Russia-Ukraine Conflict Through Realist Theory

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POLSC 250: International Relations

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November 19, 2025

Abstract

This essay, through the realist perspective, examines the continuation of the historic struggle for power, security, and national interest between the US and Russia as its reemergence underlies the ongoing Russo-Ukraine war. Such a struggle, rooted in realism theory, dates back to the Cold War and post-Cold War era in which realist principles greatly influenced behavior and policy between the US and Russia. With this struggle dying down after the end of the Cold War, both nations' actions would still continue to be informed by such realist principles as the US, through NATO, would take the opportunity to bid for European hegemony, while Russia would be threatened and attempt to rebalance the scales by aggressing Georgia and Ukraine to not only acquire more power and regional influence, but also deter the spread of NATO. Beyond this, however, realism theory also suggests that Russia's aggression towards Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia in 2008 were offensive realist "tests" used to strategically gather information and gauge global reactions. Targeting only specific regions for aggression and seizure rather than the entirety of Ukraine, Russia would learn how far it can push against the balance of power and expand without provoking Western military retaliation.

Russia-Ukraine Conflict Through Realist Theory

When considering Ukraine's current crisis, it would not be unlike that of a disastrous earthquake. Akin to an earthquake, this crisis has shaken Ukraine to its core, damaging buildings and key infrastructure, killing citizens and soldiers alike, and leaving destruction in its wake. In this same vein, the catalyst for this crisis is out of sight, unable to be found on the surface. Rather, according to the realism theory of international relations, it lies just beneath the surface in the form of the two clashing tectonic plates: the US (and the EU/NATO) and Russia. Through the realist lens, the Ukraine crisis is not merely seen as an abrupt conflict initiated by Russia against Ukraine but rather is truly understood to be a continuation of the historical conflict between Russia and the West, with Ukraine now hanging in the balance. As the relations between these two great powers have been on a downward spiral for the past few decades, they have, on various occasions, butted heads with increasing hostility and frequency. With tensions reaching Cold War-era levels, their relations finally reached a breaking point when their conflicting interests converged beneath the fault line that is Ukraine. Given this, the conflict has thus been continually prolonged and escalated, with Ukraine having to bear the brunt of the two nations' wrath in the process. As a whole nation is at stake, the realism theory of international relations would provide clarity to the situation, explaining this conflict as a continuation of the historical struggle between the US and Russia over acquiring power, maintaining security, and expanding spheres of influence.

Realism Theory

Realism theory of international relations is a system-level theory that focuses on power, citing it as the motivating factor behind behavior and decisions in the international arena. As contemporary realism or neo-realism assumes that the international system is naturally

anarchical, lacking “a central authority or government to enforce law and order between states and throughout the globe,” each state must use its own power to ensure its security in this “self-help system.” With no one to rely on, nations must be “rational actors” that make decisions with their national interests in mind; namely, security (Genest, 2004). To this end, offensive realism would assert that states are inclined to pursue aggressive foreign policy that revises the status quo and balance of power, as this allows them to gain more power and thus more security. Given that power equates to security, offensive realism assumes that the ultimate goal of a state is to become the most powerful and thus most secure state in its region: a hegemon, in other words. As a hegemon, a state can limit threats and challenges to its security by leveraging its power to dominate and exert control over the states within its “sphere of influence” (Lobell, 2017). What inhibits a nation from achieving hegemony, however, would be the balance of power principle. This principle suggests that, when a nation grows too strong, threatening the balance of power, other relevant nations protect themselves by “matching [their] power against the power of the other side.” To “match power” with an external threat, a weaker state may equalize the scales by acquiring more power (new territory or weaponry), or by coalescing with other states to form an alliance (Balance of Power, 2025). In doing so, however, this state may find itself trapped in an escalating “security dilemma” as increasing a state’s security comes at the cost of another state’s security. When another state observes these ultimately defensive actions, they are uncertain of the other state’s intentions and must take defensive measures with the worst case in mind. The situation then devolves into an “action-reaction spiral of mistrust” (McCallion, 2023, p. 3) where the former state deems this as a threat and increases its security, further warranting another defensive reaction from the latter state, and so on.

