

Opinión invitada**Empire and Revenge: Outlining Vladimir Putin's Motivations for War**

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The invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 triggered a multitude of debates between pundits and policy makers alike over Russia's, and more specifically, Vladimir Putin's motivations in invading Ukraine. Without oversimplifying excessively, on the one hand, one group argued that Putin's move was understandable given the fact that since the end of the Cold War, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion was bringing the alliance dangerously close to Russia's traditional sphere of influence and therefore represented a direct threat to the national security interests of the country. Following this logic therefore, Putin's invasion was a *defensive* move against NATO and the United States aggressive and anti-Russian post-Cold War European policy.

The most vocal of proponents of this argument is the renowned University of Chicago academic, John Mearsheimer. He argues that prevailing view in the West is that the Ukraine war is primarily due to Russian aggression and Putin's desire to revive the Soviet empire (Giles, 2022). However, Mearsheimer argues that the United States and NATO are to blame for the invasion because the expansion of the alliance into Russia's traditional sphere of influence threatened the latter's geopolitical integrity. Russia was too weak to respond to NATO's enlargement when Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined in 2004. However, the red line for Moscow was the formal announcement of Ukraine and Georgia's desire to join NATO in 2008. At the time, Putin even went so far as to say that Ukraine was not even a real country (Marson, 2009). Great powers are always sensitive to potential threats in their spheres of influence and Russia should not be portrayed as

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the main culprit in the conflict since Putin was merely responding to threats emanating from the West and Ukraine (Mearsheimer, 2014).

Alternatively, other policy makers and pundits argue that this war is motivated more by the personal ambitions of Vladimir Putin. The political scientist and president of the *Eurasia Group*, Ian Bremmer, is one of the more vocal proponents of this interpretation of the war. He has argued that Vladimir Putin is personally responsible for the invasion because Ukraine did not pose any kind of threat to Russia (Bremmer, 2023). He squarely place the blame for this war on Putin's convenient misinterpretation of history to suit his own ambitions to maintain a tight grip on power in Russia by restoring an ill-defined vision of the "glorious" Russian empire which combines both the elements of 18th and 19th Century Tsarist Russia and Stalin's Soviet Union. In that sense, what Vladimir Putin is attempting to do is to restore the global importance that Russia had in the past.

This paper evaluates the evidence on both sides of these opposite interpretations of Putin's motivation for the war. It begins by outlining how NATO expanded in the period after the end of the Cold War and why it occurred. It then briefly examines Putin's response to NATO expansion. The paper then presents the central concern that was consistently presented as a threat to Russia in the period leading up to the war, which was Western inspired regime change, not NATO expansion as argued by Mearsheimer. NATO faced significant challenges in the last decade, all of them internal to the alliance, the most notable of which was the presidency of Donald Trump. It is thus important to outline what these challenges were and how they were perceived by the Kremlin. The paper then discusses how Putin's ambitions to create a new Russian empire influence his decision making with regards to the invasion. Finally, the paper evaluates the utility of Mearsheimer's thesis in understanding the causes of the war. It also discusses what is likely to be the long-term impact of the war on global politics and international relations.

Not one Inch

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, NATO has experienced six notable moments of expansion, starting with a new unified Germany joining in 1990. The Soviet Union and NATO agreed that a reunified Germany would join NATO under West Germany's existing membership. Restrictions were placed on the deployment of NATO troops on former East German territory. However, it

should be highlighted that the then Soviet leader Michael Gorbachev, resisted unified German membership in the alliance as a negotiating strategy to secure financial assistance from the United States and Germany, rather than out of a genuine fear of what a larger NATO would mean for Soviet national security. In this regard, it is important to note that American-Soviet friendship was at never-before-seen high and that the Soviets had decided to support the US and its Western allies in the Security Council of the United Nations in condemning the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990. Further, the Soviet Union voted in favor in the Security Council to authorize the deployment of Western forces into the region to militarily push Iraq out of Kuwait. Once again, this support was implicitly contingent on continued financial support for the collapsing economy of the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's seemingly hard-line opposition to membership in NATO of a unified Germany ended almost immediately after Russia was able to secure a financial package from the West.

