

# Ukraine as an Example: The Cold War Never Ended

Ben Padan

Diablo Valley College

## ABSTRACT

The United States and Russia have almost always been in constant conflict since the start of the twentieth century. While the Cold War took shape as a largely political battle between the superpowers, massive militaries were constructed to ensure their own interests. The collapse of the USSR left weakened, yet powerful Russia which sought to reassert its dominance into Eastern Europe. Clashes between pro-US and pro-Russian sides took place in countries like Ukraine, where it led to war in 2014. Acting against a disorderly NATO alliance, Russia launched a full scale invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022. Using realism to guide their actions for decades, both countries continue to use realist driven policy to secure their national security interests and influence in Ukraine. The United States and Russia each have a piece of the blame in what is apparently an endless conflict.

## Introduction

The war in the Ukraine, the first major land war in Europe since World War Two, has had disastrous consequences. Thousands of soldiers and civilians are dead, millions of others have become refugees, and various other social, economic, and humanitarian crises have been catalyzed (Assessing the..., 2023). While media coverage of the war has died down since the start of the invasion, the war goes on at full pace, with both sides preparing for further clashes.

Since the dawn of the Cold War to the rise of Russian President Putin, the US and Russia have been at odds with each other. Vying for influence across the world, the war in Ukraine is yet another battleground for both of these nuclear-capable countries to display their strength and gain global influence, politically and economically. Realist international relations theory best describes the countries relationship and ongoing conflict. For years, both countries have been inserting their influence into Ukraine. Russia's invasion came out of the realist rationality of pursuing and protecting their national interests.

## History of US-Russian Relations

Diplomatic relations between the US and Russia/Soviet Union have, for the most part, been belligerent. For the better part of the twentieth century, and much of the twenty-first century, the United States and Russia have found themselves on opposing sides of many global conflicts. The first of these conflicts can be traced back to Russia's Civil War, where the US supplied troops and aid to support The White Army against the Bolsheviks (Trickey, 2019). After the Bolsheviks victory and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922, the United States rejected the USSR for over 10 years before finally establishing formal diplomatic relations in 1933 (Abarinov, 2011). Off to a rocky relationship, the United States and Soviet Union would finally be forced together by the aggression of Hitler's Nazi regime during World War Two. This war would go on to be one the few exceptions where both countries' national security and interests aligned. This hopeful alliance would not last forever though, and the new divide of Europe – and the nuclear bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki – would define the future of US-Soviet relations.

## The Cold War

The Cold War between the US and Soviet Union was a battle of power: culturally, economically, ideologically, and militarily. Each battled for respective spheres of influence, most notably seen in Europe between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Winston Churchill famously noted in 1946 that “an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” With the United States’ Marshall Plan and Russia’s establishment of satellite states, the stage was set for confrontation. In order for the United States to protect its global influence, the Truman government formally adopted the policy of containment in 1947. Containment policy outlined a foreign policy model where the United States would contain “Russian expansive tendencies” (Larson, 2021). A few years later, the US would adopt NSC 68. This policy paper was one the more serious realist policies adopted during the Cold War.

The State Department analyzes the policy as,

“In the event that an armed conflict with the Communist bloc did arise, the United States could then successfully defend its territory and overseas interests... [It] concluded that the only plausible way to deter the Soviet Union was for President Harry Truman to support a massive build-up of both conventional and nuclear arms.” (Milestones: 1945..., n.d.)

The start of the US outlook towards the Soviet Union after WWII was based on realist principles to defend US interests and influence. For the Soviets to rival the US on the world stage, they still needed one thing: the atomic bomb. Knowing the United States was the world’s preeminent power with nuclear weapons after WWII, the Soviets developed their own nuclear weapon in 1949. This sparked an arms race where both countries armed themselves with thousands of nuclear weapons. This eventually led to each of their successful hydrogen bomb programs in the 1950s (Soviet Atomic..., 2014). Since their global influence was mainly calculated militarily, it seemed a rational response by each country to build up massive weapon stockpiles and militaries. These nuclear buildups reached a near breaking point in 1962 when the CIA uncovered evidence of nuclear missile sites being built in Cuba. This led to a standoff, and the closest we have ever been to nuclear war (Cold War..., n.d.). In exchange for the Soviets removing missiles from Cuba, the United States removed the missiles it had in Turkey (Cuban Missile..., n.d.). Both countries acted logically throughout the crisis. Acting under realist principles, they each had missiles placed in strategic locations to better their power, security, and interests. It was also in each other's interests to later deescalate the situation by removing the missiles, as it became an issue of survival.

