

# Returning to Realism: The Other Face of the Ukraine Crisis

Written by Mohamed Mahad D. Darar

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/06/12/returning-to-realism-the-other-face-of-the-ukraine-crisis/>

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In recent weeks, the debate over the driving force behind Putin's invasion of Ukraine has divided the West into two major camps: one renders Russia's offensive as merely Putin's grand scheme to resuscitate the Soviet Empire and has nothing to do with NATO, while the other portrays Russia's aggression in Ukraine as Putin's response to reckless Western policies concerning the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to Russia's neighbors. While both arguments merit serious attention, both ignore a crucial connection that may, in fact, be the impetus behind Putin's war: a tendency within the foreign policy rhetoric of the United States that systematically exaggerates, in a manner bordering on malevolence, the designation of Russia as an "evil empire"—an antiquated relic of a once globally dominant force under the Soviet Union whose political values and practices have no place in the new globalist world order. Such hostile domestic and political rhetoric by the United States may indeed in part have helped provoke Russia into taking its so called "defensive" actions by attacking Ukraine. While the US role in helping spark the war can of course be seen only as ancillary to Putin's broader interests of regional dominance, it seems clear that the extensive negative political rhetoric about Russia that has long permeated US domestic and foreign policy discourse is deeply implicated in Putin's decision to foment war against neighboring Ukraine, whose own political discourse has often expressed a deep longing to join the democratic world order. Hence, the US's consistent campaign to denigrate Russia in the wake of the Soviet Union's fall, combined with the US commitment to expand NATO along Russia's borders, may well have played a significant role in helping precipitate Putin's war.

At the outset of Putin's war on Ukraine, both large swaths of the US foreign-policy establishment and numerous US mainstream news outlets rushed to explain Russia's aggression as a long-sought attempt by Putin and his KGB friends to revive the Soviet Union. Putin is an entrenched autocrat fearful of democratic movements, so the argument goes. His aggression against Ukraine is the culmination of a sequence of behaviors that have sought to disrupt democratic movements around the globe, and particularly in former Soviet satellites. This argument turns on the idea that Putin's grand scheme is not merely to invade Ukraine but rather to take it over entirely, after which it will continue to reclaim additional former Soviet states in a well-planned bid to recover and reinstate the structure of the Soviet Empire. This argument thus prescribes that the West's response to the invasion of Ukraine should be powerful, bent on stopping Putin before he manages to enact his plan.

However, the argument that Putin is an irrational person with imperialistic goals fails to stand up under closer scrutiny. When one attentively observes Putin's strategic calculus since he came to power, it is hard to see him as an irrational leader with imperialistic inclinations as some in the West would like to view him. Although Putin inherited a weak petrostate, he played a weak hand well and brought Russia to the forefront of international politics. He came to power when Russia was on the brink of further fragmentation and economic collapse in the early 2000s. He met hard issues head-on and introduced a number of economic and political reforms. Once a despondent communist empire infested by internal rifts and rivalries, in recent years, Russia has transformed into a modern country with sophisticated cyber capabilities. Putin even sought a rapprochement with Russia's established nemesis, the US, after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. To portray such a person as little more than irrational and dangerous, a fanatical leader bent on re-conquering the Baltics to reclaim a long-gone empire, is a pill too hard to swallow. Putin himself declared that those who envisage him as trying to recuperate the Soviet Union have no brain. However, Putin's real plans may have little resemblance to US policy makers' image of them.

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The other US-led argument that has recently picked up steam originates mostly from academia, particularly through Russian experts and structural realists like the University of Chicago Political Scientist John Mearsheimer. Partially faulting the West for Russia's desperate and dangerous invasion of Ukraine, Mearsheimer casts Russian aggression as a response to the dangerous expansion of NATO, in which the US has sought to extend NATO membership throughout the former Soviet Bloc nations, including to Russia's immediate neighbors. According to this theory, Putin's response follows the principles of Great Power Politics, in which survival is a "paramount goal" of a country. In this view, the US has failed to recognize Russia's sphere of influence and honor its security concerns by thoughtlessly violating a doctrine practiced by the U.S. itself. For instance, the Monroe Doctrine, first enunciated by President James Monroe in his address to Congress on December 2, 1823, sought to deny colonial powers of the time, including Britain, Spain, Russia and France, to interfere in or seek to dominate Latin American nations in particular, in a region that the U.S. considered and still considers its own proper geographical sphere of influence. Hence, for this camp, whose theories are largely enunciated by political scientists like Mearsheimer, the US foreign-policy establishment's belief that Putin is somehow determined to "reincarnate" the former Soviet Union is incorrect—perhaps even "invented" for the domestic public—because in fact, they claim, Putin seeks mostly to protect Russia and Russian power through direct action against Western military expansion (NATO) at its borders.

While there may be more than a kernel of truth in the argument that Putin's invasion of Ukraine is aimed mostly at protecting a long-defined area of "rightful" influence in the region, this theory also contains a number of flaws. First, the concept that the US should respect Russia's sphere of influence simply because Russia is a great power competitor is inconsistent with Russia's actual contemporary situation. Although Russia is still a major Eurasian player, with a significant arsenal of nuclear warheads and therefore capable of doing irremediable military damage, this does not mean that Russia still holds either the same status or the goals it did decades ago.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia all but lost its claims to great power status. Today's Russia may possess substantial weaponry, but most of its weapons have proven either unreliable or lacking in modern maneuverability parallel to those of other great powers like the U.S. and China. Nothing supports this argument more than Russia's present gross incompetence in Ukraine where its military forces have sustained catastrophic losses in the face of Ukrainians armed with Western weapons. Economically, Russia doesn't even come close to competing with certain U.S. states, let alone with the entire US. For example, Texas's economy is \$400 billion larger than Russia's. President Obama even mentioned in his book *A Promised Land* that Russia was a member of the Group of eight (G8) for geopolitical, not economic reasons. Therefore, while Russia may not be a superpower worthy of the status of a great power like the US or China, whose sphere of influence may not be overstepped—and a strong argument can be made that it is not just another nuclear power, like France and Britain, but a nation with historically rich tradition with far more diverse and higher number of population, nevertheless, Russia should have learned how to share the region with its peers. That the US has continued to see Russia mostly through historically tainted lenses, in both major interpretations of Putin's potential motivations in Ukraine, means that the invasion cannot be understood as a contemporary movement and response to Russia's current, rather than to its former, political conditions.