An often-overlooked aspect of offensive realism would be “information gathering in the pursuit of power.” As the realist world is an uncertain and anarchical world, it is vital to gather information so that states can make rational decisions that do not endanger or risk national security. To this end, states may use specific aggressive actions or “tests” to not only accrue power but also challenge the status quo in order to measure its reaction. In doing so, a state thus gains valuable insight regarding “global constraints and opportunities, as well as [its] own power.” By gathering information and performing tests, states can thus inform their future decisions and realize the best approach to gaining power while minimizing the risk of global outlash and annihilation. As “abstaining from pursuing power in order to survive is not an option” under offensive realism, states must challenge the status quo, with only the informed likely to survive. This would be the case as an uninformed state would surely risk escalation and annihilation by brazenly pursuing power (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

History of Russian and US Relations

Cold War Relations

The Cold War that spanned forty-four years from 1947 to 1991 marked a historic low point in US-Russian relations that many assumed would never have been reached again. While this period was marked by a great deal of geopolitical tension and rivalry between the two great superpowers, the conflict never devolved to open warfare, hence the designation: Cold War. This feud was the culmination of several disagreements and irreconcilable differences that the US and Russia maintained following the end of WWII. A great deal of these disagreements revolved around Soviet expansionism and, with that, the future of post-war Europe. Even after the Cold War began, these disagreements only continued to stack up with such conflicts as the arms race

triggered by the US arms buildup, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the Korean and Vietnam proxy wars (Cold War History, 2025).

Over the course of WWII, Russia suffered heavy losses both foreign and domestically as the nation, with its unfavorable geography, faced multiple invasions such as Operation Barbarossa and Typhoon (Operation Barbarosa, n.d.). According to Baloch, this would not be the first time that Russia was invaded from the west, as its geographical position at the end of the European plain invites invaders to cut through this empty expanse and "straight into the political and economic heart of Russia." Following the end of WWII, Russia shifted its focus towards security and deterring future invasions (Baloch, 2022). Being dealt a less-than-ideal geographical hand, Russia's defensive approach against invasion has and continues to be limited, with one of the few options being to expand westward to create a protective buffer zone. This expansionist approach is what the then-president, Joseph Stalin, primarily employed, transforming Russia's western neighbors, such as Poland and Hungary, into satellite states that could not be used against it (Ball, 2018). Initially, Stalin's approach was less oppressive, only intending to install friendly (and not subservient) regimes that would "be influenced to some degree by the Western powers." While the first priority of this soviet expansionism was security, this expansion also allowed for the Soviet Union to obtain additional geopolitical and economic advantages (Hensel, 2023). As the US perceived this expansionism as a part of a "Russian plan to control the world" (Cold War history, 2025), it would thus vow to combat Soviet expansion and provide "assistance to all democratic nations under threat from external or internal authoritarian forces" (The Truman Doctrine, n.d.). This gave rise to the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan, which both acted as justification for foreign intervention in Eastern Europe. This intervention in the Soviet Union's buffer zone, coupled with the later formation of NATO, would threaten the Soviet sense

of security, leading Stalin to "[crack] down on Soviet bloc nations and their governments" (Baloch, 2022), beginning the early stages of the cycle of escalation between the two nations.

Post-Cold War Relations

Having won the Cold War after the USSR's collapse, the US, contrary to George H. W. Bush's cautions against triumphalism, would become arrogant, now possessing absolute control during this unipolar moment. This would, in turn, influence US policy towards Russia and thus US-Russian relations accordingly. As Bandow says, the then-US policymakers' belief was that "America represents all mankind, and everything it does is by definition moral and right" (Bandow, 2021). Given this hubris and euphoria from Cold War triumph, the US would disregard Russia's national interests and various other "insignificant" factors, defining Russia and its needs on its own terms: an incomplete and failing state that required US help. With this in mind, under the three subsequent presidencies of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, US policy towards Russia would revolve around supporting and supervising Russia's transition to democracy and liberal capitalism in order to make this broken nation whole and groom a strong new ally "in America's own image." Such support can be seen with the 1992 Freedom Support Act, which delivered economic and technical assistance on the basis that Russia committed to democracy and liberal capitalism. By enacting de facto sanctions or withholding this assistance, the US could pursue and influence reform, socially engineering Russia (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019).

