the use of force at any time, states would logically resort to maximizing their own power, i.e. their offensive capabilities, and seek to dominate their parts of the world.<sup>29</sup> According to Jack Snyder, both 'defensive' and 'aggressive' realists believe that states are primarily motivated by security considerations. Where they differ is with respect to how security is best attained. In the eyes of 'aggressive' realists, the 'international system creates powerful incentives for aggression'.<sup>30</sup> As with more general attempts to distinguish between realist and liberal theory, probing an argument for optimistic or pessimistic thinking—or a focus on change versus continuity—offers a practical way of telling offensive and defensive strands of realism apart.

It has been argued—most systematically by Annette Freyberg-Inan—that all realist theories, including structural realism, are based on 'assumptions about the motives of political actors, which represent beliefs about individual psychology'. As a result,

<sup>22</sup> Mearsheimer, 'Why is Ukraine the West's fault?'

<sup>23</sup> Mearsheimer, 'Why is Ukraine the West's fault?'

<sup>24</sup> Chotiner, 'Why John Mearsheimer blames the US for the crisis in Ukraine'.

<sup>25</sup> Chotiner, 'Why John Mearsheimer blames the US for the crisis in Ukraine'.

<sup>26</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Wrecking Ukraine: the cost of winning the war', interview, 19 June 2022, [https://youtu.be/q4TV4\\_tLzE](https://youtu.be/q4TV4_tLzE).

<sup>27</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'The causes and consequences of the Ukraine war', lecture at European University Institute, Florence, 16 June 2022, <https://youtu.be/qciVozNtCDM>.

<sup>28</sup> Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, pp. 29–32.

<sup>29</sup> Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics*, pp. 30–31.

<sup>30</sup> Jack L. Snyder, *Myths of empire: domestic politics and international ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 12, n. 36. The full note reads: 'Walt, *Origins of alliances*, is the quintessential example of what I call the defensive Realist position. Mearsheimer, 'Back to the future', comes close to the aggressive Realist position ... Waltz, *Theory of international politics*, has a foot in both camps.'

the relationships between the central motivating forces of fear, self-interest, and the desire for power have not been systematically specified by realist theory. Neither has the degree of influence that the operation of these motives, as compared to that of constraints imposed by the environment, is expected to have on foreign policy decisions.<sup>31</sup>

Dominic Johnson and Brad Thayer offer yet another way to think of the behavioural micro-foundations of structural theory. They suggest that the three core assumptions about behaviour made by Mearsheimer and other offensive realists—self-help, power maximization and out-group fear—are not only evolutionarily adaptive but also empirically common in primate and human societies. States behave the way offensive realists predict, not because of an anarchical international system but because of the adaptive traits with which evolving in that system has equipped us.<sup>32</sup> Their evolutionary take on structural realism also offers us an explanation of why individual leaders themselves, and not just states, seek power.

### **The problem of power differentials**

Both traditions of structural realism explain foreign policy with reference to an anarchic international system, where only power maximization or alliances can ensure a state's survival. Strictly speaking, neo-realism, according to its progenitor, Kenneth Waltz, claims to be able to explain not any one state's foreign policy but only broader patterns in international politics.<sup>33</sup> Where foreign policy analysis is, nonetheless, guided by structural theory, it has traced changes in Russia's place and relative power in the state system and drawn strategic implications from them. There is a direct link between changes in the distribution of power and policy outcomes, irrespective of domestic politics or the motivation of individual decision-makers. In spite of this seemingly straightforward logic, conclusions drawn by structural realists, and policy recommendations based on their analysis, have been all but uniform.

A main determinant of the thrust of the argument is which 'side' is thought to have embraced the lessons of power politics, and which 'side' to have ignored them for the sake of ideological maxims. Taking stock of broader patterns in Russian–western relations, John Mearsheimer has argued that the United States provoked Russian aggression by ignoring the imperatives of power politics. In a similar vein, Bock and colleagues applied balance-of-threat theory to the 2014 Ukraine crisis and found that that western policy-makers had failed to see how their actions could be seen as a threat to Russian interests.<sup>34</sup> Alexander Korolev views Russia's actions in Ukraine as part of a broader 'hard balancing response'

<sup>31</sup> Annette Freyberg-Inan, *What moves man: the realist theory of international relations and its judgment of human nature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Dominic Johnson and Bradley Thayer, 'The evolution of offensive realism', *Politics and the Life Sciences* 35: 1, 2016, pp. 1–26.

<sup>33</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', *Security Studies* 6: 1, 1996, pp. 54–7.

<sup>34</sup> Andreas M. Bock, Ingo Henneberg and Friedrich Plank, "If you compress the spring, it will snap back hard": the Ukrainian crisis and the balance of threat theory', *International Journal* 70: 1, 2015, pp. 101–109.

to US hegemony.<sup>35</sup> Stephen Sestanovich applies an analogous logic but turns the argument on its head, asserting that American and European leaders had no alternative with respect to major decisions they took in respect of the European order since the end of the Cold War, even if they meant alienating Russia. Equally, Russia had no choice but to respond in kind.<sup>36</sup>

More fundamentally, power differentials—or different interpretations of shifts in the balance of power—frequently lie at the core of contradictory conclusions. Russia's power base had appreciated significantly since 1999 as oil prices rose. While the country suffered from a recession brought on by the 2009 financial crisis, its military expenditure kept climbing. By contrast, the United States, which also felt the effects of the economic crisis, had to bear the additional cost of prolonged military operations in the Middle East. Using different quantitative metrics, Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev argue that Russian relative power was rising against that of the US and European states between 1999 and 2016.<sup>37</sup>

Mearsheimer's assessment is premised in part on Russia's improved power position (although he still does not consider it to be a 'peer competitor' of the US). In 2014, Russia had both the will and the ability to react to efforts to turn Ukraine into a western stronghold and eventually expand a hostile military alliance up to Russia's doorstep. Mearsheimer attaches little value to claims of democracy promotion and economic cooperation, apart from as exculpatory rhetoric. American and European leaders had made the mistake of ignoring the facts of *realpolitik* and how their actions would be perceived in Russia.