Moreover, from a national security perspective, the Soviet fear was not so much the existence and expansion of NATO but rather what would be the implications of a now more powerful unified Germany. Memories of Second World War (WW2) were still very strong in the collective psyche of Russians and the fear was that a unified Germany may someday reemerge a serious threat to the Soviet Union. For the Soviets (and the French) German membership in NATO, and its unified command under the direction of the Alliance was viewed as a significant guarantee that a unified Germany would continue to behave as Western liberal democracy with a responsible and reasonable foreign policy. German membership in NATO post-1990 provided the Soviet Union with an important security guarantee.

Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic became NATO members in 1999. The context for this expansion was two-fold. First, Russia's response to the Yugoslav wars and subsequent massacres of Bosniacs by Serb-nationalists supported by Belgrade and Moscow suggested to many former Eastern bloc countries that the new "Russia" was in fact no different from the old Soviet Russia. This idea was further cemented in the minds of leaders—especially those bordering Russia itself—by the Russian invasion of the break-away re-public of Chechnya in 1999 and the subsequent brutal occupation by Russian forces. These two events were critical moments in that they convinced leaders and public opinion in former Eastern bloc countries that the only real protection they had had against future Russian aggression was NATO membership.

There is an unsubstantiated rumor that after the reunification of Germany, James Baker, the then Secretary of State of the US, promised to Gorbachev that NATO would “not expand one further inch”. This supposed guarantee has been used repeatedly by critics of post-1990 Alliance expansion as evidence that NATO and the US broke promises made to Gorbachev at the moment he permitted a unified Germany to join. However, there is no evidence that such a promise was made. Indeed, Gorbachev stated further NATO expansion was not even discussed at the 1989-1990 meetings at all. Rather, Gorbachev’s statements were misrepresented because he was quoted as stating that post-1990 NATO expansion was “a violation of the *spirit* [emphasis added] of the ... assurances made to us in 1990” (George H. W. Presidential Library, 1990).

Even if true, it is important to highlight that during these meetings, and in exchange for significant amounts of financial assistance by the West, Gorbachev promise that the days of “imperial” Soviet ambitions were finally over and that Russia, just like its former Soviet satellite states in the East, only wanted to transition to a modern Western liberal democracy (Gooding, 1990). For many former soviet satellite states, Russia’s behavior in the Balkans in the early 1990s and Chechnya in the late 1990s proved otherwise. If such a “not one inch” promise was broken, it was done in the context of Russian support of Serb ultra-nationalists and genocide in Bosnia and the ruthless occupation of Chechnya.

Year 2004 saw the most significant moment of NATO expansion because most of the new members (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania) had direct land or Black Sea border with Russia. 2004 was also the last time NATO expanded eastwards directly threatening Russia’s geopolitical situation if looked at from Mearsheimer’s Realist perspective. And indeed, tensions between NATO and Vladimir Putin, the then new president of Russia, were heightened. Although invited to the NATO summit meeting in Istanbul in June of 2004, Putin boycotted the event. However, the reasons for the boy-cott had very little to do with the expansion of NATO itself. Rather, ongoing tensions had developed over Russian military intervention in Georgia and Moldova as well as the unwillingness of NATO member states to ratify the Adapted Conventional Forces Agreement (CFE) signed in 1999. The treaty would have placed limits on the quantity of conventional weapons deployed by both Russia and the alliance. NATO argued that the war in Georgia and the deployment of troops in Moldova in separatist regions loyal to Russia were an inherent violation of the treaty. Russia was surpassing the number of troops

permitted by the treaty in Armenia and Azerbaijan as well (Falkenrath, 1995). Given these circumstances, numerous NATO countries, particularly those in the East felt that the ratification of the treaty would compromise alliance security. It is significant to note therefore, that at the precise moment when NATO expansion could be correctly interpreted as a threat to Russia, there were no pronouncements in that regard. Rather, Putin chose to boycott the summit over the loosely related issues of the ratification of a treaty and Western objections to Russian intervention in Georgia and Moldova among other countries.

Between 2009 and 2020 NATO enlarged to include Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and Northern Macedonia —countries sufficiently far away from Russia that they do not represent a geopolitical challenge—. Yet again, pronouncement from the Kremlin were at best, muted. In essence, NATO enlargement prior to war did not appear in Putin's anti-Western rhetoric.

