The Proxy War in Ukraine

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Abstract

The United States and Russia have had a tense relationship throughout their history, which can be traced back to the Cold War, which began after World War II ended. The Cold War showed the differences between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, particularly their political-economic systems, which shaped Europe as it is known today. The Russian-Ukrainian War, which began in 2014 after the Euromaidan protests, continues today with ever-increasing casualties. U.S. foreign policy under the two recent presidents is distinct, yet both had some element of pro-democracy-and-capitalism. The use of political culture theory shows how patriotism and love of ideals guides the countries in this fight, while also showing the unlikelihood of a direct conflict between the two nations.

Keywords: Ukraine, Russia, Russian-Ukrainian War, political culture theory

The Proxy War in Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, moments after Russian president Vladimir Putin announced a "special military operation" to protect the people of the supposedly free Donetsk and Luhansk republics, Russian forces launched an invasion into Ukraine. Even in the face of strong international condemnation, Russia continued its invasion and has not let up, even in the present day.

The invasion, and the overall Russian-Ukrainian War that has been ongoing since 2014, has become a proxy war between the United States and Russia. Both countries have escalated and endured many conflicts in their history which have been deeply woven into the fabric of their societies and cultures. Both are using Ukraine to fight each other on the world stage without directly attacking each other, inching closer to mutually assured destruction should nuclear weaponry come into play. Political culture theory is a theory that can best explain the U.S.' role in Ukraine, explaining the reasoning behind the political and patriotic aspects.

The Cold War

The United States and the Soviet Union, Russia's predecessor, had an intense rivalry across everything from political-economic systems to technology to military innovations. It started after the World War II alliance between the U.S., the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union began to deteriorate following the defeat of Nazi Germany in May 1945, particularly when the Soviets began installing "left-wing governments" in Eastern Europe countries freed by the Red Army. The U.S. and UK were opposed to Soviet-style communism and favoured Western-style democracies instead, which became the first conflict in the Cold War ("Cold War," 2024). With the UK struggling with many internal issues, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were the only two global superpowers and their opposing ideas set them on a path towards conflict.

The primary ideological conflict during the Cold War was the clash between Western democracy and Soviet-style communism. The Soviet Union was trying its hardest to spread its version of communism to many states, reaching a peak of 15 (U.S. Department of State, 2008). At the same time, the U.S. and its allies were trying to spread democracy while countering this rapid spread of communism. This political-economic divide had a physical presence in Eastern Europe with the Berlin Wall, which was erected in 1961, which also represented the Iron Curtain, the boundary dividing Europe into two halves. The two countries also fought several proxy wars during this period, including Korea, Cuba, Vietnam, Congo, Nicaragua, Chile, Angola, and Afghanistan, usually by funding and aiding a side in each of those wars (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023).

The Fall of the Soviet Union

Under Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet Union began a path towards democratization and openness with his *glasnost* (transparency) and *perestroika* (restructuring) policies. Gorbachev did nothing to stop the communist states as they began to declare sovereignty and independence or transition to democracy ("Cold War," 2024). In August 1991, a group of communist hardliners composed of the heads of the KGB, interior ministry, armed forces, and the vice-president placed Gorbachev under house arrest at his Crimean dacha. Their goal was to roll back his reforms and to prevent the signing of the New Union Treaty, which would transfer significant amounts of power and property to the republics from the central government. Around the same time, Boris Yeltsin, the then-president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, called for Gorbachev's return while simultaneously transferring power over the Russian economy and Soviet security forces on Russian territory to himself (Bond, 2021). These factors, tied with growing unrest in the republics, led to the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on December

26, 1991, with Declaration 142-N issued by those remaining in the Soviet parliament (Soviet of the Republics of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, 1991).

The fall of the Soviet Union led to the conclusion of the Cold War with the United States. Capitalism had triumphed over communism in this battle and the U.S. became the sole superpower in the world. Even though Russia considers itself the continuation of the U.S.S.R., in contrast to the Belovezha Accords' preamble which reads that the "[U.S.S.R.] as a subject of international law and a geopolitical reality no longer exists", they lack the key elements required to be considered a superpower (Zakharova, 2022; Buravkin, 1991, p. 3).