Other proponents of *realpolitik* have reached similar conclusions for fundamentally different reasons, suggesting that Russia acted not out of an improved power position, but out of weakness or desperation, trying to cement its status and influence while it still could, even at disproportionate cost.<sup>38</sup> In an early formulation of hegemonic stability theory, Robert Gilpin challenged the basic logic of states acting more aggressively the more powerful they become by pointing out that declining powers might take greater risks in trying to defend their relative position. This fundamental condition also applied to nuclear powers:

A nation still might start a war for fear that its relative strength will diminish with time, and an accident still might precipitate unprecedented devastation. It is not inconceivable that some state, . . . [such as] a declining superpower, might one day become so desperate that it resorts to nuclear blackmail in order to forestall its enemies.<sup>39</sup>

Because of internal contradictions, arguments based on power differentials were 'nearly tautological and unfalsifiable', as Elias Götz and Neil MacFarlane

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Korolev, 'Theories of non-balancing and Russia's foreign policy', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41: 6, 2018, p. 889.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Sestanovich, 'Could it have been otherwise?', *The American Interest* 10: 5, 2015, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/14/could-it-have-been-otherwise/>.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Saradzhyan and Nabi Abdullaev, 'Measuring national power: is Putin's Russia in decline?', *Europe-Asia Studies* 73: 2, 2021, pp. 291–317.

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Andrej Krickovic, 'The symbiotic China–Russia partnership: cautious riser and desperate challenger', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 10: 3, 2017, pp. 299–329.

<sup>39</sup> Robert Gilpin, 'The theory of hegemonic war', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18: 4, 1988, p. 613.



observe.<sup>40</sup> According to the vantage-point—i.e. assuming either a ‘strong’ or a ‘weak’ Russia—the relative power of western states shifts with the Russian position. An assertive Russia could have either been emboldened by western weakness or acted as a challenger to the global hegemon.

In his take on the 2014 crisis, Joe Nye suggested that Russia was ‘a very real threat to the international order’ because it was in ‘long-term decline’, and declining states had a tendency to ‘become less risk-averse’.<sup>41</sup> The work of Hal Brands also suggests that Vladimir Putin has been haunted by the ‘spectre of decline’, making Russia more dangerous as a result.<sup>42</sup> Trying to make sense of Putin’s decision to invade the whole of Ukraine, Henry Kissinger has made a similar point: apart from an effort to reconstruct the empire, you could also interpret Russia’s move as ‘recognition of growing Russian relative weakness’. The West was approaching via Ukraine, and Putin’s war was essentially ‘a last act to show that there were limits to what Russia could tolerate’.<sup>43</sup>

Another point of criticism frequently levelled against structural realism is that its parsimonious nature—zeroing in on a narrow set of variables at the level of the international system—absolves the analyst from engaging with historical, cultural, institutional and personal specificities. Any theory-driven approach to foreign policy analysis—realist or liberal—runs the risk of oversimplification. Templates from western strategic thought are occasionally applied to the Russian context without accounting for idiosyncracies of the case; or simply treat Russian foreign policy as a ‘dark double’ or inverse template of US policy. In other instances, Russian strategy is improperly characterized as an enigma or an impenetrable black box; or the entire defence-industrial complex is portrayed as a monolith, serving only the grand design of one man. Yet another set of explanations seem to suggest that Russian defence and security policy are so peculiar that they do not lend themselves to rigorous analysis. These may be indicative of either intellectual laziness or the romanticized verbiage of would-be Kremlinologists.

By focusing on material power and the structure of the system, structural realist explanations accentuate the causal relevance of great powers—the United States and, by extension, NATO—while downplaying the role of other actors and the variety of their motives: the EU, a supranational organization, which played a key role both in the start of the 2014 crisis (through extending an association agreement to Ukraine, as Mearsheimer himself points out) and in setting the stage for its potential resolution (through Germany’s and France’s role in drafting the Minsk agreements); powerful EU member states with their own diverging economic

<sup>40</sup> Elias Götz and S. Neil MacFarlane, ‘Russia’s role in world politics: power, ideas, and domestic influences’, *International Politics* 56: 6, 2019, p. 718. As Neil MacFarlane pointed out to me in conversation, the contradictory nature of assessments of Russia’s power position tends to resolve itself if one considers the possibility of Russia operating from a strong position regionally and from a weak position in the international system as a whole.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph S. Nye, Jr, ‘The challenge of Russia’s decline’, *Project Syndicate*, 14 April 2015, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-decline-challenge-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-04>.

<sup>42</sup> Hal Brands, ‘Danger: falling powers’, *The American Interest*, 24 Oct. 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/10/24/danger-falling-powers/>.

<sup>43</sup> Fareed Zakaria, interview with Henry Kissinger, 10 July 2022, <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/fzgps/date/2022-07-10/segment/01>.

and security interests; different factions within American politics, ranging from pro-Russian right-wingers to former Cold Warriors; and separatists in Ukraine.

Rather than objective power differentials, what appears to matter most is how a state perceives its relative power position. Putin may have been emboldened by a concatenation of circumstances that had weakened Russia's competitors. Its main rival, the United States, had been humiliated by the hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan, and President Biden had been grappling with low approval ratings since coming into office. Equally important, the political landscape in Europe had undergone substantial changes. Brexit had arguably weakened Europe's collective security arrangement, and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson had already come under criticism for alleged violations of COVID restrictions. In France, Emmanuel Macron was in the midst of a fervid re-election campaign, and the retirement of Germany's Angela Merkel had removed an element of stability and continuity in EU politics.