What was believed to pose a significant threat was what Russian officials often referred to as US inspired "*color revolutions*". First mentioned in a 2014 Russian white paper, the document argues that the *color revolutions* phenomenon is becoming a major factor in the destabilizing (sic) of the situation in many regions of the world... The "*color revolutions*" experiment may be applied in any part of the world. The pattern has already been trialed (sic) in the Middle East and North Africa (Shoygu, 2014). Further, the document goes on to argue that "most of them initiated in one form or another by the U. S. and its NATO allies" (Gerasimov, 2014). The timing of when this document was published is important. The occupation of Crimea took place in February of 2014 and the document was released in May of the same year. Thus, it seems to serve as a justification for the invasion of Crimea, not NATO expansion. Putin was worried that the West was setting the stage for yet another *color revolution* in Ukraine.

Indeed, Russian officials believe this threat to be so pervasive that they argued that even the *Arab Spring* in the early 2010s was planned and executed by the United States and its allies through covert CIA operations. The document states that:

...during the past decade, a wave of these *color revolutions* has been instigated by the U. S. in the post-Soviet space, North Africa, and the Middle East. This has affected the military-political situation in these regions and the world as a whole. The beginning of the *Arab Spring* was marked by the victory of *color revolutions* in Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, and a number of other countries. (Gerasimov, 2014)

This “threat” was considered imminent by Putin because there was a fear that Russia would be next. After the 2012 rigged Russian presidential election, the country experienced a significant number of anti-Putin protests which were eventually quelled by force by Russian security agencies. This move was heavily criticized by the then US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton. The perception thus grew and solidified in Putin’s mind that the West was instigating revolutionary activity throughout the world including Russia (Gerasimov, 2014).

It should not be surprising therefore, that the annexation of Crimea in 2014 occurred precisely the moment when a pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, was overthrown after weeks of protest. Ukraine had signed the *European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement* in 2012. However, it began to unravel under Yanukovich in 2013 and looked like it would be cancelled completely by 2014. Protesters took to the streets in what came to be known as *Euromaiden* revolution which eventually led to the ouster and exile of Yanukovich in 2014. These events led Putin to decide to invade and annex Crimea immediately after the ouster of the former pro-Russian Ukrainian president. At no point did protesters demand that Ukraine join NATO. The only agreement between Ukraine and NATO was the NATO-Ukraine Action Plan signed in 2002, whereby NATO provided technical advice to the armed forces of Ukraine. It’s worth noting that Armenia —formally a military ally of Russia through the Collective Security Treaty Organization— also has signed a similar action plan with NATO. There were no serious discussions between NATO and Ukraine to join NATO before the 2014 annexation of Crimea. This is especially the case given the fact that the country’s president between 2010 and 2014 was pro-Russian. Rather, what was in play was a deepening of relations between Ukraine and the European Union (EU).

A powerful and threatening alliance

Related to the argument that NATO expansion drove Vladimir Putin’s regime to invade Ukraine out of fear of further expansion was the idea that the alliance was somehow “powerful” from an institutional point of view (Mearsheimer, 2014). The “out of area” missions in Afghanistan and Iraq post 9.11 fueled that perception to a large extent. Despite the overall failure of the missions from a political point of view, it is undeniable that from a purely military perspective, the wars were undeniable victories. In both instances, the re-

gimes in power fell within several weeks. Through these engagements, NATO demonstrated it possessed vastly superior military power combined with a logistical capability surpassed by none.

But was the message that Vladimir Putin leading up to the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 this one or something completely different? First, if NATO was such perceived to have been such an institutional and military success unified against commonly defined threats, then he would not have invaded in the first place. The risk associated with an invasion of a country that was being considered for NATO membership was too high. Putin therefore must have believed that NATO would not intervene and that the Ukraine invasions would be over in a matter of weeks (Nicks, 2014).

