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RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE, THE NEW COLD WAR, AND THE RESURGENCE OF REALIST THEORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has triggered significant geopolitical shifts reminiscent of Cold War tensions. The Russia-Ukraine war and various other regional conflicts, such as the Israel-Hamas conflict and conflicts in Ethiopia, Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and Iran, etc., have significant implications for international relations as they have led to renewed recognition of the relevance of realist international relations theory and its implications for international peace and security. The failure of multilateral institutions to resolve these conflicts seriously questions their credibility in ensuring peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and the establishment of accountable institutions. Despite significant theoretical progress, various International Relations theories have not fully explained the regional and global transformations these conflicts have brought about. In particular, they

have struggled to clearly distinguish between the behaviour of states and the institutional shortcomings of multilateralism, often remaining isolated theoretical frameworks with limited interaction to analyse the transformations defining the post–Cold War international order. In this context, this paper argues for the significance of realism in understanding power politics, state sovereignty, and the anarchic nature of international relations, examining how the division of global powers has rekindled debates about the so-called New Cold War and the resurgence of Realist International Relations Theory, challenging liberal paradigms. The authors explore the motivations behind Russia's actions through the lens of realism, its impact on international security, and the limitations of existing multilateral institutions in resolving conflicts. Many nations must rebalance their foreign policy priorities amid the shifting order, taking into account various geopolitical and pragmatic considerations. However, it is essential to do a historical analysis and critically assess the applicable theoretical frameworks to assess the implications of the conflict on the world and provide suggestions to create a more participatory and equitable international relations framework for all to ensure sustainable development by including outreach and cooperation with various actors, such as civil society and other non-state actors, to establish peace and security.

Keywords

Russia, Ukraine, International Relations, Multilateral, Cooperation, Realism, Peace, Security.

Resumo

A invasão russa da Ucrânia, em fevereiro de 2022, desencadeou mudanças geopolíticas significativas que evocam as tensões da Guerra Fria. A guerra entre a Rússia e a Ucrânia e vários outros conflitos regionais, tais como o conflito entre Israel e o Hamas e os conflitos na Etiópia, no Iémen, na Somália, na Síria e no Irão, entre outros, têm implicações significativas para as relações internacionais, uma vez que levaram a um reconhecimento renovado da relevância da teoria realista das relações internacionais e das suas implicações para a paz e a segurança internacionais. O fracasso das instituições multilaterais em resolver estes conflitos põe seriamente em causa a sua credibilidade na garantia de sociedades pacíficas e inclusivas, no acesso à justiça e no estabelecimento de instituições responsáveis. Apesar de avanços teóricos significativos, várias teorias das Relações Internacionais não explicaram plenamente as transformações regionais e globais que estes conflitos provocaram. Em particular, têm tido dificuldade em distinguir claramente entre o comportamento dos Estados e as deficiências institucionais do multilateralismo, permanecendo frequentemente como quadros teóricos isolados, com interação limitada para analisar as transformações que definem a ordem internacional pós-Guerra Fria. Neste contexto, o presente artigo defende a importância do realismo na compreensão da política de poder, da soberania estatal e da natureza anárquica das relações internacionais, examinando como a divisão das potências globais reacendeu os debates sobre a chamada «Nova Guerra Fria» e o ressurgimento da Teoria Realista das Relações Internacionais, desafiando os paradigmas liberais. Os autores exploram as motivações subjacentes às ações da Rússia através da perspetiva do realismo, o seu impacto na segurança internacional e as limitações das instituições multilaterais existentes na resolução de conflitos. Muitas nações têm de reequilibrar as suas prioridades de política externa no meio de uma ordem em mutação, tendo em conta várias considerações geopolíticas e pragmáticas. No entanto, é essencial realizar uma análise histórica e avaliar criticamente os quadros teóricos aplicáveis para avaliar as implicações do conflito no mundo e apresentar sugestões para criar um quadro de relações internacionais mais participativo e equitativo para todos, de modo a garantir o desenvolvimento sustentável, incluindo o envolvimento e a cooperação com vários atores, tais como a sociedade civil e outros atores não estatais, com vista a estabelecer a paz e a segurança.