### The problem of determining interest and rational objectives

Its innate indeterminism is part of the reason why realism has earned the unfortunate epithet of the 'stuff happens' theory of IR.<sup>44</sup> What 'happens', however, is also dependent on the analyst and whether their work is directed at a particular audience. Structural realism, in this sense, tends to have an answer ready not only when things go wrong but also when a wager pays off for one of the conflicting parties. In that way, the theory may rationalize the irrational and frame risky behaviour as advantageous even when it appears to be self-defeating.

Compared to Russia's current invasion, the Ukraine crisis of 2014 was a field day for structural realism, which might explain why Mearsheimer's assessment of the situation has fewer supporters in 2022 than it did eight years earlier. While the main mechanics of the explanation are similar, the outcomes are manifestly different. The annexation of Crimea was a strategic success—swift, efficient, bloodless—creating a *fait accompli* that failed to generate a unified western response and was popular with domestic audiences in Russia.<sup>45</sup> The current invasion is a strategic disaster. Announced weeks in advance by American intelligence services (although believed by few), it has killed thousands of Russian soldiers who did not want to be there, turned the country into a pariah on the world stage, crippled its economy, polarized Russian public opinion and driven many intellectuals into exile. With the benefit of hindsight, the annexation of Crimea seems like a 'rational' move for Putin. It is hard to interpret his 2022 invasion in that way.

This assessment muddles different concepts of rationality. It is laid out here because, at times, structural realists are guilty of *ex-post* rationalization. Evidently, whether or not we judge Putin to be rational matters a great deal. If he cannot be

<sup>44</sup> A slightly adapted quote from a discussion at an annual convention of the ISA, as recounted by Stefano Guzzini, *Realism as a critique of militarism and national primacy*, Danish Institute for International Studies, 8 Dec. 2017, <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/realism-as-a-critique-of-militarism-and-national-primacy>.

<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, it can be argued that by annexing Crimea, Russia forfeited any chance of ever exerting influence over Ukrainian domestic politics again.

convinced that the costs of his invasion are going to far outweigh any potential gains, he might be driven to escalate further or drag other states into the war. First, we need to specify the time-frame. Are we judging the rationality of the Russian leadership's decision to invade on the basis of the information it had available at the time, or on the basis of their capacity to adapt their actions in the light of new information? Putin's unwillingness to negotiate may seem irrational considering the long-term costs inflicted on Russia. At the same time, Russia's withdrawal from western Ukraine in the absence of the desired military successes is not the handwriting of a deluded warlord.

Second, we need to determine whether we take Putin's ends for granted, or question the rationality of his objectives themselves, as Dale Copeland argues.<sup>46</sup> If Putin thought he needed to prevent Ukraine's westward orientation for some predetermined reason—e.g. to avoid humiliation, to stay in power or to ensure the survival of 'Russian' civilizational values—and believed he would be able to take control of the country quickly (a belief which may itself be cited as evidence of irrationality), his decision might indeed have been rational. Miscalculation (about the likely success of the military operation) is not evidence of irrationality.<sup>47</sup> Even Putin's seemingly outlandish rationale—that Ukraine was a 'brother nation' but he would rather see it completely destroyed than fall to the West—may be rational in his own frame of reference, in which a western encroachment on Ukraine is tantamount to the destruction of both Ukraine and Russia. A more comprehensive concept of rationality, however, asks not whether Putin's means were suitable to meet his ends but whether his ends made sense in the first place. That is, whether a rational decision-maker, if put in Putin's shoes, would have arrived at a similar view of reality based on the information available. This understanding of rationality carries little insight, however. If we cannot presume objectives, how are we supposed to evaluate policy?

Assuming that Copeland is right in saying that most realists 'believe his [Putin's] action is at least understandable given his declining geopolitical position vis-à-vis NATO and the relative firepower advantage everyone thought the Russian army possessed', then they have chosen the former conception of rationality, i.e., taking Putin's ends as a given and questioning his means. Making that assessment is itself difficult, as the costs and risks associated with a certain course of action cannot be known in advance. Whether Putin was right to assume that, because he got off lightly in 2008 and 2014, the consequences of an invasion in 2022 would be similarly negligible is anyone's guess.

Thinking of Putin's actions as representing a geostrategic 'gain' or 'loss' is fraught with additional problems. 'Why did Putin attack Ukraine?' might be the wrong question to ask, because it frames his choices as a strategic gambit. In 2014, Putin seemed to score a 'win' by harnessing turmoil in Ukrainian politics and

<sup>46</sup> Dale Copeland, *Is Vladimir Putin a rational actor?*, Miller Center, 10 March 2022, <https://millercenter.org/vladimir-putin-rational-actor>.

