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Mearsheimer, Realism, and the Ukraine War

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Abstract: The usefulness of 'realism' in explaining Russia's decision to invade Ukraine has become a keenly contested debate not only in International Relations but in wider public intellectual discourse since the onset of the war in February 2022. At the centre of this debate is the punditry of John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent offensive realist who is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Chicago. This article argues that although Mearsheimer is indeed a realist, his offensive realism is but one of many different realist theories that can forward an explanation of the Ukraine War. Beyond the apparent hegemony of structural realism (the branch of realism to which Mearsheimer's offensive realism belongs), it is argued that classical and neoclassical realist frameworks can provide more nuanced and, ultimately, convincing arguments as to why Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to invade Ukraine. This is because both classical and neoclassical realism can incorporate insights from non-realist studies—such as the concepts of civilization and ontological security—and combine them into an overarching power politics framework. Although neither classical nor neoclassical realism is flawless in their explanations, they demonstrate that realism does not just have to be about international power structures but can offer multivariate accounts of why a state, like Russia, decided to act, such as invading Ukraine.

Keywords: realism, structural realism, classical realism, neoclassical realism, civilization, ontological security, Russia, Ukraine

Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 has elicited significant online debate as to the merits of 'realism' as a theoretical approach to International Relations (IR), with notable ongoing discussions occurring on social media platforms

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like Twitter (n.d.) and Reddit (n.d.).[1] On one side, many self-anointed realistxs in the academic and think tank worlds boldly assert that realism adequately explains (and even predicted) Russia's invasion of Ukraine, largely as a consequence of the haphazard US-backed expansion of NATO eastwards and the discrediting of Russia's status as a great power. Russia is seen as acting rationally to the changing material reality (Chotiner 2022; Klein 2022). On the other side, many non-realists have criticized so-called realist assumptions about NATO expansion and have offered more psychological or ideational explanations for Russian President Vladimir Putin's decision to go to war. Russia is seen not as a rational actor but as a complex and multifaceted entity (Burns 2022; Vilmer 2022). Unequivocally, at the heart of the debate around the efficacy of realism in IR is the scholarship and commentary of John J. Mearsheimer, a prominent offensive realist from the University of Chicago.

This article aims to add depth to the debate around the merits of realism in helping explain the Ukraine war. Firstly, it takes issue with the conflation of structural realism with realism in general, most notably the tendency to universalize the work of Mearsheimer whose offensive realism is but one of many different possible realist theories that could be used to examine the Ukraine war. Secondly, it is argued that while structural realist accounts of the Ukraine war might convincingly explain the broader trend in European security over the past three decades since the collapse of the Soviet Union, they are insufficient in explaining the intricacy of Putin's decision to invade Ukraine. Therefore, thirdly, it is argued that to offer a convincing explanation it is necessary to open the black box of Russia up and engage with more ideational and psychological-emotional factors, such as Putin's increasing use of civilizational rhetoric and the symbiotic waning of Russia's ontological security. Fourthly, although non-realists tend to discredit the ability of realist theories to bring in ideational, emotional and psychological factors, it is argued that both classical realism and type II neoclassical realism can offer convincing multivariate accounts of the Ukraine war.

1 Mearsheimer and the Hegemony of Structural Realism in Broad IR Discourses

Mearsheimer has undoubtedly become one of the most prominent—and polarizing—commentators of the Ukraine war and his realist underpinnings have been

1 Such debates have yet to been manifested in the literature, mostly due to the War being so recent and that journals and books tend to have a significant lag time when discussing current events.

a source of much debate. *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, and *Foreign Polics*—among many others—have all devoted significant column space to Mearsheimer since Russia decided to invade Ukraine. This is unsurprising as, over his long career, Mearsheimer has been one of the most outspoken and successful IR publicists (Mayer and Smith 2019). His theory of offensive realism has won him many admirers, particularly amongst think tankers, policy wonks, and the general populations of various countries (especially in the United States, Russia, and China). This is partly due to the parsimony of his offensive realism which is built on an assumption that states—especially great powers—are "concerned mainly with figuring out how to survive in a world where there is no agency to protect them from each other" and that "the [anarchic] international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals" (Mearsheimer 2001, 21) Thus, unlike another variant of structural realism, defensive realism, which argues that states seek security maximization, for Mearsheimer (2001, 34), the surest way a state can ensure its ultimate goal, survival, is by always power maximizing and hoping it can, one day, become the 'hegemon in the system'.

The amplification of Mearsheimer's offensive realism is partly because for a long stretch of the previous five decades, structural theories of realism have held not only a dominant position within the realist tradition of IR but also been one of the most popular theories of IR in general. The 'behavioural revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s—often mythologized as the second great debate of IR (Curtis and Koivisto 2010)—challenged the then dominant 'traditionalist' methodological approach to IR (mostly influenced by the methods of historians) by seeking to adopt a more scientific methodological approach based on the tenets of empiricism and positivism (Wæver 2009). Kenneth Waltz's (1979) 'Theory of International Politics', arguably the most influential IR work of all time (Wæver 2009), was the apogee of the movement to turn IR into a science as he offered a parsimonious scientific theory of IR based on the tenets of neoclassical economics. Thereafter, structural theories of realism came to dominate the 1980s IR discourse. Although structural realism has since faced heavy challenges from neoliberalism (Keohane 1989) and early constructivism (Wendt 1992) and, later, credibility issues with the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union (Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Vasquez 1997), its enduring influence in IR remains undeniable (Götz 2016; Waltz 2000).

