

**THE WAR IN UKRAINE AND THE TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS:****A PARADIGMIC SHIFT – FROM FAR-FETCHED LABELLING TO DOWN-TO-EARTH REASONING**

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Even before Russia's invasion in Ukraine approx. eight months ago, there has been some conventional wisdom that the war can be explained through the prism of the first debate in IR theory, i.e. Realism vs. Idealism. As far as Kremlin's transgressions of Kyiv's sovereignty have been the stepping stones of an escalating crisis since the Crimea's annexation in 2014, it is taken for granted that the explanatory potential of the first debate remains valid. This paper, however, argues that the dynamics of the warfare peels off the superficial layer of explanation and bares the deeply rooted behavioral drivers and structural factors.

**The orthodox narrative: Realism vs. Liberal Internationalism**

Russia's intervention in Ukraine as of February 2022 is widely attributed to causality – Putin has attacked the neighboring country because he is feeling insecure of its growing affiliation with what he labels the 'collective West'. Here Prof. J. J. Mearsheimer is widely referred to with his study of the Crimea's annexation back in 2014 – he claims that the Russian regime is not the only one to be blamed for, but "*the United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis*".<sup>i</sup> NATO enlargement and EU eastward expansion are the critical reasons why Ukraine is pulled out of Kremlin's orbit and thus turned into a major threat. Eight years later, Mearsheimer persists with his Realist explanation of the causes of the conflict in terms of spheres of influence: "*Moscow did not invade Ukraine to conquer it and make it part of a Greater Russia. It was principally concerned with preventing Ukraine from becoming a Western bulwark on the Russian border.*"<sup>ii</sup> The author admonishes for a bloody stalemate due to Ukraine's commitment and is principally against the transatlantic support to winning the war at the expense of their adversary; moreover, he doesn't exclude the nuclear weapons option (because of the Western 'provocation'). He accuses US and its European allies of failing to make Ukraine a neutral buffer similar to Austria's position during the Cold war.

Mearsheimer's arguments are so indicative of the Cold war reasoning which reduces international relations to a zero-sum game. Such policy-making entangles states in a permanent security dilemma where the maximization of the power of one state comes at the cost of the minimization of the power of the other state or states. Realists postulate an anarchical world of *bellum omnium contra omnes* which is governed by escalation dynamics. Great power behavior is reduced to territorial claims, partitioning of spheres of influence (blocs, satellites, and military alliances), revisionism and imperialist struggle.

The realists' lens is confronted with the Liberal internationalist optic which substitutes the causal explanation with some normative considerations. Liberal values are the independent variables here, and Russia has to reconcile with the inevitable fact of the worldwide spread of democracy, not by coercion but by persuasion and attraction. Liberals describe the US and the liberal order it sponsors as having superior characteristics of multilateral cooperative peace and free trade, whereas competing orders led by Russia and its predecessor Soviet Union are categorized as degrading coercive zones of power hierarchy. Liberals are convinced that modernizing forces reinforce each other, pushing the global system forward in a progressive direction.

Several years ago, G. John Ikenberry, for one, held a criticism against the global liberal order because of a feared loss of its identity as a western security community – “*the democratic world was now less Anglo-American, less western*”.<sup>iii</sup> However, in the wake of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and the transatlantic consolidated reaction in the form of tough sanctions and massive military (lend-lease) assistance, he now believes that the war in Ukraine “*has made the US all the more eager to work with the EU to build up a lasting security structure in Europe*”.<sup>iv</sup> NATO has indeed started to play a more constructive role on its vulnerable eastern and northern flanks by improving stabilization and crisis management instruments, by enhancing its capabilities and partnerships, by strengthening coordination with the European Union, and, last but not least, by associating new EU members – an unprecedented U-turn for traditionally neutral Sweden and nominally independent Finland.

The First debate (Realism vs. Idealism) undoubtedly merits the academic discussion on the ongoing war. Still, it diminishes Ukraine's active contribution (forced to the status of a pawn on the global chessboard) and is uninterested in EU member states' relations. Both approaches put Russia on the defensive which does little justice to the Kremlin regime's accountability for

flagrant international law violations. The debate outlines a black-and-white picture of the reality and tends to make erroneous historical analogies.

### **The dissident narrative: Constructivism and new structural approaches**

The transatlantic community's perspective requires more precise analysis of the behavioral factors, beyond the polarizing rhetoric. Firstly, states are definitely not monolithic entities. The elites and societal actors may diverge in the way they perceive a crisis. Cases in point with the war in Ukraine are the domestic opposition's fleeing the Kremlin regime and the fiasco of a mobilization. Secondly, states are not necessarily rational actors, especially autocratic states may become the target audience of their own propaganda. As a defector (former diplomat Bondarev) admits about the side-effects of hybrid warfare: "*The war is a stark demonstration of how decisions made in echo chambers can backfire.*"<sup>v</sup> (the post-truth about the ineffectiveness of the Crimea sanctions, the consolidated support of the autocrat at home, and the trustworthy allies abroad).

