



Realism Versus Idealism- A Comparative Analysis of the Dominant Ideology in the Russia-Ukraine-Conflict

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ABSTRACT

The Russia-Ukraine war has emerged as one of the most significant conflicts of the twenty-first century, garnering widespread attention from political analysts and scholars of international relations who are assessing the reasons for the conflict and also analysing the future course of the war. The conflict has generated significant debates regarding the sovereignty and integrity of a state, security and role of international organization such as United Nations and whether it is still relevant in the present scenario. This paper examines the conflict through the theoretical lens of the theory of Realism and Idealism in International Relations. Realism on one hand, emphasizes power politics, national interests and pursuit of strategic interests by a state while Idealism emphasizes on collective security, diplomacy and dialogue to maintain international peace and harmony among the nations.

A comparative analytical approach is applied in the study to evaluate how both the theories explain the reasons and the consequences of the conflict. Realism evaluates the conflict in terms of power politics and pursuit of strategic interests by the nation for the fulfilment of its national interests. From this perspective, Russia actions can be analysed as an attempt on its part to preserve and secure its national security and protect its strategic national interests in the face of perceived external threat by the expansion of NATO into the Eastern Europe and including Ukraine as its member.

In contrast, Idealism emphasizes the principles of international peace and stresses on the importance of dialogue and diplomacy for maintaining peace and stability. It also emphasizes on the utility of international organizations for maintaining peace and security. During the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict these principles were reflected as the United Nations repeatedly condemned Russia's act of violation and aggression but Russia being a permanent member at the United Nations Security Council, these attempts by United Nations proved to be futile.

The following study presents the notion that both realism and idealism offer valuable insights into the conflict, though Realism tends to provide a stronger and viable explanation of the strategic motives behind the state actions while Idealism highlights the importance of international institutions, diplomacy and legal norms. The paper concludes that an elaborate understanding of the conflict requires consideration of both perspectives.

INTRODUCTION



The Russia-Ukraine war, which escalated into full scale conflict in February 2022, has been widely recognized and considered as the worst geopolitical catastrophe of the 21st century which has plunged Europe into worst security crisis since World War II. Since its outbreak, the war has entered its fourth year with no significant progress being achieved on various diplomatic negotiations mediated by actors like United States, Turkey and various European countries.

After the Cold War ended with the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, there was a restructuring of the European security architecture. The dissolution of Soviet Union in 1991 ended the bipolarity that had influenced European balance decades and efforts were made to establish a rule-based order which was based on institutions like NATO, EU (European Union) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). NATO which was formed during Cold War as a military alliance of US to curb Soviet expansion and influence continued to exist after 1991 and it expanded its membership eastward to include countries that were former members of Warsaw Pact, an alliance which was formed by the Soviet Union. This expansion was justified by the West to promote democracy and security in Eastern Europe; it inculcated strategic anxieties within Russia. Moscow perceived this expansion as a threat to its strategic interest and as an effort to decrease Russia's influence in the region. This laid the foundation for a deep mistrust and a sense of insecurity between Russia and the West.

The Russia-Ukraine conflict should be understood as a process that has evolved over the years instead of the sudden attack by Russia in 2022. During the post-Soviet transition, Ukraine emerged as sovereign state that wanted to maintain closer ties with the West while maintaining historic and cultural ties with Russia. Tensions between Russia and Ukraine started to intensify since 2014 when Ukraine's pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich was removed as in 2013, he suspended EU-Ukraine Association Agreement as he wanted closer ties with Russia instead of Europe. This led to protests by people demanding closer integration with Europe and in 2014 Viktor fled to Europe.

Moscow viewed this regime change as a Western backed coup that threatened its interests. Russian military following this took control of Crimea as it has large ethnic Russian majority in the region. After this conflict in Donbas also erupted as this region hosts large Russian-speaking population, and they feared that after the removal of Yanukovich they would lose their cultural and linguistic rights. These protests were militarily, politically and logistically supported by Russia. The conflict escalated drastically in February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine and since then Russia has captured 20% of the Ukrainian territory including the region of Donbas and Russia has explicitly stated that it will not return the captured territories to Ukraine.

The war apart from highlighting the military and humanitarian consequences, has stirred up debate among various scholars within the domain of international relations regarding the nature of international system which is characterized by realists as anarchic in nature as states are driven by power, domination and preserving their security (Waltz, 1979). The States have to prioritize and fulfil their National Interest and if they sense a threat to their strategic



interests, they even go to the extent of waging a war against the country that threatens its interest. In such circumstances, conflict becomes inevitable.

