

A New Cold War? Russia, America, and the Crisis in Ukraine

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Abstract

America and Russia share a lengthy history of hostility and mistrust; the Cold War Era was a prolonged manifestation of conflict that ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The emergence of a new revanchist government under Vladimir Putin has once again scaled up tensions by its repeated attempts to control former states of the Soviet Union. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 intensified the already simmering hostility between America and Russia. Russian aggression was responded to by open American support for Ukraine. Nevertheless, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 compelled the U.S. to initiate a proxy war against Russian aggression by providing support to Ukraine. The historical and geopolitical context of this conflict compels one to view this renewed Russia-America conflict under the lens of the realist theory of political science. Russia's aims for expanding regional influence and power are a core issue behind the current military conflict with Ukraine and tension between Western powers and Russia.

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Since the inception of the U.S.S.R. in 1922 as an aftermath of the communist revolution, the capitalist and democratic American society has had a hostile relationship with the Russian Federation. The first nuclear test conducted by the United States in July 1945 initiated the Cold War between the U.S.S.R. and America, marked by the long-lasting diplomatic and military confrontation that ended in 1991 after the collapse of the Russian Federation (Davidson, 2022). More recently, Russia's invasion and ultimate capture of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014, followed by Vladimir Putin's uncompromising attitude toward growing American influence in the region and open support for separatists in eastern Ukraine, scaled up the tension between the two countries to a new Cold War (N.B.C. News, 2022). However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 deteriorated the relationship between these two world powers to an all-time low. A panoramic view of the historical profile of the hostility between Russia and America reveals that the quest for political, military, and economic might has been the key factor behind the long-lasting tensions between these two countries.

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia has taken a path towards the resurrection of the former Russian Federation; the sole purpose behind the Russian invasion is the accumulation of regional strength by annexing former Russian states. On the other hand, the United States and its allies have enhanced their economic, social, and military influence in response to the looming threat of Russian aggression in Eastern Europe. NATO's expansion aims to free Ukraine from consistent Russian threats and to check the growing Russian influence in the region (N.B.C. News, 2022). Thus, the struggle for expanding regional influence and power is the core issue behind the current military conflict and tension between Western powers and Russia. The historical and geopolitical context of this conflict compels one to view this renewed Russia-America conflict under the lens of the realist theory of

political science. This theory explains that the struggle and strife between regions and countries is a contest for power, making the quest for material wealth and military strength the basis of the relationship between two countries (Genest, 2004). As indicated by the context of the Russian/American conflict over Ukraine, power is a primary determinant of the dynamics and direction of the relationship between these two countries. The following paragraphs substantiate this theory.

The Historical Profile of U.S-Russia Conflicts

The historical profile of the relationship between Russia and America confirms that the two countries have sought to overcome each other's military and economic might for decades. For this same reason, their foreign relations have remained primarily hostile. After the first-ever atomic test conducted by America in July 1945, the Russians responded by conducting their own atomic test in 1949. These events triggered an escalating nuclear arms race between the two superpowers, which became the most significant feature of the 45-year-long Cold War (Davidson, 2022). This long-term nuclear arms race indicates the true nature and cause of the hostility between the two nations. Nuclear bombs are the symbolic and practical representation of destruction and demolition, and their possession enhances a nation's military might to unlimited proportions. Thus, the core focus of this nuclear arms race was to exercise greater military strength, which endorses the notion that the relationship between nations is a game of power and influence.

Before the inception of this arms race, American policy towards Russia was based on the principle of "might is right." In 1946, Americans developed a foreign policy to restrict the Russian Federation's growing influence within the region. This policy was based on the premise that the West would do all it could to avert any military threat to countries neighboring Russia without taking aggressive or provocative action against the Russian Federation. These limiting tactics used to curtail Russia's military and social influence in the

region, coupled with the threat of American nuclear weapons, instigated an equally hostile response from the Russians. The Russians initiated their first confrontation with the West by cutting off ground communication lines to West Berlin (Davidson, 2022). These events demonstrate that the fear of being overwhelmed and influenced by other countries' military and economic might has been a core factor behind America's tensions with Russia.