The hegemony of structural realism within the realist tradition of IR has been adequately illustrated by both supporters and critics in the public intellectual discourse on Russia's invasion of Ukraine which has, often, presented a caricature of realism being, more or less, just structural realism. For example, Isaac Chotiner's (2022) article in *The New Yorker*, Edward Luce's (2022) article in the

Financial Times, and Ross Douthat's (2022) article in *The New York Times*, all present a reductive version of realism that privileges more structural variants over other forms. Even the article by Adam Tooze (2022) in *The New Statesman*, titled "John Mearsheimer and the dark origins of realism", which explicitly aimed to examine the origins of realist thought, fails to offer a serious appraisal of the tradition of realism. In critiquing Mearsheimer, Tooze (2022) concludes that "the realist model is grossly underspecified and fails to grasp the qualitative shift implied by the opening of hostilities".

Furthermore, prominent 'realist' academics, such as Stephen Walt (2022) and Paul Poast (2022), have also exhibited something of a bad habit of presenting realism as a monolithic theory or ideology which, unsurprisingly, also privileges structural variants of realism. However, importantly, realism is not a monolithic theory of IR but rather a broad church 'tradition' that encompasses many different theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ontological positions (Smith 2018). Although Hans J. Morgenthau has received some reference in the recent public intellectual discourse on the Ukraine war, along with George Kennan, there has been little effort to articulate the different underpinnings of their realist thought. Importantly, Morgenthau's (1948) and Kennan's (1954) 'political realist' scholarship predates the behavioural revolution and, therefore, more adequately fits within the 'classical' school of realism. Rather than structure, classical realists are typically more preoccupied with how human nature affects individuals and groups in foreign policy decision making (Smith and Yuchshenko 2021). Other 'classical realists' that have been mostly absent from the discourse include titans like E. H. Carr (1939) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1953) and contemporary voices like Sten Rynning (2011) and Patrick Porter (2016).

Another major branch of realism that has been often ignored in the discourse as well is the neoclassical variant of realism. Neoclassical realism is a much more recent strand of realism than either structural or classical realism and, since it was first coined in 1998 by Gideon Rose (1998), it has arguably grown to represent the most dynamic strand of realism at the current time. In essence, neoclassical realism is best thought of as a marriage of structural realism and classical realism, as it contends that while the structural distribution of power primarily drives state action (as the independent variable), internal (state-level) variables—such as decision makers' perceptions, state-society relations, and strategic culture (the list goes on and on)—play an intervening role in channelling and skewing the structural forces into policy outcomes (Smith 2018). Neoclassical realism has evolved significantly in the years since and now encompasses three distinct variants: a type I that seeks to explain abnormal state behaviour that goes against the structural incentives, a type II that seeks to explain foreign policy outcomes, and a newer type III that seeks to offer a grander, Waltz-style, theory of international

politics that includes both external and internal variables (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016).

Therefore, importantly, beyond using realism in a monolithic way, even grouping such an array of scholars as 'structural realist', 'classical realist' or 'neoclassical realist' does a disservice to the uniqueness and diversity of thought within the broad church of realism. Certainly, all realists have some common traits, such as a 'state-centric' view of IR, a belief that the international system is anarchic, and that states are (mostly) rational actors (Smith and Yuchshenko 2021). But, speaking of a single realist theory of IR is a complete misnomer and does a great disservice to the tradition. Mearsheimer is a structural realist, but his offensive realism theory is but one of many different structural realist theories. Structural realism is a branch of realism, but structural realism is but one of many different branches of realism. Such distinctions, although perhaps coming across as pedantic, are nevertheless important disclaimers that need to be made when one talks about what realism can elucidate about the Ukraine war.

2 Structural Realism and its Limits in Explaining the Ukraine War

Mearsheimer (2014) first gained significant attention in the context of Ukraine with his 2014 *Foreign Affairs* article, 'Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault', which argued that the 'United States and its European allies share most of the responsibility for the crisis'. For Mearsheimer (2014, 77–8), the root cause of Russia's decision to annex Crimea and destabilize the Donbas region was the expansion eastwards of NATO and, to a lesser extent, the European Union (EU)—along with its democracy promotion—which threatened Russia's "core strategic interests, a point Putin made emphatically and repeatedly". Mearsheimer (2014, 78) also warned that it "would be an even greater mistake" for the West to continue a policy of "attempting to turn Ukraine into a Western stronghold on Russia's border". This last point has led many to proclaim that Mearsheimer predicted the war in Ukraine (Douthat 2022) and, as such, his arguments and prognostications need to be taken seriously.

The structural realist explanation for the Ukraine war has some obvious strengths. As Barry Posen (2022) argues, "because structural realism emphasizes the anarchic nature of international relations, it suggests the war is unsurprising, a reminder that states still compete for security, sometimes violently, and the prudent will prepare for it with tools for self-preservation". According to Shiping Tang (2008, 453), "offensive realism holds that states should (and do) assume the worst over others' intentions. Offensive realism asserts that this worst-case

assumption over others' intentions is absolutely necessary because states are inherently aggressive (...) due to anarchy." Thus, the inherent pessimism of structural realists gave them a head start in considering the potential for Russia to escalate their action. Furthermore, as Posen expands upon, a strength of structural realism is its assumption that the conditions international anarchy creates for states trump other international variables such as norms, multilateralism, economic interdependence, and morality.

> Anarchy shapes and shoves because it permits the strong to try whatever they wish to try and incentivizes those in the way to react. Anarchy encourages competition, mainly in and about any means that contribute to security. (Posen 2022)

Indeed, the structural geopolitics of Eastern Europe became much more problematic after the expansion of the EU and NATO eastwards and, subsequently, elicited significant foreboding about what it meant for Ukraine (Dannreuther 1999; Friedman 1998). Ukraine, up until that point, had been pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy in which it tried to maintain positive relationships with both East and West (Smith 2020). This was quite a successful strategy in the 1990s and early 2000s but soon became largely untenable in the mid-2000s, a time when Ukraine found itself nestled in a geographic corridor (along with Belarus and Moldova) between Russia and the EU/NATO; also called the 'shared neighbourhood' (Averre 2010). Mearsheimer's argument that the West, through its 'misbegotten' strategies of institutional expansion and democracy promotion, provoked Russia into a strong response in Ukraine, such as the annexation of Crimea, is ostensibly compelling. The structural changes occurring in Russia's self-defined 'near abroad'—the former territories of the Soviet Union, save for the Baltic three, that are now independent states and, since 2004, NATO and EU members (Trenin 2006)—led it to undertake a short war in Georgia; a warning shot about the repercussions of seeking NATO membership (Jibladze 2007). At the time of the Russo-Georgia conflict, Ukraine too became a point of great discussion and warnings were raised about the West's interaction there (Kuzio 2009; Larrabee 2010).