The present Russia-Ukraine conflict strengthens this view as when Putin perceived Ukraine's membership to NATO as a threat to his country's survival and security so he invaded the country without further delay. Despite numerous sanctions imposed by the Western countries on Russia for its actions in Ukraine, Russia is firm on its stance that it will not stop the war unless it eliminates the threat for which it initiated the conflict that is to prevent from Ukraine joining NATO and thus to eliminate NATO's influence in Eastern Europe.

The relevance of moral and legal norms in global affairs has also come under scrutiny as States do not consider them to be of importance or of utility when they are motivated by power, influence and domination. These moral and legal norms are undermined by such states seeking power and global or regional dominance. This view is evident from the Russia-Ukraine conflict as Russia undermined International Law and violated the sovereignty of Ukraine by invading the country as Russia considers the sovereignty of Ukraine secondary to its interests which are of primary and utmost importance to it and to protect it, Russia went to the extent of waging war against Ukraine (UN Charter, 1945).

The credibility of International Institutions like the United Nations has also been subjected to serious scrutiny, with the relevance of the organization being questioned by the people, as the United Nations apart from issuing statements to condemn the Russia-Ukraine conflict has failed to stop Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. The United Nations which was formed on the idea of promoting peace and preventing war, has failed to achieve the aims for which it came into existence and in current scenario it is being considered a futile organization.

The limited usefulness of UN during the conflict has raised questions regarding the collective security mechanisms. (UNGA ,2022)

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has been widely examined as a case study for assessing the continued relevance of contradictory theories of International Relations that is Realism and Idealism. According to Realism, states are primary actors. They are sovereign and rational actors and in its interaction with other states each state will try to promote its own "interest". The foremost interest of each state is its own security and expansion. (Mearsheimer,2014)

The International Relations is anarchic in nature as there is no central authority to govern international relations among these sovereign states and this condition "frees" to act towards its self-interest. Control over material resources is fundamental to these states as it adds to the coercive capacity of the state against its counterpart.

Idealism, on the other hand, emphasizes that states are not only the primary actors as the International Institutions are of significant importance. Idealists emphasize that human nature is inherently good and they prioritize peace above the National Interest of the country. They believe that conflict is not inevitable as through cooperation, diplomacy and negotiations conflicts can be resolved (Keohane,1984) It emphasizes on cooperation and collective security.

Through Russia-Ukraine conflict, these contrasting ideologies have been brought into question to assess which ideology has influenced the conflict.



Scholars like John Mearsheimer, the proponent of Realist theory have frequently interpreted Russia's conduct through Realist perspective as Russia had concerns related to Ukraine's potential membership of NATO and the subsequent NATO expansion into east which Russia considered as an "existential threat" for itself and Russia chose to respond militarily to this threat by launching a full-scale invasion in Ukraine. John Mearsheimer believes that "Ukraine crisis is the West's fault." (Mearsheimer,2019) This stance of John Mearsheimer is fuelled by the belief that West tried to extend its influence into Eastern Europe, which Russia considered its sphere of influence, by trying to include Ukraine into NATO and since Russia considered this as a threat to its strategic interest it waged a war against Ukraine.

In this context, an attempt has been made in the following study to examine which ideology between Realism and Idealism dominated the conflict and has been influential in shaping the behaviour of countries involved in the conflict. The conflict is assessed within the framework and perspectives of both the ideologies so that a clear understanding is reached by the end of study to draw valid inferences regarding which ideology dominates the war and the reasons for the dominance is also analysed.

The conflict is assessed from the perspectives of both the ideology as certain elements of both Realism and Idealism were present in shaping the conflict although the degree of effectiveness varied, and thus by the end of study conclusion is reached as to which ideology had a significant role to play in shaping the conflict.

Through such an analysis, a clear understanding can be achieved regarding how the classical international theories shape contemporary international conflicts. This demonstrates that these ideologies are not just restricted to learning but also understanding their application when conflicts like Russia-Ukraine happen.

LITERATURE REVIEW

John Mearsheimer's works *Why the Ukraine Crisis is the West's fault* presents the realist explanation of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. He argues that primary reason for the crisis was not Russia's motive of expansionism but policies pursued by the Western countries after the Cold War. He argues that the prospect of NATO's eastward expansion was perceived by Russia as a direct threat to its strategic and national interests.

The book emphasizes that great powers are highly sensitive and cautious of the developments in their neighbouring countries, especially when those developments threaten their strategic interest and security, and so they can react strongly when faced with such situations in geopolitics. He argues that Russia's actions should be understood within the broader framework of power politics and national security rather than on ideological and moral grounds.