<sup>47</sup> We also need to be careful not to 'conflate high-stakes gambles—and the unsuccessful policy they have spawned in this case—with irrationality'. I would like to thank two of my anonymous reviewers for emphasizing this.

annexing Crimea. This ignores the widespread perception among Russian elites that Crimea, despite having been gifted to Ukraine in 1954 by Khrushchev, was still considered part of Russia.<sup>48</sup> To Putin, Crimea and Ukraine were his to lose. This has implications for his decisions, as interdisciplinary research has shown that political operatives tend to have a perceptual bias towards negative information.<sup>49</sup> The dread of losses is a much stronger motivating factor than the possibility of gains.<sup>50</sup> Put differently, a Russian president who fears a loss of the preferred status quo is more motivated to take action than a leader who merely seeks to make a dubious territorial gain. While allowing us a more differentiated representation of relative preference hierarchies, however, prospect theory does not stipulate a mechanism by which framing occurs.<sup>51</sup>

Assessments of Putin's rationality since the beginning of his invasion of Ukraine have been accompanied by a process of introspection on the part of some observers, who might have previously viewed the Russian leader as a capable strategist. It is safe to say that Russia's lacklustre military performance has been the source of some cognitive dissonance, if not disappointment, about its commander-in-chief. Eliot Cohen put it very clearly: Putin was no longer a 'chess master' but simply an ageing dictator—paranoid, brutal and in mental decline. 'Putin's behaviour shocked many people because they bought into his image as a grand master of intricate policy manoeuvres, which assumes intentionality, adroitness, and cunning.'<sup>52</sup>

John Mearsheimer, too, once described Putin as a 'first-class strategist'. His actions corresponded to those of a decision-maker who has taken the imperatives of power politics into account and acts accordingly. In keeping with the parameters of structural realism, personality should not matter. Personality, however, does matter. Walt suggests that structure might tell us most of what we need to know about the reasons for Russia's war in Ukraine, but cannot tell us everything. International politics cannot be fully understood without accounting for misperception and miscalculation. '[Structural] realist theories are less helpful here,' he admits,

as they tend to portray states as more or less rational actors that calculate their interests coolly and look for inviting opportunities to improve their relative position ... Even when information is plentiful, perceptions and decisions can still be biased for psychological, cultural, or bureaucratic reasons.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Ted Hopf, "'Crimea is ours': a discursive history', *International Relations* 30: 2, 2016, pp. 227–55.

<sup>49</sup> Dominic D. P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, 'Bad world: the negativity bias in international politics', *International Security* 43: 3, 2018, pp. 96–140.

<sup>50</sup> This is the central premise of applications of prospect theory in IR. See Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, 'Prospect theory and foreign policy analysis', in Robert A. Denemark, ed., *The international studies encyclopedia* (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Tuomas Forsberg and Christer Pursiainen, 'The psychological dimension of Russian foreign policy: Putin and the annexation of Crimea', *Global Society* 31: 2, 2017, p. 229.

<sup>52</sup> Eliot A. Cohen, 'Putin's no chess master', *The Atlantic*, 26 Jan. 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/01/russia-ukraine-putin-nato/621370/>; Eliot A. Cohen, 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man', 1 March 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/03/putin-ukraine-invasion-military-strategy/622956/>.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen M. Walt, 'An International Relations theory guide to the war in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, 8 March 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/08/an-international-relations-theory-guide-to-ukraines-war/>.

Given the degree to which Vladimir Putin personally exerts control over foreign policy-making in his country, it appears that insights into his character and psychology are particularly called for. To be clear, any such assessments may be no better than what used to be known derisively as Kremlinology: 'the art of second-guessing the inner dynamics of an opaque system'.<sup>54</sup> However, it is also clear that there is no alternative to engaging in some kind of 'Putinology'. Making a determination about the rationality of his aims in Ukraine is impossible for the time being, and may well never be possible. Perhaps he himself does not know what actually drives his actions.

To circumvent the problem of dealing with subjective categories such as personality, perception or individual motives, we may turn to universal or 'generalizable' human phenomena such as emotions, patterns of risk perception, or other mental shortcuts or behavioural heuristics. Hans Morgenthau referred to these as 'repetitive patterns' of the mind.<sup>55</sup> Compared to the 'actual' motives of state leaders, which were impossible to deduce, we could draw on these phenomena, which have been comprehensively studied across psychology, linguistics and neuroscience, and which offer a way to hypothesize about the likely behavioural responses they promote.

Affect and emotion have been of particular interest to mid-twentieth-century classical realists.<sup>56</sup> Neuroscience has since offered more insights into their role in decision-making. As Damasio argues, information must first be affectively valenced to enable rational thought and decision-making.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, an affective response cannot be generated without prior cognitive appraisal. In spite of this, most of the work on emotion in IR still situates the phenomenon within a rational choice framework and assumes that decision-makers operate according to the logic provided by computational theories of mind.

Emotions, as predictive tools,<sup>58</sup> represent the mechanism which causes decision-makers to treat negative scenarios as more likely, because the consequences of negative outcomes would be felt more severely. Emotions and affectively charged experiences shape our expectations of the future even before we have become fully cognizant of our environment, and might be sufficiently intense to uphold these expectations even if new information runs counter to them. In that way, our affective disposition not only prepares us for the worst but also selects for the kind of information that would affirm our expectations—thereby enhancing existing biases. As a result, decision-makers over time may come to experience hypervigilance, conspiratorial thinking, paranoia or even persecutory delusions.

<sup>54</sup> Forsberg and Pursiainen, 'The psychological dimension of Russian foreign policy', p. 223.

<sup>55</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, sixth ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), pp. 7–8.

<sup>56</sup> See Andrew A. G. Ross, 'Realism, emotion, and dynamic allegiances in global politics', *International Theory* 5: 2, 2013, pp. 273–99.

<sup>57</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' error: emotion, reason, and the human brain* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), pp. 34–51.

<sup>58</sup> On the underlying logic, see Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How emotions are made: the secret life of the brain* (London: Pan, 2018).

The remaining sections of this article will deal with some of these phenomena and their potential ramifications for the case of the Ukraine war. Specifically, it addresses the consequences of perceived status denial at the collective and individual levels, and what might lie beneath Russians' supposed fear of NATO.

