

Russia's Growing Stomach

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POLSC 250: International Relations

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December 9, 2025

Abstract

Looking back at history, there has been a clear pattern. The pattern of the continued conflict between the United States and Russia. Conflict arose significantly after World War II, mainly caused by their two different ideologies of capitalism versus communism. Not only has there been a consistent and growing conflict between Russia and the United States, but the same conflicts have been brewing between Russia and Ukraine. The invasion of Ukraine by Russia has amplified the conflict in the United States. Viewed through the international relations theory of realism, this provides a possible explanation for the conflict exhibited between these three countries.

Russia's Growing Stomach

Ukraine had been a part of the Soviet Union and governed by Russia from 1922 to 1991. Ukraine gained their independence with the fall of the Soviet Union in late 1991. Moscow has had the continued desire to take control over Ukraine for decades. Marketing this acquisition as being an opportunity to reinsert Russian influence and ideals in Ukraine. After decades of planning, on February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This set off the substantial war between Russia and Ukraine. However, the war between Ukraine and Russia did not start in February of 2022, but rather it started in February and March of 2014. Russian troops invaded and occupied Crimea, a peninsula located in southern Ukraine. Crimea has access to the Black Sea ports, which provides entry to the Eastern Mediterranean, Balkans and Middle East. The main reason for this annex is the ability for trade and deals through other countries. The invasion order was given by Russia's president, Vladimir Putin. Putin's main goal was to regain power through sea trade. Creating more opportunities to grow power and business. The invasion of 2014 can be seen through a realist lens, exhibiting Russia's increase of influence and defense. Russia's current access to the Black Sea ports, demonstrate Russia's gain of military advantages. Realism sees this as a calculated move by Putin, where he is prioritizing Russia's regional dominance and resource expansion. It is clear that Russia aims to gain major influence and power over Ukraine with the 2024 full force invasion.

The invasion of 2022 took the world by storm, as well as amplifying the conflict between the United States and Russia. With the invasion of Ukraine, the United States sent over aid to help Ukraine protect themselves. While this seems like an act of good ethical and moral reasoning, the real reason and most historically accurate reason, is the United States desire to maintain global security for the United States. As well as to reduce Russia's already spreading

aggression and leadership power. The United States actions align with realism as the United States are focusing on indirectly fighting against the Russian plan of complete power in our world.

Realism Theory

The international relations theory of realism is a perspective of how our countries' systems work and how they view world politics. The realism theory states the concept of endless competition for power and position within the anarchic global system among countries. The realism theory offers a proposition that countries' actions are motivated by a personal gain of political power, national interest, military power, and country security.

A growing aspect of realism is structural realism, also known as neorealism. The theory was developed by Kenneth Waltz, an American Political scientist, in his 1979 book titled *Theory of International Politics*. Waltz's book challenged the concept of classical realism by focusing on structural factors opposed to individual factors. Neorealism states that conflict is caused by the anarchic structure of the international system itself. Opposed to the theory of classical realism, which states that conflict is caused by flaws in human nature. These two concepts of theories in international relations work together to display Russia's current plan for expansion.

Demonstrating the two within Russia's actions, fits into Russia's ideals of self-interest and primary power.

NATO's Role and NATO Expansion

NATO has been a major supporter of Ukraine since the initial Russia invasion in 2014. While NATO is not directly fighting with Ukraine against Russia, NATO has been fighting against further Russian damage and helping to divert Russia's hostility. The theory of realism is key when understanding NATO's actions taken with Ukraine. Following the Cold War, NATO

expanded eastward. The main reason for this was to promote democracy and stability. According to Vladimir Putin, the expansion of NATO has been the driving threat for conflict in Ukraine. As said by the Australian Institute of International Affairs, “During the 1990s debate over whether Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic should become alliance members, many military and foreign-policy experts argued that NATO expansion would lead to big trouble with Russia.”

(Switzer, 2024) The expansion of NATO posed an immense threat to Russian influence and national security. Especially after the cold war expansion into Eastern Europe, which included countries that had formerly been a part of the Soviet Union, or in the Soviet Union sphere of influence. (Walter, 2025) With the conflict with NATO and Russia, Russia has never directly fought with NATO regarding the conflict. Instead, Russia focuses on spreading misinformation regarding the Ukraine invasion, the United States role and Russia’s actions. Attempting to paint Russia in a positive light. In 2012, a law on “foreign agents” was enacted in Russia. This law aimed at journalists, media outlets and organizations that are perceived to be opposed to the Russian regime. By limiting what is shown to Russian people, it can easily create a bias and contribute to creating overarching support for Russia. By spreading misinformation regarding NATO and what NATO stands for, it develops a further conflict between Russia, NATO and neighboring countries. Russian censorship on media and news is a straight connection to the realism theory of selfish acts? NATO is currently the main threat to Russian power.