What was the message that NATO was projecting that Putin picked up that made him believe that this would be a quick and relatively low-cost war? three interrelated factors were operating institutionally within the alliance before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. First, on multiple occasions—and in a very public manner—the Trump administration questioned the need for the alliance in the first place. In March of 2016, Trump stated that “NATO is costing us a fortune and yes, we’re protecting Europe with NATO but we’re spending a lot of money” (The Washington Post Opinion Staff, 2016). More importantly, he also stated in 2016 that “here’s the problem with NATO: it’s obsolete ...Big statement to make when you don’t know that much about it, but I learn quickly” (Parker, 2016). Further, on at least one occasion, Trump went so far as to say that Article 5 of the alliance charter -which states that an attack on 1 member state is considered an attack on all of them- would not automatically be respected by the US in the event of war (Blake & Birnbaum, 2022). This was undoubtedly the most visible indicator that NATO as institution faced serious challenges moving forward.

Indeed, in 2014, following Russia’s invasion of Crimea, NATO members agreed to spend at 2% of their Gross domestic product (GDP) on defense by 2024. At the time of the signing of this agreement, only the United States, Greece and the UK were compliant (NATO, 2022). Today, only about 30% of the alliance members have reached that goal (NATO, 2022). The inability and unwillingness of member states to comply with the agreement leading up to the 2022 invasion suggests that the Alliance was in trouble.

Second, Euroskepticism, pervasive in several countries such as Italy and Hungary, and to a lesser extent in France and Germany, impacted the alliances as well. In other words, Trump’s criticisms of NATO did find favor in some political circles in Europe (Minkus, Deutschmann & Delhey, 2018).

A final event that occurred during the Trump presidency and that influenced Putin that he would likely not face a challenge from the US in the event of an invasion of Ukraine was the insurrection in Washington on January 6, 2021. It demonstrated that the US was weak, divided and collapsing politically (Liévano & Coe, 2021). More importantly, it suggested that the future president, Joe Biden, would have to focus most of his attention on domestic political, leaving little time for a coherent foreign policy. In other words, Putin undoubtedly calculated that the political divisions within the US would translate into a docile and inconsistent foreign policy: the US would be paralyzed for the foreseeable future.

When Biden won the election, he promised that “America is back, the transatlantic alliance is back”, suggesting that his administration would reinvigorate the NATO (The White House, 2021). Leading up to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the opposite occurred. The disastrous NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 demonstrated to the Kremlin just how weak the alliance actually was. Not only had the US not given adequate warning to its other NATO partners in the region such as Germany, but more importantly, the withdrawal demonstrated that the US is an unreliable partner and ally. At the time, it was clear that the Kremlin (and Beijing as well, for that matter) were paying very close attention and that the lesson they learned from the disastrous withdrawal was that in fact the US was *not* “back” despite Biden’s pronouncements.

Thus, although Biden repeatedly warned Putin to not invade, Putin calculated that the US would do nothing. The US had done nothing when Russia invaded Georgia, and very little when Putin occupied Crimea. Putin believed that the US would continue respond in a muted matter in the event of a complete invasion of Ukraine.

This is not to say that American inaction is a cause of the war in Ukraine, but rather that it served as a permissive factor from Putin’s perspective. Undoubtedly, he believed that NATO would be paralyzed and unable to act in the event of a Russian invasion of Ukraine. He probably also believed that the war in Ukraine would generate such intense divisions within the alliance that it could ultimately lead to its dissolution. Debates within NATO and the EU did occur after the 2014 annexation of Crimea over the breadth of the sanctions to be imposed. The differences were so strong that ultimately, only minimal economic punishment was imposed on Russia. The value of trade lost for Russian economy due to Western sanctions imposed in 2014 is only

around \$1.3 billion (Hanousek & Bêlín, 2019). In other words, if Putin was receiving any kind of signal as to the institutional strength of NATO and its accompanying political unity, it was that the alliance was almost dead.