## Denied status and anger

A re-engagement with classical texts suggests that political realism goes beyond detached power calculations. Morgenthau emphasizes the importance of the pursuit of prestige to bolster the state's power base ('prestige in support of a policy of the status quo or of imperialism').<sup>59</sup>

Status concerns, particularly the consequences of perceived status denial, add an important facet to our understanding of Russian foreign policy. While it may not be able to provide a self-contained explanation, the concept makes many aspects of Russian behaviour more intelligible. First, status accentuates the role of Ukraine as a determinant of Russia's role as the regional hegemon.<sup>60</sup> This is echoed by Larson and Shevchenko: 'Great-power status carries with it the expectation that . . . smaller states, especially within its region, will defer to its wishes on foreign policy.'<sup>61</sup> When such expectations are frustrated, some form of 'angry' reaction is the result. Forsberg and colleagues suggest that 'anger about the West and its perceived ignorance over Russia's social status during the past make Russia's resentfulness vis-à-vis the West and its attempts to create new "rules of the game" in the relationship more comprehensible'. Lastly, status highlights how the Russian leadership came to view the use of military force in Ukraine (in 2014, although a similar argument could be made about the current war) as a 'necessity' rather than a reckless wager.<sup>62</sup>

Arguments based on status face several challenges. First, as Larson and colleagues suggested, because of its stickiness and fungibility, and because intangibles are at stake, status conflicts are more difficult to resolve.<sup>63</sup> Second, the literature on Russian status aspirations incorporates a seeming inconsistency. It is based on the assumption that Russian foreign policy is primarily directed westwards at its 'significant other'—Europe, the US or 'the West' more broadly.<sup>64</sup> Why, in that case, would a Russian leader choose a course of action that is sure to outrage those by whom he seeks to be recognized?

The issue matters for explanations not just of Russia's invasion of Ukraine but also its annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, its

<sup>59</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, Regina Heller and Reinhard Wolf, 'Status and emotions in Russian foreign policy', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47: 3–4, 2014, p. 267.

<sup>61</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for status: Chinese and Russian foreign policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 233.

<sup>62</sup> Forsberg et al., 'Status and emotions in Russian foreign policy', p. 267.

<sup>63</sup> T. V. Paul, Deborah Welch Larson and William C. Wohlforth, *Status in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 19.

<sup>64</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the idea of Europe: a study in identity and international relations*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

earlier invasion of Georgia, and its backing of a universally despised despot in Syria. More fundamentally, it relates to the question whether the use of force reinforces or runs counter to a state's status claims. Nicholas Onuf suggested that the relationship was inverse: 'Military capability, as a crucial measure of standing, should not be treated as an asset, to be expended in the pursuit of some other interest like security, because its depletion will adversely affect one's standing.'<sup>65</sup> Military power, in other words, can enhance status only when it is not used.

One way to disentangle the status paradox can be found in Morgenthau's writings on prestige. He distinguishes between prestige to bolster the state's power base ('prestige in support of a policy of the status quo or of imperialism') and the pursuit of prestige for its own sake (or for 'the personal glory of the ruler') while being 'neglectful of the national interests at stake and of the power available to support them'.<sup>66</sup> Mearsheimer's work on lying in international politics makes a similar distinction between selfish and strategic lying.<sup>67</sup> In his work on narcissism and nationalism, Morgenthau further elaborates on the interconnections between a leader's personality and foreign policy. Nationalism, he suggests, may be thought of as an expression of individuals' search for vicarious fulfilment of their emotional needs through the state.<sup>68</sup>

The status paradox can also be broken down to how theories of status account for perceptual differences regarding the impact of certain behaviours on status. Jonathan Renshon provides a conceptualization of status that integrates material factors and perceptions.<sup>69</sup> One way in which states actively seek status, as the title of Renshon's book suggests, is through fighting. Taking a rationalist approach, he explains how conflictual behaviour can be aimed at enhancing status, and suggests another way of looking at Moscow's Crimean calculation as far from irrational. Forsberg and Pursiainen offer a similar interpretation: 'There is a fine line between assertiveness and anger in Russia, and hence displays of anger often reflect superiority and determination, convey an image of effectiveness and can also increase a politician's domestic popularity.'<sup>70</sup>

Renshon's argument draws on other (mainly social-psychological) perspectives on status as well as general IR theory. With respect to the latter, Renshon adopts one of the core propositions from the structural realism of Robert Gilpin. The 'most prestigious members of the international system', Gilpin suggests, 'are those states that have most recently used military force or economic power successfully'.<sup>71</sup> In the absence of economic output befitting a great power, resorting to force to assert itself in the region might seem like an expedient option for contemporary Russia.

<sup>65</sup> Nicholas G. Onuf, *World of our making: rules and rule in social theory and international relations* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), p. 281.

<sup>66</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, *Why leaders lie: the truth about lying in international politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Hans Morgenthau and Person Ethel, 'The roots of narcissism', *Partisan Review* 45: 3, 1978, pp. 337–47.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for status: hierarchy and conflict in world politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>70</sup> Forsberg and Pursiainen, 'The psychological dimension of Russian foreign policy', p. 240. See also Mark N. Katz, 'Assertive, but alone', *The World Today* 63: 11, 2007, pp. 29–30.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 32.

