

**The New Cold War: Examining The Dynamics Of Russian-American Confrontation In
Ukraine Using Realism Theory**

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Abstract

This essay meticulously examines the dynamics of the Russian-American confrontation in Ukraine using realism theory. Realism suggests that nations, pivotal players on the global political stage, are predominantly motivated by their desire for survival and pursuit of influence. The examination covers how Russia's assertive tactics, embodied in the annexation of Crimea and involvement in Eastern Ukraine, are aligned with its pursuit of national interest and consolidating power. There is also a discussion of America's response to these acts, such as implementing economic sanctions on Russia. This essay demonstrates how realism is invoked to uphold Western democratic ideals and counterbalance Russia's growing influence. The paper also ventures into forecasting future conflict developments, rooted in the tenets of realism. Potential scenarios of complex power dynamics, Russia's continued quest for regional control, and even a potential impasse akin to the Cold War are explored. Consideration is also given to the potential aftermath of the conflict from a realist lens, including increased global division, aggravated economic confrontations, possibilities of an arms race, and severe humanitarian repercussions. This essay amplifies the significance of realism in assessing and predicting state behavior in the context of intricate international conflicts, specifically underscoring the Russia-Ukraine situation. The findings affirm that realism acts as an insightful tool, shaping our understanding of the motivations and maneuvers of key participants in global political theatrics.

The New Cold War: Examining the Dynamics of Russian-American Confrontation in Ukraine Using Realism Theory

The international stage is currently marked by the persisting conflict between Ukraine and Russia, shaped by layers of historical complexities, territorial issues, and a bid for global power assertion. This crisis is best understood under the guiding principles of realism in international relations, a theory that places countries at the forefront, navigating in an environment where no supreme authority can enforce global regulations. This framework underscores the national interest's pursuit and the inevitable power tug of war among nations. The core of this study delves into realism theory's application to decipher the Ukraine-Russia conflict. From the realist standpoint, the conflict's undercurrents are the desire for territorial dominance, protection of national interests, and a quest for an improved balance of power on the global platform. The subsequent analyses aim to unravel not just Ukraine's and Russia's motivations but also to highlight the ripple effect such a conflict has on global stability and international interactions. The Ukraine-Russia situation serves as a case study, reflecting more significant global power play dynamics, and thus, effectively studying this conflict brings greater understanding to global diplomacy and nations' behavior's purpose. The principles of realism theory elucidate the strategic calculations that drive Russia and the United States. These superpowers are engaged in a complex power struggle influenced by national security interests and territorial control. The theory establishes that the Ukraine-Russia war is not merely an ideological conflict; instead, it is a stark reflection of the timeless pursuit of power and security within the anarchic international system.

The Original Cold War

Capitalism versus Communism

The disastrous Second World War was the hallmark of two superior nations: the United States, which represented capitalism, and the Soviet Union, whose ideology was

communism. According to Peterson (2017), their profound ideological differences marked the onset of the Cold War, a face-off characterized by extensive political and military unease rather than direct warfare. Spearheaded by Stalin, the Soviet Union was intent on pushing its communist ideologies far and wide, mainly through Eastern Europe, establishing regimes sympathetic to their cause. On the other hand, Safranchuk (2018) pointed out that the United States, led by President Truman, formed policies such as the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. These were strategic moves designed to thwart the Soviet Union's territorial ambitions by aiding nations economically and militarily that were under the shadow of communism. Several events spotlighted in this era were the indirect or proxy wars, for example, the Korean and Vietnam Wars. These were battles between the two superpowers, fought on foreign lands through their allies.

Furthermore, the alarming acceleration in the production of nuclear arsenals by both countries led to high-stake standoffs, the Cuban Missile Crisis being the most notorious. Research by Sokolshchik and Sokolshchik (2023) claimed that secret operations, economic duels, and political maneuverings defined the Cold War. Consequently, the political, economic, social, and international factors disintegrated Communism in 1991, hence marking the termination of the confrontation.