Therefore, it is fair to say that structural realist fears about the changing power structure of Eastern Europe and how this would lead to greater instability and even conflict in Ukraine were quite prescient in the context of the onset of the Ukraine crisis in 2014. Furthermore, the structural realist warning of the threat of the West not taking on board the systemic feedback and altering its policies towards Ukraine might help explain why many were caught off guard by Russia's eventual decision to invade Ukraine in 2022. As Götz (2016, 302) contends, Russia's actions are "simply an attempt by a local great power to maintain a sphere of influence around its borders in the face of increasing external pressure" and that such an

action is not a uniquely Russian response but, rather, a typical response that any great power in such circumstances would pursue.

However, there are significant limits to what structural realism can explain in the context of Russia's actions toward Ukraine. One of the most popular strawman arguments used by critics to discredit structural realism is that it fails to explain specific outcomes. But, in reality, from Waltz onwards, most structural realists have consciously and carefully admitted that, at best, structural realist theories are most adept at explaining long geopolitical trends. Structural realist theories can tell us that a relationship or a region will come under great stress and that conflict will be likely, but they cannot tell us what this will look like. As Waltz (1979, 121) makes clear: "the theory does not tell us why state X made a certain move last Tuesday" and that one should not "mistake a theory of international politics for a theory of foreign policy."

Yet, many structural realists seemingly do try and explain foreign policy, especially when engaging in public intellectual pursuits. To this end, Mearsheimer has long, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrated the limits of his offensive realist theory in his public intellectual commentaries related to specific events and/or policies. Take, for example, his musings on the Ukraine crisis and, now, the Ukraine war. While his arguments as to why these events occurred undeniably stem from his structural realist underpinnings, to add nuance and weight to his arguments he typically has to reach for additional variables, particularly domestic ones, that his theory explicitly disregards. For instance, Mearsheimer blames the West's misunderstanding of how the expansion of NATO and the EU could affect Russia's power calculations on the propensity of liberalism in the West.

> Having won the debate in the United States, liberals had little difficulty convincing their European allies to support NATO enlargement. After all, given the EU's past achievements, Europeans were even more wedded than Americans to the idea that geopolitics no longer mattered and that an all-inclusive liberal order could maintain peace in Europe. (Mearsheimer 2014, 84)

However, a domestic factor such as liberalism dominating the foreign policy discourse in Western states should not matter to offensive realism because it is assumed that all states are rational and respond to external pressures in a typical way.

Ironically, if Mearsheimer was to follow his own offensive realist theory to the letter in his commentary, he would surely have to conclude that NATO and EU expansion made absolute sense for the United States and its European allies because this was an opportunity for them to maximize their power at the expense of Russia. After all, offensive realism assumes that states will seek to further their power advantage over adversaries at any opportunity they get. So, striking

while Russia was weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union was merely, under the lens of offensive realism, a rational response to the systemic incentive on offer. Thus, in offering his thoughts on Ukraine, Mearsheimer largely ceases to be an offensive realist and verges more towards the realm of neoclassical realism, especially the type I variant, as domestic factors become a necessity of his arguments.

3 Ideational and Psychological Factors in Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Structural realist scholarship has, undoubtedly, added value to the interpretation and explanation of Russia's actions in Ukraine. Dismissing it completely is unwise because it is clear that the distribution of power is, at least implicitly, an important component of the conflict. Furthermore, its pessimism about the altering geopolitics of Eastern Europe has proven to be prescient and it has offered some useful recommendations for foreign policy makers such as its central warning to the West about continuing to pursue the same policies in Ukraine. However, in only looking at structural factors, such theories overlook an array of important variables which are crucial to adding nuance and broadening one's understanding of why Russia has taken its actions against Ukraine, and why the United States (and the EU) has been acting against Russia.

Offensive realism's focus on survival in anarchy clearly is relevant; although it does not take 'survival' to include the emotional and ontological aspects. To this end, this article identifies two important, interlinked factors largely from outside the broad church of realism (stemming more from constructivism, cognitive IR, and research on emotions in IR), which are necessary to understanding Russia's policymaking: civilizational thinking and ontological security. Although the focus below is on Russia, the implication is that these arguments are equally valid in explaining the United States' and other Western countries' foreign policies.

The concept of civilization in the IR context is likely to evoke memories of Samuel Huntington's (1993, 22) 'clash of civilization' argument in which he argued "the fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future". However, Huntington's (1993, 23) conceptualization of a civilization as merely "a cultural entity" is quite essentialist as "civilizations are thought to display essential characteristics that are largely static or unchanging" (Hobson 2007, 149). A more layered and complex definition offered by A. Nuri Yurdusev (2003, 82–3) is that:

> civilizations are large-scale collective identifications (…) They are large-scale entities in two senses: in their spatial coverage and temporal extensions. Civilizations are wider and broader and more durable and long-lived than other collective identifications in human history (…) civilizations thus incorporate a multiplicity of other social collectivities or group identifications.