It is also important to recognize that anger, as a consequence of status denial, comes in different forms and accordingly promotes tendencies towards different types of action. There are indications that the character of anger, as displayed by Putin over the perceived denial of Russian status, has changed over time. It may now be best described as contempt—for the western model, for the Ukrainian government and, more broadly, for those who oppose him. What distinguishes contempt from other forms of anger—such as defiance or resentment—is one's self-perceived position in the social hierarchy. While resentment, for example, is targeted at those thought to be higher up in the hierarchy, contempt is felt for those perceived to be lower than one's own in-group. Psychologist Ian Robertson has long observed markers of contempt in Putin's behaviour:

Contempt must be considered as one of the most important elements of [Putin's] psychology. It is not only contempt for what he almost regards as weak—and, possibly in his macho world view, effeminate—Western leaders. More important is his contempt for their institutions.<sup>72</sup>

In terms of likely behaviours resulting from an affective experience, contempt is more problematic than other variants of anger: first, because the probable action tendencies promoted by contempt are distinctly more aggressive; and second, because contempt negates empathy—the ability to take the other side's view.<sup>73</sup> That ability, however, is a cornerstone of successful diplomacy. In the absence of empathy, establishing trust and finding compromise solutions becomes virtually impossible. As Robertson writes in his psychological profile of Vladimir Putin, 'contempt negates the other perspective and the object of contempt is just that—an object. Objects do not have a point of view.'<sup>74</sup> Action tendencies do not accurately predict future behaviour. However, much as 'societal debates do not determine foreign policy moves, ... the general tenor of policy debates has the effect of making certain moves easier to legitimate than others'.<sup>75</sup>

The literature on status concerns holds important lessons in setting the agenda for future dealings with Russia. The question continues to be 'whether Russia can be induced to seek prestige by exercising more responsibility for global stability. Continued indifference to Russia's status aspirations will encourage Russian elites' sense of injury and humiliation, possibly leading to further conflict.'<sup>76</sup> An affective perspective may prove insightful. It is worth considering, for example, the hierarchy of affective concerns, which delineates the range of policy choices a Russian leader will consider. As Forsberg argues, Russia may be quite willing

<sup>72</sup> Ian H. Robertson, 'The danger that lurks inside Vladimir Putin's brain', *Psychology Today*, 17 March 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-winner-effect/201403/the-danger-lurks-inside-vladimir-putins-brain>.

<sup>73</sup> Nancy Eisenberg, *Altruistic emotion, cognition, and behavior* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986); Nancy Eisenberg, 'Empathy and sympathy', in Michael Lewis and Jeannette M. Haviland-Jones, eds, *Handbook of emotions*, second ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 677–91.

<sup>74</sup> Ian H. Robertson, 'Inside the mind of Vladimir Putin', *Telegraph*, 24 Feb. 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ukraine/11431850/Inside-the-mind-of-Vladimir-Putin.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Iver B. Neumann, 'Russia's Europe, 1991–2016: inferiority to superiority', *International Affairs* 92: 6, 2016, p. 1394.

<sup>76</sup> Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status seekers: Chinese and Russian responses to US primacy', *International Security* 34: 4, 2010, pp. 70 and 93.



to 'understand its relative status when military or economic issues are at stake'. However, when its interpretations of 'international norms and questions of justice' are disputed, Russia is likely to act defensively.<sup>77</sup>

## **Fear of revolution**

A literal reading of structural realist theory might suggest that threats are objective phenomena, emanating from attempts to alter the balance of power. Failures to interpret threat (or what might appear threatening to the other side) correctly are down to systemic 'fuzziness' or ineffective communication. Theoretical innovation has introduced a range of amendments and exceptions to this simple logic. The self-declared disregard for how political actors come to make their choices becomes problematic when affective, cognitive or social-psychological claims are elevated to constitute central components of the theory. Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, for example, introduces 'hostile intentions' to explain outcomes in international politics that escape strictly balance of power-based analyses.<sup>78</sup> By attempting to deconstruct the transmission mechanism between power and state behaviour, however, additions to structural theory might not just modify but rupture the simple logic outlined by Kenneth Waltz.

There is, however, another conclusion to be drawn from the way fear features in offensive realist explanations. Mearsheimer's perspective highlights an obvious, yet crucially important, point made previously by Robert Jervis: while states (and political commentators in these states) might view their own actions as benign, others might perceive them entirely differently.<sup>79</sup> Both Jervis's spiral model and Mearsheimer's offensive realism are rooted in the anarchic nature of the international system and the fear it instils in states. Both frameworks therefore offer ways to study that system and the outcome of particular configurations of it—by way of psychological mechanisms such as fear—and how that might lead to a regional conflict, an arms race or great power war.

What matters most in Jervis's model is not the objective nature of the threat that is being issued, but how it is perceived. That makes it necessary to engage with the process of how individual leaders come to develop certain fears. Mearsheimer's reference to precipitating causes, too, suggests that what really makes the difference in international politics is how certain moves are interpreted by leaders on either side. After all, substantial shifts in the balance of power occur very rarely, while the defining condition of the system itself, anarchy, is a constant.

Freyberg-Inan has directly related the emotion of fear to realist theory. The pursuit of power, when viewed through the prism of fear, is not an end in itself but a means to an end, which is survival. Thinking of assertive foreign policy

<sup>77</sup> Tuomas Forsberg, 'Status conflicts between Russia and the West', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 47: 3–4, 2014, p. 323.

<sup>78</sup> For example, why, in the 1940s, states with a significantly greater aggregated power base allied against the perceived threat of Nazi Germany. See Stephen M. Walt, *The origins of alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>79</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and misperception in international politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), ch. 3.

action thus need not be ‘part of a proactive strategy motivated by a lust for power and domination’, she notes. It is just as plausible to view it ‘as part of a reactive strategy, as responses to a more basic motive, which is the emotion of fear’.<sup>80</sup>

Asked whether Putin’s fear of democracy would not provide a better or equally suitable explanation for the Ukraine crisis, Mearsheimer acknowledged, in a lecture in June 2022, that indeed, he must have ‘a mortal fear of colour revolutions’.<sup>81</sup> Without accounting for changes in Russians’ threat perceptions, the central part of his explanation, ‘fear of NATO expansion’, rings somewhat hollow. Mearsheimer and other realists make an important point by highlighting how certain actions taken by the West may have seemed threatening to Russia. For one thing, NATO did not keep to its mutually agreed boundaries,<sup>82</sup> launched an extraterritorial war in 1999 despite Russian protest, and placed ballistic missile defence systems in eastern Europe.