Delving into the history of the Cold War further reveals other aspects of this long-lasting political, military, diplomatic, and economic confrontation between Russia and America. The role of power in the conflict became even more significant when America conducted the first test of the thermonuclear bomb in late 1952. This explosion was remarkable because it was much more powerful than the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Russia responded with its own thermonuclear test in 1955, prompting an uglier and potentially deadlier turn in the atomic arms race (Davidson, 2022). This costly nuclear arms race culminated in 1958 when Russia, America, and the United Kingdom separately conducted more than one hundred atomic bomb tests. This extraordinary escalation helps explain that the search for unlimited power to destroy and rule over others was the driving force behind the arms race between Russian Federation and Western countries, including America.

Even the most significant and dangerous historical confrontation between Russia and America was based on the principle of power play. The Cuban Missile Crisis was initiated by the installation of Russian ballistic missiles in Cuba in 1962, which was governed by anti-American Fidel Castro. The presence of these missiles posed an existential threat to America, prompting American President John F. Kennedy to adopt an aggressive military policy culminating in a planned invasion of Cuba to neutralize the threat. Fortunately, diplomatic negotiations prevailed, and the Russians agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for America's assurance that it would not invade Cuba (Davidson, 2022). This crisis put the

entire world on edge over the fear of a third World War; nevertheless, the root cause of this confrontation is best supported by the theory of realism. The presence of missiles in Cuba benefited Russia, as it could use them to gain more influence and power in the region; conversely, these missiles posed a direct threat to America and its influence in the region. Thus, realism and practicality drove the confrontation and its peaceful end.

The Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 also marked a new turn in the hostility between America and Russia. This event started another form of Cold War between the two states in which America trained and funded Mujahedeen to combat Soviet forces. This nine-year-long proxy war ended in the defeat and collapse of the Russian Federation (Davidson, 2022).

Seeing the looming threat of the Russian Empire in 1983, American President Ronald Regan announced his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which aimed to build space-based ballistic missile protection to combat Russian threats. Whether it was the Russian invasion of Afghanistan or the establishment of space-based ballistic missile defense, the core factor behind these aggressive strategies was the threat of annihilation, mutual destruction, and control over the region. Thus, the Russian and American administrations acted realistically and took concrete steps to ensure their survival rather than relying on promises and suppositions. These actions also confirm the prevalence of realism in geopolitical issues and endorse the proposition of the realist theory.

The most prominent military and geopolitical conflict since the end of the Cold War occurred in 2014 with Russia's invasion of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Historically, Ukraine played a key strategic role for the former Russian Federation as it was the center of agriculture, defense production, and military installations (Al Jazeera English, 2022). Ukraine's separation from Russia gave a death blow to the collapsing Russian Empire by limiting Russia's ability to protect its regional interests. Following its independence, Ukraine

further distanced itself from Russian influence by seeking membership in the European Union (E.U.) and NATO (Al Jazeera English, 2022). This realignment on the part of the Ukrainian government reduced Russian dominance in the region and strengthened diplomatic, economic, and military ties between Ukraine and Europe.

Russia also has historical political, social, and cultural ties with Ukraine due to its highly polarized ethnic diversity. Half of the Ukrainian population comprises a Russian-speaking, pro-Russian faction, while the other half is Ukrainian-speaking, pro-West faction. Additionally, Ukraine provides a gateway for Russian fuel pipelines and strongly influences Russian trade (Al Jazeera English, 2022). A primary reason behind Russia's 2014 Ukraine invasion and the subsequent increase in tension between Russia and the West was the growing economic and military ties of Ukraine with the E.U. When pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich scrapped plans to create a formal economic relationship with Europe, countrywide protests known as Euromaidan finally ousted the pro-Russian government. Moscow deemed this regime change a threat to the Russian people living in Crimea, resulting in Russia's covert operation to annex Crimea in 2014 (Al Jazeera English, 2022).