The Cold War saw many other power struggles take place between the USSR and the United States. The Korean War, Vietnam War, wars between Israel and its neighbors, Afghanistan, the Berlin Wall, and regime change in Latin America are examples of how power politics played out between the US and the Soviet Union. Both countries used realist policies to secure their interests and try to win. Actions taken to contain, block, counter, and battle one another defined the Cold War. Eventually, in 1991 with waning influence and economic struggles, the Soviet Union collapsed and its satellite states gained independence. The United States finally became the world's sole superpower.

## Post-Cold War

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the world saw hope for world peace and success. The Iron Curtain fell, and to those in the West, freedom and democracy had prevailed. However, for future Russian President Vladimir Putin, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe. With the United States seeing itself as the victor in the Cold War, it proceeded to take advantage of a weakened Eastern Europe to penetrate Russia’s sphere of influence.

NATO and the European Union planted their roots at the start of the Cold War as early measures to help secure Western Europe’s political and economic freedom. After the Soviet Union’s dissolution, both organizations went into phases of expansion. In 1999, three nations formerly under heavy Soviet influence joined NATO: Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic. Next came the largest enlargement for both groups. Seven countries joined NATO

and ten joined the European Union in 2004. Most notably were the ex-Soviet republics of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia (Associated Press, 2022). Even though the U.S was pursuing its interest of influence in the region, Sen. Joe Biden had previously remarked it would result in “a vigorous and hostile reaction in Russia” (Kaonga, 2022). What Putin and Russia saw in these actions were reneged promises on NATO expansion, and a move by the United States to undermine Russian influence and reaffirm US hegemony. To Russia, the expansion was seen as a security threat. At the same time, the pro-West Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003) and Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004) were interpreted by Russia as US conspiracies against them by the United States.

The expansion of NATO, the EU, and Western ideology in Europe would eventually lead to Russia’s 2008 conflict in Georgia. This would be reached when both Georgia and Ukraine officially announced their ambitions to join NATO and the European Union. These acts were once again seen as US interference within Russia’s range of influence and is partially responsible for Russia’s war with Georgia later that year. The war ended with a cease-fire and two Russian backed breakaway regions within Georgia (Russia Profile..., 2019).

NATO’s expansion and the war in Georgia at face value look like separate, unrelated incidents that do not involve the United States or Russia going against each other. However, it can be inferred that these events are all because of these two global powers pursuing realist interests. The United States pushed to expand Western influence into post-Soviet Europe and succeeded up to the borders of Russia. The US hegemony over Europe made Russia perceive a serious national security threat. In 2008, it responded in its own interest, by bullying Georgia and recognizing Russian sided breakaway regions within the country. US promises on NATO expansion in the early nineties were made to avoid future conflict with Russia. Going back on these promises only led to a severe security issue in Georgia, and then Ukraine in 2014 (Bush accuses..., 2008).

The 2014 crisis in Ukraine can find its beginnings with the NATO and EU expansion since the fall of the Soviet Union. In 2013, Ukraine was finalizing talks with the European Union when pro-Russian Ukrainian President, Viktor Yanukovich, suddenly pulled out of the deal. What happened next was a mass uprising in Ukraine known as Euromaidan. For the next few months, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians protested in Kyiv against Yanukovich’s government. These protests turned violent when government forces tried to break up and suppress the masses. The United States and Russia quickly took sides, with Russia supporting Yanukovich and the United States siding with the protesters (Fisher, 2014). Both countries took actions to influence the protests and Ukraine’s government. A leaked call between diplomat Victoria Nuland and the US Ambassador to Ukraine exposed US talks in deciding who should take over the government even before the ousting of Yanukovich (Ukraine Crisis..., 2014). Nuland can also be heard saying “fuck the EU.” The United States clearly got involved for its own gain and influence within Ukraine. Once again, they followed their realist policy to pursue their interest. Russia’s involvement within Ukraine during the protests is less obvious yet implied.