Nonetheless, it must be called into question whether Russians—even the president and his closest advisers—truly believe that a land invasion by the North Atlantic alliance is on the cards. Initially, Russians viewed NATO as a relic of the Cold War. Potential enlargement was not deemed threatening, and some analysts blamed the initiative on organizational inertia.<sup>83</sup> Even after the most recent phase of enlargement, NATO forces on the Russian border hardly posed a credible deterrent.<sup>84</sup>

The problem with NATO now appears to be not what it is but what it has come to represent. As former prime minister Yevgeny Primakov once suggested, enlargement was not a ‘military problem’ but a ‘psychological one’.<sup>85</sup> ‘NATO’s growth in post-Cold War Europe served as a symbol of Western accomplishment and Russian defeat.’<sup>86</sup> More recently, the North Atlantic alliance has been associated with an even more far-reaching assault on Russian values and cultural sovereignty. The threat from the West, as Mark Galeotti argues, might not be one ‘borne by tanks and missiles but [by] cultural influences, economic pressure, and political penetration’. This, in the eyes of the Russian leadership, amounts to a ‘civilizational threat aimed at making Russia a homogenized, neutered, subaltern state’.<sup>87</sup> The way the ‘special operation’ has come to be framed in official statements and state television—as part of a civilizational struggle between Europe and Russia—may itself testify to Putin’s fear of competing models for societal development.

<sup>80</sup> Freyberg-Inan, *What moves man*, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> Mearsheimer, ‘The causes and consequences of the Ukraine war’.

<sup>82</sup> The controversy surrounding alleged promises that NATO would not expand is complex and perhaps best summarized in M. E. Sarotte, *Not one inch: America, Russia, and the making of post-Cold War stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Nikolai Patrushev, ‘Vyzov prinyat’, *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 22 Dec. 2005, in Sarotte, *Not one inch*, p. 102.

<sup>84</sup> Jorge Benitez, *NATO summit special series: Estonia and Latvia*, Atlantic Council, 3 July 2016, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/nato-summit-special-series-estonia-and-latvia>.

<sup>85</sup> Yevgeny Primakov, quoted in Leonid M. Mlechin, *Ministry inostrannykh del: romantiki i tsiniki* (Moscow: Tsentr poligraf, 2001), p. 620. Similarly, broader security concerns, such as the historically founded ‘encirclement thesis’, may also be framed in psychological terms.

<sup>86</sup> Kari Roberts, ‘Directions: the United States’, in Andrei P. Tsygankov, ed., *Routledge handbook of Russian foreign policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 240.

<sup>87</sup> Mark Galeotti, ‘NATO is a symbol that Russia is always an outsider’, *Intellinews*, 11 July 2016, <https://www.intellinews.com/stolypin-nato-is-a-symbol-that-russia-is-always-an-outsider-101714/>.

Putin's fear may also be rooted in deeper, socio-cultural foundations. Through a process of socialization, the historical precedent of multiple land invasions has implanted a sense of insecurity in Russians. In part, this has been, and continues to be, reinforced by the size of the country and the associated challenge of protecting its vast borders. In education, culture, folklore, religion and state customs, narratives of Russia as a 'besieged fortress' have created an image of the encircled state as an 'embodied condition', as stipulated by Gerard Toal's concept of affective geopolitics.<sup>88</sup> This suggests that territorial security matters to Russians in ways for which western analytical paradigms fail to account.

Research at the intersection of IR, psychology and neuroscience has identified possible consequences of fear. Among the most damaging biases elicited by a 'fearful' experience is a tendency to identify future threats—including ones that do not exist—and impaired risk assessment faculties. As a result, decision-makers might behave in a way that, even if intended as defensive, is seen as threatening by others. Once fear grips the political apparatus, it can become self-sustaining through narratives, doctrines, practices and institutions emphasizing enmity or aggression. In that way, the colour revolutions, various western interventions and the events of late 2013—leading to the banishment of Yanukovich—may have imprinted a lasting fear on Putin and his associates.

## Conclusion

Did Russia invade Ukraine because structural factors acted on it, or because of its leader's aggressive tendencies? In all likelihood, a mix of both sets of variables was at play. A diligent reading of Mearsheimer and other structural realists suggests that structure does not explain everything. In fact, depending on the case, precipitating factors may do most of the explanatory work. The vigorous debate generated by Mearsheimer's analysis of the Ukraine crisis has highlighted some frequent *misunderstandings* accompanying both academic and public discourse on applications of realist theory:

*Misinterpretation.* Mearsheimer sets out a coherent case of western responsibility for the Ukraine crisis. That is laudable in and of itself, if only because few others in academic IR have been willing to make that argument and stick to it. However, a look beyond the headlines suggests that while US designs to turn Ukraine into a western bulwark on Russia's doorstep constituted the root cause of the crisis, a host of other factors—including economics, demographics and Putin's mystical notion of Russian-Ukrainian unity—also feature in his explanation.

*Misapplication.* Conventional wisdom holds that IR theory offers simple, uniform lessons for interpreting a crisis such as the war in Ukraine and deriving policy responses. Liberal theory is thought to view Russian foreign policy as an outgrowth of Putin's increasingly authoritarian domestic rule. Accordingly, it promotes a tough and unwavering stance to counter the Russian leader's

<sup>88</sup> Gerard Toal, *Near abroad: Putin, the West, and the contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 46–7.

revisionist agenda. Social constructivists argue that the present state of Russian–western relations and the representation of both sides’ interests are all in our heads, and that increased attention to identity formation, the diffusion of norms and the creation of common values might salvage what is left of the relationship. Structural realists, in a simplistic reading, seem to add little value but to deflect blame from Russia by blaming the West.

