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The return of power politics? Russia's war in Ukraine from a Neorealist perspective

I. Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine marks the largest military confrontation between European states since 1945. This seems to confirm the impression, which has persisted for years, that Russia continues to pursue a foreign and security policy guided primarily by interest of power politics. If this were to prove correct, it would also have far-reaching implications for the trans-Atlantic security architecture.

Thus, after 1990, the view held by the heads of the European states gave the impression that the age of power politics had ended with the end of Cold War and the concomitant collapse of the Soviet Union. This allowed for more far-reaching disarmament measures and a drastic reduction in military spending, which led to a more beneficial reallocation of these funds to other sectors in the form of the so-called *peace dividend*.¹ Potential

rivalries with authoritarian states - e.g. China - were to be countered by the expressly non-military approach of *change through trade*: “[...] the United States, Germany convinced itself that China’s authoritarian politics would morph into a free, open, and more democratic system through ever-tightening economic ties”².

A return of power politics would also have far-reaching implications for the scientific discipline of International Relations (IR), which has seen even more controversial debates since the end of Cold War. Thus, it was often argued that the intensified wave of democratization had broken the anarchic character of the international system advocated by Realist scholars. The claimed central consequence: a civilization of international politics.³ The current war and the numerous war crimes appear to prove the opposite.

Therefore, this article aims at clarifying the question to what extent the Russian war in Ukraine may be explained with the help of realism; in this case: neorealism. To this end, the basic assumptions of neorealism are first presented. Based on the analysis of the distribution of power among the great powers after

¹ Hoagl (1990).

² Barkin (2020), p. 2.

³ Lebow (1994).

the end of Cold War, the theoretical implications for Russian foreign and security policy are then derived with the help of two hypotheses. These hypotheses will subsequently be compared with the motives and the operational logic of the invasion of Ukraine.

II. Central assumptions of Neorealism

With his book “Man, the State and War”, published in 1959, Kenneth N. Waltz laid the foundation for his theory. In his 1959 work, he first dealt with explanatory approaches to inter-state conflicts. Waltz divides causes of war into three categories: the level of the individual (first image), the level of the internal constitution of a state (second image), and the level of the international system (third image).⁴ The theorist comes to the conviction that the third image has a central importance for interstate behaviour.⁵

According to neorealism, in the international system, the structural level shapes and constrains the behaviour of the states on the unit level.⁶ The dominant principle of the international

system is anarchy, which can be characterized by the absence of a power monopoly: “Formally, each is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey. International systems are decentralized and anarchic.”⁷ As a result, the states can only ensure their survival by means of self-help.⁸ Furthermore, neorealism views power imbalances as a threat to survival - therefore the *balance of power* is the primary interest of states.⁹ Nevertheless, the process of balancing frequently results in the unsolvable security dilemma: “Hence a state that is amassing instruments of war, even for its own defensive, is cast by others as a threat requiring response. The response itself then serves to confirm the first state’s belief that it had reason to worry.”¹⁰

The following capabilities are considered as a central indicator of the distribution of power between states: “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.”¹¹ According to Waltz, unipolar distributions of power tend to be highly unstable, since the dominant power (hegemon), due to its excessive

⁴ Waltz (2001).

⁵ Ibid., p. 238.

⁶ Waltz (1979), p. S. 92.

⁷ Ibid., p. 88 f.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 103-105.

⁹ Waltz (2000), p. 28.

¹⁰ Waltz (1988), p. 619.

¹¹ Waltz (1979), p. 131.

concentration of power, poses an imminent threat to other states, which will therefore engage in conflictual counterbalancing.¹²

III. Power Distribution after Cold War

After decades of US-Soviet bipolar balance of power, the collapse of the Soviet bloc paved the way for the U.S. as sole remaining superpower after Cold War. Already in 1990, Charles Krauthammer referred to this situation as *unipolar moment*: “Now is the unipolar moment. There is today no lack of second-rank powers. Germany and Japan are economic dynamos. Britain and France can deploy diplomatic and to some extent military assets. The Soviet Union possesses several elements of power-military, diplomatic and political-but all are in rapid decline.”¹³

Although this striking superiority in capabilities was without precedent, IR scholars – notably neorealists – predicted upcoming balancing efforts against the U.S.¹⁴ Nevertheless, U.S. policymakers sought to preserve this state,

primarily by perpetuating and developing the U.S. alliance systems in Europe, Middle East and Asia.¹⁵ This is particularly evident in the example of NATO, which has grown by 14 new member states since 1990.