Perhaps there is a third explanation for Putin's behaviors. Ever since George H. W. Bush's address to Congress in January, 1992, in which he declared the death of Communism (Putin often refers to this address in his own speeches), US domestic and foreign policy discourse has continually cast Russia as America's archrival, almost as if the Cold War had never ended. Certainly, Russia champions a political system that is antithetical to that of the US. Russia has challenged the US in numerous international crises in Africa and the Middle East to advance its strategic plans. But it is plausible that the way Russia's threat is presented in US domestic and foreign policy political discourse is excessively inflated for purely domestic political rationales.

It is often argued by some in the foreign-policy establishment that Putin has never gotten over the collapse of the Soviet Union. But to the contrary, it may be the US foreign-policy establishment that has never gotten over the Soviet Union, even after its collapse. It appears as though the Soviet Union's demonization, regardless of how ingenuous such statements may have been in the past, often serves as a unifying force for the West. US foreign policy throughout the twentieth century had one objective: the defeat of Communism. The unifying force of this overweening objective was reflected in the US's often irreconcilable foreign and domestic politics in the past such as battling Communist authoritarianism abroad while saddled with right-wing authoritarian McCarthyism at home. Since the

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collapse of the Soviet Union, though, some within the foreign-policy establishment have felt that the U.S. has lost its *raison d'être*. For instance, during the early 2000s, especially in the post-9/11 period, believers in the *Clash of Civilizations*, like former Vice President Cheney and Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, briefly managed to substitute Islam for Russia as America's wicked scapegoat for the US's foreign-policy ills—but later, when the US invaded Iraq and Afghanistan and returned with nothing but a grim record of human rights violations, it became clear that the strategy of casting Islam as the new archenemy was not working. Interestingly enough, soon after President Obama's Speech to the Muslim World in Cairo, Egypt, in June, 2009, offering a "new beginning" between America and the Muslim world based on "mutual interest and mutual respect," the US foreign-policy establishment receded back to blaming its usual suspect for its foreign-policy ills: Russia.

It is common for US politicians to espouse a maximalist view of Russia, oftentimes demonizing the country as the evil empire or going so far as to publicly implore Russians to assassinate Putin. When such rhetoric is combined with the US's idealist strategies, such as spreading democracy or expanding NATO, it adds fuel and fear to the judgments of an already overly charged skeptic like Putin and escalates the situation.

These days, talk of a new Cold War or other rhetoric such as a once-stagnant NATO has Putin to thank for its rebound are common in the press. But as much as Russia's demonization in US politics and the press may seem to serve a specific short-term purpose, when an isolated and paranoid dictator like Putin who follows US politics from a distance and is surrounded by "yes men" hears such talk, he immediately embarks on taking notes and begins strategizing a way to counter what he perceives as a direct threat to himself and Russia—a deep-rooted insecurity that emanates from a fear of a NATO encirclement of his country and an eventual regime change effort that will topple his government.

In cases where crisis created by such conditions is inevitable, sadly, the U.S. is often trapped into choosing between the less harmful of two bad choices: double down or back off, in which case, the party in office is more inclined to double down out of a fear of handing more ammunition to the domestic opposition. Such an escalation is evident in the US's recent change of strategy over the Ukraine invasion, since the Biden administration has moved from helping Ukrainians defend themselves to ensuring a more active stance by pledging to degrade Russia's military capabilities or expand plans to admit more NATO members, a controversial move that strikes at the core of the current Ukraine crisis.

While it would be ludicrous to fully blame the US for Putin's invasion of Ukraine or his blatant violations of international law, the US response to Putin's violations seem mired in what seem today like ancient interpretations of a country whose actions might better be seen as grounded in modern, rather than historical, conditions. US foreign policy's failure to understand and interpret Putin as a modern leader whose actions are much more likely to spring from his personal interpretation of Russia's contemporary political situation represents flawed thinking driven more by domestic concerns than by actual foreign policy analysis.

In conclusion, the US would need to seriously reconsider returning to its realist foreign policy approach of world politics during Bush's (the father) era in order to correct the misperceptions now driving US interpretations of the Ukrainian invasion. One potentially helpful approach already exists. The "Scowcroft Doctrine" named after Bush's National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, argues that the West should deal with the world as it is, and when differences arise, attempt to foment change primarily through diplomacy. The same logic should dominate the domestic political discourse and the press in the US. Richard Haas, President of the Council on Foreign Relations and himself a familiar face in the foreign-policy establishment, remembered Scowcroft in the *Washington Post* after his death in 2020, as "above all, a realist." At the end of the piece, Haas lamented that Scowcroft's approach may seem "distant from America." Putin is certainly accountable for the current crisis in Ukraine, but if the domestic and foreign-policy establishment is to outmaneuver him, an upgrade in thinking to view Russia as a contemporary country with present-day policy goals as opposed to just an irredentist dying regime should be seriously considered.

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