

The Role of Economic Elites in War

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Abstract

The modern conflict surrounding Russia, Ukraine, and the United States warrants an understanding for the reasons behind the war. This paper examines these motivations through the lens of the class system theory, which is the leading theory for explaining the ultimate reasons for the current conflict. The class system theory highlights how the decisions made by countries are a direct reflection of the economic priorities of the elites of each respective country. This paper will illustrate how the economic elites of both Russia and the United States benefit from the actions they are currently taking, including the preservation of defense markets, regional hegemony, and the exploitation of foreign nations and labor. By using the class system theory to explain the Ukraine-Russia conflict, this paper argues that the war is driven primarily by the economic interests of the elites of the United States and Russia, respectively, explaining that each country's actions reflect greater economic incentives rather than purely ideological, political, or ethical motivations.

The Role of Economic Elites in War

Ukraine was an independent country from around 1917 to 1919 and was known as the Ukrainian People's Republic. However, this changed right after the First World War, when the Bolsheviks invaded Ukraine in full force, eventually defeating the Ukrainian People's Republic. This defeat promptly led to Ukraine becoming a part of the USSR. Fast forward to the early 1930s, when the leader of the Soviet Union, the infamous Joseph Stalin, deployed harsh tactics against the people of Ukraine in an attempt to crush independence movements. One of these tactics included the forced famine on Ukrainian citizens, when Stalin's regime would break into houses and fields, and then steal anything edible, which was then dispersed to others around the USSR, especially industrial centers. The food the police took ranged from crops to even pets, which represents the ruthlessness displayed by Stalin's tactics. This agricultural policy, known popularly as the Holodomor, is responsible for the deaths of millions of Ukrainians, estimated to be around one in every eight Ukrainian citizens. The policy even specifically targeted poor Ukrainian farmers who were rumored to be starting independence and revolutionary movements. The famine was even reported to lead to cannibalism, as evidenced by police reports. Ultimately, the famine brought with it a larger attack on the identity of the Ukrainian people as a whole. During the same time that a genocide was being committed against the people of Ukraine, Soviet Union agents were halting the use of the Ukrainian language and targeting sympathizers of the Ukrainian People's Republic. These targets included public humiliation rituals, trips to the gulag, or even executions. (Applebaum, 2019)

Another Stalin-era policy that heavily affected Ukrainians was the forced deportation or movement of millions inside the USSR. Stalin wanted to crush any revolutionary movements, and in an attempt to do so, he forcibly displaced millions of people against their will, including

deporting them to Siberian prison camps. An important thing to note is that these forced displacements heavily affected the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic makeup of these areas, possibly altering parts of the makeup of Ukraine for the future. (Green, 2022)

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine pushed for independence, with a 92 percent favorable vote in support of independence by the citizens. Following the election of their first president, Ukraine held ownership of a substantial number of nuclear weapons. These nuclear weapons were later traded away to Russia in a deal that allowed for Russia and Western states to recognize Ukraine's independence.

In 2010, Yanukovych was elected to be the President of Ukraine, who was advised to “recast himself as more open to EU integration” by American political consultants. However, this belief was not long-lasting, as he later withdrew from conversations about a potential association agreement. This announcement almost immediately sparked outrage, leading to widespread protests. These protests began peacefully, until the government moved to break up protesters, “and the ensuing crackdown killed more than 100 people.” (Ukraine has..., 2022) The protests were significant because many citizens' rights were taken away, as Yanukovych signed “a series of laws restricting the right to protest.” This action gave way to a series of bloody clashes involving both policemen and citizens, where dozens were injured on both sides. Furthermore, many protestors seized different government buildings at this time, including the justice ministry in Kyiv. (Ukraine's pro-European..., 2024)

Amid this turmoil, Russia seized Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula that is majority ethnically Russian. Russia then held a referendum, in which the citizens of Crimea could essentially vote for a decision to secede from Ukraine and join Russia. This referendum was deemed illegal and illegitimate by much of the West, where the “UN General Assembly vote[d]

100–11 against recognizing the referendum result.” (Russia’s illegal..., 2025) It is important to understand why Crimea is so important to Russia. Why would they use so many resources and tarnish relationships with many countries to illegally annex a small part of land? The answer points towards economic factors. Crimea’s unique location is incredibly important to either side that has it, as it allows for control over shipping routes in the Black Sea, which are a “critical corridor for the world’s grain, among other goods,” all of which are profitable. Moreover, the seizing of Crimea gives Russia access to the naval port of Sevastopol, allowing Russia to conduct military operations from the area, like when they used the port to conduct a blockade on Georgia in 2008 in order to prevent it from joining NATO. This is because Georgia joining NATO would threaten the influence Russia has in the region, including economic influence, as Russia is one of the countries Georgia trades with the most. (Russia’s takeover..., 2014) Therefore, it can be argued that Russia’s motivations for the annexation of Crimea are primarily to satisfy the elites of the country who benefit from the access to oil pipelines directly rather than detouring around other waters.