Importantly, compared to nation-states, civilizations “have their own ideas, lives and death, their own possibilities of self-expression” (Yurdusev 2003, 83). As Christopher Coker (2019, 25–6) surmises, “when we talk of a civilization, think of it, if you will, as a lifestyle start-up that becomes over time a business conglomerate (…) a constant ‘work in progress’”.

Civilizations are continually evolving in different directions. So, while in the West the concept most adequately denotes a loose ‘political community’, in places like China and Russia, the notion of civilization has evolved to be “coterminous with a state” (Coker 2019, 92). These emerging ‘civilizational states’ force the reconsideration of Patrick Thaddeus Jackson’s (2007, 47) argument that civilizations are not actors because there is “no front office or central bureaucracy”. Indeed, there is a significant body of literature on the emergence and consolidation of civilizational thinking in Russia under Putin (Coker 2019; Kazharski 2020; Tsygankov 2015; 2016a; Silvius 2015). The general line of this argument is that, over time, Putin has relied more and more on evoking the concept of Russia as a unique (non-European) civilization in order to justify his strongman rule at home and to reassert Russia as a significant great power globally. Putin’s use of civilizational ideas became most apparent when he returned as President of Russia in 2012. As Andrei Tsygankov (2016a, 237) argues, “partly in response to U.S. criticism, since Putin’s return to the presidency, Russia’s foreign policy has obtained an ideological justification” based on the idea that Russia is a “culturally distinct power”. Indeed, on his return, Putin drew heavily from the ideology of Eurasianism (Silvius 2015), stating in his 2012 inauguration speech that he aimed to develop “our vast expanses from the Baltic to the Pacific, and on our ability to become a leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia” (Putin 2012). As Mankoff (2014, 66) interpreted, Putin’s desire was for Russia to embark on a grand ‘national cause’ of making Eurasia “a cultural and geopolitical alternative to the West”; a project that would amount to little without Ukraine’s involvement (Smith 2016).

Such a description of Russia’s growing use of civilizational rhetoric undoubtedly conjures up the concept of nationalism and indeed, the two concepts are closely linked and have very similar results. At the centre of Russia’s civilizationism is the notion of the Russian nation and the growing evocation of Russia’s grandeur and uniqueness is in a way a form of nationalism (Malinova 2020), while the use of the Z symbol potentially represents something closer to fascism

(Kuzio 2022). However, this article chooses to characterize this within the framework of civilization because much of the rhetoric being pushed by Putin (and others close to the regime) does not simply concern the nation-state of the Russian Federation but, rather, a much broader concept of Russia. As Brubaker (2017, 1191) has observed with the growing populist movements in Northern and Western Europe, these movements are 'distinctive in construing the opposition between self and other not in narrowly national but in broader civilizational terms". While in the context of Northern and Western Europe, such civilizationism is built of the back of Islam as the 'other', in the case of Russia, the other is Europe and, more broadly, the 'West' (Malinova 2020).

Regarding Ukraine, it naturally became an integral part of Russia's civilizational turn because, in part, history is an inextricable aspect of civilizationism and Russia and Ukraine have a lot of 'history'. Indeed, intertwined with the increased use of civilizational thinking, Putin has increasingly used history to justify his decisions such as evoking the glory of the Soviet Union (especially its 'victory' in WWII) (Wood 2011), attempting to rehabilitate Stalin (Satter 2011), and using the post-Crimean war (1853–56) rebound of the Russian Empire—under the stewardship of Prince Gorchakov—as an allegory for Russia's contemporary trials and tribulations (Petro 2018). In the context of Ukraine, what started out as Russian action framed on the pretence that it wanted to "help the Ukrainian brothers to agree on how they should build and develop their country" (Lavrov 2014) has morphed into questioning the very future of Ukraine as an independent nation (Putin 2022a). Using history is dangerous as those invoking it often unleash forces that they cannot control (Smith and Mayer 2019). As Mayer (2018) argues, 'historical statecraft' involves the systematic and persistent application of representations of the past in order to frame and legitimize foreign policy as well as undertake the naturalization of a certain image or role that a country occupies in world history. But, states that mobilize historical memory run the risk of actually doing "self-inflicted harm to the object of defence in the very effort to defend it" (Mälksoo 2021, 489). Therefore, Russia's use of history to justify its increasingly bellicose actions against Ukraine may be an example of the 'trap of history' (Smith and Mayer 2019).

Although civilizationism and its accompanying historical statecraft is an important aspect of trying to understand Russia's actions in Ukraine, the question of why civilizationism is such an attractive option for authoritarian regimes like Russia, Turkey and China is an important question to consider. To this end, an assertion of civilization by a state is closely linked with the pursuit of ontological security—this is particularly the case in 'civilizational states' that are not part of so-called Western civilization but are still, in some aspects, enveloped and threatened by it (Kavalski 2019). The term ontological security was originally

coined by the psychologist R.D. Laing (1960, 41–2) in his work with schizophrenic patients and used to denote patients whose "identity and autonomy are never in question". An ontologically insecure patient, therefore, would typically "feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world so that his identity and autonomy are always in question" (Laing 1960, 42). The term's popularity, however, largely stems from the work of the Sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984, 357), who used it more broadly to refer to an individual's "confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity".

Giddens research was not concerned with IR, so the idea was migrated into IR scholarship by researchers such as Jennifer Mitzen (2006) and Brent Steele (2008). Mitzen (2006, 351–52) argues that while states are not individuals and that their behaviour is "subject to different logics", states still seek a kind of ontological security because they are, in a basic sense, a collection of individuals and "losing a sense of state distinctiveness would threaten the ontological security of its members". Therefore, in the scope of IR, "ontological security, as opposed to security as survival, is security as being" (Steele 2008, 51). The psychological-emotional aspects of security as being are, therefore, crucial. Insecurity arises when there is a rupture in the continuity and order that defines the 'self'. This is because asserting an ontology and having others recognize it is an integral human drive. Collectively, all social entities desire this, too. In the context of Russia, Kazharski (2020, 24) argues that establishment-led civilizational discourses that coherently intertwine critical points of history are an attempt to provide ontological security as they aim to "construct unity across ideological, spatial, and societal cleavages".