Palavras-Chave

Rússia, Ucrânia, Relações Internacionais, Multilateral, Cooperação, Realismo, Paz, Segurança.

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Introduction

The Confrontations in the aftermath of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 evoked memories of the Cold War, as the division is reminiscent of the Cold War confrontation between the US-led Western Alliance and the Moscow-led Eastern Bloc. Much like the Cold War, the conflict has created a critical landscape characterised by ideological, political, and military rivalry. The Western response, led by the United States and NATO, included extensive economic sanctions against Russia, military aid to Ukraine, and strong diplomatic condemnation similar to the strategies used by the West to restrict the Soviet Union during the Cold War Similarly, Russia has sought to expand its sphere of influence, based on historical and strategic interests, reminding of the Soviet Union's initiatives to maintain control over Eastern Europe. (Dag and Tufekci, 2025)

This war brought Moscow and Beijing closer than ever before, as they declared their open opposition to the US-led global order and split the world into two hostile blocs, similar to those of the Cold War. (Gaspar,2023) Even though the ideological distinction between the two blocs may not relate to property and the economy, it does relate to authoritarianism, nationalism, and democratic values and decision-making. Despite the vast ideological, cultural, and other differences, China, Russia, and Iran align themselves against the US-led global world order.(Tripathi,2024)

This situation presents a critical research problem, i.e. to what extent does the post-2022 international system reflect a New Cold War dynamic, and how effectively does Realist theory explain these developments and their implications for European security and the global order. The authors further examine the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the structure of the contemporary international system as well as assess the growing strategic cooperation among Russia, China, and Iran in opposition to the US-led global order.

Simply stated, realism theory believes that states are the primary actors in international relations who function based on national interest, to achieve power, i.e., both militarily and politically, to protect the state. As states do not trust other states as per the realist theory, they often compete for power to avoid being dominated, as seen in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis.

Coming back to the Russia-Ukraine war, the Russian mistrust of the West, Russia using its offensive military capabilities, the threat of the use of nuclear weapons to retain Ukraine in its sphere of influence using military force, and disregarding the close cultural ties. These actions collectively indicate that Russia is acting to safeguard its sphere of influence, assert its dominance, and protect its national security, manifesting the central realist ideas of self-interest and survival in international politics..(Lebow, 2022)

The Russian invasion has not only affected Ukrainian independence and security but also transformed the regional security mechanism, with implications in global politics for the influence between Russia, China, and the US.(Harris and Marinova, 2022) The realist theory emphasizes the role of powerful states in shaping global order and politics while seeing international bodies as having limited influence in their ability to foster global cooperation.(Mansbach and Pirro, 2013) The invasion reflects the Russian shift from soft power to a military aggressor as it returned to traditional warfare through direct military aggression aimed at territorial gains and resource acquisition. Hence, the invasion not only increased the geo-political tensions in the region, threatening peace and security, but also reemphaised the relevance of the realist theory of international relations. (Alimova, 2024)

The outcome of the ongoing war will have significant consequences for the future of International Relations norms that govern the international community. Several scenarios have been predicted for future relations, including the continuance of the long war, a hostile co-existence, or a renewed peace (Oberoi and Leandro,2023). Each outcome carries significant implications for global governance, collective security, and the resilience of liberal international norms. Ultimately, the conflict serves as a major test of whether liberal principles can adapt and exist in an increasingly contested and multipolar world.

Many scholars believe that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the result of the diversionary War theory due to rising authoritarianism, domestic insecurity, and politics, which pushed Russia to enter into this conflict and play the long game because it serves its purpose domestically.(Fernando and Cruz, 2022) Like other major powers, Russia has tried to control and align the actions of neighbouring small countries regarding their security while pursuing its self-interest through offensive realism. Scholars argue that realist theory, particularly offensive realism, provides a clear explanation for the invasion, involving insights from non-realist studies such as civilization, ontological security, etc. (Edinger, 2022).

