ANALYSIS

An International Relations Theory Guide to the War in Ukraine

A consideration of which theories have been vindicated—and which have fallen flat.

By **Stephen M. Walt**, a columnist at *Foreign Policy* and the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University.

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The world is infinitely complex, and by necessity we all rely on various beliefs or theories about "how the world works" to try to make sense of it all. Because all theories are simplifications, no single approach to international politics can account for everything that is taking place at any given moment, predict exactly what will happen in the weeks and months ahead, or offer a precise plan of action that is guaranteed to succeed. Even so, our stock of theories can still help us understand how the tragedy in Ukraine came about, explain some of what is happening now, alert us to opportunities and potential pitfalls, and suggest certain broad courses of action going forward. Because even the best social science theories are crude and there are always exceptions to even well-established regularities, wise analysts will look to more than one for insights and retain a certain skepticism about what any of them can tell us.

Russia Invades Ukraine

A major land war looms over Europe.

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Given the above, what do some well-known international relations theories have to say about the tragic events in Ukraine? Which theories have been vindicated (at least in part), which have been found wanting, and which might highlight key issues as the crisis continues to unfold? Here's a tentative and far-from-comprehensive survey of what scholars have to say about this mess.

Realism and Liberalism

I'm hardly an objective observer here, but it is obvious to me that these troubling events have reaffirmed the enduring relevance of the realist perspective on international politics. At the most general level, all realist theories depict a world where there is no agency or institution that can protect states from each other, and where states must worry about whether a dangerous aggressor might threaten them at some point in the future. This situation forces states—especially great powers—to worry a lot about their security and to compete for power. Unfortunately, these fears sometimes lead states to do horrible things. For realists, Russia's invasion of Ukraine (not to mention the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003) reminds us that great powers sometimes act in terrible and foolish ways when they believe their core security interests are at stake. That lesson doesn't justify such behavior, but realists recognize that moral condemnation alone won't prevent it. A more convincing demonstration of the relevance of hard power—especially military power—is hard to imagine. Even post-modern Germany seems to have gotten the message.

Regrettably, the war also illustrates another classic realist concept: the idea of a "security dilemma." The dilemma arises because the steps that one state takes to make itself more secure often make others less secure. State A feels unsafe and seek any ally or buys some more weapons; State B gets alarmed by this step and responds in kind, suspicions deepen, and both countries end up poorer and less safe than they were before. It made perfect sense that states in Eastern Europe wanted to get into NATO (or as close to it as possible), given their long-term concerns about Russia. But it should also be easy to understand why Russian leaders—and not just Putin—regarded this development as alarming. It is now tragically clear that the gamble did not pay off—at least not with respect to Ukraine and probably Georgia.

To see these events through the lens of realism is not to endorse Russia's brutal and illegal actions; it is simply to recognize such behavior as a deplorable but recurring aspect of human affairs. Realists from Thucydides on down through E.H. Carr, Hans J. Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Kenneth Waltz, Robert Gilpin, and John Mearsheimer have all condemned the tragic nature of world politics, while at the same time warning that we cannot lose sight of the dangers that realism highlights, including the risks that arise when you threaten what another state regards as a vital interest. It is no accident that realists have long emphasized the dangers of hubris and the perils of an overly idealistic foreign policy, whether in the context of the Vietnam War, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, or the naive pursuit of open-ended NATO enlargement. Sadly, in each case their warnings were ignored, only to be vindicated by subsequent events.

The remarkably swift response to Russia's invasion is also consistent with a realist understanding of alliance politics. Shared values can make alliances more cohesive and

enduring, but serious commitments to collective defense result primarily from perceptions of a common threat. The level of threat, in turn, is a function of power, proximity, and foe with offensive capabilities and aggressive intentions. These elements go a long way to explaining why the Soviet Union faced strong balancing coalitions in Europe and Asia during the Cold War: It had a large industrial economy, its empire bordered many other countries, its military forces were large and designed primarily for offensive operations, and it appeared to have highly revisionist ambitions (i.e., the spread of communism). Today, Russia's actions have dramatically increased perceptions of threat in the West, and the result has been a display of balancing behavior that few would have expected just a few short weeks ago.