Such detachment from reality accounts for the miscalculation on the Russian side about the initiation of the invasion and its subsequent failures. As Lebow puts it in the context of the false inferences of the Western "weakness" after Georgia'2008 and Crimea'2014, "*Linear projection is always questionable, and especially in international relations.*"<sup>vi</sup> By focusing on the subjective aspect of the decision-making as social constructivists do, we establish that:

- first, it is quite unlikely that any single motivation could explain the invasion alone, and it is difficult to assign relative weight to different motivations;
- second, while there is no shortage of statements of Putin and other Russian officials on the subject, many are contradictory, and none can be taken at face value, and
- third, the motivations and goals of the war can shift after its start in reaction to success or failure on the battlefield and changes in both domestic and international contexts.<sup>vii</sup>

Apart from individual misconceptions, affections and bias, it should be noted that collective beliefs, attitudes and expectations are also at play. Strategic culture can be applied as a framework, e.g. Russian strategic culture has two pillars, namely deep-seated fear of invasion (a reformulation of the security dilemma) and desire for great power status entailing sphere of influence (imperialism), which created space for launching the large-scale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>viii</sup> Historical allusions or better said, delusions, with the Great Patriotic war, have also

served their misleading purpose and made Russia's justification with 'liberation' and "denazification' sound cynical.

On the Ukrainian side, the lack of consistent identity proved to be a flimsy presumption that converted into a stable identity in the course of Kyiv's upholding of its fundamental right to self-defense as a sovereign state; it also turned into an alternative to the alleged large-scale Eurasian identity of the Russian federation.

Speculations about a possible prevention of the aggressive war by the transatlantic partners are of no avail. Some counterfactual thinking would only assert the fact that a momentous shift into a consolidated Euro-Atlantic security order wouldn't have been possible had it not been for the shock of the invasion (very much like in September 1939). Thus the war in Ukraine has revealed some structural shifts in transatlantic relations.

The first one is on the transatlantic level and it makes the search for strategic autonomy even more pressing, as is the case with the 'Strategic Compass for a stronger EU security and defence by 2030' (March 2022). This autonomy should be considered as a strengthening tool to NATO efforts in the event of imminent crises and complex emergency situations. Key issues of financial equity and military deterrence should be adequately addressed, as well as aligning regional force designs and rendering foreign policy compatible with the strategic priorities of the European Union (EU).<sup>ix</sup> Nevertheless, a European security deficit still exists due to differing national interests,<sup>x</sup> in the light of the specific essence of the integration community (combining the supranational and intergovernmental approaches). This constitutes a problem in the cases when member states take a divergent stance in what is formulated as a unified position and common policy, as in the example of the military support for Ukraine.

The second structural shift is related to the global positioning of the transatlantic partners, the US and the EU. As Newsome and Riddervold have inferred, on the one hand, transatlantic relations within NATO are strengthening within the context of the war in Ukraine, with shared norms and institutions stabilizing the relationship.<sup>xi</sup> On the other hand, longer-term geopolitical and economical structural changes necessitate a shared burden in multilateral institutions.

As we have observed the support Russia receives in the form of abstention votes at the UN, this even calls for an engaged resistance to future incursions on international legal order whose motivations would be even more difficult to fathom...

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- <sup>ii</sup> Mearsheimer, J. J. (2022): Playing With Fire in Ukraine. The Underappreciated Risks of Catastrophic Escalation - *Foreign Affairs* online, August 17, URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/playing-fire-ukraine>
- <sup>iii</sup> Ikenberry, G. J. (2018): The end of liberal international order? – *International Affairs*, 94:1, doi: 10.1093/ia/iix241, p. 20.
- <sup>iv</sup> *War & Peace 2022 · Interview with G. John Ikenberry* [transcript]. CIDOB Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, Mar 31, 2022, URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=efEm4-SyKnA>
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- <sup>vi</sup> Lebow, R. N. (2022): International Relations Theory and the Ukrainian War. - *Analyse & Kritik*. De Gruyter, 44(1), p. 131,
- <sup>vii</sup> Bahenský, V. (2022): Can ‘Realists’ and ‘Hawks’ Agree? Half-measures and Compromises on the Road to Invasion of Ukraine. - *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3, p. 63
- <sup>viii</sup> Götz, E., Staun, J. (2022): Why Russia Attacked Ukraine: Strategic Culture and Radicalised Narratives. - *Contemporary Security Policy*, 43(3), pp. 486-487
- <sup>ix</sup> Engelbrekt, K. (2022): Beyond Burdensharing and European Strategic Autonomy: Rebuilding Transatlantic Security After the Ukraine War. - *European Foreign Affairs Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 383 – 400
- <sup>x</sup> Knutsen, B. O. A (2022): Weakening Transatlantic Relationship? Redefining the EU–US Security and Defence Cooperation. – *Politics and Governance*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 170.
- <sup>xi</sup> Newsome, A., Riddervold, M. (2022): Conclusion: Out With the Old, In With the New? Explaining Changing EU–US Relations. - *Politics and Governance*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 233