With US triumphalism in full effect, the relations between the victorious and defeated nations would be turbulent over the course of these presidencies. Notably, Rumer and Sokolsky would observe that these relations would enter a pattern of boom-bust cycles whereby the introduction of a new administration signaled a reset and improvement of these relations before they ultimately soured and were reset by the end of the administration and the start of the next.

They argue that these relations would generally sour as the US would regularly employ foreign policy that was dismissive of Russian national interest/security. Such can be seen with the US support of the colored revolutions, which raised concerns of US encirclement during the Bush administration (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019) or the NATO installation of the THAAD SM-3 missile system, which would protect Europe from Iranian intercontinental ballistic missiles and, at the same time, have the capacity to attack Russia (Burns, 2024). While Russia soured relations by resisting democratic reform and US assistance, it can be said that it was retaliating against the quite obvious social engineering aspects of the US Assistance programs that the US "did little to conceal or make up." By far, however, the point of contention that is chiefly responsible for the deterioration of US-Russian relations would be the Eastward expansion of NATO (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019).

NATO Expansion

As NATO was originally formed in order to combat the USSR, this anti-Soviet alliance, interestingly enough, did not cease to exist after the USSR's collapse. Rather, it would even expand eastward under the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, assimilating more and more of the soviet nations previously a part of the Warsaw Pact. Now the preeminent European security architecture of the post-Cold War era, NATO would strive to create a security umbrella and promote democracy by supporting the democratic transition of its former Warsaw Pact members. Such European security would be maintained as, in Clinton's words, "democracies do not attack each other." With this in mind, the nondemocratic, nonmember Russia would be largely left marginalized and ignored by NATO. Although Russia perceived this early NATO expansion as a threat to its security, the nation's protests continually fell on deaf ears as the US would consider these legitimate national security concerns to be nothing more than "remnants of

the old Soviet ideology that Russia would shed as it transitioned to a free market, liberal democracy" (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019, p. 15). Such disregard for Russian concerns can be seen when, in a 2016 forum, William Perry, the Secretary of Defense during the Clinton administration, described the reactions of those in the Clinton administration to the mere mention of Russian concerns as follows: "'Who cares what they think? They're a third-rate power'" (Borger, 2016).

This aside, Russia would also disapprove of this eastward expansion as it would contradict prior assurances made to Gorbachev and Yeltsin during the negotiations for the unification of Germany. While not explicitly stated in the resulting treaty, numerous representatives, like US Secretary of State James Baker, US President George H. W. Bush, German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, among others, were all recorded as having made "iron-clad" assurances to Gorbachev and other Russian officials that NATO would not expand Eastward after the Unification of Germany. In the famous assurance made by James Baker on February 9th, 1990, he guaranteed to Gorbachev that "not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction [would] spread in an eastern direction." While many would argue that these assurances were made in the context of Germany alone, as no one at the time considered the possibility of Warsaw Pact members joining NATO, this would ultimately prove false. For one, Hans-Dietrich Genscher was quoted in his conversation with British Foreign Minister Douglas Hurd, stating (well before the fall of the Warsaw Pact) that "the Russians must have some assurance that if, for example, the Polish Government left the Warsaw Pact one day, they would not join NATO the next." Similarly, this same British Foreign Minister, in a meeting with Soviet foreign minister Alexander Bessmertnykh on March 26th,

1991, would explicitly state that “there are no plans in NATO to include the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in NATO in one form or another” (Savranskaya & Blanton, 2017).