By contrast, the main liberal theories that have informed key aspects of Western foreign policy in recent decades have not fared well. As a political philosophy, liberalism is an admirable basis for organizing society, and I for one am deeply grateful to live in a society where those values still hold sway. It is also heartening to see Western societies rediscovering liberalism's virtues, after flirting with their own authoritarian impulses. But as an approach to world politics and a guide to foreign policy, liberalism's shortcomings have been exposed once again.

As in the past, international law and international institutions have proved to be a weak barrier to rapacious great-power behavior. Economic interdependence did not stop Moscow from launching its invasion, despite the considerable costs that it will face as a result. Soft power couldn't stop Russia's tanks, and the U.N. General Assembly's lopsided 141-5 vote (with 35 abstentions) condemning the invasion won't have much impact either.

As I've noted previously, the war has demolished the belief that war was no longer "thinkable" in Europe and the related claim that enlarging NATO eastward would create an ever-expanding "zone of peace." Don't get me wrong: It would have been wonderful had that dream come true, but it was never a likely possibility and all the more so given the hubristic way it was pursued. Not surprisingly, those who believed and sold the liberal story now want to pin all the blame on Russian President Vladimir Putin and claim that his illegal invasion "proves" that NATO enlargement had nothing whatsoever to do with his decision. Others now lash out foolishly at those experts who correctly foresaw where Western policy might lead. These attempts to rewrite history are typical of a foreign-policy elite that is reluctant to admit errors or hold itself accountable.

That Putin bears direct responsibility for the invasion is beyond question, and his actions deserve all the condemnation we can muster. But the liberal ideologues who dismissed Russia's repeated protests and warnings and continued to press a revisionist program in Europe with scant regard for the consequences are far from blameless. Their motives may

have been wholly benevolent, but it is self-evident that the policies they embraced have produced the opposite of what they intended, expected, and promised. And they can hardly say today that they weren't warned on numerous occasions in the past.

Liberal theories that emphasize the role of institutions fare somewhat better by helping us understand the rapid and remarkably unified Western response. The reaction has been swift in part because the United States and its NATO allies share a set of political values that are now being challenged in an especially vivid and cruel way. More importantly, if institutions such as NATO did not exist and a response had to be organized from scratch, it is hard to imagine it being anywhere near as rapid or effective. International institutions cannot resolve fundamental conflicts of interest or stop great powers from acting as they wish, but they can facilitate more effective collective responses when state interests are mostly aligned.

Realism may be the best overall guide to the grim situation we now face, but it hardly tells us the whole story. For example, realists rightly downplay the role of norms as strong constraints on great-power behavior, but norms have played a role in explaining the global response to Russia's invasion. Putin is trampling over most if not all of the norms pertaining to the use of force (such as those contained in the U.N. Charter), and that is part of the reason that countries, corporations, and individuals in much of the world have judged Russia's actions so harshly and responded so vigorously. Nothing can stop a country from violating global norms, but clear and overt transgressions will invariably affect how its intentions are judged by others. If Russia's forces act with even greater brutality in the weeks and months ahead, current efforts to isolate and ostracize it are bound to intensify.

Misperception and Miscalculation

It is also impossible to understand these events without considering the role of misperception and miscalculation. Realist theories are less helpful here, as they tend to portray states as more or less rational actors that calculate their interests coolly and look for inviting opportunities to improve their relative position. Even if that assumption is mostly correct, governments and individual leaders are still operating with imperfect information and can easily misjudge their own capabilities and the capabilities and reactions of others. Even when information is plentiful, perceptions and decisions can still be biased for psychological, cultural, or bureaucratic reasons. In an uncertain world filled with imperfect human beings, there are lots of ways to get things wrong.