U.S. - Russian Foreign Relations in Ukraine Crisis in 2014

In the period succeeding the famous Cold War, the U.S. and Russia emerged entangled in a complex tapestry of relations. When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the two nations aimed for healthier ties. However, Smith (2016) noted that divergent diplomatic interests often erected roadblocks in 2014, when a new chapter unfolded with the surge of the Ukraine crisis. Ukraine, bearing links to the Soviet Union, was torn between its ambition to join Western alliances and the counteracting pull of Russian forces. The abrupt choice by the then Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, a Russian ally, to reject an agreement with the

European Union in 2013 triggered immense civil backlash. The backlash spiraled into the Euromaidan revolution, resulting in Yanukovich fleeing the scene early in 2014. Concerned by Ukraine's drastic political change, Russia rapidly acted to assert control over Crimea, which not only hosted a majority of Russian-speaking citizens but was also home to their prized Black Sea Fleet. The global community, particularly the United States, strongly condemned Russia's actions and responded by implementing strict economic sanctions (Sokolshchik & Sokolshchik, 2023). The escalating situation in Eastern Ukraine led to a pro-Russian uprising, sparking an ongoing clash as a consequence of their revolt. The tensions simmering between the two global powers for years, which had long dredged up ghosts of a bygone era lingering in the memories of both nations since the days their opposing ideologies vied for dominance across the Iron Curtain, have now reached a full boil, threatening to plunge the divided countries into an all too familiar standoff. The desire for power and dominance has been the underlying motive for these two nations at war, significantly impacting international relations.

Application of Realism Theory

Realism theory provides a wide-ranging lens through which to view the manifold undertakings of both the capitalists and the communism amidst the prolonged and pervasive anxiety of the Cold War epoch. Realism theory emphasizes the pursuit of power and national interests by each party involved. As key players in an anarchic international system, both nations were primarily motivated by their national interests, as realism theory suggests. Feinstein and Pirro (2021) explain that the USSR aimed to expand its ideological and territorial influence, seeking to establish control over Eastern Europe and promote communism through the creation of satellite states. These actions align with the realist concept of accumulating power and ensuring survival within an anarchic system.

As the USSR spread its ideological views, the U.S. aimed to curb communism's reach to preserve equilibrium among competing influences across the international system.

Initiatives like the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan were not solely altruistic gestures to aid struggling nations, but rather strategic measures aimed at countering Soviet influence (Peterson, 2017). This approach aligns with realism's emphasis on pursuing national interests, even through the guise of international cooperation. Additionally, according to Siracusa (2020), the nuclear arms race exemplified the realist concept of 'self-help,' as both nations stockpiled weapons to ensure their security. The Cuban Missile Crisis, on the other hand, showcased the balance of terror, another realist perspective, where both sides avoided direct conflict due to the risk of mutually assured destruction. Overall, realism theory effectively explains the actions of both countries during the Cold War, emphasizing the pursuit of national interests and maintaining power equilibrium within an anarchic international system.

Critical Events in the Current Conflict

Ukraine Crisis from Russia's Invasion

The Ukraine crisis, taking center stage in the post-Cold War geopolitical theatre, dramatically unfolded in 2014. A nation sandwiched between its historical ally, Russia, and the allure of Western alliances; Ukraine found itself walking a tightrope. A significant shift occurred when Viktor Yanukovich, then Ukraine's President, chose to side closer to Russia, discarding an anticipated agreement with the European Union in 2013 (Aliyev, 2022). The unexpected pivot triggered a wave of discontent, especially in the western territories of Ukraine. Furthermore, the ensuing wave of protests, known as the Euromaidan movement, swelled into a revolution, leading to Yanukovich's expulsion in February 2014. Russia moved the chess piece swiftly, annexing Crimea in March 2014 after a grip slip in the region. With a majority Russian-speaking population and home to the valuable Russian Black Sea

Fleet, Crimea was a significant catch. Despite loud international protests and refusal to recognize the annexation, the rift between Ukraine and Russia deepened.

Conversely, the situation in Eastern Ukraine turned volatile. Pro-Russian separatist factions, with suspected support from Russia, proclaimed autonomy in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. The resulting skirmish between these entities and the Ukrainian government escalated into the War in Donbas (Gomza, 2022). In addition, a deadlock ensued, alongside severe humanitarian crises and a toll on human lives that continues to rise. The serious turn that the crisis had taken in July 2014 was made evident when the Malaysian aircraft was downed over Eastern Ukraine in a troubling development. Western governments blamed Russian-backed separatists for the incident, further straining Russia's relations on the international stage (Aliyev, 2022). Currently, the Ukraine crisis remains unresolved. Despite multiple efforts to negotiate peace and establish ceasefires, a lasting solution seems elusive. As tensions remain high between Ukraine and Russia amid ongoing turmoil, a pall of uncertainty continues to darken the contours of wider international dynamics.