Applying Realism to Ukraine’s Actions

Following the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the current Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy stood his ground for Ukraine. Instead of fleeing during this war, Zelenskyy remained in Kyiv. Despite many offers of evacuation from neighboring countries. Zelenskyy’s approach to this conflict lies heavily in strengthening military and defense, as well

as utilizing NATO and allies' resources. Throughout the growing conflicts and war, Zelenskyy has continued to reassure the Ukrainian people. Showcasing courage for continuing to stay at the center of the conflict in Kyiv. "The fight is here; I need ammunition, not a ride,". (Zelenskyy, 2022) A popular quote stated by Zelenskyy in a video response to the United States' offer of evacuation. Zelenskyy's continually exhibited actions of refusal to negotiate during the beginning of the invasion. This caused the war to become a bigger conflict and turn into an extreme problem. Many see Zelenskyy's actions as miscalculated, as he misunderstood Russia's ability to act with the invasion. (Latham, 2025) Relating Zelenskyy's actions to realism, this shows human error. Zelenskyy's early actions are a clear example of the concept of realism towards the human misperceptions of power and the drivers of power. As the Ukraine and Russia war is going into its 3rd year, Zelenskyy has not backed down with his prior negotiation qualifications for Russia. This continuing fight and setbacks for negotiations continues to add to the current conflict.

Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy

Vladimir Putin became acting president on December 31, 1999. Following this, Putin won the presidential election and became president of Russia in March of 2000. After his presidential terms, he became the prime minister from 2008 to 2012. Afterwards he returned to presidency in 2012, which he has remained as since. Prior to becoming president of Russia, Putin worked as a foreign intelligence officer for the KBG, The Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union. Working there for 16 years, rising up to become the lieutenant colonel. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2025) He briefly served in the Russian government before deciding to run for presidency.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy became Ukraine's president on May 20, 2019. Prior to running for president, Zelenskyy was a successful comedian, actor, screenwriter, and film producer. He starred in many popular Ukrainian films. Zelenskyy's main reason to run for presidency was due to the corruption that Ukraine's government had been in for the past years. Though he had no prior political experience.

Putin's actions and decisions with Russia are clear and concise. Each of them has a clear goal and preferred outcome. While comparing this with some of Zelenskyy's choices, especially with the conflict, they are completely different. Zelenskyy focuses more on deflecting current conflict, rather than a clear plan of action for the growing conflicts. Putin's overarching goal is to reinsert Russian influence and power into Ukraine. Zelenskyy's goal is to restore and strengthen Ukrainian independence and governmental power status. In the anarchic system of realism, Ukraine's prior attempt to balance power with Russia through NATO was misinterpreted and ended up creating a bigger power balance between Russia and Ukraine.

Ukraine's Land and Independence

Vladimir Putin would benefit substantially with the full takeover of Ukraine's land. A common interpretation of the conflict between the two can be described by Russia taking back what they believe belongs to them. Ukraine had previously been under Russian governmental control from 1922 until 1991. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia suffered the loss of Ukraine and Ukraine's land. The current invasion and conflict is not directly related to "Ukraine" but not focusing on the power growth and status that would be exhibited if Russia was able to be successful.

Throughout the years, Ukraine has struggled hard for its independence. Mainly fighting against Russia and Russia's struggle for power and gain. Repeatedly at every instance that

Ukraine exhibits its independence, another conflict arises where Russia attempts to take that power back. With the constant fight for their basic independence, many Ukrainians have lost hope and have been fleeing their home country to develop a safer life. In the three years of war that Ukraine has suffered, almost 7 million Ukrainian refugees have fled to other countries. (Buchholz, 2025) With the growing loss of Ukrainians, this adds to the forfeiture of Ukraine culture that historically has been inevitable in war. Ukraine's population prior to the invasion of 2022, was upwards of around 45 million. Looking at the current numbers now, it is now around 33 million. More than 10 million Ukrainians have either fled or died. (Escritt, 2024) Even if Russia does not "win" this war, Russia is still getting what it wanted, which signifies Russia's victory. Russia's main goal is to destroy Ukraine's independence and culture, and implement Russian culture and power in place, which is happening as a result of Ukraine's weakening population.

As the war is amplifying and Ukraine is losing more and more of its heart, the conflict and growing issues of globalization are beginning to peek out. Ukraine has multiple trade ties with neighboring countries. With this current war, it makes it hard to continue to provide these resources for trade. Before 2022, globalization played a huge part in the economic health and status of Ukraine, helping to give Ukraine the reputation of being an important resource that other countries should utilize. After the conflict of 2022, Ukraine is now less connected to other countries. The war has also damaged a lot of the Ukrainian ports that would allow them to participate in the trades. The lowering population of Ukrainians aids in the current issue with globalization as a lot of essential workers in Ukraine are no longer there to keep the country moving like before.