While the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) proposed by the Trump administration has not yet materialized,¹⁶ Washington remains committed to its existing security partnership with the Gulf Cooperation Council states as well as Jordan and Egypt, despite its troop presence being reduced by nearly 80% since 2008 (2008: 220,000 soldiers, 2019: approx. 46,000 soldiers).¹⁷

Similarly, in East Asia, the existing alliance system with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia and - informally - with Taiwan has been preserved. The “Pivot to Asia” announced by U.S. President Obama in 2011, laid the foundation for a stronger political, economic and military presence of the U.S. in Asia, but especially in East Asia, where the U.S. has also established a defensive shield for two of its closest partners - Japan and South Korea - against medium- and long-range ballistic missiles.¹⁸ In parallel, the U.S. is seeking to integrate

¹² Waltz (2000), pp. 27 f.

¹³ Krauthammer (1990), p. 24.

¹⁴ Sears (2016).

¹⁵ Mastanduno (1997), p. 58

¹⁶ Thomas (2019), pp. 1-2.

¹⁷ Bowman (2008), pp. 80 f. International Institute for Strategic Studies (2019), pp. 59-61.

¹⁸ Yoon (2021). Nagashima (2021), p. 2.

existing alliances with regional partners into an overarching alliance system, as in the case of AUKUS (Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (India, Australia, Japan, and the United States).¹⁹

In sum, the international alliance and basing system is central to U.S. power projection capabilities that uniquely allow Washington to shape international politics through the use of military capabilities below the nuclear threshold, as demonstrated by numerous large-scale operations against various countries worldwide in the past.

In contrast, Chinese power projection capabilities, remain limited: While there have been rumours about potential military bases in Cambodia, the UAE or Equatorial Guinea, the base in Djibouti (est.: 2017) remains the only substantial deployment of Chinese troops abroad. Furthermore, a global alliance system comparable to the American, is still out of reach.²⁰ Nevertheless, China has already established a robust regional posture – especially in the South China Sea – which could hamper U.S. effectiveness of regional force deployment in a

future potential conflict.²¹

What implications arise for Russia from this assessment? At the global level, the capability gap to the U.S. as the hegemon of the unipolar international order is unassailable: For example, the U.S. GDP in 2020 amounted to about \$21 billion, while Russia's was about \$1.5 billion (11th place).²² Also in terms of conventional military capabilities, Russia is a shadow of its former (Soviet) self and faces considerable difficulties in militarily defeating its neighbour, Ukraine, even under topographically favourable conditions.

From the perspective of neorealism, this means that Russia will be unable to engage in international balancing efforts against the United States. It may therefore be expected that Russia will confine its efforts to its remaining sphere of influence and, beyond that, will seek to create alliances aimed at weakening U.S. dominance. Given that, according to neorealist logic, states try to prevent relative gains (of power by other nations) – especially gains of the dominant power – the following hypotheses can be derived:

¹⁹ Biden (2022). U.S. Department of State (2021b).

²⁰ The Economic Times India (2021).

²¹ Tri (2017).

²² The World Bank (2022).

Hypothesis 1: The Kremlin will fight relative gains of U.S. power in its remaining sphere of influence with all its available strength, taking little heed of international law and willingly accepting large-scale economic damage, since the paramount interest lies in preserving its geopolitical sphere of influence.

Hypothesis 2: The feasibility of curbing U.S. influence is conditioned by

– Russia’s mere ability to coerce its neighbour X with the military, political and economic means available (2.1) and

– the degree to which the survival of the Russian state is threatened by a possible nuclear retaliation in response to a (conventional) attack (2.2).

In the following chapter, these hypotheses will be compared with the motives and the operational logic of the invasion of Ukraine.

IV. Motives and the operational logic of the Russian intervention

The end of the Soviet Union in 1991 is inextricably linked to the collapse of the Communist sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This not only sealed the end of the military Warsaw Pact Alliance, but also the political disengagement of these states from Moscow. At the time, the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev refrained from restoring the political order in the then still remaining spheres of influence - as it did in the GDR in 1953, in Hungary in 1956 or in the CSSR in 1968. Such attempts were only made in the seceding Soviet republics, ultimately unsuccessfully, as in the relatively small Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic in January 1991.²³

The political leadership of the successor state, the Russian Federation, referred to this considerable shrinkage of its own sphere of influence as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”²⁴. Nevertheless, Moscow continued to regard the territory of the former Soviet Union - the so-called Near Abroad - as a natural and legitimate sphere of influence that was supposed to be protected from U.S. interference. The

²³ Deutsche Welle (2021).