The Russian-Ukrainian War

Euromaidan

The Russian-Ukrainian War that continues today has its roots in Viktor Yanukovych, the fourth president of Ukraine. He was elected in 2010 with 48.95% of the vote in an election that the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) called "efficient, transparent, and honest" (OSCE Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2010, pp. 2, 25). Yanukovych was pro-Russia, garnering the support of Russian president Vladimir Putin in the 2004 election six years prior. This was an election he lost, and subsequently tried to disavow the image he had gained of being "Moscow's man" by taking his first foreign trip as president to Brussels, the de facto capital of the European Union, rather than Moscow ("Profile," 2014). One distinction is that his cabinet declared support for Ukrainian accession to the European Union while rejecting the U.S.-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

In November 2013, Yanukovych abruptly refused to sign the European Union-Ukraine Accession Agreement, an agreement which would bring Ukraine closer to EU membership, in favour of the Russian-backed Eurasian Economic Union. Even though the unicameral Ukrainian

parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, passed a statement supporting the Accession Agreement 315-349 and Yanukovych urged the parliament to pass laws to meet the EU's criteria in order to sign the agreement, Russia used political and economic leverage to dissuade Yanukovych from signing the agreement (Interfax-Ukraine, 2013). They blocked nearly all imports from Ukraine, which reduced Ukrainian exports by 25% and shrank the economy by 1.5%, while Gazprom, the Russian state-owned energy corporation, threatened to cut off gas supplies if Ukraine did not pay billions in back pay (Popescu, 2013, p. 1; Brooks, 2013).

The refusal to sign led to mass protests across Ukraine, but primarily in the capital city of Kyiv. The protests, named Euromaidan after Kyiv's Independence Square Maidan Nezalezhnosti, only grew in size with Lutsevych (2015) noting it as "the largest ever pro-European rally in history". Facing a heavy police presence in cold weather, protests continued. Violent riots erupted in response to police brutality and government repression. Many members of Yanukovych's pro-Russian Party of Regions fled or defected, causing it to lose its majority in the parliament. Enough opposition members remained to form a quorum, allowing them to pass laws and resolutions that removed police from Kyiv, stopped anti-protest operations, removed Yanukovych from president, and restored the 2004 constitution, among other actions (Afineevsky, 2015). Under the 2004 constitution, the powers of the president would be transferred to the chairman if the president resigned or was unable to fulfill their duties. Shortly thereafter, Yanukovych fled to the second-largest Ukrainian city, Kharkiv, where he requested and was granted asylum in Russia on February 24. He maintains that he is the lawful president of Ukraine, as his removal was not conducted in line with the country's impeachment procedure (Lopatonok, 2017). On February 25, 2014, Oleksandr Turchynov, the then-chairman of the Verkhovna Rada, officially became the acting president (уповноваження, 2014). A few days

later, parliament approved a new cabinet headed by Arseniy Yatsenyuk with 331 deputies voting in favour ("Ukrainian Parliament," 2014). Because this appointment was believed to be unconstitutional by Yanukovych and Putin, Crimeans voted 97% to join Russia in a referendum with 89% turnout (Lauria, 2023). In response, the United Nations General Assembly adopted nonbinding resolution 68/262, where 100 member states affirmed the commitment to Ukraine's internationally recognized borders and underscored that the referendum that was held had no validity (UN General Assembly, 2014a). 11 states, namely Russia and its allies, voted against. 58 states abstained, with an additional 24 absent (UN General Assembly, 2014b). A U.S.-sponsored Security Council resolution, which would be legally binding and affirmed the same elements as 68/262, was vetoed by Russia (UN Security Council, 2014, p. 3). It should be noted that the annexation of Crimea by Russia technically violates international law because of the Budapest Memorandum, the first confirmation of which reads "The Russian Federation … reaffirm their commitment … to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine" (Ukraine et al., 1994).

Separatist Republics

As Russia annexed Crimea, Russia-backed separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts seized Ukrainian government buildings and declared themselves independent republics, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) respectively, in May 2014. No government officially recognized the referendum results (Kramer & Cowell, 2014). A short war between pro-Russian separatist's groups and the Ukrainian armed forces in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts continued until Minsk I, the first international agreement that aimed to end this war, was signed by Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, and the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR. Its resounding failure prompted another round of talks in February 2015 which resulted

in Minsk II. The measures in Minsk II included a full and immediate ceasefire in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, pullout of heavy weaponry, OSCE monitoring, and Ukrainian government control of the state border, among others. Minsk II stayed in effect until Russia recognized the DPR and LPR on February 21, 2022, with Putin on the record that the "Minsk agreements are non-existent" on February 22 ("Minsk Agreements," 2022).