Overview of US - Russia Relations

Following the end of the second world war, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as the two global superpowers, as much of Europe was still damaged and recovering from World War II. In a race to be the only superpower, the United States and the USSR engaged in a long cold war that nearly saw the start of a true war between the two countries. The United States made a strong effort to pursue containment, not just militarily, but economically, where they wanted to make sure no other countries adopted the economic system of communism. This is because communism is a direct threat to the power and influence that the United States have. Switching the global economic system from capitalism to communism would theoretically

benefit many less developed, “peripheral” countries, but seriously threaten the influence of the United States. As they have set up methods of economic dependence, outsourcing and imperialism that allow the United States to benefit from the labor and cheap resources from other countries, a switch to communism would effectively get rid of the economic advantage that they have, which would not be in the best interest of the mega-corporations that have so much influence over United States politics. During the period of the Cold War, the United States imposed vast amounts of propaganda campaigns, aimed at demonizing the word “communism” to the point that it was an insult to hurl at others. These propaganda campaigns were widely successful, as they were able to get people afraid of a different economic system, a terror that is popularly known as the “red scare.” Senator Joseph McCarthy was a big advocate for the terror of communism, as he “presented colourful accusations that drove some government workers out of their jobs and brought popular condemnation to others.”(Martin, 2024) There was also a notable period of time during the 1940s to 1950s when the House Un-American Activities Committee “conducted investigations into alleged communist activities by individuals who included well-known artists and entertainers.” These investigations sometimes led to incarcerations for refusal to answer the committee’s questions and blacklisting by the Hollywood studios for some of the entertainers and well-known artists that were put into question.

Following the Cold War, when Russia seized Crimea through referendum in 2014, the United States (and other foreign powers) imposed sanctions that “have steadily hampered Moscow’s ability to borrow from foreign capital markets and limited its access to western technologies and direct investments.”(Grishin et al., 2021) As these sanctions slowly shaved off small percentages of Russia’s GDP, the United States benefited from their economic power being threatened.

In modern times, Russia and the United States continue to have a rocky relationship that is currently categorized by NATO's march eastward and the special military operation on Ukraine. Although Russia is still considered top 10 in global economies, it is no longer the economic threat to the United States that it once was. However, Russia is now closely aligned with a major economic superpower, that being China. Around February 2022, the friendship between these two countries was deemed as having "no limits." (Thibault & Benoît Vitkine, 2024) This relationship obviously threatens the economic interests of the United States, since both countries are explicitly trying to erode the United States' influence globally. Furthermore, China is a country that is ruled by a party that proclaims themselves to be of the "Chinese Communist Party," obviously a direct threat to capitalism being the global economic system. Finally, as both Russia and China do not operate under a legitimate democracy, (choosing autocracy) having the world see their countries flourish under different systems could prove dangerous to American global influence.

The Class System Theory

The class system theory is a theory that is used to explain certain conflicts and issues in the world of international relations. The class system theory explains that economic factors are the driving force behind all of international politics. Therefore, conflicts like the Ukraine-Russia conflict can be explained and reasoned for when discussing the concept of the class system theory. This theory is grounded in Marxist thought, where "in the capitalist phase of Marx's dialectic, human interaction is characterized by the strong exploiting the weak, the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors." (Genest, 1996) For the purpose of this paper, the class system theory can essentially be broken into three interconnected components in order to understand how the theory applies to the world of international relations.

The first component develops the position that a state's behavior directly reflects the interests of the dominant economic class of the respective country. Therefore, a country only makes decisions based on how it will affect its domestic elites, rather than issues like national security or political ideology. These economic interests shape everything we know about the government, like its geopolitical and military power. For example, the United States of America is a very capitalist country that wants to protect the interests of its elites, many of whom benefit from the incredible amounts of money the country allocates towards defense spending. Many of these beliefs are rooted in historically accurate evidence, like how the United States was able to profit so heavily from the first and second world wars. With the use of the Marshall Plan, signed into effect by President Truman, the United States of America protected the interests of its economic elites by preventing other parts of the world from falling under the economic system of communism, therefore “creating markets for American goods [and] reliable trading partners.”(On April...,2021) As this plan propelled the United States to become a global superpower, it is only reasonable to assume that a similar economic plan would continue to benefit the country. These capitalist countries are controlled by the very elites that would stand to benefit from these types of policies; therefore, policymaking that controls production and finance reflects this. Therefore, when countries clash, it is “caused, according to class system theory, by the clash of opposing economic interests—namely, the clash between capitalist and noncapitalist states.” (Genest, 1996)