²⁴ NBC News (2005).

idea of national sovereignty – as enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Accords – of the former, now independent Soviet republics, was given a subordinate role in Moscow’s policy.²⁵

While Moscow succeeded in coercing five former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia to remain permanently in the political-military successor organization, the CSTO, this approach completely failed in the case of the former Baltic Soviet republics due to the pronounced political will of these newly independent states. Central developments in this context were the Eastern enlargements of NATO and the EU, in the course of which both organizations absorbed the three former Baltic Soviet republics (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) and six countries of the former Warsaw Pact (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) by 2004 (NATO) and 2007 (EU) respectively.²⁶

Regarding Hypothesis 2.1 of this article, Russia had little to no capabilities to balance against the enlargement of U.S.-dominated NATO in the case of the Eastern European states. Moscow also failed to assert its interests at the diplomatic

level within the framework of the NATO-Russia Council: “However, it [the Council] has not been effective in dealing with the more sensitive and controversial issues which challenge the NATO-Russia relationship, it has not changed the mistrust and suspicion that permeate and continue to define the relationship.”²⁷

Moscow’s external actions were therefore initially limited to strategic communication. Thus, at the NATO summit in April 2008, against the background of discussions on the accession of Ukraine and Georgia, President Putin stated that “Moscow would view any attempt to expand NATO to its borders as a ,direct threat”.²⁸

In consideration of hypothesis 2.2 of this article, a violent restoration of the status quo ante in Eastern Europe was already ruled out for Russia at that time, given that, in the event of an attack on the Baltic States, a large-scale conventional or nuclear response by NATO under Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty would have been likely. Nonetheless, NATO in particular left open a space for action that allowed Moscow to limit the impending U.S. power gains in Eastern

²⁵ Zhao (2021).

²⁶ For closer insights to Eastern Europe’s motivations: Rizova (2014).

²⁷ Lunn (2013), p. 1.

²⁸ Dawar (2008).

Europe and the Caucasus: Not by (fruitless) diplomatic objections to Washington, but by military coercion against inferior neighbours in the Near Abroad. This space for action is characterized as follows by Benson/Smith:

“To join NATO, countries must first be offered a membership action plan, which includes a formal invitation and a tailored road map for future membership. To obtain such a plan, prospective members must first peacefully resolve outstanding international, ethnic and territorial disputes. The problem this poses is obvious: Putin can sabotage a state’s NATO bid by starting a conflict.”²⁹

In accordance with hypothesis 2, this space for action was exploited by Russia in two cases within 6 years: Hence, the Russian attack on Georgia took place as early as August 2008 (four months after the NATO summit in Bucharest), and on Ukraine in the spring of 2014.³⁰ While the Kremlin seemed to have achieved its minimal goal of preventing Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO in the foreseeable future, Russia lacked political support in the targeted countries. NATO

member states also continued to reaffirm Ukraine’s right to self-determination and therefore saw no indication of withdrawing the prospect of Ukraine’s accession.³¹ Furthermore, the U.S. also continued its bilateral assistance to Ukraine, supplying military equipment and ammunitions worth nearly \$1.5 billion from 2014-2019 alone, roughly 90% of Ukraine’s foreign aid supplies during that period.³² In addition, Washington and Kiev formed a strategic partnership in November 2021 to contain Russian influence. Despite Russian threats, the agreement was signed as planned by Foreign Ministers Blinken and Kuleba on November 10, 2021.³³

Therefore, the Kremlin apparently sought alternative military-backed options to break the political will in Kiev. From a neorealist perspective, the Ukrainian leadership faced the disadvantage that Russia had to consider the capabilities of its own armed forces as the only limiting factor in its military planning (Hypothesis 2.1). It was in a position to deploy them in a flexible timeframe - and thus at the point of optimal capability build-up - since there was no serious time pressure due to

²⁹ Benson et al. (2022).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Stoltenberg & Zelenskyy (2021).

³² Kim (2019).

³³ U.S. Department of State (2021a).

Ukraine's lack of immediate prospects of joining NATO.