Finally, Putin's argument that if not for the invasion, Ukraine would have joined NATO has no basis in factual events. NATO and Ukraine were in discussions before the 2014 annexation of Crimea to establish mechanisms for communication and cooperation, as did Russia as well. In the 2008 NATO summit, Ukraine and Georgia declared their intentions to pursue membership in the alliance, however, NATO members felt that it would threaten their relations with Moscow and the decision was taken to indefinitely postpone discussions with these two countries (Mearsheimer, 2014). It was not until after the 2014 invasion did serious discussion begin. NATO began training Ukraine troops in modern Western logistics, communications, intelligence and even combat techniques (NATO, 2015). However, none of this meant that Ukraine was about to be invited to join the alliance. First, NATO has a very long list requirements for membership that Ukraine was very far away from complying with. More importantly, the fact that Ukraine was in a *technical* state of war with Russia because of the annexation of Crimea and the ongoing militarized dispute with Russia in the east Ukrainian region of the Dombas meant that if Ukraine joined the alliance, NATO would automatically be at war with Russia because of Article 5. This single factor made NATO membership impossible. One important item on the list is that a candidate member may not have any ongoing territorial disputes with another country. Ukraine knew this, but more importantly, so did Putin.

Empire and Revenge

What Putin fears is not NATO, but rather, Western liberal democracy and the potential for regime change in Russia. He is cognizant of the fact that if Russians protest authoritarian policies as they did after the rigged 2012 election, his hold on power will be challenged. Countries that have experienced the so-called *color revolutions* are not driven and paid for by the CIA as he believes, but rather, these movements have been much more about an overwhelming desire of the people wanting their country to adopt liberal democratic policies.

When this movement directly impacted Ukraine in 2013-2014, the danger for Putin was too close to home and the potential for contagion was high. The ousting of his close ally in Ukraine —Yanukovych— and his subsequent

exile in Russia was, from Putin perspective, the last straw. His subsequent annexation of Crimea was partly a function of assuring uninterrupted access to the Black Sea, but it was also about fomenting nationalism in Russia which ultimately helped distract public opinion away from the increasingly authoritarian policies that Putin's regime was implementing. The recent overt revival of Stalin's image as a strong leader who always put the "motherland" first is at the same time perplexing yet understandable. Through well orchestrated prop-aganda directed by the Kremlin, Russian population seem to have forgotten that Stalin is responsible for an estimated 30 million Russian deaths through starvation, purges, and war (Keller, 1989). Further, while Putin attempts to mobilize Russian public opinion by arguing that Ukraine is governed by Neo-Nazis (Putin, 2021), he conveniently forgets to mention that Stalin and Hitler were allies between September of 1939 and June of 1941 with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Putin has strengthened his authoritarian hold on Russia even further in the context of the war. Protests of any kind are now punishable with a substantial fine or even prison. All independent press has been eliminated. He fully controls the country's legislature through his political party —United Russia— which holds 325 of the 450 seats. He can, with no legislative resistance whatsoever, pass any laws he deems convenient and has been able to do so for several years now. Examples of such legislation include the widely known law that makes it illegal to refer to invasion of Ukraine as a "war". Other lesser-known examples include a law that makes it illegal for an individual to identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ community. Other laws have targeted religious freedom. Various minority religious groups and NGOs have reported that authorities are constantly targeting, imprisoning, torturing individuals due to their religious beliefs, affiliation or membership in groups that have been labeled "extremist" or "terrorist" (United States Department of State, 2022). Putin has poisoned a multitude of political opponents, the most famous of which is Alekséi Navalni. Having survived the 2020 attack in a hospital in Germany, Navalni later returned to Russia in 2021 and is now serving a 15-year sentence for trumped up charges of extremism and fraud. In October of 2022, a new criminal case was opened against Navalni that could potentially double his current sentence by indicting him for "terrorism" and "financing extremist activity" (AFP, 2022). Thus, for all intents and purposes, Putin has now become a dictator.

And the purpose of the war is not to stop NATO expansion but rather the reinvigoration of imperial Russian and Soviet empire. This assessment comes

as no surprise: Putin has repeatedly stated that this is his goal. In that sense, the conquest of Ukraine will only embolden Putin to pursue other territorial ambitions.

Since 2005, he has repeatedly stated that the collapse of the Soviet Union was the most significant geopolitical event of the 20th century (Putin, 2005). And he has taken it upon himself to reconstruct that empire at the expense of a multitude of neighbors. As far as Ukraine is concerned, he has stated that it is an “artificial” state to begin with. Manipulating historical facts, he has argued that “in 1922, the territory that was once Russia was transformed to Ukraine. We did it for political reasons. Historically and culturally, Ukraine is ours” (Putin, 2021). He further goes on to state that “we gave them independence, so it’s ours to take back” (Putin, 2021). More alarmingly, he has repeated similar claims with respect to Moldova, Georgia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia.