Vladimir Putin also supported pro-Russian separatists located in the southern part of Ukraine. Putin termed these regions Novorossiia, which means "New Russia." This term was used in the imperial Russia of the eighteenth century (Al Jazeera English, 2022). Thus, this political, social, and cultural background of the Russia-Ukraine conflict of 2014 indicates that the quest for regional influence and power was the fundamental driving force behind Russia's aggression toward an independent state. After losing its federation and the status of a superpower, Russia has strived to regain its former regional influence and glory. However, its regional influence is linked to the growing economy, and Ukraine is the link between its agricultural, trade, fuel supply, and access to other regional states. Due to its desire to

recapture this power, Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014 further validates the realist theory in assessing international relations.

As the above-referenced examples indicate, realism grounded in the pursuit of power formed the core principle of Russia's conflict with the West, including the United States. Therefore, it is helpful to apply the principles of the realist theory to understand the nature of the Russian/American conflict. The realist theory was originally formulated by ancient Greek philosophers more than 2500 years ago. During the Renaissance, the Italian political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli also advocated in favor of this theory. In the modern world, scholars like Hans Morgenthau, Edward Hallett Carr, and Kenneth Waltz have further supported this theory by adding to its different dimensions (Genest, 2004). One significant factor that underscores the relevance of this theory in global geopolitics is that during the Cold War between Russia and America, Americans used this theory as the basis for devising and designing their foreign policy (Genest, 2004).

The Realist Theory: A Brief Discussion

To explain realism's role in global politics, several scholars argue that world leaders increasingly rely on its use to formulate their international relations due to its independence from diplomacy. The realist theory separates fact from illusion, further simplifying decisions for leaders. This theory is universal since it is based on the search for power and material wealth, which are inherent to human nature. This craving for power also influences our behavior and relationships regardless of time. Realism's applicability is also illustrated by nation-states' perpetual attempt to gain and retain power. For this reason, most diplomatic policies that the international community formulates are based on power politics (Genest, 2004).

The basis of the realist theory was founded in ancient Greece, where renowned scholar and historian Thucydides described the basis for the war between Athens and Sparta.

He described the fundamental nature of the armed conflict between these two city-states in the following way: “What made war inevitable was the growth of Athenian power and the fear which this caused in Sparta (Genest, 2004). Consequently, when Spartans saw and sensed the growing military might of Athens, they perceived it as a threat to their existence. Therefore, they began increasing their regional military strength to maintain the balance of power. When the Athenians realized the growing military power of the Spartans, they attempted to stop it via force. Thus, one can infer that fear of being dominated governs subsequent military, social, and economic conflicts between two states just as much as the desire for power.

Machiavelli, the Italian philosopher referenced above, also endorsed the significance of the principle of realism in shaping political and social relationships. In his political treatise “The Prince,” he attempts to separate politics from the principles of ethics since he deems politics and political relationships an outcome of objective interest between two nations. He categorically claims survival, thriving, and dominating are the basic tenets of a nation’s political, diplomatic, and military relationships. Machiavelli advocates that realism is the core principle that makes nations friends or foes as they seek to gain material wealth and power while staying true to their objective desires. Hans Morganthau is another political scientist who, in his book “Politics Among Nations” also underscores the significance of objective reality in determining political and social relationships. He argues that insecurity, aggression, and armed conflicts are common aspects of international relations, and these behaviors are based on human instinct. Thus, he rightly states that humans make decisions rationally, keeping their interests in the first place (Genest, 2004).