Russia's and America's Responses to the Realism Approach

Realism theory contends it is the self-interested pursuits of power and security by nation-states, acting primarily out of motivations to increase their standing on the global stage, that come to dominate interactions between countries around the world. While Russia aims to maintain influence, America's reaction stems from a desire to project strength while ensuring stability, as both consider responses through a lens of preserving preeminence during unrest over Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea exemplifies the exercise of power politics consistent with realism theory. Russia perceives its "near abroad," including former Soviet territories and satellite states, as essential for safeguarding national security and maintaining its status as a major power (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021). The Euromaidan movement and the subsequent pro-Western Ukrainian government posed a threat to Russian

influence, prompting a swift and assertive response to protect its sphere of control. Paine (2022) discovered that the pro-Russian uprising in Eastern Ukraine further served Russia's interests by creating a buffer zone, a concept rooted in realist thinking. By allegedly supporting these separatist movements, Russia effectively kept Ukraine destabilized, preventing its deeper integration with the West while preserving its power in the region.

While America's response is explicable from a realist perspective, its actions can be assessed through an alternative theoretical lens as well. For example, America's support for Ukraine, including imposing sanctions on Russia, applying diplomatic pressure, and providing aid, demonstrates its attempt to limit Russia's expanding influence. From the perspective of American national interests, a democratic and Western-oriented Ukraine aligns more closely with its goals compared to a Ukraine under Russian control (Peterson, 2017). While the United States has ostensibly championed international standards related to sovereignty and borders, how it has done so merely accentuates its unmatched status as the foremost global adjudicator. Both countries' actions, therefore, reflect realism's central tenets: a quest for power, the pursuit of national ideology, and permanence in an anarchic global organization.

NATO Expansion in Western Influence

Post the Cold War, significant shifts in international relations took shape, including expanding NATO and rising Western influence. To expand their security influence and geopolitical reach, Western powers extended the purview of NATO, a defense alliance originally established against the Soviet Union (Peterson, 2017). This expansion resulted in newly inducted member states embracing Western values such as democracy, market economy, and human rights. Safranchuk (2018) explains that integration into Western political, economic, and security frameworks required these nations to conform to NATO standards, leading to increased military collaboration and the establishment of military bases.

While Russia perceived NATO's progression eastward as posing an unmistakable security threat and diminishment of its authority in the region, other perspectives considered such expansion as supportive of neighboring nations' sovereign right to self-determination. The perceived advance of NATO military forces closer to Russia's borders raised serious concerns, resulting in heightened tensions between Russia and the West (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021). NATO's enlargement and the increasing Western impact in Europe have considerably altered the balance of influence across the region, with meaningful implications for how authority is distributed. While promoting Western security commitments and the spread of democratic principles, these developments also sparked geopolitical tensions, feelings of insecurity, and resentment within Russia. There has been growing concern that the ever-increasing Western influence within Europe poses risks to European security and constitutes interference in internal political matters.

Moreover, Russia has retaliated against the NATO influence in Europe as a means of fighting back to Western influence. Despite progress, the specter of the Cold War and its aftermath casts a long shadow on international politics, a testament to the era's far-reaching influence. Therefore, the unfolding geopolitical landscape of the Cold War continues to shape nations' relationships.

The U.S. Policy on Ukraine and Russia

When examining the international strategies of President Trump and Biden, it is striking to observe their distinct approaches toward Ukraine and Russia. According to Wallin (2017), President Trump's foreign policy toward Ukraine was unorthodox and unpredictable. While his administration provided military aid to Ukraine, it was marred by controversial allegations of seeking political advantages from the Ukrainian government. Meanwhile, Trump pursued a nuanced approach, establishing a diplomatic relationship with President Putin while imposing an economic response to actions like the annexation of Crimea. While

diverging from his predecessor's unconventional methods, the current administration has rededicated itself to steadfastly defending Ukraine's self-governance and borders from foreign encroachment, taking a resolute position opposing unwarranted hostility.