Finally, since the invasion, Putin has begun to frame the war as an act of defense against the encroachment of the West. More than simply an issue of NATO expansion, he has argued that the war is response to the infiltration of Western “ideas” (Barber, Foy & Barker, 2019). During his Asia-Pacific tour, Stefano Sannino, the Secretary General of the European Union’s European External Action Service, criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin, accusing him of waging a war against NATO and the Western world. Sannino stated at a press conference held in Tokyo that Putin had shifted his approach from a war of conquest in Ukraine to a full-scale war against NATO and the West (Yamaguchi, 2023).

Maintaining consistency with the earlier discussed *color revolution* argument, Putin argues that the US and its allies cynically use democracy and liberalism to spread influence globally (Roth & Borger, 2023). In his address at the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin explained that:

One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural, and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this? (Putin, 2007)

Putin’s imperial ambitions are nothing new when looking at Russia’s history and the behavior of many of its leaders. Russians believe that Russia is a global power. And on several occasions, its leaders have attempted to

project power globally. These repeated attempts —be them by imperial or Soviet authorities— have generally failed, resulting in domestic instability and ultimately revolutions. The instability usually has been the result of the excessive use of resources to fund global aspirations. In other words, Russia's history is replete with examples of imperial overstretch (Kennedy, 1987). Two examples are worth noting. At the turn of 19th century, Russians Tsars had imperial aspirations that spanned from the Balkans through Siberia all the way to the Pacific Ocean. A massive territory which would today include much of Eastern Europe including Poland, the entirety of the Balkans all to the east to include Manchuria and Korea. These imperial ambitions brought them into direct conflict with Japan, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian empire, the German empire and at times even with the British Empire.² Russia was clearly overextended in this period, and it ultimately led a disastrous war with Japan in 1904-1905 and served as a contributing factor to the outbreak of ww1. Ultimately, Russia collapsed under the pressure of these two wars which resulted in revolution.

Similarly, after ww2, two Soviet leaders, Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev aspired to compete globally with the United States. Khrushchev referred to his policy of competition with the US as “Peaceful Coexistence”, while Brezhnev dramatically increased Soviet presence in Latin America and especially Africa. Empire cost the Soviets heavily. Maintaining the Castro regime in Cuba was such a significant drain on resources that one of the first things Michael Gorbachev did once in power was to cut economic assistance to Cuba almost completely (Shearman, 1989). Further, by the mid 1970s, the Soviet Union was spending close to 15%³ of its GDP on defense spending (Steinberg, 1990). This spending, for the sake of maintaining empire, was equally unsustainable. And Gorbachev's attempts to rescue the economy by scaling back military spending and cutting financial assistance to its allies was not enough to save the Soviet Union. Once again, the now Soviet policy of possessing a global empire led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

In that sense, Russia under Vladimir Putin is very similar to Russia un-

2. Tsar Nicolas II and Russia under Leonid Brezhnev. The war in Ukraine
Over the potential threat that Russia to Great Britain's pacific possessions.
3. However, the Soviet Union consistently exaggerated its overall GDP. The 15% figure is an estimation based on officially reported information by the Soviet Union.

has demonstrated that Russia has reached the limits of its capabilities and assets. It is important to highlight that Russia's economy is about the size of South Korea's (1.8 trillion USD; The World Bank, 2022). Putin cannot sustain a global or even regional Russian empire. As noted, he now claims that the war is against the West. It is extremely unlikely that he will prevail given the fact that collectively, the GDP of EU and US is about 40.5 trillion USD, more than 20 times that of Russia's (The World Bank, 2021). The problem lies in the fact that Putin does not recognize this reality. If history repeats itself, the result will be regime change in Russia, precisely what Putin believed the West was trying to achieve in Russia through its purported CIA sponsored *color revolutions*.