On the contrary, some Russians believe that their country is at war with the West and that Western nations are conducting the war through Ukraine as a proxy, which must result in dethroning the United States as the global hegemon to establish a rule-based multipolar world order as seen from the prism of Realist Theory. Russian security concerns, including their attempt to maintain and regain their sphere of influence,

implementation of an offensive realist strategy to claim Ukrainian territory, and its efforts aimed at revisionism against the US-led liberal international order, are some of the key arguments in favor of the steps taken by Russia.(Danciu, 2023) From the Russian perspective, a stable peace is only possible by addressing issues of values, security, and economic and political relations among Russia, Ukraine, and Western countries to promote peaceful and inclusive societies (Tsygankov,2023).

In this view of Russia, the critics claim that the liberal school of thought has put excessive reliance on global institutions and norms, which, according to the realists, is inconsequential in addressing the underlying causes of instability and conflict, as these international institutions reflect the interests of large, powerful countries and do not represent the concerns of smaller, weaker nations. (Mearsheimer, 1995) However, realist theory has also been criticised for its narrow focus on power and state interests, often undermining the role of international cooperation, economic interdependence, and norms in reducing conflict and promoting global peace and stability.

From an international relations perspective, the Russian invasion and, consequently, the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to counter increasingly assertive Russia has further strengthened transatlantic relations, but the failure to reach a diplomatic solution to the present crisis and to protect the smaller nations against the great powers has undermined the multilateral institutions and resulted in the breach of peace and security that has violated the UN charter principles and hindered the path towards sustainable development.(Lebow, 2022) It is no longer acceptable to most of global society to use war as a weapon, which was earlier seen as a legitimate form of state activity.(Bode and Huelss, 2018) The critiques of the application of the realist theory argue that this invasion has a specific historical and geo-political context that requires a nuanced application of this theory with deeper qualitative analysis of the local political contributory factors (Sousa et. al,2024).

Resurgence of Realist International Relations theory

The right balance is to say that the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis has reemphasised the importance of the realist theory of international relations. The core assumptions of the realist theory include state-centricity, anarchy, and the primacy of security and survival.

The actions of both Russia and Western states reflect these characteristics. On one hand, Russia’s military intervention can be seen as an attempt to prevent further NATO expansion, while Ukraine’s resilience and its appeal for Western support are based on existential security concerns. Similarly, NATO’s participation reflects a realist strategy, aimed at resisting Russian expansion without getting involved in a broader conflict.Although the theory of realism has assumed significance, it has been used vaguely to mean everything from those who support Ukraine against Russian Aggression and argue for NATO to directly engage in the war to defeat Russia, as well as those who believe that it is the West due to whose actions the war has taken place.

In their eagerness to protect the state, the realists stress the significance of preserving state sovereignty, national security, international stability, and great power status, forgetting that no state exists in isolation and is part of the larger international

community. While protecting state interests is important and needs protection, as seen in the case of Russia, which has seen several changes from being an autocracy to communism, followed by liberalism and shifting back to semi-autocratic ideology, the theory of realism has helped it to navigate through these turbulences. It has formed an essential part of their national identity (Kropatcheva, 2012).

Nonetheless, within the group of realists in Russia, diverse views exist, some of whom defend and advocate for putting in efforts by Russia to win the war by completing the special military operation. In contrast, others believe there is a need for restraint and compromise to end the conflict by advocating for a ceasefire and settlement to preserve Russia's security and sovereignty. This uncertainty, as per some of the thinkers, is due to the politics of the West since the 1990s. The war in Ukraine has also been attributed to the efforts of NATO to consolidate power in Eastern Europe, threatening Russia's geopolitical interests and invoking its nationalistic agenda to protect its interests in response to NATO's eastward expansion. In the name of the liberal world order, the West has intervened in countries that resulted in global disorder, in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan, etc. (Dodge,2013).

From a realist perspective, differences within Russia do not contradict realism but instead reflect competing narratives based on a common realist objective, which is to preserve Russia's security, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy. Further, from a Russian perspective, Ukraine is integral to Russia's identity and security and the fact that Ukraine remains neutral and a non-member of the Western military organizations is of paramount significance for Russia's strategic objectives, as the Russian *Realists* do not feel secure if Ukraine becomes a member of Western political and military institutions (Taras, 2022).