Furthermore, Biden's perspective towards Russia is more stringent, viewing it as a potential threat to American hegemony. In addressing the issues of cyberattacks, election meddling, and human rights violations, his administration has endeavored to curtail such damaging conduct by initiating a fresh set of restrictions, with the intent of discouraging additional troublesome behavior of this nature. The focus has been solidifying alliances with Western nations, aiming to counteract Russia's destabilizing maneuvers collectively. While both presidents acknowledged the issues presented by Russia, their tactics varied in tone and strategy.

Russia's Reaction From a Realist's Perspective

Through the lens of power dynamics and national interests, one can examine Russia's response to NATO's eastward movement in a more nuanced way that considers each side's strategic calculations and perceived security needs within the relationship. Realism theory asserts that the pursuit and preservation of power are central to nation-states. According to Tsygankov's research (2018), Russia viewed NATO's eastward growth as a direct threat to its security and strategic goals, prompting a strong response. The increasing proximity of NATO military infrastructure to its borders raised concerns about encirclement and challenged Russia's regional dominance. To protect its national interests, Russia took assertive measures rooted in *realpolitik*. The seizure of Crimea and assisting separatist movements in Eastern Ukraine was one of the significant responses by Russia (Wallin, 2017). These actions aimed to secure strategic resources, maintain control over crucial geopolitical territories, and prevent further encroachment of Western influence. From a realist standpoint, nations prioritize self-preservation and the pursuit of relative power in an anarchic global system.

According to Stephen (2017), Russia's response to NATO's expansion aligns with these principles, as it focuses on protecting its security and exerting influence within its perceived spheres. Russia's reaction, while seemingly a calculated response to maintain a balance of power within its perceived sphere of influence and thereby ensure its survival and security against perceived Western threats, nevertheless risks exacerbating tensions and undermining stability in the region unless addressed through constructive diplomacy. Therefore, Russia's response to the expansion of NATO, when analyzed through a realist lens, reflects the dynamics of power politics and follows a strategic approach aimed at safeguarding national interests, projecting power, and preserving regional influence in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Realism Perspective of the Conflict

Realism, a fundamental perspective in political theory, casts the world stage as a forum of self-interest where nations play strategic games of power. This perspective assists in unraveling the driving forces behind the steps taken by the U.S. and Russia in the Ukrainian dispute. The fascinating action of Russia, the incorporation of Crimea, and the apparent meddling in Eastern Ukraine can be interpreted from the perspective of its tactical advantage (Tsygankov, 2018). Its national interest mainly drives a nation's actions. For Russia, sustaining its regional influence and creating a protective buffer against the stretching arms of NATO seem to be the triggering factor. The political and geographical significance of Ukraine to Russia is not something to be dismissed lightly, making it a rational target for their assertive move.

On the other hand, America's response to the conflict is also a spectacle of realism. America's position as a global powerhouse commits it to uphold the status quo of the international political structure; therefore, territorial intrusions are perceived as a direct affront to this order. The chain of sanctions imposed on Russia by America can be seen as

more than just retaliatory measures; they are a statement of authority and a demonstration of geopolitical strength (Stephen, 2017). Furthermore, America's support of Ukraine is not just a sign of solidarity but a strategic tactic to meet Russia's influence in the region head-on, representing the realistic sentiment of states aiming for a balance of power. From a realist theory approach, the chess game of politics unfolds as a clear picture: countries are in constant pursuit of their interests, power dynamics dictate the scene, and survival becomes the center of attention. The Ukraine conflict, alongside the reactive maneuvers of Russia and the U.S., showcases how perfectly realism can be applied to interpret the world's political theatre.

Role of Power and National Interest in Responses to the Conflict

The sphere of international relations is an ongoing power play governed by national interests that relentlessly shape diplomatic negotiations and actions. This realism-driven view is exemplified in the reactions to the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Power, as a core concept in realism, is not merely about military strength or economic weight; it is about the ability to influence outcomes in a manner that serves a country's interests. The role of power is evident in the diplomatic chess game surrounding the Ukraine conflict. Take, for example, Russia's annexation of Crimea. This decisive action demonstrates Russia's quest to assert power and create a buffer against Western penetration, further establishing its regional hegemony (Korolev, 2016). In response, the United States, as a significant global power, utilized another form of power - economic sanctions. This is a classic power maneuver in international relations, leveraging economic influence to achieve desired political change. These sanctions, aimed at destabilizing Russia economically, reflect a strategic deployment of economic power to protect American and Western interests (Allers, 2017). However, beneath these power dynamics, national interests sit at the epicenter of the conflict. For

Russia, the national interest lies in maintaining its historical influence over Ukraine and preventing NATO's eastward expansion.