NATO

According to Vladimir Putin, one of the main causes of the war is NATO expansion. Former NATO secretary-general acknowledged this in a speech addressed to the European Parliament Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Security and Defence in September 2023, saying that Putin had sent a draft treaty in autumn 2021 "to promise no more NATO enlargement … to sign that promise, never to enlarge NATO. He wanted [NATO] to remove our military infrastructure in all Allies that have joined NATO since 1997" (Stoltenberg, 2023). Since the Russian-Ukrainian war began in 2014, four countries have joined NATO: Montenegro in 2017, North Macedonia in 2019, Finland in 2023, and Sweden this year ("Enlargement", 2024).

A Russian-NATO conflict was narrowly avoided when Russia was accused of interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election to elect Donald Trump. The U.S. activated missile systems in Romania, which was claimed to be a shield to protect NATO countries from short- and medium-range missiles from the Middle East in response to alleged interference ("US activates," 2016). Russia, in response, said the "defensive" system could be used offensively because a strike on Moscow could occur within 10–12 minutes when launched from that base. This heightened tensions between the two nuclear powers. A few months later, NATO began "aggressive exercises" against Russia, with 31,000 troops in war games near their borders, the

largest exercise since the Cold War ended in Eastern Europe. Russia offered draft treaties to the U.S. and NATO which would remove the Romanian-based system and withdraw NATO troops from Eastern Europe, which the U.S. and NATO rejected (Lauria, 2023).

Political Culture Theory

Political culture theory is a state-level theory in international relations which argues "that a state's political culture has a substantial influence over its foreign policy" (Kropf, 2020, p. 11). Political culture has been described as a set of commonly shared beliefs, values, and feelings towards a country's political system. It frequently serves as a link between a government and its people (Longley, 2023). For example, the U.S. political culture is shaped around the commitment to democracy, capitalism, and equality. Principles of liberalism which emphasize individual rights are very prominent in American culture, especially given the history leading up to the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. Because of these commitments, the U.S. promotes democracy and capitalism, even though its actions do not always concur. In contrast, Russia promotes an anti-democracy argument, especially in regard to Ukraine, which it views as its historical lands that it was robbed of (Putin, 2021).

U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Russia and Ukraine

Trump Administration (2017-2021)

The Trump administration's foreign policy was very chaotic, with Deyermond (2023) noting how Trump lacked any political background and understanding of other states and diplomacy, and also had no apparent interest in learning these crucial elements to navigate a world in which the U.S. is the sole superpower and has tremendous influence on the world stage. The contradictory nature of Trump's rhetoric makes it difficult to ascertain what his true objectives were, but one thing is for sure: his administration was well-connected to Russia.

Ignoring the Mueller Report which found two Russian efforts to influence the 2016 election but did not link them to the Trump campaign, Russian companies had paid several administration officials and had met with senior Russian officials prior to Trump's election (Barr, 2019; Swalwell, 2023). These connections lead to one of the administration's foreign policy priorities, improving relations with Russia. Throughout his presidency, regardless of Russian action, Trump continued to heap praise upon Putin. In one interview after he left office, he praised Russia's invasion of Ukraine calling it "genius" and "pretty savvy" (Gedeon, 2022).

From the beginning of his administration, there was a clear disconnect between Trump's rhetoric and the actions of his administration. For instance, Deyermond (2023) noted how Trump repeatedly suggested that Crimea, which Russia had illegally annexed, was part of Russia, at one point telling G7 leaders that "Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian" (Nardelli & Ioffe, 2018). However, his Department of State published the Crimea Declaration less than a month later, which in part read, "the United States rejects Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea and pledges to maintain this policy until Ukraine's territorial integrity is restored" (Pompeo, 2018). This declaration was repeated to Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko and other members of the Ukrainian government, and by White House officials (Deyermond, 2023). The declaration itself can be linked to political culture theory by nature of the support for Ukraine as a democracy against the antidemocratic and U.S. rival Russia.