Another modern aspect of the realist theory is neo-realism, which modifies the classical version of the theory. According to this latest version, the instability and incoherence in the international system of governments compel nations to muster as much

strength as possible to avert any existential threat. Kenneth Waltz is the key proponent of this theory, and he contends that the lack of an organized system of government based on central authority is the key that determines international relations as the government finds themselves in the dilemma of beefing up their security based on the principle of self-preservation in an anarchical world. Since the world politics and military and social setup are not based on the principles of harmony, coherence, and mutual peaceful existence, nations face a security dilemma. Thus, to survive in such a fluid political scenario, nations prefer to fulfill their national security consideration on a self-help basis. The result of this materialistic arms race is the root cause of modern-day conflicts (Genest, 2004).

Accordingly, one may conclude that the realist theory provides a defensible explanation behind a nation's diplomatic, economic, and social ties, and more specifically, the nature of the conflict between America and Russia. Based on the lengthy history of conflict between these two countries, the quest for power and material gain has been the root cause of these conflicts. Their standoff over Ukraine is another manifestation of this fact, as both countries deem Ukraine a means of gaining regional influence and power. Such prolonged confrontation is best understood when viewed through the lens of realism rather than other competing political theories.

Trump and Biden's Policy for Ukraine and Russia

In recent times, ex-President Donald Trump and the current President Joe Biden have been the key figures who shaped a renewed American foreign policy with Russia. Despite a changing geopolitical climate, American foreign policy with Russia has remained consistent since the root causes of the difficulties and disagreement between the two nations have remained constant. Nevertheless, there was sudden, unexpected leniency in America's response toward the Putin administration during the tenure of Trump. During and subsequent to the 2016 presidential election, the relationship with Russia became a hot topic in American

domestic politics due to Moscow's alleged involvement in the election in support of Trump (N.B.C. News, 2022). These rumors were reinforced by Trump's unusual commendation of the Putin administration's policies. Most tellingly, America's support of Ukraine against Russian aggression became more lukewarm during the Trump administration (France 24 English, 2021).

After coming into power, Trump showed consistent leniency towards Putin's aggressive policies. In a controversial press conference following a summit meeting with Putin in Helsinki, Trump defended Russia's stance on its alleged involvement in American elections in the following way: "President Putin says it's not Russia. I don't see any reason why it would be." (N.B.C. News, 2022). This indifference toward a foreign power's meddling with the American domestic system has been unprecedented in the American history of conflict with Russia. On the one hand, Trump's reluctance to condemn Russia strengthened the rumors of Russian involvement in Trump's election; conversely, this submissive response weakened American foreign policy toward Ukraine. Thus, one can infer that during Trump's tenure as the president of the United States, American foreign policy for Ukraine received a considerable setback.

Throughout his tenure, Trump never stopped praising Putin's power politics in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. One of the possible explanations for Trump's unusual tilt toward Russia is his experience as a real-estate developer; in this capacity, he always viewed Russia as a land of immense business opportunities. In the views of some scholars, Trump's inclination toward Russia is rooted in his own domineering, overbearing personality as he displays profound respect for authoritative and strong rulers (Wallen, 2015). Trump consistently held Russian President Putin in great awe and admiration. This reluctance to find fault with Russia provided significant political and social space for Putin, and he further bolstered his presence in Ukraine.

John Bolton, the National Security Advisor under the Trump administration recalls his observance of the Trump-Putin meeting in his memoirs and reveals that “Trump ‘never offered an opinion on Putin’”. He openly admits that he was always reluctant to ask Trump about his opinion of Putin since he feared he might hear a highly admiring account. For Bolton and other officials, Trump’s thoughts on the Russia-Ukraine war and Vladimir Putin’s personality remained a mystery (Wallen, 2015). These facts also corroborate the notion that Trump’s policies toward the Russian invasion and the Russian government were ambiguous and suspicious on several occasions. It is defensible to suggest that this lenient stance toward Russia allowed its hold on Crimea and southern regions of Ukraine to strengthen significantly during the Trump administration.