In particular, the vast literature on misperception—especially the seminal work of the late Robert Jervis—has a lot to tell us about this war. It now seems obvious that Putin miscalculated badly on several dimensions: He exaggerated Western hostility to Russia,

gravely underestimated Ukrainian resolve, overstated his army's ability to deliver a swift and costless victory, and misread how the West was likely to respond. The combination of fear and overconfidence that seems to have been at work here is typical; it is almost a truism to say that states do not start wars unless they have convinced themselves that they can achieve their aims quickly and at relatively low cost. Nobody *starts* a war that they believe will be long, bloody, expensive, and likely to end in their defeat. Moreover, because humans are uncomfortable dealing with trade-offs, there is a powerful tendency to see going to war as feasible once you've decided it is necessary. As Jervis once wrote, "as the decision-maker comes to see his policy as necessary, he is likely to believe that the policy can succeed, even if such a conclusion requires the distortion of information about what others will do." This tendency can be compounded if dissenting voices are excluded from the decision-making process, either because everyone in the loop shares the same flawed worldview or because subordinates are unwilling to tell superiors that they might be wrong.

Prospect theory, which argues that humans are more willing to take risks to avoid losses than to achieve gains, may have been at work here as well. If Putin believed Ukraine was gradually moving into alignment with the United States and NATO—and there were ample reasons for him to think so—then preventing what he regards as an irretrievable loss might be worth a huge roll of the dice. Similarly, attribution bias—the tendency to see our own behavior as a response to circumstances but to attribute the behavior of others to their basic nature—is probably relevant too: Many in the West now interpret Russian behavior as a reflection of Putin's unsavory character and in no way a response to the West's prior actions. For his part, Putin seems to think that the actions of the United States and NATO stem from an innate arrogance and deeply rooted desire to keep Russia weak and vulnerable and that the Ukrainians are resisting because they either are being misled or are under the sway of "fascist" elements.

War Termination and the Commitment Problem

Modern IR theory also emphasizes the pervasive role of commitment problems. In a world of anarchy, states can make promises to each other but cannot be certain that they will be carried out. For example, NATO could have offered to take Ukrainian membership off the table in perpetuity (though it never did in the weeks before the war), but Putin might not have believed NATO even if Washington and Brussels had put that commitment in writing. Treaties do matter, but in the end they are just pieces of paper.

Moreover, the scholarly literature on war termination suggests that commitment problems will loom large even when the warring parties have revised their expectations and are seeking to end the fighting. If Putin offered to withdraw from Ukraine tomorrow and swore on a stack

of Russian Orthodox Bibles that he'd leave it alone forever, few people in Ukraine, Europe, or the United States would take his assurances at face value. And unlike some civil wars, where peace settlements can sometimes be guaranteed by interested outsiders, in this case there is no external power that could credibly threaten to punish future violators of any agreement that might be reached. Short of unconditional surrender, any deal to end the war must leave all parties sufficiently satisfied that they do not secretly hope to alter or abandon it as soon as circumstances are more favorable. And even if one side capitulates entirely, imposing a "victor's peace" can sow the seeds of future revanchism. Sadly, we appear to be a long way from any sort of negotiated settlement today.

Moreover, other studies of this problem—such as Fred Iklé's classic *Every War Must End* and Sarah Croco's *Peace at What Price?: Leader Culpability and the Domestic Politics of War Termination*—highlight the domestic obstacles that make it hard to end a war. Patriotism, propaganda, sunk costs, and an ever-growing hatred of the enemy combine to harden attitudes and keep wars going long after a rational state might call a halt. A key element in this problem is what Iklé called the "treason of the hawks": Those who favor ending the war are often dismissed as unpatriotic or worse, but the hard-liners who prolong a war unnecessarily may ultimately do more damage to the nation they are purporting to defend. I wonder if there's a Russian translation available in Moscow. Applied to Ukraine, a worrisome implication is that a leader who starts an unsuccessful war may be unwilling or unable to admit they were wrong and bring it to a close. If so, then an end to the fighting comes only when new leaders emerge who are not tied to the initial decision for war.