Another example of the disconnect is the opinion towards NATO, the U.S.-led military alliance. During campaign stops prior to the 2016 presidential election, he called NATO "obsolete", with swift backlash from Ted Cruz, who said that NATO was essential to fighting terrorism and counterbalancing the influence of Russia (Parker, 2016). After being elected, his administration shut down those comments with Pence (2017) saying "[the U.S.] strongly

supports NATO and will be unwavering in our commitment" and a joint press conference Trump and Stoltenberg (2017) in which Trump revoked his previous "obsolete" claims, "I said it was obsolete; it's no longer obsolete."

In response to false allegations that the Ukrainian government had protected Hunter Biden, the son of then-Democratic primary candidate Joe Biden, from criminal investigation, Trump froze almost $400 million of congressionally mandated military aid to Ukraine (LaFraniere et al., 2019). On a call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Trump created a political scandal when he asked Zelenskyy to "do us a favor" and set up a quid pro quo. The favor had two parts: first, to see if CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity vendor contracted by the Democratic National Committee to look into servers after the hack in 2016, had any Ukrainian connections; and second, to investigate his political rivals, namely Joe Biden and his son, and see if Biden had interfered in an investigation into the activities of his son, Hunter Biden, in Ukraine (Trump & Zelenskyy, 2019; "CrowdStrike's Work," 2020). Former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine William B. Taylor Jr. noted in a deposition for the House impeachment inquiry that the Russians would love for Zelenskyy to make a public announcement that he is opening an investigation into Burisma and the 2016 election, taking all the heat, and not receiving any U.S. security assistance. Taylor called it "the nightmare" ("Deposition", 2019). This would have been another positive effect for Russia under the Trump administration. The actions surrounding his quid pro quo arrangement, which he was impeached and acquitted for, was in his own personal interest and also supported Russia, something he repeatedly did while also aiding efforts against them.

Biden Administration (2021-present)

Joseph R. Biden, the Democratic candidate, defeated Trump in the 2020 presidential elections to become the 46th U.S. president. His foreign policy goals were contrary to Trump's.

In other words, he aimed to restore the multilateral order and position the U.S. at the forefront of the world ("U.S. Foreign," 2024). One of these goals was to restore NATO. At the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference, Biden (2021) emphasized U.S. support for NATO, "You know, to me and to the United States, and to us, … we'll keep faith with Article 5. It's a guarantee. An attack on one is an attack on all. That is our unshakable vow."

As part of Biden's international support campaign, he wrote an opinion essay in The New York Times, where he mentioned that U.S. military aid is being used to ensure Ukraine has a strong position on the negotiating table. The U.S. is also fully opposing Russia by "reinforcing NATO's eastern flank with forces and capabilities", which in part was aided by the accession of Finland and Sweden to the organization. Critically, he noted what the U.S.' goal for Ukraine is: "a democratic, independent, sovereign and prosperous" country that can defend itself (Biden, 2022). This plays into U.S. political culture shaping foreign policy because even though the U.S. government has previously supported dictators and anti-democratic governments for its own gain, the values of its citizens align with the premise of a democratic republic, which is to spread democracy at the same time, Russia, an authoritarian state, wants to recreate an entity like the Soviet Union by absorbing Ukraine.

It was during President Biden's term that Russia became increasingly hostile against Ukraine. Russian forces began increasing troops near Ukraine's eastern border, near the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, beginning in April 2021, which Russia claimed were defensive forces that posed no threat ("Merkel Tells," 2021). It was the largest mobilization since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In January 2022, Russia amassed more than 100,000 troops on three sides of Ukraine through Belarus and Crimea. When the "special military operation" began, it represented a direct challenge to the U.S. in terms of their defense of

Ukraine. In response, Western nations, led by the U.S., issued wide-ranging sanctions, the most prominent of which was banning select Russian banks from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT) international payment messaging system, which effectively bans them from international markets (Perez, 2022).

Conclusion

The Russian-Ukrainian War has been the latest flash point that Washington and Moscow have disagreed on, leading to increasingly unstable and tense relations between the U.S., Russia, and their allies. Based on my examination of the latest conflict, Russia's goals of reuniting its stolen historical lands, increasing its influence around the world, and spreading antidemocratic ideals run contrary to the United States' push for democracy and capitalism. The proxy war currently ongoing in Ukraine — Ukraine with U.S. and Western support versus Russia — is one that appears to be unlikely to cause a direct war between the two Security Council members. As neither country is likely to acknowledge a defeat because they want to spread their respective political cultures, a direct war would serve no purpose and therefore is improbable.

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