Similar Conflicts Throughout History

While the war between Ukraine and Russia might seem uncertain and unordinary, this is not something new. The major and growing conflicts between China and Taiwan in the 1950s and late 1990s exhibit the same types of desire that have been shown by Russia. Throughout the years, and even in today's day, there is still debate on whether Taiwan is its own country or deserves to be considered as one. While Taiwan's history and discussion of independence have been uncertain with no clear answer, Taiwan is considered to be an independent country. Though this answer often changes depending on political view. Taiwan and China relate to the current conflict of Ukraine and Russia as China and Russia were and are both fighting for something that they believe is "rightfully" theirs. China believes that Taiwan is their land and should have to be governed by China's ideals. While Russia believes Ukraine's land should be owned by Russia's and lived through Russia's ideals. The result of China and Taiwan's conflict has been mixed with no one clear answer. They are essentially in a political standoff.

The war between Israel and Palestine has some similarities to the Russian and Ukraine war. This is because of the shared discussion over land that others believe should belong to them. Whether one is right or one is wrong, major conflicts in the world have had a pattern regarding land and political power status. While the war of Israel and Palestine have differing overarching reasons, there are a few similarities as well. This war started after military Palestinian groups decided to launch a surprise attack on Israel. This attack resulted in the killing of around 1,200 Israelis. Israel fought back by an immense military attack with air strikes and a ground invasion in Gaza, Palestine. This war has been historically very controversial especially with the discussion of religion, which has been a major contributor to the growing conflict and attacks between Palestine and Israel. Many support Israel's heinous actions against Palestinians, calling

it an act of religious expression. (Charisya, 2025) A majority might support Israel's side of an invasion but will not support Russia's side. There is clearly a double standard showcased when comparing these two different conflicts. Religion is an essential factor, but possibly not the main reason for the double standard. Religious conflicts grow with other aspects of race and identity. It is hard to say the exact reason for the double standard, as human behavior is very based on bias. People will continue to believe and support what they are familiar with, as this has been historical for decades.

U.S. Foreign Policy Towards Russia and Ukraine

Trump Administration (2017-2021)

Donald J. Trump was sworn in on January 20, 2017. In his inaugural address, he announced an "America First" approach to foreign policy and trade. This approach was centered on reducing U.S. trade deficits and rebalancing burden sharing within alliances. On July 7, 2017, Trump attended the Group of Twenty (G20) leaders' meeting, where he met with Vladimir Putin. They conversed about Syria, both agreeing to establish a de-escalation zone in the South, and North of Korea. Over a year later on July 16, 2018, Trump and Putin met in Helsinki for a private two-hour meeting. The most notable topic discussed was Russia's possible full invasion of Ukraine. The Trump administration's main goal was to aid Ukraine, as well as build a relationship with Russia to further defuse the conflict between the two countries. The United States also imposed sanctions on Russia's top industrial workings. Attempting to withhold some power that Russia had to use against Ukraine. Trump's stance on the Ukraine and Russia conflict was mixed. Trump shared the desire to resolve Ukraine's conflict but raised skepticism regarding the effectiveness of providing military aid to Ukraine. Trump also needed to take into account

the possibility of nuclear war between Ukraine and Russia. If this catastrophe were to occur, this would completely set off the current political stability.

Biden Administration (2021-2025)

Joe Biden was inaugurated as the 46th president of the United States on January 20, 2021. The Biden Administration's U.S. foreign policy toward Russia and Ukraine was centered on supporting Ukraine militarily and economically. By providing military aid and other necessities to Ukraine during the conflict. Biden had a firm opposition to Russia's aggression, specifically towards Ukraine. Biden focused on reducing the tension between NATO and Russia. As stated by The New York Times, Biden called Russia's aggression "naked aggression", going on to say the United States would continue to stand with the "brave people of Ukraine." (Biden, 2023) As well as imposing sanctions on Russia, the Biden Administration also worked with allies to halt the price of oil, to restrict Russia's ability to finance the war against Ukraine. (The White House Archives, 2023) In June of 2021, Biden and Putin met to discuss their views of Ukraine and the current conflict. Nearing the end of Biden's term on September 26, 2024, he met with Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy to announce \$8 billion dollars in military aid that the U.S. will give to Ukraine. Prior meetings between Biden and Zelenskyy were used to discuss Ukraine's plan with the war and the U.S. efforts to provide weapons and other resources. Comparing Biden's actions to the actions that Trump made during his presidency from 2017-2021, it shows the clear line of difference between the way the two presidents chose to approach the situation. Trump chose to focus more on meeting with Putin and working with Russia, focusing on prioritizing the reduced risk of damaging the current U.S. and Russia relationship. Biden on the other hand, focused more on working more closely with Ukraine. Providing military aid and other resources to help support and strengthen Ukraine during the war.