Moreover, the connection between Russia and Ukraine in terms of culture, religion, and language further complicates the situation, as the realists in Russia argue that these common characteristics are essential for preserving the unity of the two countries.(Kappeler, 2014). This is a threat given the insistence on a continuing eastward expansion of NATO, the United States, and its European allies, who have needlessly provoked Russia and even backed it into a corner (Kulick, 2022). In the past, it was the 2008 Bucharest summit, under which Russia was further provoked after NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit, which promised eventual membership to Georgia and Ukraine. (Arbuthnot,2008) Diplomatic response to the invasion also involved considerations of the role of the civilizational state created by the Putin regime, which focused on the historical struggles between the West and Russia.

On the other hand, the Russian moderates do not favour the continuation of the war and are searching for an acceptable compromise to end the Special Military Operation. Such a group is primarily composed of those who believe in restoring peace, and their reasoning about the causes of war and Ukraine and Russia's objectives varies significantly from that of the realists. Such moderates believe that a prolonged conflict undermines Russia's national security, economic stability, and international position. The rationale behind this difference is that the members of the moderate group do not accept that the war in Ukraine was inevitable. However, they believe that the West refused to consider Russia's security and national interest; they believe that a compromise based on diplomacy should be the way forward. For them, what matters is the fact that Russia has suffered economically and politically more than during the Cold War due to the absence

of dialogue between Russia and the West, leading to isolation at the international level and an ongoing struggle in the hearts and minds of the non-Western world.(Fisher, 2020) Seen in this light, while it may be argued that the West failed to be respectful of Russia's interests and concerns in Europe and Ukraine, at the same time, Russia has also failed in its responsibility to demonstrate the reason behind such interests and concerns.

In this regard, realism helps to interpret the Russian attitude to preserve the state's survival and strategic autonomy not as a moral or ideological choice but on grounds of compulsion. Russia's behavior can therefore be understood as a response to assumed external threats, changing power balances, and historical exploitations rather than purely normative goals. Thus, realism helps ensure long-term state survival within a competitive international landscape.

Amidst this background, it must be understood that in the modern-day context, where regional and local conflicts are evolving rapidly, it seems challenging to capture or predict the future context, whether it is the Russia-Ukraine Crisis or the Israel-Palestine War. Thus, there is a need to be flexible when dealing with specific situations in the international community. Even though the Russian invasion appears to serve Russia's strategic interests at present, the result of such a war and incalculable human and economic suffering has proved to be catastrophic, which the realist theory of international relations may only be able to partially reflect upon, as incorporating other perspectives and regional dynamics offers a more comprehensive view of the conflict and its global implications.

The crisis of Multilateralism

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis traces its roots to the West assuming responsibility for developing post-Cold War structures and processes that further distanced Russia from the decision-making process. Specifically, the US leadership further complicated the issue through NATO's military structure and its aim to expand in European countries, which has been the contention even in the current crisis. Surprisingly, during NATO's expansion, the USA and its allies never took into consideration the views of the Russian Federation. The USA and allies controlled aspects that provide relevant context for understanding Russia's subsequent actions.

Such exclusion faced by Russia instilled a feeling in Moscow of viewing NATO's eastward expansion as a direct threat to its national security and regional influence, thus impacting its practices and policies. These changes help understand why Russia has framed its actions in Ukraine as defensive rather than aggressive, and help understand the motivations behind Russia's foreign policy behaviour.

The current illegal annexation of Ukrainian territories has set a dangerous precedent for all sovereign nations that achieved independence in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's Collapse. This has been coupled with the inaction by the UNSC (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2025), as Russia abused its veto power as a permanent member by restricting the UNSC from taking any steps to prevent the humanitarian crisis that has unfolded in Ukraine (Peters, A.,2023).