Moreover, it seems plausible that the Ukrainian armed forces were seen as a weak opponent from the Russian perspective: Thus, the comparatively weak contingent of about 150,000 troops may be considered as an indication of the belief that Ukraine's fighting strength was negligible,³⁴ which could itself muster some 200,000 men of the regular armed forces and an unknown number of reservists.³⁵

Interestingly, Ukraine was a nuclear power until 1996, as parts of the former Soviet arsenal were located on the territory of today's Ukraine. However, Kiev renounced on these weapons in return for (obviously worthless) security guarantees given by the USA, Russia, and Great Britain within the framework of the Budapest Memorandum of 1994.³⁶ A threat to survival from possible nuclear retaliation (Hypothesis 2.2) by Ukraine could therefore be ruled out in Russian war planning.

From a neorealist and geopolitical point of view, however, Russia had to achieve an overwhelming victory following its invasion in order to show any

success at all: Thus, even an independent (residual) Ukraine would most likely have continued to be supported by the West, which would have made it much more difficult for Moscow to defend its claim of Ukraine as an exclusive zone of influence. The minimum goal was therefore – plausibly – nothing less than the annihilation of independent Ukrainian statehood (Hypothesis 1).

This theoretical derivation also matches the actual approach: Apparently, Russian operations since February 26, 2022 were aimed at eliminating the political centre of gravity in Kiev through air strikes, a parallel airborne landing west of Kiev, and a pincer-like attack by ground forces from East and West.³⁷ After successful completion of the operation, the establishment of a military administration or a puppet government loyal to the Kremlin would have been conceivable.³⁸ This would probably not have been recognized by the international community, much like in the case of Russian-backed separatists in Transnistria (Moldova) and South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Georgia).

Hypothesis 1 also appears to be confirmed in as much as Russia prioritizes

³⁴ Cooper et al. (2022).

³⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies (2017), p. 228.

³⁶ Broad (2022).

³⁷ Lewis et al. (2022).

³⁸ Hennigan (2022).

preserving its geo-political sphere of influence over sanction-related economic damages and diplomatic reputational damage. For instance, Russia's war of aggression not only violated several articles of the UN Charter and the Geneva Conventions, but also breached numerous treaties of international law (CSCE Final Act 1975, Budapest Memorandum 1994) and acted contrary to previous assurances of December 2021 and February 2022.³⁹

On top of that, the Kremlin showed at best an instrumental understanding of international law: Referring to an alleged anti-Russian genocide in Ukraine, the Kremlin not only granted itself the right to conduct the operation without a UN mandate, but also to extend it far beyond the ostensibly intended purpose.⁴⁰

V. Summary and implications

This article has examined the extent to which Russian foreign and security policy in the case of Ukraine is determined by power-political interests. For this purpose, hypotheses were derived from a neorealist perspective and compared

with the evidence available, which offered strong support to both Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Hypothesis 1

Regardless of assurances from the West and actual intentions, the Kremlin considers a stronger Western involvement in Eastern Europe - especially in the Near Abroad - unacceptable. Economic and diplomatic calculations are unconditionally subordinated to the supreme interest - the preservation of the geopolitical sphere of influence. Russia thereby accepts severe diplomatic isolation and massive losses of prosperity. This suggests that power politics has persisted in Moscow and was never abandoned after the end of Cold War.

Nevertheless, the question arises whether Russia has achieved its goal - the preservation of the geopolitical zone of influence. On the one hand, the war has obstructed Ukraine's near-term prospects of joining NATO and the EU. For instance, in March 2022, Ukrainian President Zelensky publicly declared that Kiev would not join NATO.⁴¹ European leaders also rejected an accelerated

³⁹ United Nations (1949). United Nations & International Committee of the Red Cross (1949). CSCE (1975). United States of America & the Russian Federation & the United

Kingdom (1994). The Kremlin (2021). The Moscow Times (2022).

⁴⁰ Dickinson (2022).

⁴¹ Koshiw et al. (2022).

accession of Ukraine to the EU.⁴² At first glance, this may appear to be a success.

On the other hand, the Russian war of aggression is the central reason for the West's intensified assistance to Ukraine: in March 2022, Washington reaffirmed its support for Ukraine and underlined this with the pledge of arms deliveries worth \$3.5 billion as part of a total package worth \$13.6 billion.⁴³ Moreover, it was not until the Russian attack that Germany, which itself had prevented the delivery of 9 howitzers to Ukraine before the war, made a spectacular U-turn: Berlin not only declared itself willing to make extensive arms deliveries (including over 1,500 anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons),⁴⁴ but also abandoned its reluctance to meet NATO's 2% target.⁴⁵ The pushback of Western influence from Eastern Europe in general and from Ukraine in particular is thus becoming increasingly difficult for Russia.