Another significant aspect of Trump’s policy toward Russia is its inconsistency; he believed in a progressive foreign policy and advocated for Russia’s readmission into the G8. This apparent tilt toward Russia favored the Russian government facing global political isolation; Trump’s invitation to Putin to attend a summit in Washington further bolstered Russia’s international status. According to a senior Trump administration official, Trump’s leniency toward Russia might have resulted from his desire to strike a nuclear deal with Russia, enhancing America’s political and economic ties with Russia while lessening its inclinations toward China (Wallen, 2015). Trump’s stance on Russia was based on over-confidence and misguided self-belief; he always ignored the preparatory “deep dives” on the subject he was to discuss with Putin. This over-confidence was the primary cause of the failure of his pro-Russia policy.

Nonetheless, American foreign policy toward Ukraine remained consistent during the Trump administration, as Washington continued its military, political, and economic support to Ukraine. America also bolstered NATO and its presence in Central Europe. Despite these policy measures, Trump’s engagement with Ukraine was based on his political interests.

Later, he used Ukraine to manufacture and spread derogatory information against his political opponents (Wilkerson, 2021). Trump's lukewarm attitude toward Russian aggression in Ukraine helped Putin escape international pressure in his six-year-long war with Ukraine.

Biden, who took office after the 2020 elections, faced several challenges in maintaining a suitable foreign policy for Russia. Under his presidency, America ended the dichotomy between the American administration and the presidency over the issue of dealing with Russia and Ukraine. After Crimea's annexation, Russia launched a secret operation in the Donbas province of Ukraine to keep the country destabilized and deter it from strengthening ties with Europe (Wilkerson, 2021). American military, economic, and diplomatic support is necessary for Ukraine to deal with this Russian conspiracy; therefore, the Biden administration's attempts to restore negotiations to bring a peaceful solution to Donbas province's turmoil were favorable to Ukraine.

Biden is an experienced politician aware of international relations' dynamics and fluidity. In contrast to his predecessor, Biden does not seek quick results and victories. He believes in patience and understands that resolving Donbas and other conflicts with Russia is a lengthy and time-consuming process (Wilkerson, 2021). However, America's role in the Ukraine/Russia conflict is well beyond a traditional strategic partner; America's diplomatic and military support is the only thing that keeps Ukraine's hope of regaining stability alive. Therefore, Biden's policy for Russia and Ukraine must reflect this geopolitical fact. The most crucial aspect of the America-Russia-Ukraine conflict is that Russia is not only interested in Crimea or Donbas, but Ukraine's geo-strategic location makes it a target of Russian attack (Al Jazeera English, 2022).

Russia's growing interest in Ukraine, particularly considering its potential addition to NATO, resulted in a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This invasion resulted from Russian fear of Western powers' growing influence in the former regions of the Soviet

Union. The Biden administration's negotiation with Russia is focused on the issue of NATO's expansion and Russia's concerns over it. Before invading Ukraine, Russia asked NATO and the Biden administration to stop NATO's growing influence in Eastern Europe and remove military installations and nuclear weapons from the region (Al Jazeera English, 2022). Although western powers and America are willing to negotiate, they refuse to relinquish military installations in the region. Under the Biden administration, the United States is committed to restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity and supported it with financial and military aid before and during the invasion. So unlike Trump, the Biden administration is more openly inclined toward Ukraine.

Conclusion

The historical context of conflict between America and Russia and its current perspective in the wake of the 2014 and 2022 Russian invasions of Ukraine makes it clear that the tension between the United States and Russia has reached an all-time high. Several scholars and political scientists have expressed their fear that the expansionist motives of Russia will further escalate the tension between the two world powers. Several scholars have described Russia under the Putin administration as a "revanchist power," and this power is set to regain its former breadth and influence in Eastern Europe (Al Jazeera English, 2022). As the realist theory suggests, the hostility in the relationship between America and Russia is based on the power struggle. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will further deteriorate the relationship between these two countries.