Under Article 24(1) of the United Nations Charter, the Security Council acts to maintain the peace and security of the world. However, the Security Council has been paralyzed through veto under Article 27(3) of the UN Charter. Thus, it has restricted the UNSC from responding to atrocities, shielding the perpetrators from accountability instead of maintaining international peace and security and reaffirming fundamental rights (Alhamdan,2023). Thus, the crisis exposes structural shortcomings of multilateralism, particularly within the United Nations Security Council, as the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis has undermined the Council's capacity to respond effectively to humanitarian crises,

Coming to the EU interests, the current crisis has affected European Security governance, European energy security, and the global legal order, and there exists the need for a serious diplomatic effort to re-establish the core principles of the UN Charter, respecting the territorial sovereignty and political independence of Ukraine under Article 2 of the UN Charter. In this context, Russia behaviour and reluctance to withdraw from the occupied land and negotiate meaningfully on various imaginary lies of being under attack by Ukraine must be seen as a contributory factor to the failure of multilateral instituions .

This invasion has challenged certain assumptions underlying Western policy in the post-Cold War era, such as treating Russia more as a partner than an adversary and considering Europe essentially stable and safe from invasion which is certainly not the case when it comes to Russia, even though the Common Security and Defence Policy (Tardy,2018) is in place and is responsible for supporting revised security policies, but it has been proven insufficient as Ukraine's sovereignty and independence have been violated (Dag and Tufekci, 2025).

This current invasion is unique because it lacks a limiting condition to explain why the use of force might be justified for claiming sovereignty based on historical grounds of ownership, as claimed by Russia, which has resulted in rampant violations of the use of force under the UN charter. Such acts illustrate how states may act unilaterally when pursuing perceived strategic interests in disregard of established legal norms.

Whereas the failure of multilateral institutions to resolve the Ukraine conflict and other global crises raises questions about the credibility of these bodies. Despite advancements in global governance, these institutions often appear powerless in the face of great power politics. Realist theories argue that such failures are inevitable as states prioritize their own interests over collective security. This means that these institutions remain limited by procedural requirement such as veto powers, which limit their capacity to regulate the powerful states. From a realist perspective, this variance between state behaviour and institutional effectiveness is on expected lines, as international institutions ultimately reflect the interests of powerful states.

However, on 16 March 2022, among other measures, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered the Russian Federation to immediately suspend its military operations in Ukraine. The Court opined that a direct and unbridled armed attack against a neighbor by a permanent member of the United Nations (UN) Security Council, whose task is to maintain and preserve international peace and security. The ICJ held that there exists a dispute relating to the interpretation, application, or fulfillment of the Genocide Convention. It rejected President Putin's statement that the invasion was 'in accordance with Article 51 (chapter VII) of the Charter of the United Nations and that the 'purpose'

of the operation was 'to protect people who have been subjected to abuse and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years' and to stop such 'genocide'.(Kulick, 2022) After the ICJ gave such interim orders, several member states of the ICJ, between 21st July 2022 and 15th December 2022, filed declarations of intervention under Article 63 of the ICJ Statute.(Huremagić,2024) even when the Russian Federation continues questioning the legitimacy of such interventions and the jurisdiction exercised by the ICJ. In January 2024, the ICJ confirmed it has jurisdiction over key parts of Ukraine's complaint and earlier ordered provisional measures requiring Russia to suspend military operations, though Russia has not complied. While the ICJ's rulings are legally binding, enforcement remains weak. Thus, reinforcing realist claims that global governance mechanisms lack enforceability against powerful states.

Under international law, the ground of collective defense can only be invoked when the victim state requests military aid in response to the actual or imminent threat, whereas, in the ongoing crisis, Russia has made a premature recognition of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in Donbas region which is a clear violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine and is inconsistent with the principles of the UN. Additionally, another claim made by Russia was that the lives of the Russian nationals in the Donbas region are under threat, and its actions constitute an 'extension of state.' This argument also lacks validity as there is no evidence of significant large-scale violations of human rights to its nationals, and the action of Russia has gone beyond the Donbas region (Pelliconi,2024), thus defeating the objective of preventing its nationals from injury (Hurak and D'Anieri, 2022).

However, the lack of comprehensive multilateral intervention in the Ukraine crisis reflects the realist critique of international institutions, which lack the enforcement mechanisms to prevent conflict or enforce peace. Russia's continued aggression in Ukraine highlights this gap between the theory of collective security and the reality of power politics. From a realist perspective, states focus on national interests and survival over institutional commitments, particularly when major security concerns are a matter of consideration.