Yanukovich finally fled Ukraine to Russia after protestors stormed his mansion and government quarters (CBS/AP, 2014). Immediately following this, to make up for its loss of influence in Ukraine, Russia invaded the Crimean Peninsula. Shortly after the successful takeover by Russian troops, a referendum was held where over ninety percent of voters decided to leave Ukraine and join Russia. It should be duly noted that Crimea is majority ethnically Russian. Most of the world and the US declared the annexation illegal and do not officially recognize Crimea as part of Russia. (White & Popeski, 2014). Concurrent to the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatists captured government buildings in the Donbas region of Ukraine. Two new breakaway republics were declared and recognized by Russia. Russia sent hard military aid and even some personnel to assist the new breakaway states battle the Ukrainian military (Gordon, 2014).

An obvious post-Cold War pattern can be seen between the United States and Russia. The United States continued its realist policy after WWII, leading to encroachment into Russia’s sphere of influence, which ultimately resulted in clashes in Georgia and the 2014 crisis in Ukraine. Russia also followed realist tendencies to protect its national security interests, using military force to do so. Russia has been in a scramble to protect its sphere of influence while the US is busy expanding its own. With an examination of realist theory, we can better understand why Ukraine is caught in the middle between two countries fighting for power.

## Realist Theory

Realism is often posited as the first theory of international relations. It is one of the main system level theories, and has been a driving force in global politics for hundreds of years. The theory, as the name suggests, is rooted in providing a realistic description for international relations. Its nature is often appealing to foreign policy decision makers, as it gives them guidance on how to act in the real world, and not in an ideal one. Contrasted with the cooperative nature of liberalism, realism was first developed by Greek historian Thucydides during the Peloponnesian War to try to describe the cause of the conflict (Antunes & Camisao, 2018).

The Peloponnesian War was a conflict between the city states of Athens and Sparta in Ancient Greece. Thucydides deemed the cause for the war to be the rise of Athenian power, which Sparta feared (Historical Context..., n.d.). Thucydides' work recognized some of the basis for modern realism. One of the main acknowledgments was the identification of the state being the central actors on the world stage. In Thucydides' case, it was the states of Athens and Sparta. His work also realized that states would act to preserve and protect their self-interest, just as Sparta did when it started to fear Athens. Modern realism uses the term the Thucydides Trap to describe the "idea that the decline of a dominant power and the rise of a competing power makes war between the two inevitable" (Bartosiak, 2020). While the United States is not a rising power, its rising power and influence within Ukraine led Russia to fall into a Thucydides trap in 2022. Realist theory would be famously expanded on by Italian philosopher Niccolo Machievelli.

Niccolo Machievelli's treatise *The Prince* would be his lasting legacy in international relations. This publication was supposed to act as a guide for princes or state leaders in decision making. Machievelli's ideas emphasized the state's self-interest and national security. *The Prince* advised leaders to act against their morals and values, and enact decisions based on what was actually happening in the world (Antunes & Camisao, 2018). In other words, he was promoting pragmatism. Acting out of a rational self-interest, as Machievelli supports, is one of the key tenets of realist theory. Realist theory promoted by figures like Thucydides and Machievelli also relied on human nature being conflictual. It viewed humans as self-interested, and motivated to gain more power. Neo-realism, on the other hand, worked to separate human nature from realist theory.