What makes Putin different from his predecessors is that he is not only driven by a desire for empire, but also by *revenge*. He has repeatedly argued that the US took advantage of Russia in the period following the end of the Cold War (Barber, Foy & Barker, 2019). In his 2022 ww2 Victory Day Speech, Putin stated that:

...the United States began claiming their exceptionalism, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, thus denigrating not just the entire world but also their satellites, who have to pretend not to see anything, and to obediently put up with it. But we are a different country. (Bloomberg, 2022)

What he ignores is that George H. W. Bush went out his way to not make any claims that the "West" had won the Cold War. Rather, what he argued was that the Western *ideas* of "freedom and liberty" was the victor (The New York Times, 1991).

Final thoughts

Mearsheimer's argument does not give us understanding of the motivations behind Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. As demonstrated, relying on the Realist precept of "maintaining the balance of power" as a justification for the invasion omits a significant and probably the best explanation for the invasion -that of Vladimir Putin himself. What Mearsheimer ignores are a series of personality traits unique to Putin. In an interview for the *New Yorker* nine months after the war started—and despite mounting evidence against his interpretation—Mearsheimer maintained that Putin does not intend to resuscitate the Soviet empire.

The conventional wisdom in the United States is that it's not about balance-of-power politics, and, in fact, Putin is an imperialist who is interested in conquering Ukraine for the purpose of making it part of a greater Russia. I don't think that is the case. I don't think he had nor has imperial ambitions. What motivates him is fear of Ukraine becoming a part of NATO (Chotiner, 2022).

Also, he denied that Putin has made any comments regarding Ukraine's lack of statehood and wanting to take what was once part of the Russian empire, "There is no evidence in there that he was bent on conquering Ukraine and incorporating it into a greater Russia" (Chotiner, 2022). This puts into question Mearsheimer's argument. At best, his thesis is not based on facts.

Putin has portrayed himself as a modern-day savior of Russia and its historical right to empire (The Guardian News, 2022). The invasion of Chechnya in 1999, Georgia in 2008, maintaining a military presence in Moldova, the Crimea in 2014 annexation of, and the invasion of remaining Ukraine in 2022 have all been framed along the lines that historically, these regions were part of imperial Russia and/or the Soviet Union (Putin, 2021). He has justified the targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure in Ukraine because he is fighting "NAZIS", invoking Russian collective memory of the Second World War to gain domestic support for the war. He believes that Russia was and should once again be a global superpower despite the fact that in 2022, the country ranks 11th in nominal GDP after South Korea and before Brazil (The World Bank, 2022).

Putin's argument —employed by Mearsheimer— that NATO expansion was threatening Russia's security was only *fully expressed* until *after* the invasion of 2022. When Russia occupied Crimea for example, no mention was made of NATO. Rather, what seems to have been at issue was an economic agreement between Ukraine and EU in a region which prior to 2014, was considered within Russia's sphere of influence.⁴

Of further concern should be that since the invasion, Putin has demonstrated notable moments of extreme stress and emotional instability which contributes to the unpredictable nature of his behavior. Examples of this include maintaining a significant amount of social distance between himself and his advisors, probably because he is afraid of contracting Covid-19, meeting his advisors online for probably the same reason, publicly berating advisors as he did with his national security advisor on live Russian TV on February

4. What Russian politicians have referred to as the "near-abroad" (Götz, 2022).

22, 2022, the constant rotation of military leadership, threatening the use of nuclear weapons, targeting civilians, and demonstrating complete disregard for the lives of Russian soldiers.

It appears he is willing to do almost anything, including allowing Russia's economy to collapse, to satisfy his imperial ambitions. The cost of the war has been approximately of 82 billion USD according to a study conducted by Forbes (Datsenko, 2022). A central tenant of Realist theory is that actors behave rationally. Looking back the last year, one would be hard-pressed to characterize Putin's behavior as rational. Indeed, Putin has demonstrated the ruthlessness of Joseph Stalin and the unpredictability of Nikita Khrushchev. One must ask an oft forgotten yet crucial question: would this invasion have taken place when Boris Yeltsin or Michael Gorbachev were in power?