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But there's another problem: Autocrats facing defeat and regime change may be tempted to "gamble for resurrection." Democratic leaders who preside over foreign-policy debacles can

be forced from office at the next election, but they rarely if ever face imprisonment or worse for their blunders or crimes. Autocrats, by contrast, have no easy exit option, especially in a world where they have reason to fear postwar prosecution for war crimes. If they are losing, therefore, they have an incentive to fight on or escalate even in the face of overwhelming odds, in hopes of a miracle that will reverse their fortunes and spare them ouster, imprisonment, or death. Sometimes this sort of gamble pays off (e.g., Bashar al-Assad), sometimes it doesn't (e.g., Adolf Hitler, Muammar al-Qaddafi), but the incentive to keep doubling down in hopes of a miracle can make ending a war even harder than it might be.

These insights remind us to be very, very careful about what we wish for. The desire to punish and even humiliate Putin is understandable, and it is tempting to see his ouster as a quick and easy solution to the whole god-awful mess. But backing the autocratic leader of a nuclear-armed state into a corner would be extremely dangerous, no matter how heinous his prior actions may have been. For this reason alone, those in the West who are calling for Putin's assassination or who have said publicly that ordinary Russians should be held accountable if they do not rise up and overthrow Putin are being dangerously irresponsible. Talleyrand's advice is well worth remembering: "Above all, not too much zeal."

Economic Sanctions

Anyone trying to figure out how this plays out should study the literature on economic sanctions too. On the one hand, the financial sanctions imposed this past week are a reminder of America's extraordinary ability to "weaponize interdependence," especially when the country acts in concert with other important economic powers. On the other hand, a substantial amount of serious scholarship shows that economic sanctions rarely compel states to alter course quickly. The failure of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran is another obvious case in point. Ruling elites are typically insulated from the immediate consequences of sanctions, and Putin knew sanctions would be imposed and clearly believed the geopolitical interests at stake were worth the expected cost. He may have been surprised and discomfited by the speed and scope of economic pressure, but nobody should expect Moscow to reverse course anytime soon.

These examples do no more than scratch the surface of what contemporary IR scholarship might contribute to our understanding of these events. I've not mentioned the enormous literature on deterrence and coercion, any number of important works on the dynamics of horizontal and vertical escalation, or the insights one might glean from considering cultural elements (including notions of masculinity and especially Putin's own macho "personality cult").

The bottom line is that the scholarly literature on international relations has a lot to say about the situation we are facing. Unfortunately, no one in a position of power is likely to pay much attention to it, even when knowledgeable academics offer their thoughts in the public sphere. Time is the scarcest commodity in politics—especially in a crisis—and Jake Sullivan, Antony Blinken, and their many subordinates are not about to start leafing through back issues of *International Security* or the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* to find the good stuff.

Warfare also has its own logic, and it unleashes political forces that tend to drown out alternative voices, even in societies where freedom of speech and open debate remain intact. Because the stakes are high, wartime is when public officials, the media, and the citizenry should work hardest to resist stereotypes, think coolly and carefully, avoid hyperbole and simplistic clichés, and above all remain open to the possibility that they might be wrong and that a different course of action is required. Once the bullets start flying, however, what typically occurs is a narrowing of vision, a rapid descent into Manichaean modes of thought, the marginalization or suppression of dissenting voices, the abandonment of nuance, and a stubborn focus on victory at all costs. This process seems to be well underway inside Putin's Russia, but a milder form is apparent in the West too. All told, this is a recipe for making a terrible situation worse.

Stephen M. Walt is a columnist at *Foreign Policy* and the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University.

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