Moscow's failure to annihilate Ukraine as an independent state, would therefore imply a major strategic defeat as it would demonstrate Moscow's incapability of securing its perceived sphere of influence. Notwithstanding, this would merely continue a trend that was

already described in 2016 by Nathan A. Sears as follows: "However, Russia's balancing strategy has to a large extent proven to be counter-productive. Instead of preventing the expansion of NATO through a "divide and conquer" strategy, or driving a diplomatic wedge between the United States and Europe, Russian revisionism has united NATO and the European Union behind the United States."⁴⁶

Hypothesis 2

Still, Russian capabilities should not be underestimated. Evidence on Hypothesis 2 has illustrated that Moscow is willing to use existing military space of action to prevent U.S. power gains. This space for action is determined by two key factors:

No. 1: The mere feasibility (in the sense of the ability to achieve the political goal militarily).

No. 2: The degree of threat to the survival of the Russian state (by a nuclear retaliation of the attacked state), which,

⁴² Rose et al. (2022).

⁴³ Pallaro et al. (2022).

⁴⁴ ABC News (2022).

⁴⁵ NATO Press Office (2022).

⁴⁶ Sears (2016).

moreover, can be completely ruled out, should the defender possess neither nuclear weapons nor a guarantee of assistance by nuclear powers.

In the case of Ukraine, both conditions were met: Not only did it seem possible for military planners in Moscow to easily overcome Kiev's seemingly weak defences with a small force build-up – nuclear retaliation was not to be expected either, since Ukraine had not possessed nuclear weapons for over 25 years. An additional favourable factor was that Russia's capability development had sufficient time to take full effect: Not only did it have almost 14 years (since 2008) to prepare strategically for the war, but it also had more than three months to consolidate its forces in the operational force generation since November 2021. However, from the factors considered here, three countermeasures can be derived that make it possible to close Russia's military space of action.

Option 1 – Insurmountable defence. The potentially aggressed state builds a defence – preferably a dense array of anti-tank and anti-air weapons – impossible to penetrate for Moscow. Due to the discernible power imbalance between Russia and the potential target

states (including Georgia, Finland, and Moldova), the application of this option has only a limited deterrent effect.

Option 2 – Joining NATO within the shortest possible timeframe. This option has the obvious advantage of a formal guarantee of assistance after accession. However, timely admission is crucial here: Moscow must not have any time to generate and mobilize forces for an attack on the membership candidate. At best, membership negotiations should therefore be conducted within the shortest possible timeframe and in secret (behind closed doors). This option is, however, extremely hazardous: Should a timely accession fail in the specific case (as in the case of Ukraine) and Russia thus have sufficient time for attack preparations, it is to be expected that the belligerent Russian plans will be turned into reality.

Option 3 – Own nuclear weapons. This option addresses a sensitive point in Russian operational planning and would complicate it considerably. Thus, planners would have to include in their calculations not only purely conventionally caused losses in the ranks of their military, but also potential nuclear-caused devastating destructions of both civil and military infrastructure in the Russian homeland. As early as 1993, IR

realist scholar John J. Mearsheimer made the following comments in the context of negotiations for the return of former Soviet nuclear weapons located on the territory of Ukraine:

“In fact, as soon as it declared independence, Ukraine should have been quietly encouraged to fashion its own nuclear deterrent. [...] A nuclear Ukraine makes sense for two reasons. First, it is imperative to maintain peace between Russia and Ukraine. [...] Ukraine cannot defend itself against a nuclear-armed Russia with conventional weapons, and no state, including the United States, is going to extend to it a meaningful security guarantee. Ukrainian nuclear weapons are the only reliable deterrent to Russian aggression.”⁴⁷

Iran and North Korea may also see the attack on Ukraine, which is armed only conventionally, as confirmation of their intentions to employ nuclear weapons as their main deterrent against a regime change induced by a foreign power. John Erath, a researcher at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, argues:

“Iran, North Korea and other states

possibly considering nuclear weapons will be watching carefully and could come to the conclusion that Ukraine is vulnerable to coercion and loss of territory because it made the decision to give up its nuclear weapons.”⁴⁸

Finland and Sweden have already made their choice. If countries such as Moldova or Georgia will choose to follow that path, must be left unanswered at this point. What is clear, however, is that the policy of détente is being severely strained and that none of these countries can afford to remain inactive. It is now up to the free world to prove that, even after more than 30 years of continuous disarmament, it is willing and able to defend itself and its values - as it did in the past.

⁴⁷ Mearsheimer (1993), pp. 50 f.

⁴⁸ Erath (2022).

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