In 2008, when NATO finally set its sights on expanding into Ukraine and Georgia, arguably the two most important Soviet Bloc states to Russia, this was a bridge too far in Russia’s eyes, forcing retaliation in the form of the Russo-Georgian war later that year (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019). During the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit, the leaders of NATO made a promise that, in the vague future, these nations “will become members of NATO” (Bucharest Summit, 2008). This statement, according to Rumer and Sokolsky, was a compromise between the US, which vehemently supported Ukraine and Georgian membership, and other NATO leaders who opposed the idea. This insistence by the US reflected how Russia’s cultural and security concerns “mattered little to the George W. Bush administration or to the president.” In its post-Cold War hubris, the US was dismissive of the fact that Russia saw these two nations as integral parts of Russian identity/history as well as Russian security. As such, Putin would kick off the brief Russo-Georgian War, “[reaffirming] the red line around the former Soviet space” (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019, p. 15). Given the justification provided by the Georgian president’s artillery attack, Putin would invade Georgia to support the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, ultimately leading to the Russian recognition of the secession of the two regions (Traynor, 2009).

With all this in mind, the history of US-Russian relations can notably be observed as the result of realist agendas and thought. Starting with the Cold War, this conflict arose when Russia, fearful of the threat of invasion, would preemptively defend against the possibility by expanding. Oguejiofor asserts that, as a great power, Russia followed realist logic and sought to create a buffer zone or sphere of influence (Oguejiofor, 2024). Though these actions were ultimately

defensive, Russia would tip the balance of power and threaten the US, as it was uncertain of Russia's intent by expanding. In turn, the US would equalize the scales by combating this expansion and coalescing with the Western European powers to form NATO and the Western Bloc (Cold War History, 2025). This would initiate the Cold War security dilemma, as Stalin thus cracked down on its buffer states as a result of this escalation (Baloch, 2022). After the end of the Cold War, the US and NATO would become the preeminent powers in Europe while Russia would be forced to cede its great power status. Although the US was arrogant and gave in to triumphalism, at the end of the day, its actions are still in line with offensive realist logic, as it did not pass up the opportunity to acquire more power and become a hegemony (Lobell, 2017). To maximize security, the US would expand NATO's influence eastward, working to transform the former Soviet Bloc states and even Russia into cooperative, democratic allies. Given the realist principle that increasing one state's security comes at the cost of another's, Russia would bear the cost as it would be threatened by NATO and its military capabilities entering Russia's former sphere of influence and inching closer to its borders. In a similar sense, Russia would also be fearful of US encirclement as the West would support and intervene in the color revolutions that took place in Russia's neighboring countries (Rumer & Sokolsky, 2019). With Russia having recovered some strength as a rising power, Feinstein and Pirro argue that Russia invaded Georgia to primarily destabilize the country as a preemptive defense against Eastward EU/NATO expansion. By destabilizing Georgia, Candiago states that it would reduce the likelihood that Georgia is considered for EU or NATO membership, as it lacks full authority over all its territory (Candiago, 2022). Similarly, as realism assumes that Russia, like all other states, "want[s] to revise the status quo," the invasion would seemingly be a means of reaffirming Russia's renewed great power status and putting an end to the West's dominance and

the unipolar moment. Most notably, however, Feinstein and Pirro suggest that this invasion would also serve as an offensive realist test conducted by Russia. By taking this aggressive action against Georgia, Russia would push against the status quo in order to gauge the reaction and learn valuable insight. For one, Russia learned that its own military was lacking and would thus increase spending and acquire more weaponry. Similarly, Russia would learn that "[picking] on smaller, weaker neighbors, in which [it] has long had an interest and where ethnic Russians are present" (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021) would likely not trigger a Western Military response or even a strong response at all. Dickson in the Ukraine Alert blog would come to a similar conclusion that "The Kremlin learned that the West preferred to ignore or at least minimize Russian bad behavior in the so-called Near Abroad" (Dickinson, 2021). Given all this, Russia would carry these lessons with it to its next "test" in Ukraine (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