There is much variation within realism, however. Even structural theory presents a range of contrasting explanations—especially when applied to east European states’ quest for NATO membership. It has been called into question whether Mearsheimer’s analysis of the Ukraine crisis even fits the theoretical postulates outlined in *The tragedy of great power politics*. An alternative interpretation seems equally valid: Russia was expected to try to reassert itself as the regional hegemon. Its neighbours saw it clearly, tried to warn the rest of Europe and to prepare as best they could. By the time Russia became powerful enough to take aggressive action, most of the countries at risk had managed to join NATO—leaving Georgia and Ukraine to bear the brunt of Russia’s quest for regional hegemony. The West, accordingly, should not be faulted for having caused the tragedy of Ukraine by expanding NATO. If anything, the way to prevent it would have been to expand NATO further, and do so more quickly.

*Misperception.* Could a better understanding of Russia’s security concerns, and of how Russian officials perceived (or misperceived) actions taken by the United States and European states, have averted the annexation of Crimea or the 2022 invasion? Perhaps. In any event, it is the analyst’s responsibility to keep in mind the multitude of causal forces that generate a particular foreign policy. As Eliot Cohen notes, ‘some observers missed the power of personality in a different way, thanks to a belief in structural causes and forces—what passes for “realism,” which is indeed often highly unrealistic’.<sup>89</sup> As Jervis’s writings on the security dilemma taught us, what we should be concerned with is not actual changes in the balance of power but how leaders might perceive them.

It is also helpful to think of Russian foreign policy not through the lens of realism but as an outgrowth of realist thinking. Since 2014, its foreign policy orientation has been shown to have solidified around a *realpolitik* understanding that emphasizes the necessity of regional dominance and borrows from geopolitical theory as well as Eurasianist narratives promoted by the likes of Alexander Dugin.<sup>90</sup> This orientation is more uncompromising than in the past, and views liberal values and democratic development not only as a deception based on underlying western strategic objectives but, in and of themselves, as a threat of cultural homogenization. Putin, it seems, feels called to carve out a counter-concept that protects Russian sovereignty and cultural self-determination—a vision that many among the country’s ruling elite still appear to share.

*Misgivings.* Mearsheimer likes to point out that there is a strong bias against realist ideas in public discourse and scholarship. This was felt most strongly inside

<sup>89</sup> Cohen, ‘Cometh the hour, cometh the man’.

<sup>90</sup> Aleksandr Dugin, *Osnovy geopolitiki: geopoliticheskoe budushchee rossii* (Moscow: Arktogetya, 1999).

universities, 'where dislike of realism is widespread and often intense'.<sup>91</sup> More recently, Stephen Walt argued that their unpopular truths on the Ukraine crisis have been renewed cause for hatred of realists.<sup>92</sup> The phenomenon is worthy of further investigation, because investigating the reasons for aversion towards realism—which arguably still exists—offers a promising avenue for disciplinary introspection.

It is important to remember that the chief purpose of theory, including structural realism, is not to condone acts of aggression but to make us understand—ideally, even anticipate and mitigate—the consequences of power politics, which may, at times, be tragic indeed. Morgenthau reflected that his realism was aware of the moral significance of political action, just as it recognized that good morals and the 'requirements of successful political action' would frequently clash with one another. Realism, therefore, should not make it appear 'as though the stark facts of politics were morally more satisfying than they actually are, and the moral law less exacting than it actually is'.<sup>93</sup>

One might argue that now is not the time to place substantive blame on actors who had very little to do with the suffering that is currently being inflicted on civilians. One might also note that a perspective like Mearsheimer's systematically downplays the agency of Ukrainians, who have, through their bravery and perseverance, animated and united much of the world in condemnation of the Russian attack. Yet one cannot help but show some appreciation for the minimalism and internal consistency exhibited by Mearsheimer's explanation of the crisis. Even those opposed to Mearsheimer's conclusions should be appreciative of his talent for putting the finger on weaknesses and inconsistencies in the foreign and security policies of the United States and its European allies, and in so doing ultimately help to strengthen the western position.

When studying the possible causes of Russian foreign policy, it is worth keeping in mind that there is usually not one simple truth, or monocausal explanation, to be discovered. Russia's intervention in Ukraine in 2014, much like Putin's current war, was not reducible to geopolitics, domestic power struggles, ideology or personal whims, but derived from a combination of these and other factors. Russian philosophers of science have described the phenomenon of *kon'yunktura*.<sup>94</sup> The term denotes, among other things, ways in which researchers adapt to the current political regime or intellectual environment—at worst inhibiting them from even considering interpretations of events not supported by the prevailing climate of thought. Those dismissing analytical eclecticism as a 'laundry list' explanation should at least be cautious of the fallacies of pre-eminent narratives.

<sup>91</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, 'Realism, the real world, and anarchy', in Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey, eds, *Realism and institutionalism in international politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>92</sup> Stephen M. Walt, 'Why do people hate realism so much?', *Foreign Policy*, 13 June 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/13/why-do-people-hate-realism-so-much/>.

<sup>93</sup> Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, p. 12.

<sup>94</sup> See e.g. Ivan A. Gobozov, 'Istoriya i moral', *Filosofiya i Obschestvo* 1: 57, 2010, pp. 10–11, [https://www.socio-nauki.ru/journal/files/fio/2010\\_1/istoriya\\_i\\_moral.pdf](https://www.socio-nauki.ru/journal/files/fio/2010_1/istoriya_i_moral.pdf).