Russia's strategic calculations

Historically, the present-day Ukraine crisis began with Nikita Khrushchev's 1954 transfer of Crimea from the Russian Socialist Federal Republic to the Ukrainian Socialist Federal Republic, to historicise the 300th anniversary of Ukraine-Russia unification. These events, accompanied by the collapse of the Soviet Union, gave rise to the concept of the Ruskiy Mir (Russian world), which was adopted by Russian nationalists, who believed all Russian-speaking people should be united in one state. These nationalists view Ukraine differently from other former republics of the Soviet Union, as Ukraine is culturally and linguistically more akin to Russia. Critical events in Russian history took place on their territory, as Kyiv was the first capital of the Russian state. As a result, Russian nationalists have never accepted Ukrainian claims to be governed separately with the right to their own country (Lebow, 2022). In 2014, Russia reannexed Crimea and lent military support to Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine who sought to break away and join Russia. The invasion of 2022 is an extension of this policy under which President Putin declared that Ukraine

is not a neighbouring country but an inalienable part of our history, culture, and spiritual space (Kuzio, 2018).

The 2022 invasion further complies with Realist logic, as President Putin subjugated Ukraine's sovereignty at a lower pedestal to Russia's national security interests. As per this perspective, claims about shared history and identity function as legitimising arguments, in line with realist assumptions, Russia's actions manifest an intention to violate international norms reinforcing the belief that power dynamics and not international law ultimately affect state behavior.

However, this does not give rise to the use of force to annex the territory of a sovereign state, as the use of force is only justified for defensive purposes or requires authorization by appropriate regional or international organizations, which is missing in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The reasons cited for the invasion were NATO's enlargement in the east and Western support for the pro-democracy movement in Ukraine, which were directly threatening the core strategic interests of Russia. However, due to the inaction of the West in the past regarding Russia's use of force in Georgia, the occupation of Crimea, and the use of its military in support of Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine, the significance of international relations was undermined.

From a Realist perspective, such behaviour is a response to the changing balance of power in international relations. Moreover, the West's earlier failure to respond decisively to Russia's has resulted in the erosion of international norms.

International law is faced with the conundrum of dealing with the violatory behavior of Russia, through which it aims to regain its past glory and prestige.(Menon, 2020) In the aftermath of the Soviet Union collapse, Russia has regularly violated principles like non-use of force under Article 2(4) of the UN Charter or the principle of non-intervention under Article 2(7) of the UN Charter (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2025), whether it is the invasion of Georgia that took place in 2008 putting them in a precarious position regarding their national security and their desire for NATO membership. In recent times, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has resulted in further distancing of Georgia and Ukraine outside the Russian influence and increased Russian dependence on China due to sanctions aimed at isolating Russia under international law, as was seen during the initial stages of the conflict (Green, 2022).

It is essential to highlight the critical points by presenting a larger picture of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These are mainly on the lines of the West–Russia escalation, with the aim to prevent Ukraine from becoming a NATO member and to prevent the supposed genocide of ethnic Russians and Russian nationals in the Donbas region by the Ukrainian government. This fact of supposed genocide needs to be seen from the period 2014-2021, where the Donbas region experienced a great deal of war and bloodshed, which was a result of the occupation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 due to which the situation prior to the invasion arose.Moreover, under Article 39 of the UN Charter, the Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression. In this regard, no decision was made by the United Nations Security Council to categorize the situation in Ukraine's Donbas region as a threat to peace or a breach of peace prior to the Russian invasion in 2022. This reflects an attempt to degrade the quality of democratic governance in Ukraine by Russia to establish its supremacy

over Ukraine and to assert itself against the Western allies increasingly.The conflict in Donbas since 2014 and the annexation of Crimea highlight how Russia acts to maintain its sphere of influence and counter Western interference, consistent with Realist ideas of power politics and survival

For Russia, the invasion serves dual purposes: strategically, it aims to expand influence, secure additional territory, and align neighbouring states with its interests; domestically, it reinforces political control and legitimizes rising authoritarianism in pursuit of a nationalist cause that unites everyone.