The Russo-Ukraine War

The Russian Ukraine war can be traced back to events that took place in Ukraine in 2014 under the fourth president, Viktor Yanukovych. Elected in 2010, Yanukovych's time in office was characterized by widespread corruption and practices that would enrich Yanukovych and his family at the state's expense (Gorchinskaya, 2020). Similarly, despite the pro-European trajectory that Ukraine was on, Yanukovych was also pro-Russian, which further fueled public disapproval. With the people of Ukraine already discontent with the Yanukovych administration, Sobolieva states that their disapproval reached a head when Yanukovych abruptly backed out of a trade association agreement made with the European Union and instead pursued agreements with Russia's Eurasian Customs Union. As this disrupted the pro-European trajectory, seemingly reversing it entirely, demonstrators would gather at Maidan Square in peaceful protest of the decision. As Yanukovych ordered police violence on numerous occasions to quell these

Euromaidan protests, it would have the opposite effect, sparking fiercer and much greater outcry. Previously, only protesting Yanukovych's decision, the demonstrators now "opposed the widespread corruption, police violence, and abuse of power by Yanukovych and his allies" (Sobolieva, 2022). As this protest would gain traction in the global news, US representatives would come to express their support of the protest and promote democracy (McCallion, 2023). With Parliament and Yanukovych's political base condemning his unjustified use of violence, he soon fled the country on February 21st, 2014 (Sobolieva, 2022). The next day, he was officially removed from office and replaced by pro-EU/Western candidate Oleksandr Turchynov, who would be the acting president until the agreed May elections (Oleksandr Turchynov, 2014).

Annexation of Crimea

Near the last days of the Euromaidan protests, Russian separatists in Crimea would oppose the Euromaidan revolution and seek to return to Russia. As Crimea's population has consisted largely of ethnic Russians, it has shown "consistent popular support for leaving Ukraine, with most polls showing majority support for annexation by Russia if a referendum were to be held, including among ethnic Ukrainians" (McCallion, 2023, p. 5). Given this, Konończuk states that on February 23rd, a separatist organization, the Russian Front, would seize the opportunity, gathering members in Sevastopol to replace the city's mayor with a Russian citizen and demand that Crimea secede from Ukraine and be allowed to join Russia. Four days later, on February 27th, Putin would supposedly send armed soldiers or "little green men" with no insignias to Crimea in order to support local separatist militias in seizing the peninsula's government buildings. In addition, the Russian soldiers stationed at the leased naval base in Sevastopol would also support the takeover. These combined forces would dismiss Crimea's pro-Kiev prime minister in place of a member of the Russian Unity political party and

take control of various strategic sites such as airports, roads, government buildings, etc (Konończuk, 2014). On March 16, leaders of Crimea would hold a divisive referendum in which there was a reported "turnout of 83 percent, with 96.7 percent voting to join Russia." While many nations would consider the referendum to be ultimately illegal, on March 18th, the Treaty of Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia would be signed, marking Crimea's questionable annexation (Pifer, 2020).

Separatist Republics

Shortly after the Euromaidan protests and the annexation of Crimea, there would be a surge of separatist activity in the Donbas region, particularly Donetsk and Lugansk. These regions, being the closest region to Russia both geographically and culturally, would oppose the Euromaidan takeover, seeking to declare independence from Ukraine. With Russian backing, these separatist forces seized the government buildings of their respective regions and "proclaimed the creation of 'people's republics'" (Ukraine's separatist regions, 2022). From there, pro-Ukraine forces would mobilize to quell this "terrorist" uprising in what is dubbed the first Donbas War. Relying on far-right radical groups as battalions, the pro-Ukraine forces would gain early traction but were ultimately pushed back by the pro-Russian "lightning offensive that was only halted by the signing of the first in the series of Minsk agreements" (Gormezano, 2024). This agreement, signed by the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics, Ukraine, Russia, and the OSCE in September 2014, would call for a ceasefire in the Donbas region with several stipulations. Chief among these conditions would be "the withdrawal of weapons, monitoring of the ceasefire by the OSCE, and the holding of local elections in the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics on their future status in Ukraine" (What are the Minsk agreements, 2022). Ukraine and Russia, disagreeing over the terms, would shortly thereafter resume the

conflict, resulting in the signing of Minsk II in February 2015. Signed by Russian and Ukrainian representatives and mediated by France and Germany, Allan points out that this rushed agreement contained “contradictory provisions and [set] out a convoluted sequence of actions” (Allan, 2020), which contributed to its early breakdown.