The war highlights a series of important miscalculations on the part of the Kremlin that further questions the utility of Mearsheimer's Realist understanding of the war. The most obvious is that Putin miscalculated the cohesiveness and resilience of NATO and the EU in the face of the war. As noted, given the behavior of NATO leading up to the invasion, Putin can be forgiven for erring in this regard. After all, Realism argues that leaders are rational "given available information", what is often referred to as "bounded rationality". Putin probably expected that the invasion would divide the allies possibly to the point that the institution would collapse. Quite the opposite occurred. Not only is NATO more unified today than it has ever been since the terrorist attacks of 9.11 when the collective defense clause (article 5) of the alliance was activated, but it has strengthened institutionally speaking under the leadership of the Biden administration, its members have promised that they will individually increase military spending to a minimum of 2% of GDP (a NATO benchmark), and Germany has dropped his post WW2 foreign policy orientation of "Ost Politik" which was an attempt to appease the Soviet Union and then Russia. Most importantly, Finland has requested to join the alliance breaking its decades long policy of neutrality. This places Russia's Northwestern border under tremendous risk. Since the end of WW2, and because of Finnish neutrality, Russia could focus the overwhelming majority of its military capability along the border with Eastern Europe. Finland joining the alliance means that Russia now needs to defend a further 1500km of border. Therefore, its defensive capability will have to spread out more thinly. If Putin was worried about NATO expansion before the invasion of Ukraine, he

now has made the situation substantially worse. This massive miscalculation, however, can be accommodated by bounded rationality.

What bounded rationality and Realism cannot account for is the second massive miscalculation: that of the resistance of the Ukrainian people and its armed forces to Russian aggression. Putin's intelligence services had advised him that Ukraine would fall within a few days because its people did not want war and its armed forces were not driven to fight. The intelligence was clearly incorrect and undoubtedly due to incompetence or alternatively, telling Putin what he wanted to hear. This massive mistake is not something that bounded rationality can account for because the information was available. Putin's government simply chose not to process it. Related to this argument was the state of the Russian armed forces. Lack of training and the inability to conduct modern combined arms warfare only partly explains their failure. Corruption explains the rest. Funds destined for the modernization and maintenance of the country's armed forces were diverted by corrupt officials. The combined effect of the antiquated training and corruption largely explain the failure of the Russian military in this war. What is important to highlight is that lack of training and corruption are not considered in any realist understanding of the causes and conduct of war.

Irrespective of the outcome of the war, what is clear is that this war has triggered a dramatic shift in global politics and international relations. If there was any doubt that we are now once again in a new Cold War, the events of 2022 dispels it. However, this new Cold War will be more complex and thus more dangerous. China has also now become a military adversary of the US and the West, siding with Russia on many security issues including the invasion of Ukraine. But it should be highlighted that in the China-Russia bilateral relationship, Russia is clearly the junior partner. This means that China will not unconditionally support Russia going forward. Thus, it is not clear if the new international system will be bipolar —with the West on one side and China and Russia on the other— or multipolar —with the West, Russia, and China enmeshed in a complex trilateral relationship which lacks clarity and predictability.

To make matters worse, recent technological developments will make nuclear deterrence unlikely to work as it did during the Cold War. Deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) were premised on the idea that a nuclear war was unwinnable because neither the Soviets nor the US, had the ability to destroy the other side's capacity to retaliate in the event of a nuclear

attack. Weapon systems simply did not possess the accuracy to make that kind of attack possible. Thus, it did not matter who launched their weapons first. Both sides would lose. This was referred to as a “second-strike” nuclear capability. Moreover, both the US and the Soviet Union actively guarded against the possible development of these types of weapons through various treaties —such as the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty (1972) and the two Strategic Arms limitation Treaties (1972, 1979)— knowing how dangerous it was to possess them.

The five global nuclear powers (US, Russia, China, UK, and France) now possess extremely accurate weapons systems which necessarily negate deterrence and MAD. In other words, in today’s nuclear world it *will* matter who launches their missiles first because the potential to destroy the opponent’s nuclear retaliatory capability does in fact exist. These weapons will make the avoidance of international crises and their management if they do occur extremely difficult. The pressure to launch first will be high. The world has never been so close to nuclear war, even taking into account the worst moments of the Cold War.

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