The troubling aspect is that when acute ontological insecurity takes hold, finding ontological security tends to overtake material security as the most pressing national interest of the afflicted state (Steele 2008). Ukraine's position within Russia's ontology is already implicitly identifiable in the civilizational rhetoric briefly examined earlier (Pieper 2020). Under an ontological security framework, the Kremlin perceives that the West's apparent imposition of its social identity on Ukraine (and potentially, via a kind of normative osmosis, on Russia too) not only poses a tangible security threat to Russia but, also, a deeper ontological threat. It challenges Russia's sense that Russian identity should be socially valued, prioritized, and deemed positive, if not superior to the West, especially in Russia and its self-defined 'near abroad'. Therefore, Ukraine has become a "make-or-break national interest" for Russia (Smith 2017a), which helps, in part, explain Russia's inability to accommodate Western calls for dialogue or cooperation to avert a war scenario.

Therefore, if one subscribes to the idea that Russia's increasing use of civilizational thinking (and Ukraine's crucial part to play in this) is about asserting ontological security and related psychological-emotional instincts, then Putin's decision to unleash a war against Ukraine starts to make more sense than it simply being about power and Western encroachment, and survival in a more physical sense of the word, as structural realist approaches simply assume. Acts like the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, the intervention in Syria in 2015, and, perhaps, now the invasion of Ukraine, all of which went against the wishes of the Unites States-led 'West' (and its ontological security, which is bound-up in the same encroachment), are in some ways an assertion of ontological security; an assertion of an ideology of Russia as a great power and a great civilization that can act on its own, distinct from the control and aspirations of the West.

4 Classical and Neoclassical Realist Accounts of the Ukraine War

Whereas structural realist accounts of the Ukraine war omit crucial ideational and psychological factors, contrariwise, looking specifically at the role of ideational and psychological factors like civilizationism and ontological security should not be done at the expense of omitting the similarly crucial role underlying power dynamics have played. This article argues that other realist theories, such as classical realism and type II neoclassical realism, can coherently marry material, ideational, and psychological factors into an overarching power politics framework which can offer useful and convincing realist explanations for the Ukraine war.

4.1 Classical Realism

Clearly, like structural realism, classical realism believes that the international system is anarchic, and states are its principal units. It also retains offensive realism's focus on power politics, seeing power as the immediate goal of politics whether in a domestic setting or the international arena (Morgenthau 1948, 13). Unlike the former, classical realism sees the international system as characterized by contingency as well as anarchy, rather than conforming to predictable patterns, and as just one of the factors. Others require examination—including the 'lust for power' and related psychological-emotional drives—when evaluating the state's foreign policy. Thus, classical realists tend to be more concerned with the first image (the individual) and second image (the state) evaluations than the strict

third image studies of structural realism. Although structural realism is often characterized as being primarily concerned with the inherent fear of states, fear is not the only relevant emotion and survival, though basic, is not enough to service the social entity's (i.e., the state's) ontological needs. Russia and the United States are striving to assert their visions of positive social identity and the ideal social reality over the other. Rather than survival, for classical realism what is interesting politically is this struggle over the determination of wills and meanings and the fulfilment of vital psychological-emotional desires. In making these points, the classical realism theoretical approach also casts doubt on offensive realism's assumption that the state is rational.

In his realist depiction of politics as power-orientated and antagonistic, Morgenthau has common ground with another prominent theorist of his day, Carl Schmitt. The latter, however, goes on to define politics as a separate social sphere of enmity between 'friend versus foe' (Scheuerman 2009, 32–5). Here, Morgenthau breaks with him (eventually forcing Schmitt to change positions), maintaining that any conceivable sphere of activity or set of actors can take on a political coloration or posture (Scheuerman 2009, 32–5). Differences of opinion routinely occur in domestic and international affairs. Morgenthau argues that 'the political' is characterized by intense struggle or competition. States and other social entities vie intensely for power to secure their 'interests', which can be any symbolic object, and to assert or impose their vision of social reality (Williams 2005, 110, 114–15).

Success in this struggle enables states to confirm value and position and to achieve self-realization. Position can refer to 'status', which is ranking according to valued attributes in a social hierarchy (Larson, Paul, and Wohlforth 2014, 7). However, in contrast with status theorists, Morgenthau sees his preferred term for social standing and recognition, 'prestige', as directly linked to psychological sensations and human emotions. Morgenthau sees prestige not just as affirming the sustenance of power, but also and in addition as a foreign policy with a strong emotional pull that can be pursued (and easily abused) for its own sake; in short, for the pleasure it may bring leaders and, vicariously, publics (Morgenthau 1948, 55–6). This is important for the discussion of the Ukraine crisis, for as argued below, it is not Ukraine over which Russia and the United States (and the EU) are struggling; rather, their battle of wills is linked to the righteous satisfaction they expect to feel once their view of Ukraine's future is socially confirmed and—at least tacitly—accepted by the other.

Classical realism's approach to international politics and foreign policy revolves around the 'lust for power' (*animus dominandi*), which has a survival aspect and an assertion aspect. Survival is states' key aim under offensive realism, but arguably the assertion aspect says more about the substance of power

politics. "The desire for power", argues Morgenthau (1947, 165), "concerns itself not with the individual's survival but with his position among his fellows once his survival has been secured". The United States and Russia are echoing this sentiment, asserting through and on Ukraine competing visions of social order. "Russia's choice of war" is "a direct challenge to the rule-based international order established since the end of World War Two", President Joseph Biden (2022) declared in March 2022. "They seem to believe that the dominance of the West in global politics and the economy is an unchanging, eternal value", President Vladimir Putin (2022b) observed that June, but "Nothing lasts forever". The United States is determined to show that the West's institutions and values are not cresting or being contained; Russia's ontological security, by contrast, depends on upholding the view that Ukraine is where its will prevails. This struggle became so intense it finally split into the military sphere.