Just as the prior events that have impacted US-Russian relations can be explained by the theory of realism, Russia’s behavior towards Ukraine in 2014 is no different. As the EU-Ukraine agreement would also stipulate “Ukraine’s ever-deeper involvement in the European security area” (Association agreement, 2014, p. 7), such would have laid the foundation for “Ukraine’s general exit out of Russia’s sphere of influence.” Following realist logic, the US and Europe would have increased their power and security at Russia’s expense. Seeing this threat to Russian security on the horizon, Putin thus persuaded Yanukovych to accept the Eurasian Customs Union’s deal instead, strengthening Ukrainian ties with Russia. Sparking a growing level of protest, Putin grew concerned with the brazen US support of the Euromaidan protests, as its promotion of democracy was not unlike the same practices used during the prior colored revolutions (McCallion, 2023). As the likely US-sponsored regime change went down, replacing pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych, Russia would preemptively take Crimea as a countermeasure against the possibility that Ukraine or NATO "would drive the Russian Black Sea Fleet away from the Sevastopol base” (Li, 2018). In line with realist logic, the annexation of Crimea was also a swift opportunity to not only demonstrate Russia’s Great Power status,” but also to acquire more power. As Putin shifted his sights onto the Donbas region, he would support the separatists as the ongoing conflict would allow Russia to gain influence over more land and destabilize Ukraine in order to keep the threat of “NATO and the EU further from Russian borders” (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

Returning to Feinstein and Pirro, the two would argue that the annexation of Crimea and support of the separatist republics in the Donbas were both Russian offensive realist "tests" similar to, and informed by, the previous Georgian test in 2008. They argue that Russia purposefully targeted only these specific regions in order to gather information. If Russia had truly led a full-scale invasion to take the entirety of Ukraine, it would have surely provoked a global reaction, threatening Russian security. With the Crimean test, Russia would take its prior findings and employ a fast and deceptive approach, using "the little green men" to support separatists in taking Crimea. Given this, Russia thus learned that it could create frozen conflicts and destabilize Ukraine by covertly supporting or stirring up separatist rebellions (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

In the aftermath, Russia would gauge the global reaction and find that, though it was widely condemned and subject to severe sanctions, "no country was willing to mount a counterattack or fight for a free Crimea." As such, Feinstein and Pirro argue that Russia learned that it is safer and more advantageous to sponsor a pro-Russian separatist takeover than to take direct military action. Russia would shortly thereafter conduct another test in the Donbas region. Following the precedent from the Crimean test, Russia would sponsor pro-Russian separatist forces again, leading to a predictable result: the creation of another frozen conflict and a lackluster global military reaction. Thus, from these tests, Russia was able to learn how best to acquire power and meet its objectives in its near abroad without triggering a Western military reaction (Feinstein & Pirro, 2021).

US Policy towards Ukraine and Russia

Trump Administration (2017-2021)

With Donald Trump's coming to office in 2017, Deyermond, like many others, characterized his subsequent administration as inconsistent, incoherent, and unorthodox. At its core, the official Trump administration policy on Ukraine/Russia was a continuation of the Obama administration's policy that condemned Russia's aggression in Ukraine. The administration would recognize Crimea as Ukrainian territory wrongfully annexed and occupied by Russia and blame Russia for instigating and prolonging the conflict in the Donbas regions. In line with the prior administration's policy, the Trump administration maintained the US stance in support of Ukraine and condemnation of Russia, applying sanctions and revoking Russia's membership from high-profile diplomatic interactions like the G7. It would even go the extra mile, providing Ukraine "enhanced defensive capabilities" (Deyermond, 2023) when the prior administration only permitted the export of weapons to Ukraine.