Challenges to realist theory

While realism provides valuable insights into the causes of the Russian invasion, it also has significant theoretical and practical limitations. Realism does not fully account for violations of International Law, such as

Russia's breach of Ukraine's sovereignty, nor does it adequately address the humanitarian consequences of the War. The realist approach also ignores the potential role of non-state actors and civil society in shaping international relations. In a world where global issues increasingly require multilateral cooperation, realism's emphasis on state power may no longer explain global dynamics comprehensively particularly when examined through liberal, constructivist, and critical theoretical perspectives.

From a liberal perspective, realism undermines the importance of international institutions, international law, and cooperation who argue that multilateral institutions play an integral role in regulating state behavior and facilitating peaceful conflict resolution. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is not only to protect power, but a violation of international law, including the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity protected under the UN Charter. The Liberals would emphasize that the failure of multilateral framework in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict does not make it redundant, but point towards the need for enforcement mechanisms and stronger international cooperation, especially regarding economic interdependence, which can act as an incentive against war.

On the other hand, constructivist critiques emphasise realism's limitations by focusing on ideas, identities, and norms rather than the pursuit of power alone. The notion of ideas, identities, and norms stems from historical experiences, collective memory, and national identity, which is true in the case of Russia . To illustrate, the perceptions of Western control and identity-based fears of NATO expansion played a significant role in the Russian invasion. Moreover, realism fails to account for why international norms such as respect for sovereignty and human rights matter, which are violated in the war.

Lastly, critical perspectives, including Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial approaches, challenge realism's state-dominated focus by highlighting the power structures, economic inequalities, and marginalised voices. Marxist theorists link the conflict to resource competition and power interests rather than the pursuit of national security. Whereas the feminist scholars criticise realism for ignoring the humanitarian consequences of war, especially on women and children. Postcolonial theorists argue that realism prioritises powerful states and silences different perspectives.

The future of International Relations and Global Order

The Russian aggression against Ukraine has resulted in various geopolitical consequences indicating a shift in the world order. Many nations defined their foreign policy priorities based on multiple geopolitical and pragmatic considerations.(Topa, 2024) Russian aggression against Ukraine has challenged the post-Cold War world order, resulting in the breakdown of its relations with the US and its European and Asian allies. Russia is striving to achieve its former role as a dominant power. It is aligning itself with other non-western powers to create a multipolar world by constantly challenging the US hegemony.

Unlike Western nations, many nations outside the transatlantic partnership have shown a different approach to the Ukrainian crisis, as they have abstained from voting on the issue in the United Nations General Assembly and have repeatedly called for the crisis to be resolved through dialogue and diplomacy. To illustrate, although India, as a member of the UN, has vehemently opposed an interventionist international community in the form *of* humanitarian intervention, it has resisted taking a stand on the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, which fulfills the conditions of the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) that India and many other states have refrained from. R2P is a global political commitment that aims to address four key concerns to prevent *genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity* (Upadhyay and Mehrotra, 2025) India has not been proactive in implementing the norm of R2P into practice by justifying its strong commitment to any state's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as seen in the ongoing crisis.

In the present situation, Russia continues to violate the independence of Ukraine despite the US-led ceasefire talks that may lead to re-establishing Ukraine’s territorial and political sovereignty. Thus, the Ukrainian authorities must focus on taking steps that go beyond the consideration of choosing between peace and justice, such as initiating criminal prosecutions under existing national law and simultaneously putting in place specific steps that aim at avoiding further deterioration of the social and economic situation of persons directly affected by the conflict.

Russia’s attack on Ukraine is disrupting the post-war world order and threatening global peace and security. As pointed out earlier, Russian aggression against Ukraine is not the first time that great powers have used force against smaller nations without following international laws, undermining multilateral institutions showing the selected application of the international legal framework and human rights, but it shows the increasing shift in the global balance of power and the need for various countries to recalibrate their positions. Many countries in the Global South face extreme geopolitical pressure to realign their position, considering the consequences and implications of this invasion. As explained, Russia wants to contain the further eastward expansion of NATO and create its sphere of influence within Eurasia to counter-balance Western expansion and retain dominant control over the Black Sea.