Political problems, including conflicts, are thus projections of human political will on a social plane, Morgenthau argues. Jack Donnelly claims that power politics is the heart of international relations because of international anarchy. Morgenthau's human nature emphasis is unnecessary, he argues, since the permissive anarchic environment would reward diffident and competitive states anyway (Donnelly 2004, 48–50). However, this fails to explain how it is that social entities feel compelled to compete and assert in the first place. Classical realism offers an answer. It holds that the drive to assert one's value and priority is innate; in other words, it is part of social entities before they meet anarchy for the first time (Dawson 2022). Individuals cannot normally indulge their lust for power in domestic society. Morgenthau and Niebuhr regard the emotional need for power as the product of social and historical contexts that socially construct and cross-connect individuals, substate regions, states, and other even larger communities in a variety of layered attachments. They see the will to power as emotionally creative, and indeterminant and adaptable in terms of fulfilment and location of expression. According to Ross (2013, 275, 285–86), "the synthesis of individual emotion into corporate political allegiance can also be regarded as a peculiar product of emotional creativity" that groups individual citizens, foreign policy decision makers, and the state together.

Morgenthau would likely say that Mearsheimer and other realists emphasizing structural factors misread state foreign policy when they assume rationality is behind it. Offensive realism assumes that states are rational actors. The rational actor model suggests that foreign policy makers employ purposive action, consistent preferences, and utility maximization to yield the best decisions, if not necessarily optimal outcomes (Mintz and DeRouen Jr 2010, 37–8). Deviations are so common and systematic in state foreign policy practice that the entire model has been questioned (Cashman 2013, 66), even though it remains in use.

Classical realism recognizes the centrality of psychological-emotional factors to foreign policy decisions. This opens another window to the Ukraine case. Morgenthau, for example, argues that 'passions' are the source of politics, and that some people have enormous power drives that carry into foreign policy through the justification of their psychological-emotional compulsions in terms of larger, even transcendental, symbolic goods (Lang 2004, 47, 65, 109–10). The justifications by each side in the Ukraine war are cases in point. Each side is making rational but also distinctly emotional appeals to collective attachments and communities, the survival of which do not appear to be really threatened: defence of 'the rules-based order' or 'European Dream' in the West's framing; and 'our historical future as a nation' or 'our traditional values' in Russia's (Biden 2022; Fisher 2022).

Recent IR scholarship, for example by Jonathan Mercer (2010, 5–7), has shown that individuals and groups such as states cannot avoid using emotion, that rationality requires emotion, and that IR concepts such as power, nationalism, and status would make no sense (or be completely different) without their emotional-psychological aspects. Europe and the United States' prizing of democracy and liberty, and Russia's conception of the grandeur of its distinct civilization and great power role, emotional beliefs that cut to the heart of their competitive social assertions about Ukraine's future, would be meaningless without the emotion embedded in them (Dawson and Smith 2022). Emotional beliefs, rationality and cognition form an assimilation mechanism, argues Mercer (2010, 8), that is essential to human decision making. Mearsheimer, as noted above, basically admits that structural incentives stemming from anarchy are not sufficient to explain the Ukraine crisis. Neither is rationality. Ontological longings linked to emotional-psychological need for self-realization are inseparable from the conduct of Russia and United States foreign policy with respect to the case.

Morgenthau (1948, 17) says that "(t)he drives to live, to propagate, and to dominate are common to all" and the creation of their societies. That said, he also believes it is a mistake to allow foreign policy to become unrestrained 'nationalistic universalism' in which states strive to impose their values, morals, and political-economic systems on the rest of the world (Little 2007, 153–54). Such an ideological approach tends to obscure geopolitical realities and the contours of the national interest. Morgenthau's critique of the Vietnam War in the 1960s, which Washington, D.C. framed as part of a global campaign against communism, is made in just these terms. He decries the division of the world into 'forces of freedom' bolstered by the United States and 'forces of authoritarianism' answering the Soviet Union (Klusmeyer 2016, 64). However, both the United States and Russia once again appear to be over-indulging in classical realism's 'lust for power'. To take the first as example, President Joe Biden, *The New York Times*

argues, "has returned repeatedly to the idea of 'democracy versus autocracy' as an organizing principle for American foreign policy" (The Editorial Board 2022).

4.2 Neoclassical Realism

This article chooses to emphasize type II neoclassical realism as a viable realist framework for assessing Russia's actions against Ukraine. As stated earlier, type II neoclassical realism is predominately interested in producing a rich explanation for why a state undertook a specific foreign policy. Therefore, type II neoclassical realism is probably best thought of as a toolkit to undertake foreign policy analysis rather than as an explicit IR theory. It is more problem-driven than either structural or classical realism as it entails a researcher develop a unique framework to help understand and explain a central problem—in this case, Russia's decision to invade Ukraine.

Like structural realism, a type II neoclassical realism explanation begins with the structural geopolitical factors as to why Russia's actions towards Ukraine have significantly altered over the years. In a basic sense, it would agree with Mearsheimer and other structural realists that the expansion eastwards of the EU and NATO irrevocably changed Russia's power calculations (Smith 2016). However, whereas structural realism is more concerned with global power trends—in this case, the gradual waning of the United States' hegemony and the resurgence of Russia under Putin—neoclassical realism's operationalization of the international distribution of power as the independent variable is more flexible (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Forgoing the 'scientific' hubris of structural realism, neoclassical realism holds that the international system cannot be adequately quantified and that, rather, it is subjectively interpreted and judged by foreign policy decision makers leading to inconsistencies and disputation between different entities (Schweller 2004).