The second component argues that capitalism creates uneven development between richer “core” countries and poorer “periphery” countries, and that the core countries work hard to ensure that the inequality that exists continues to be maintained. Since capitalism inherently creates this structural divide, it’s in the best interests of the economic elites of the core countries

to continue to prolong this unequal system. One of the ways that this inequality is maintained is through imperialism. The class system theory supports the argument that core countries engage in imperialism for the very reason of furthering the economic gap between their country and other underdeveloped countries that they can exploit for their own gain. Rather than colonizing the underdeveloped countries outrightly, the core countries use imperialism as a method that involves “manipulating local economies through financial investments, trade agreements, and corporate control,” which essentially allows the developed countries to dictate the economic policies and regulations that would benefit their elite classes the most, disregarding how it might negatively impact the developing nations. (Informal economic..., 2025) Therefore, the “core” countries can create a system of economic dependency, where they have control over the terms of trade and the resources of the peripheral countries.

Many of the large corporations from the developed countries are able to export labor and resources from the developing countries that lack other economic options. This point brings about the third component necessary to understand the class system theory, which explains that transnational class coalitions and multinational corporations effectively create relationships that allow for the global capitalist system to be maintained. Multinational corporations, or MNCs, are a method by which capitalist elites from developed countries export to developing countries. Class system theories explain how these MNCs use the exploitative nature of the global economic system to benefit themselves. MNCs are large corporations that have production facilities or bases in multiple countries, often in order to profit from the cheap labor they can export from other developing countries. This relates back to the concept of economic dependence from before, where a portion of the population of a country is indirectly forced to sell their labor out to corporations that have their headquarters outside of their country. Since these corporations

can pay these workers a lower wage, they can heavily increase their profits, as their costs are lowered. Instead of having these MNCs be based out of the countries in which they source their labor, being based out of a different country ensures that these developing countries do not benefit from the labor they are giving. There is seldom a ripple effect from their labor, as it does not continue to create opportunities inside the country. These profits that are gained flow from the poor countries to the core countries, essentially benefiting elites. Therefore, “rather than assisting in the development of these poor countries, multinational corporations exploit less developed countries as a source of cheap labor and inexpensive natural resources,” something that continues to increase the inequality gap between the “core” and “peripheral” countries.

Application of Class System Theory to Russia-Ukraine-US Conflict

In order to understand the reasons for the current conflict through the lens of the class system theory, it is important to first recognize what each country has to gain from the conflict, which will shed light on why both Russia and the United States have taken the actions they have to benefit their respective countries economically.

Although it is true that NATO’s eastward march has probably threatened Russia’s hegemony, economic indicators show that Moscow’s decision to launch an invasion of Ukraine has much more notable underlying reasons. One example would be the insanely large amount of gas reserves and minerals that Ukraine possesses. First, seizing Ukraine would mean that Russia would be able to access these gas reserves and minerals, which are worth a lot of money. Prior to the invasion, “Ukraine was among the largest suppliers of noble gases such as neon (for micro-chip-making) and boasted the most significant known lithium and rare earth deposits in Europe. As the world dives into an age where artificial intelligence dominates the market and is going to surge in production, microchips that power many of the computers used will continue to be in

demand. Months after Russia invaded Ukraine, “Russia controlled over \$12.5 trillion worth of Ukrainian mineral and gas.” (Muggah & Rohozinski, 2025) Furthermore, Ukraine holds Europe’s largest supply of Uranium, a mineral that is key in the expansion of nuclear power, which is used to support the rapidly expanding amount of data centers that power artificial intelligence. Another reason for seizing Ukraine is the elimination of a possible competitor in the space of natural resources and trading. Allowing Ukraine to join NATO and getting closer to countries in the EU would likely threaten the market that Russia has for its own minerals and natural gases that it could sell. Therefore, conquering Ukraine and making it a part of Russia (like how it was in the USSR) could help Russia economically. Since Moscow views the dissolution of the USSR as unfavorable, making a return to their former might as a global power could start by taking back land that was once theirs.