## Neorealism

Neorealism was created by political scientist Kenneth Waltz during the latter part of the twentieth century. What Waltz wanted was to remove the philosophical aspect of human nature from realism. The reasoning for this was because Waltz did not want to have the philosophical debate of human nature lead to criticisms of realist theory. Instead of relying on assumptions of human nature, Waltz wanted his theory to rely on actual data. Part of Waltz's neorealism was the focus on states belonging to an anarchic and chaotic global order. In this uncontrollable world order, states must always be prepared for conflict through powerful militaries and military buildups. Waltz's theory can further be broken down into offensive and defensive neorealism. In defensive neorealism, states take reserved action with their militaries, while offensive neorealism has states act with more hostile policies (Antunes & Camisao, 2018).

Realist theory, with its expectations of conflict and power politics, certainly motivates policy within both the United States and Russia. From the end of WWII and on, both nations have acted on realist agendas, building massive militaries to battle each other for power and influence. Both countries' post-Cold War policies continued to reflect their Cold War, realist policy leading to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Ukraine has become one more theater shared by the two world powers, and realism is what has driven them to this point. Current administration policies continue to reflect this fact.

## US Foreign Policy - Ukraine and Russia

Aggressive US foreign policy towards Russia took a small hiatus for the four years Donald Trump was President. Leading up to his election as president in 2016, many were concerned about how he would tackle issues with Russia if he was elected. During his campaign, Trump praised Putin frequently. His most notable praises for Putin were for being a strong and smart leader, and in terms of the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, Trump even seemed to support Russia's annexation of Crimea saying, "The people of Crimea, from what I've heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were." The Mueller Report would later show that the Trump campaign redacted language in RNC speeches supporting the supply of lethal aid to Ukraine. A similar incident would occur in 2018 when, according to John Bolton, his National Security Advisor, Trump blocked a statement for the tenth anniversary of Russia's invasion of Georgia, something which damaged American "resolve" (Cohen, 2020).

As inferred from the example above, once elected President, Trump's rhetoric would remain much the same. When questioned on Russian involvement in the 2016 US elections, Trump defended Putin and Russia. Trump would also go on to make life easier for Russia in other ways. He weakened the NATO alliance by creating poor relationships with allied countries and called NATO dated. Senior Trump officials even reported that he wanted to remove the United States from NATO several times (Barnes & Cooper, 2019). Trump's policies towards Russia would continue to be marred by his reluctance to sign sanctions, condemn Putin, and how he handled Ukraine leading up to his first impeachment.

Trump's first impeachment trial landed him in hot water in regards to Ukraine. His impeachment came after he threatened to halt US aid to Ukraine if Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky did not investigate leading democratic candidate Joe Biden's son (History.com, 2021). The lethal aid, worth hundreds of millions of dollars, was part of the US commitment to help Ukraine fight Russian backed separatists for the last five years. Trump also spread misinformation regarding Ukrainian corruption to smear the impeachment proceedings, and attacked the US ambassador to Ukraine prior to his impeachment. All of this helped Putin and Russia in their objectives to destabilize the US and Ukraine (Cohen, 2020).

Trump's administration, however, still continued US realist policy to support Ukraine, albeit slowly. Ukraine was provided with billions of dollars of lethal and non-lethal military aid, as well as financial assistance, intelligence sharing, and training of personnel (U.S. Security..., 2023). With the election of Joe Biden in 2020, US 'friendliness' towards Putin and Russia would come to an end.

### The Biden Administration

Biden's reversal with Russia and Putin would come in the first couple months of his administration. One of Biden's first acts was to lead the United States, in coordination with the EU, to impose sanctions on Russia after Putin's opposition leader, Alexy Navalny, was detained on his return to Russia. Biden would go on to call Putin a "killer," and later in the year impose more sanctions for Russian interference in the 2020 election (Hickey, 2021). Other than a reversal of Trump's favorable expressions towards Putin and Russia, Biden also turned around US commitment to NATO and our allies. Biden wanted to reunify the US and allies in Europe after Trump had strained relations. The goal was to deter Russian aggression in Europe by showing a strong, unified front. Additionally, between the start of Russia's invasion and when Biden took office, the United States provided roughly seven hundred million dollars, continuing Trump administration policy (U.S. Security..., 2023).