The views of Trump and Biden on the conflict are nearly complete opposites. Trump focused on attempting to negotiate with Putin and find a middle ground that everyone could agree on. While Biden focused on physically fighting against Russia's invasion. This relates to the International Relations theory of realism as the acts of these two presidents are for personal gain. When looking at Trump's actions to focus on negotiation and the attempt of maintaining close relationships with Russia, it is clear what Trump is trying to obtain. Trump would benefit from this outcome for a few main reasons. One major reason is the political praise that Trump would receive if he were the one orchestrating this Ukraine and Russia negotiation. With this possible successful negotiation, it would also improve the trust between the U.S. and Russia. Which can result in more deals and partnerships further down the line in our government. While Biden's strategy of physically fighting back Russian invasion by providing aid to Ukraine, serves as an attempt to weaken Russia's military. This could also be linked to strengthening NATO and NATO allies, by providing aid to Ukraine. Though both Trump and Biden exhibit varying interpretations of realism, they are both linked to personal gain through their actions of this current conflict.

Trump Administration (2025-2029) - Currently

Following Joe Biden's term as president, Donald J. Trump decided to run for president again in 2024. His main reasons for this was to reverse the policies from the Biden Administration and attempt to negotiate the conflict between Russia and Ukraine once more. Trump became the United States 47th President on January 20, 2025. Prior to his inauguration, Trump shared that in his first 24 hours of being elected, he would end the Ukraine and Russian war. (Stent, 2024) Once Trump was in office, it seemed that ending this conflict would be harder

than he had initially thought. The growing conflict between Moscow and Kyiv continues to grow, making any sort of negotiation less and less likely.

Going on 300 days of Trump's term, he is still continuing the negotiation tactic, focusing on a few strategies. In March of 2025, Trump paused all aid to Ukraine, in an attempt to apply pressure to Zelenskyy to negotiate in a peace offering. Due to this, Zelenskyy shared that he was ready to work with the United States and Russia to come to a mutual agreement. Following the pause of aid to Ukraine, a 30-day ceasefire was also proposed. While Ukraine accepted, Russia did not fully reciprocate, which led to halts in the negotiations. Due to that, nothing was able to change and the war continued on. In July of 2025, Russia and Ukraine leaders, Vladimir Putin and Volodymyr Zelenskyy met face to face to negotiate over prisoners that were being held by Russia. While this negotiation was successful in getting these soldiers back, there was no future movement in regard to ending the war. Russia has expressed an inclination to resume negotiation talks with Ukraine, while Ukraine remains to focus on a ceasefire prior to any negotiations with Russia, which Russia does not prefer to commit to. (CNN, 2025)

Looking into the possible future between the Ukraine and Russian conflict seems uncertain. Ukraine's military is being strengthened by the United States and NATO allies, while Russia is beginning to struggle economically. Though the likelihood of Russia surrendering is low, especially when the main reason for the conflict in the first place is Russia's desire for boosting political power and expanding Russian territory.

Conclusion

Conflict between the United States and Russia initially developed after World War II, which resulted in the Cold War that began in 1945 and marked its end in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Cold War was mainly caused by the differing ideologies between the

United States and Russia. The United States focuses on freedom of speech and political freedom. While Russia on the other hand promotes a controlled economy and the communist party. Two very drastically different ideals. An additional reason was the struggle for global influence that Russia and the United States both exhibited. Throughout history both countries have attempted to expand their ideals in international politics by gaining allies and attempting to establish itself as the one dominant power. Even though Russia and the United States have never been in a full on “war”, throughout history they have always been competing with each other. The United States is based on a democracy, focusing its alliances on western nations. Russia believes in an authoritarian government, fixating on centralized power. The United States and Russia both see each other as a direct threat to their own ideals and government systems. The United States' role in NATO is directly related to the growth of Russia's issue with the U.S. NATO serves as a substantial security and power threat to Putin, as NATO poses a harm to Putin's international political influence. Ukraine's prior interest in NATO had only intensified the conflict between the three countries. Which further amplified the boiling conflict and inevitable war that would break out between Russia and Ukraine. While Russia and the United States have been at a constant and heavy conflict throughout history, the probability of a war breaking out between these countries is unlikely and largely unnecessary. While both Russia and the United States might gain a thing or two by the war, it would be unlikely as both are powerful countries. The loss would be way more than the overall gain. If Russia and the United States were to go to war, it would immensely harm and destroy the world's economics, power distribution between countries and the current implementation of globalization. A current war is deemed unnecessary as the current conflicts between the United States and Russia can be resolved and negotiated without war, as seen previously in regard to the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine. If

the two countries were to go to war, there would be no winner. We would only be left with a broken world and system.

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