As for the motivations for the United States, it is slightly different because United States troops are not involved in the crisis, and there isn’t any land for the country to gain or lose itself. However, this does not mean that the United States would not be affected by a potential switch in leadership over the land of Ukraine and Crimea. First, Ukraine is not currently a big threat to the influence that the United States has over the world as an economic superpower. However, given the long history behind the relationship of the United States and Russia, allowing Moscow to obtain this land that has access to so many natural resources could prove detrimental to their influence, especially considering that they have lost much of the influence that they previously had after the second world war. Since February 2022, the United States has allocated \$182.8 billion to Ukraine, “some of which Ukraine will have to repay with added interest.” (From Russia’s..., 2023) Clearly, the United States has something to gain from sending all of this money to Ukraine. Since Ukraine is being left financially dependent on global economic systems

that are being managed by much of the West, this is something that helps the capitalist empire of the United States. As the United States donates many of their old equipment to Ukraine so they can fight against Russia, our very high budget military can use funds they have received from congress to purchase new equipment from defense contractors such as Lockheed Martin, proving that the economic elites of the United States continue to benefit from the decisions that our country makes, even when our country might not be fighting in a war. In fact, they were recently awarded with “a \$12.5 billion contract from the Pentagon, for a total of 296 F-35 jets.” (Stone and Utkarsh Shetti, 2025)

Furthermore, losing Ukraine to Russia would be detrimental to the United States trade. Since the war has had an outsized and destabilizing impact on Europe’s economy, it could potentially impact the United States’ economic interests in trading. As Europe is one of the United States’ most vital and trusted trading partners, nearing \$1 trillion in annual US trade, “stable European markets are critical for the exports of American companies and workers,” as 1 in 5 US jobs depend on international trade. (Russia’s ongoing..., 2024) Having 20% of US jobs be affected by this war would be detrimental to the economy of the United States, and therefore detrimental to the lives of the economic elite that control these mega-corporations that benefit so much from the labor of the United States worker. Therefore, it can be implied that Ukraine being taken over by Russia would damage the interests of the bourgeois of the United States, which demonstrates why this country has taken so much action to prevent Russia from succeeding. Another one of these actions includes putting sanctions on Russia, similar to how the other capitalist empires of the world also did, by “isolating Russia from the global financial system, reducing the profitability of its energy sector, and blunting its military edge.” (Berman, 2025)

Counterargument

Although the class system theory provides a great explanation for the Ukraine-Russia-US conflict, many political analysts would argue that realism would provide a better explanation for why Russia felt the need to conduct its special military operation on Ukraine. An argument that is common for realism is that Russia feared that NATO marching eastward would threaten its national security. Therefore, when considering this perspective, the realism theory argues that Russia acted not for the benefit of its economic elites but for the security of the nation in an international system that seeks to undermine its influence. Many realists would argue that the increasing influence of NATO, especially as it moves towards Russian borders, threatens Russian hegemony. “Thirty years ago, Russia had a buffer zone of satellite states to its west. Now it has only the unimpressive presence of Belarus.”(McManus, 2021) Observing this situation through the lens of the realism theory, Russia sees Ukraine as one of the last few of its buffer states from the rest of the West, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is therefore an attempt to restore the balance of power that Russia once had during the Soviet Union, where it was a global superpower.

Additionally, from the realist view, the seizing of Crimea was a preemptive move designed to ensure that this critical land that has access to the Black Sea is not lost to NATO, which allows them to continue to maintain their regional dominance. As this port is seen as a critical military base, losing it would be a detriment to Russia’s power, proving that they have continued to act in self-interest, hoping to maintain dominance over the countries that used to be a part of the Soviet Union.

However, although this argument takes into account logical explanations for why Russia would need the land of Ukraine, it fails to dig deeper to understand Russia’s real motivations.

First, the rationalization that Russia feared a loss of its hegemony does not contradict the class system theory. In fact, many of the arguments used reflect an important aspect of the class system theory. Russia, not wanting to lose its hegemony, reflects the ambitions of Russia's economic elite class, which are the oligarchs. These oligarchs stand to benefit from regaining land that has access to vast amounts of natural resources that would continue to make them wealthier. These oligarchs "exported oil and metals that they acquired cheaply inside the country and sold abroad for vast profits."(Hoffman, 2024)

So yes, although it could be asserted that Russia does not want to lose access to this land because it could threaten their military influence, this is only important because Russia needs its influence to carry out the ambitions of its economic elites. Therefore, although the realism theory can be used to explain parts of Russia's ambitions, it fails to examine the deeper meaning behind their lust for regional power, that being the economic benefits of the land.

Conclusion

The conflict between Ukraine, Russia, and the United States demonstrates a few key factors when discussing the possibility of a war between the United States and Russia. The most important thing is that economic factors will drive the decisions that countries make in international politics. Therefore, a war between the United States of America and Russia would have to be in the best economic interest of the elites of each respective country. Luckily, I hypothesize that a traditional war between these two countries is improbable. Due to the modern defense technology of each country, a full-scale war would obliterate the very sources of wealth that these economic elites depend on, as land in each country would be turned to rubble immediately, not to mention the involvement of other countries that follow. Therefore, I contend that a traditional war between these two countries would not be winnable. Assuming that each

country uses its full military power, nuclear war would mean devastation of an unprecedented kind. Therefore, there could be no winner in a war that most likely would forever alter the course of humanity.

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