According to Gerald Toal, a professor of international affairs, regaining Russia's powerful status has always been the primary goal of Putin's aggressive foreign policy. To fulfill this aim, Russia first occupied Crimea to gain strategic military ground from where Russia could access far into Central Europe (Al Jazeera English, 2022). However, America and other Western powers do not acknowledge this expansionist agenda. After the Russian

invasion of Crimea in 2014, the United States imposed strict economic and trade restrictions on Russia. It condemned Russian aggression in the strongest terms on every considerable world forum. Moreover, America supplied all the necessary military aid to Ukraine to assist it in resisting the invasion. This aggressive approach toward Russian hostility manifests America's zero-tolerance policy against Russia's invasive attitude.

After the 2014 invasion, the diplomatic ties between Russia and America deteriorated significantly, and even during the Trump administration, America continued providing military, financial, and moral support to Ukraine (McMurtry, 2022). This background of the tension between Russia and America leads to a reasonable assumption that after the 2022 full-scale invasion, America will do whatever it can to stop Russia from its aggressive and violent acts of annexing Ukraine. As events unfolded after the February 2022 invasion, the Biden administration immediately levied severe economic sanctions against Russia, including freezing accounts of Russian billionaires and imposing a ban on oil imports from Russia. America and Western powers also removed Russian banks from the SWIFT financial messaging system (Mate, 2022).

After nearly five months of war, America's role has become even more prominent. The Biden administration plans to raise three billion dollars to provide Ukraine with military, economic, and financial support. As America's role in the Ukrainian war has increased, it can be argued that America and Russia are now waging a proxy war via Ukraine. This leads to more significant questions relating to the ultimate outcome. Will it eventually trigger a full-scale war between the United States and Russia, or will this proxy war remain limited to Eastern Europe? While talking to reporters, President Biden affirmed America's long-term commitment to weaken Russia by providing Ukraine with various forms of assistance. Referring to Putin as a dictator, Biden expressed the fear that if threats like this are not

stopped, “They keep moving. And the costs, the threats to America and the world, keep rising.” (McMurtry, 2022).

In a recent development, America has provided Ukraine with a High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (H.I.M.A.R.S.). This system will significantly enhance Ukraine’s capability to defend against the Russian invasion, which is currently oriented towards the east (Powell, 2022). This new development has further enhanced America’s proxy role in the Ukraine war. The Russian government is more likely to escalate the tension between the two countries by implementing countermeasures. The history of conflict between America and Russia foreshadows challenging times ahead. America’s commitment to prolonged support for Ukraine will escalate with time and may assume unprecedented proportions.

Some would argue that America has a history of advocating for human rights and opposing anti-democratic regimes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine gained independence from the Russian Federation. As a democratic and independent country, Ukraine must leverage political, social, and military affiliations to ensure its long-term security, particularly when threatened by Russian expansionist doctrine.

The Biden administration has shown a willingness to cross new thresholds in support of Ukrainian freedom. This renewed Russia-America confrontation is not new in the bilateral relationship between these two countries. Still, the current geopolitical environment suggests a contentious and long-lasting struggle that may continue to escalate to unprecedented levels.

Based on the recent developments discussed above, it is reasonable to assume that Russia will adhere to its expansionist policy based on the accumulation of power, as the realist theory suggests. It is also realistic to think that America and its western allies will continue to champion democracy by opposing Russian aggression through military, financial, and moral support of Ukraine. The Russian government has a reputation for disregarding human rights and disrespecting other countries’ sovereignty, so some would argue that

America's opposition to the Ukraine invasion is justifiable and inevitable. The free world has a moral and ethical responsibility to support Ukraine in its fight against aggression and dictatorship. Thus, this latest hostility between America and Russia will continue to escalate. The only way to avert a larger war is a global effort to prevent Russia from implementing its aggressive doctrine in the region.

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