The approach towards globalization has also changed, and to accommodate such changes, the United Nations Security Council and other multilateral institutions need to be democratized based on principles of democratic governance, the protection of individual rights, and the rule of law, to accommodate the differing views, considering

contemporary geopolitical realities. Such democratization needs to be characterized by equality, human rights, freedom, multilateralism, and collective security as enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations in multilateral treaties and customary rules that give effect to the values of self-determination and territorial integrity. All these values have been violated by the Russian Federation, ranging from the unlawful use of force as a violation under Article 2(4) of the UN charter and the violation of the territorial integrity of another sovereign state.

From an international relations perspective, these developments can be understood in different ways. Realist theory views the conflict as a power struggle in an international system where no single authority exists, and states are primarily concerned with their own survival. From this angle, Russia's actions reflect an effort to push back against NATO expansion and what it sees as U.S. dominance, while the decision of many non-Western states to remain neutral is driven more by practical self-interest (Smith & Dawson, 2024).

Liberal institutionalism focuses on the role of international rules and organizations, as discussed earlier, particularly the sanctions and diplomatic pressure imposed by Western countries. However, the fact that these measures failed to prevent the conflict or gain universal support highlights the limits of international institutions and suggests that the liberal global order is losing influence.

Constructivist approaches shift attention to ideas, identities, and historical experiences. Russia's challenge to the post–Cold War order is closely tied to feelings of lost status and long-standing grievances, while many countries in the Global South place greater value on sovereignty, non-alignment, and mediation than on taking sides in great-power rivalries (Platias and Trigkas, 2024).

Taken together, these perspectives point to a world that is becoming more fragmented and multipolar. Instead of a single, shared global system, today's international order is increasingly shaped by strategic competition, flexible cooperation, and contested norms.

Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has severe geopolitical implications for the world order in the context of the new Cold War, reigniting debates on the importance and relevance of realist theory in international relations by drawing parallels to the Cold War era tensions. The diplomatic, military, and economic responses to the invasion have broader implications for Europe's global order and regional security infrastructure. However, it is essential to assess the application of all the theoretical frameworks after considering the unique historical and geopolitical context in which the invasion took place to critically reflect on the application of the realist theoretical framework to this unique event. Such analysis should emphasize the international conflict, geopolitical context, NATO enlargement, the shift in the balance of power, the war dilemma, fear of escalation, and the need to expand the security infrastructure in the future, along with other factors.

Going forward, it can be said that there are many compelling arguments when the Russian invasion of Ukraine is seen through the prism of realism. At the same time, the realistic arguments are limited as it does not explain the rules of war violations. Many

nations must rebalance their foreign policy priorities amidst the shifting order based on various geopolitical and pragmatic considerations. However, a more viable solution is to create a more participatory and equitable international relations framework for all, including outreach and partnership with various actors, including civil society and other non-state actors. Russia has undertaken the invasion of Ukraine to challenge the West by undermining its liberal world order and asserting itself as an equal partner before the West. Russia wants the West to recognize former soviet republics like Ukraine as a buffer zone under Russian influence. Still, this proposition is unlikely to be accepted as these countries have their rights of territorial integrity and political independence under the UN Charter. Such actions of Russia will further distance them.

The undermining of multilateral institutions and remilitarisation across the world has undone years of progress made by international law and poses a severe threat to the security of humankind. Collective security alliances like NATO must revisit their role in maintaining international peace and security in light of their past actions and exclusionary conduct in some instances. The selective and differing standards of international relations application must be criticized when a smaller nation becomes a victim of ideological and other warfare among great powers. The international relations framework should be equally applied in all situations regarding equitable processes and procedures to create a better world.

With the continuation of the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the continuous denial by the Kremlin of any wrongdoing, the talks initiated by the US stand at a critical point. Russia is reluctant to withdraw from the occupied land; thus, the need of the hour is to bring an end to the ongoing conflict soon to ensure peace and security in building an inclusive society to ensure sustainable development.

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