Furthermore, scholarship by Wivel and Mouritzen (2012) and Smith (2016) has sought to include the regional distribution of power as important systemic stimuli (more than global power trends) in understanding Russia's power calculations and actions, in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine respectively. Zooming in on the regional level adds depth to the role of systemic stimuli because, as Buzan and Wæver (2003, 46) note, regional settings tend to be more unstable because security threats minimise symbiotically with distance: "insecurity is often associated with proximity". Subsequently, in the context of Russia's actions against Ukraine, the changing power dynamics of Eastern Europe brought about by the expansion of NATO and the EU—coupled with Russia's new assertiveness—could be best characterized as a transition to a regional setting with a bipolar distribution of power between Russia and the West. Add in that there was no agreed security

architecture, and such changing regional power dynamics engineered a regional situation naturally conducive to competition and conflict (Smith 2016).

However, neoclassical realism holds that because a state's foreign policies are rarely "objectively 'efficient' or predictable" when solely based on an "objective assessment of relative power" whether at the international or regional level, it is necessary to open the black box of a state and bring in domestic variables (Taliaferro 2006, 213). One of the most cited weaknesses of neoclassical realism is that there is no agreement as to what domestic variables should be included nor how they explicitly interact with the independent variable (systemic stimuli). Narizny (2017, 164) argues that neoclassical realism often comes unstuck because "domestic politics follows a different logic from that of international politics, even when systemic pressures are extreme". Thus, for Narizny and others (Rathbun 2008; Tang 2009), domestic variables (tightly wedded to the ontological starting point of structural realism) should only be engaged with in a very limited way or else the researcher runs the risk of losing their realist stripes and becoming *ad hoc*.

Indeed, previous neoclassical realist studies that have explicitly looked at Russia's foreign policy have operationalized different domestic variables, such as the domestic foreign policy making process (Smith 2016), status and prestige (Kropatcheva 2012), the special role of Vladimir Putin (Romanova and Pavlova 2012), and ideology (Diesen 2016). These are rich studies which offer interesting food for thought with regards Russia's foreign policy outcomes. Yet, if we accept that numerous domestic variables are important to understanding Russia's foreign policy outcomes, we must also accept that type II neoclassical realism is deficient in the sense that it cannot offer a universal hierarchy of what variables are most important. This is something the researcher must do themselves in their specific framework design – all of the previously cited studies use, in some cases vastly, different neoclassical realist frameworks. Therefore, in doing so, charges of *ad hocness* have some merit. However, given the problem-driven aims of type II neoclassical realism, such corner cutting is seen as acceptable.

Taking inspiration from the aforementioned non-realist works on Russia, identity and perceptions are two useful variables which can be operationalized within a type II neoclassical realist framework to add further insight into the logic of Russia's decision making. Of course, combining ideational and psychological variables within a realist framework is a lightning rod for significant criticism to the point where it likely engenders a situation where "epistemology fundamentally contradicts ontology" (Kratochwil and Ruggie 1986, 764). However, most type II neoclassical realist studies have embraced ontological and epistemological eclecticism (Juneau 2010) which has helped these studies avoid the "procrustean constraints on inquiry" that inhibits other theoretical frameworks

(Haas and Haas 2002, 547). Therefore, like classical realism, type II neoclassical realism is not concerned with asserting a scientific theory of IR, so such contradictions and incongruities are acceptable as long as it performs a pragmatic service: namely the offering of a theoretically informed analytical framework which can shed light on an identified problem. This is often undertaken through using the method of process tracing—especially its 'outcome explanation' type—which allows the researcher to empirically identify a loose causal mechanism between the independent, intervening, and dependent variables to explain a foreign policy outcome (Smith 2019). Therefore, contradictions aside, in the scope of a type II neoclassical realist framework, identity and perceptions fit in as intervening variables which work—along with other potential domestic factors—to "channel, mediate and (re)direct" systemic pressures into unique foreign policy outcomes (Schweller 2004, 164).

Identity—namely, the values, beliefs, norms and assumptions that a state prioritizes for its international role—influences foreign policy decisions through shaping and vetting a state's foreign policy choices. In other words, identity acts as a kind of cognitive framework for decision makers; a filter which makes sense of the international system and how an entity should act appropriately within it. In the context of Russia's action towards Ukraine, the identity discourses associated with its civilizational turn are important because they have worked to narrow the options available to Russia in responding to the changing geopolitical situation. Importantly, as Chafetz, Frankel, and Spirtaz (1999, XII) argue, "international actors tend to change their concepts about their roles only reluctantly and with difficulty", which impedes their ability to understand and interact with the alternative role identities of other actors in the international system. This can help explain why Russia has been stuck on a kind of path dependence of enduring great power status with a civilizational turn and unable to view the EU and NATO as anything other than opponents and competitors as regards to Ukraine.

Foreign policy decision makers—whether leaders, politicians, military personnel, or bureaucrats—make decisions that are based on their perceptions and calculations of relative power and other states' interests and motivations. However, unlike identity, perceptions are not constrictive but rather can skew the options available to a state, rightly or wrongly. Indeed, given that a state's perceptions stem from collective cognition, they are understandably prone to human error. Jervis (1988, 699) observed that misperceptions are common in foreign policy decision making, arguing that "errors are inevitable" when technological, organizational, psychological and social factors are accounted for". In the context of Russia's action against Ukraine, with Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, the "great power pragmatism" (Tsygankov 2016b) that characterized his

earlier terms mutated into a "new survival paradigm", which led Russia's foreign policy decision makers toward a basic zero-sum logic for its foreign policies (Smith 2017b). To this end, Russia clearly perceived having Ukraine as part of its sphere of privileged interest as a vital and unmalleable foreign policy goal and after initial efforts failed to achieve this, war became a rational option.