Another of Biden's policies was to try and deter Russia before the start of the invasion. Biden declassified US intelligence regarding Russian invasion plans of Ukraine months before the invasion, wanting to warn US allies and Ukraine, while also deterring Russia by exposing their plans (U.S. Intel..., 2022). The US goal was to help protect Ukraine and its pro-West President Zelensky before the war even started. Part of this also stemmed from US concern that if an invasion were to take place, Ukraine would fall quickly. Biden took on a deterrence policy, bolstered by

realist ideals, to protect US interest and influence in Ukraine, out of concern that Russia would take it. Russia, however, went ahead and launched its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Biden's policy towards Russia has only become more hostile. The Biden administration has released rounds of sanctions, damaging the Russian economy. The administration's rhetoric has also been to paint Russia as the only one to blame for the invasion, and Biden called Putin a "pariah." Meanwhile, Biden's policy towards Ukraine has also been resolute. The Biden administration has given Ukraine almost eighty billion dollars, more than half of which has been direct military assistance. The administration has expedited training and intelligence sharing with the Ukrainian military as well. In addition to its own aid, the United States has rallied a global coalition of countries that sends direct military assistance to Ukraine (How much..., 2023). Biden has taken the defense of Ukraine seriously, which can be seen by the US decision to send heavy weaponry like tanks and Patriot SAMs. The Biden administration continues to actively support Ukraine at all levels and is dedicated to holding Russia accountable for its aggression. It has also reaffirmed, countless times, US policy for Ukraine's territorial integrity, which includes the reunification of the Crimean Peninsula with Ukraine.

## Conclusion

The United States and Russia have always had a tenuous relationship. Even through their short alliance during World War II, suspicion and battles for influence between one another were prevalent. The Cold War saw this alliance turn into a bitter rivalry for global dominance with the US seen, by most, as the victor. Even though tensions cooled after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the feud between these two world powers quickly heated back up again in the wake of NATO expansion and Russian aggression.

The tension eventually reached a breaking point when Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine early last year. Hundreds of thousands of Russian troops invaded Ukraine, with the goal of overthrowing the pro-US regime and capturing most, if not all, of Ukrainian territory. Both the United States and Russia expected a swift Russian victory, and a large reinstatement of Russian influence deep into Eastern Europe. This however, was not the case, as Ukrainian troops put up stiff resistance, and have now bogged Russia down into over a year's long war. The United States has continued its support of Ukraine, vehemently supplying them with powerful military equipment. With opposing sides taken, it looks like a repeat of the Cold War, something only supported by the nuclear saber-rattling of Russia. Both sides continue to dig deep in what now has become a war of attrition in Ukraine's East. Russia has mobilized thousands of new troops, leveraged the Wagner PMC, and the US and its allies continue to supply Ukraine with heavier weaponry.

Realist driven policy, which powered the Cold War conflict on both sides, continues to drive the gears of both countries foreign policy. With US expansion into Eastern Europe, it was only a matter of time before Russia responded with serious aggression in Ukraine. How would America react if Mexico and Canada had suddenly aligned themselves with Russia in a powerful military alliance? While there is no one else to blame for the current war in Ukraine other than Russia, partial responsibility lies in American expansionist and realist policy, which only catalyzed Russia to act in an extreme and realist fashion themselves.

With the continued escalations from both sides, it is hard to see an end to this war. While direct conflict between the US and Russia is not inevitable, it makes sense to say that we have already reached a point of proxy war between the two nations. Both countries are desperate to win, making it seem like there is no end in sight. In realist terms, however, it seems safe to say the United States, to a certain degree, has 'won.' Russia's military has been defeated badly in its objectives, its economy has been ruined by sanctions, and its government and Putin have been rejected internationally. While the war in Ukraine is not over, the United States has destroyed Russia's international standing and shown that Russia's once powerful military is weak. The US has an interest in a prolonged conflict to further weaken Russian standing and influence, while Russia looks for anything to call a victory.

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