While this was the stance of the administration, Trump would consistently muddy the water by making comments and exercising power in ways that seemingly contradicted the position of the administration's policy (Deyermond, 2023). For example, Trump reportedly stated in the 2018 G7 summit that "Crimea is Russian because everyone who lives there speaks Russian" (Nardelli & Ioffe) and in a press conference following this summit, stated that "it would be an asset to have Russia back in [the G7]" (Trump after G7 summit, 2018). Most notable of all, however, would be Trump's reported suspension of almost $400 million of Ukraine military aid in 2019. Deyermond asserts that Trump likely froze this military aid in order to force Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to reopen investigations into Joe Biden and his son, Hunter Biden. With all this in mind, Deyermond further suggests that such mixed messages and division in the administration encouraged Russia to extend its campaign as it saw a

lack of significant risk as well as “structural weakness and decline in US foreign policy” (Deyermond, 2023).

Biden Administration (2021-2025)

With Joe Biden’s election in 2021, Russia's full-scale invasion of eastern Ukraine would begin shortly thereafter in 2022. Prior to this invasion, in the early months of Biden’s administration, Mearsheimer argues that, through NATO, Biden would reaffirm the 2008 Bucharest Summit declaration, and with it, revive the possibility of Ukraine’s membership in NATO. Vowing to assist Ukraine’s ascension to NATO membership in the “U.S.- Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership,” Ukraine would enter a west-bound trajectory, angering and threatening Russia. To this end, Russia would station soldiers near Ukraine’s border to coerce the US and Ukraine into halting Ukraine’s assimilation into the West. He would later send a list of demands to the US and NATO, mainly requesting guarantees that NATO would not join Ukraine. With the West refusing to sign these demands, Russia would launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 21, 2022 (Mearsheimer, 2022). In response, the Biden administration would enact policies that allowed the provision of over $100 billion in foreign assistance commitments over the course of the next two years. According to Belkin et al., this amount would notably consist of “almost $63 billion in security assistance, more than $30 billion in direct budget support, and almost $4 billion in humanitarian assistance.” In support of Ukraine, the Biden administration would also impose further sanctions, raising tariffs on Russian imports, restricting Russian use of US dollar reserves, controlling US export into Russia, and overall suspending normal US-Russia trade relations. Finally, the US under the Biden administration would increase US forces in Europe, deploying 20,000 armed forces after Russia’s invasion to protect the rest of Europe (Belkin et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Looking at the current Ukraine crisis, we see in it a continuation of the pervasive struggle for power, security, and national interest that has regularly been a cornerstone of US-Russian relations throughout the decades. As this struggle for power, security, and national interest is derived from the realism theory of international relations, we see, in both this crisis and those prior, various underlying realist principles that inform the behavior and perceptions on both sides of this historical struggle. That being said, however, these conventional realist principles that explained prior conflicts, such as the Cold War, can only go so far in explaining the Ukraine Conflict and Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. While conventional realist principles suggest that Russia's actions were intended to acquire more power and to reassert its great power status and sphere of influence, it does not explain why Russia limited the scale of this invasion to only Crimea and the Donbas. To thus provide a full and accurate understanding of Russia's actions, we must instead couple these conventional principles with an often overlooked aspect of offensive realist theory: strategic information gathering. In this anarchical and uncertain world, states are encouraged to conduct "tests," or aggressive actions that probe information, as such informs them of how to pursue power without risking their security. Given this, offensive realism thus explains that Russia's aggressions towards Ukraine were offensive "tests" used to gather information vital to Russia's pursuit of power and eventual hegemony. These tests would ultimately be successful as each subsequent test would allow Russia to acquire more power and skirt closer to the edge of Western tolerance without crossing it. As Russia is going to such lengths to not incur Western wrath, it likely does not want a direct war between the two powers. The same can be said for the US, which has avoided providing direct involvement in Ukraine, only relying on indirect methods such as sanctions or material aid. With neither side wanting to

go to war, I believe that a direct conflict is unlikely, unnecessary, and ultimately unwinnable, as both sides have little to gain from it.

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