Although identity and perceptions are dynamic and continuously influence and inform each other, a crude relationship between the two can be sketched for the purposes of a neoclassical realist framework. Within the foreign policymaking process of states, it is argued that identity adds parameters of appropriate behaviour from which perceptions of systemic stimuli inform consequential policy recommendations. Policy recommendations then pass through the official decision making channels leading to an agreed decision, all of which occurs in a dynamic setting with continuous feedback loops (Smith 2017b). At the heart of the identity-perceptions nexus is ontological security and, in this case, Russia's desire to find an outcome which confirms and reinforces their conceptions of ontology.

When all the variables of the type II neoclassical realist framework are combined an argument as to why Russia embarked on such foreign policy choices can be forwarded. Firstly, the argument must start with the independent variable (systemic stimuli) which is assumed by neoclassical realism as the core source of Russia's decision making. The key systemic stimulus, as mentioned earlier, was the changing regional geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe brought about by NATO/EU expansion and the resurgence of Russia in its 'near abroad'. However, thereafter, the systemic pressures were further mediated and shaped by the interaction of Russia's narrowing identity – in the shape of its civilizational-turn—and skewing perceptions—in the shape of its growing survivalism. In conjunction, these variables made Russia's foreign policy decision making in the context of Ukraine pessimistic and zero-sum, ruling out any opportunity for compromise and raising the potential for more conflict. Of course, given that neoclassical realism remains structurally driven, Russia's policies are unlikely to significantly change until there are substantial shifts in the geopolitical structure of Eastern Europe, such as the initial task of finding an agreeable security architecture.

5 Conclusion

The point of this article was to illustrate how structural realists, like Mearsheimer, can offer basic—largely common-sense—insights into why Russia's invaded Ukraine but, invariably, these theorists are incapable of offering a deeper and

more convincing explanation. However, it is important not to conflate structural realism with realism in general—a bad habit of both journalists and scholars in the public intellectual discourse on the war in Ukraine. As was demonstrated, realism is more than just the structural variant and much of the public intellectual discourse belies the richness of realism. While structural realist accounts ostensibly predicted the destabilizing effect of the changing geopolitical situation, they are unable to offer any intricacy as to why Russia chose to invade Ukraine when it did. Consequently, to expand the scope of Russia's decision making, two key, interlinked arguments from non-realist studies were engaged: civilizational thinking and ontological security. Although structural realism is theoretically incapable of incorporating such ideas, it was shown that other variants of realism—namely classical realism and neoclassical realism—are adept and can help demonstrate more convincing realist arguments for explaining Russia's actions against Ukraine.

Classical realism shows that social entities—the focus here has been on Russia—have an ontological need to see their requirements for self-flourishing affirmed. The psychological-emotional substance of this need is often overlooked by offensive realism accounts. Classical realism concentrates on power politics, but is open to social constructions, such as identity; psychological-emotional beliefs, such as nationalism, civilizationism, and status/prestige; and emotions, including but not limited to fear. Morgenthau's theorizing relies on practitioners to exercise good judgment, and arguably he would have faulted Russia's (and the United States') foreign policy decision making on Ukraine for excessively indulging in the assertion side of 'lust for power'. His realism is prescriptive and enshrines prudence (moderation) as the supreme virtue, equally for the scholar and the foreign policy decision maker (Barkin 2009, 238). Therefore, classical realists would agree that Mearsheimer's theorizing (as distinct from his punditry) on survival in anarchy is a piece to the Ukraine puzzle, but only a piece and not the most valuable.

Neoclassical realism, in this case, its type II variant, is able to take the useful structural observations of structural realists and add more by incorporating domestic variables. Although type II neoclassical realism requires significant *ad hoc* input by the researcher, when used in a problem-driven way it can produce a rich realist analysis of a given international political event or situation. In the context of the war in Ukraine and the need to bring in the concepts of civilization and ontological security, a type II neoclassical realist framework that operationalizes identity and perceptions can help produce a multivariate explanation for why Russia has undertaken the action it has against Ukraine. The changing geopolitical situation in Eastern Europe, combined with the narrowing role of Russia's changing identity—as part of its civilizational turn—and the

skewing nature of its changing threat perceptions—the adoption of a kind of zero-sum survivalism—produced a situation where Ukraine was elevated to an existential national interest for the Kremlin. Thus, neoclassical realism in this way takes Mearsheimer's basic observation and attempts to add significant richness to it.

While structural realists will likely point out that both the classical and neoclassical realist frameworks sketched out here cannot claim the same scientific verifiability as their structural realist frameworks, such positivistic underpinnings are a relic of the behavioural revolution and should be confined to the sands of time. Indeed, neither classical realism nor type II neoclassical realism is a strict theory of IR; they are more theoretically informed analytical frameworks. But, embracing humbler ontological and epistemological positions is something which could not only improve realist thought by expanding its aim and scope but also by opening up realism to influence from other IR traditions, such as ideational variables cultivated by constructivism (Barkin 2010; Rynning 2011; Smith 2014). To this end, both classical and neoclassical realism convincingly demonstrate the potential to incorporate newer ideas into realist theoretical frameworks.

Ultimately, like it or not, great power competition is back at the forefront of international politics and, because of this, realism will remain one of the dominant strands of IR moving forward. However, while structural realists may still grab the headlines in the public discourse when major international events like the war in Ukraine occur, it is important that simple caricatures that conflate structural realism with realism in general are challenged and that more classical and neoclassical realist frameworks are developed and forwarded to offer compelling explanations. Because, once again, for the record: there is not a single realist theory of IR, but numerous realist theories. And although structural realism has had a long period in the sun, the war in Ukraine demonstrates that it is time to move on to greener pastures elsewhere within the tradition of realism.

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