In contrast, the United States national interest involves safeguarding the boundary principle of Ukraine in maintaining post-Cold War order, thereby restricting Russia's expansionist tendencies. These national interests dictate respective responses to the conflict. Russia's relentless push for control over parts of Ukraine is driven by its strategic interests. At the same time, the U.S. support for Ukraine - economic, political, and military is fueled by its desire to counterbalance Russia's influence. Therefore, power and national interest play pivotal roles in shaping the responses to the Ukraine crisis.

Implications for the Future

There are several possible trajectories for the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict. Firstly, the shifting balance of power will likely continue to shape the conflict's landscape. Feyrock (2018) stated that the United States, in collaboration with its partners, may escalate economic and political pressure on Russia via heightened sanctions to deter additional hostile actions. As a counterstrategy, Russia might nurture alliances with non-western nations to mitigate the impact of these sanctions. Secondly, Russia may persist in asserting its regional power to safeguard its national interests. This could mean more annexations or increased involvement in other ex-Soviet regions. According to Winkler et al. (2019), the ongoing resistance from Ukraine, backed by Western supporters, will only fan the flames of the tension. Lastly, the conflict could descend into a stalemate, with neither side conceding ground. This would mirror the drawn-out confrontations of the Cold War era, leading to a protracted conflict marked by periods of heightened tension without a decisive end. These possible futures align with realism's principle of states striving to maintain and enhance their power and interests, resulting in ongoing power dynamics and maneuvering on the world stage.

From the vantage point of realism, one can contemplate the potential aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine standoff. Principally, the continuing hostilities could engender a further split amongst global powers, mirroring divided alliances akin to the Cold War epoch. Realism could reshape diplomatic relationships worldwide and catalyze a reorientation of the global political landscape. Secondly, an intensifying economic standoff might be on the horizon. It may involve stricter sanctions on Russia or countermeasures from Russia and its supportive allies (Bin, 2018). The sanctions send ripples through the global economic milieu, potentially upsetting international commerce and risking economic turbulence. Thirdly, the drag-on of the conflict might fuel an escalation in military preparedness. Nations may feel compelled to reinforce their military prowess, resulting in elevated defense spending and a heightened global military climate (Winkler et al., 2019). Finally, potential humanitarian implications must be noticed. The Ukrainian populace may face prolonged or even escalated hardships, spurring a potential refugee crisis that the international community would have to respond to. In the sobering light of realism, these possible outcomes are steered by the primary pursuits of nations: the preservation of self and the assertion of power.

Conclusion

The Russia-Ukraine conflict is a vibrant illustration of realism's principles on the global political stage. The tussle between these nations highlights the pivotal roles that power and a country's national interests play in shaping responses to international dilemmas. Based on the examination, Russia's forceful seizure of Crimea and influence in Eastern Ukraine are fundamentally driven by its ambition to reinforce its power and safeguard national interests. The United States' economic sanctions against Russia underscore the role of power as a tool in international relations, used to counter Russia's moves and uphold Western geopolitical goals. The role of national interests was also brought into focus in the conflict. Russia seeks to retain its influence over Ukraine and deter further NATO infiltration near its borders. The

United States, on the other hand, is committed to the preservation of Ukraine's territorial integrity and sustainment of global arrangements established after the Cold War. There will be several hypotheses of potential conflict developments grounded in realism. Scenarios encompass shifting power dynamics, Russia's continued reinforcement of its regional clout, and a potential impasse, echoing the drawn-out tensions of the Cold War era. Lastly, there are potential fallouts of this conflict as viewed through realism's lens. Further schism among global powers, intensifying economic warfare, a probable arms race, and dire humanitarian crises were among the noted possibilities, all steered by the primary pursuits of nations' self-preservation and power consolidation. The tenets of realism, power, national interest, and self-preservation illuminate the complex motivations and strategic plays of the prominent participants in this conflict, providing invaluable insights into the dynamics of international relations in our tumultuous world.

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