The book contributes significantly to the school of international thought by highlighting the role of strategic interests and security concerns in geopolitics and how they shape the behaviour of the state. It challenges liberal interpretations that emphasize democracy and role of international institutions in ensuring peace, stability and security.

The book has attracted criticism as well for its one-sided perspective. Many scholars argue that it undermines the territorial sovereignty and integrity of Ukraine and justifies the action



of Russia under the garb of national security and national interests. Critics further debate that it places responsibility on the West for inciting the conflict but does not pay heed to Russia's actions and its decisions. A conflict cannot be analysed from the perspective of one country only.

Overall, Mearsheimer's work provides an important and viable perspective and interpretation for the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It remains a widely discussed contribution and work for analysing the conflict and to debate on international security and importance of strategic and national interests.

RESEARCH GAP

Most studies either focus on the realist interpretations of the conflict that is Russia's security concerns or they focus on the liberal interpretations of the conflict that is importance of international institutions and norms for ensuring peace and security. There is limited availability of any research that comprehensively analyses both the perspectives to critically analyse the conflict.

Therefore, the following study seeks to analyse this war comprehensively by evaluating both the perspectives that is Realism and Liberal theories of the International Relations.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

In this section, theory of Realism and Idealism is explained in order to provide an understanding of these ideologies before understanding them in the framework of Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Theory of Realism-

Realism is the foundational theory of International Relations which emphasize that power and self-interest influence the behaviour of the state. (Morgenthau,1948). It posits that International System is anarchic in nature as there is no central authority to regulate the behaviour of these sovereign and rational actors that is the states. It states that this assumed condition allows the state to act in accordance with their national interest.

Realism suggests that the actions of the state will always be driven towards the advancement of their national interest even at the cost of other states as Realists view International Relations as a zero-sum game where one state's gain often implies other state's loss. (Mearsheimer,2001)

Thus, Realism emphasize that states prioritize their security and survival above everything else.

Realism emphasizes the aspect of Security Dilemma where when a state increases its power for security purpose, it can make other state feel less secure. Insecurity forms the core of International Politics and this insecurity compels the state to increase their power leading to competition among states for dominance and influence.

Realists advocate for a balance of power among states to prevent domination by any single actor. (Waltz,1979). This balance helps to maintain the stability and equilibrium and prevent aggression.

There are four types of Realism as defined below-

1.Classical Realism-



It was propounded by Hans J Morgenthau. It states that human nature is inherently selfish and since states are led by such people the state will also exhibit such characteristics that is the activities of the state will be driven by their aim of maximization of their interests. Human egoism therefore dominates state egoism. (Morgenthau,2005)

Classical Realism also emphasizes that ethical considerations, morality and wishful thinking should be excluded from the foreign policy of the state and they should only be guided by hard-headed pursuit of national interest.

2.Neo-Realism-

It was propounded by Kenneth Waltz. It states that unlike classical realism which explains that International Politics is driven by human nature which is selfish and power seeking, Neo-Realism emphasizes that it is not the human nature rather the structure of international system which is anarchic in nature which compels the state to act in order ensure their survival and security.

There are three important components of International Politics- power, interest and conflict. States accumulate sufficient power to pursue their interest and when their interest gets threatened by their rival country, then conflict prevails. This explains the nature of International System which is characterized by conflicts due to clash of interest between competing states and thus it is labelled as an anarchic international system (Waltz,1979). This anarchic nature compels the state to act to pursue their national interest.

3. Offensive Realism-

This was propounded by John Mearsheimer. It states that great powers are not only satisfied with survival and security but they seek to maximize their power to assert their dominance (Mearsheimer,2001). It believes that power maximization is the best way to ensure their survival and security.

Example- Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be analysed from the perspective of Offensive Realism as Russia is not only contended with survival and security alone but it wants to challenge the dominance of USA. It wants to ensure that international system should not be dominated by unipolarity with USA as the dominant superpower which happened after disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991. Russia wants a multipolar world order where every country has a voice on the global stage and the actions of one country should not dominate or influence the actions of other countries.

4.Defensive Realism-

It was propounded by Kenneth Waltz. It states that states accumulate sufficient power to ensure their survival and security and the goal of the state is survival and not dominance. (Waltz,1979)

While many scholars interpret Russia's aggression towards Ukraine as offensive realism but Russia has justified its actions as it has claimed it as a defensive action meant to safeguard Russia's security and survival which was threatened by Ukraine's membership of NATO and its tilt towards the West.

Realism provides a framework for understanding how states behave in the international arena and the reasons for exhibiting such behaviour. It emphasizes that in the anarchic International



System states are compelled to pursue their interest and ensure their survival, security and dominance. It places states at the center of analysis and thus by focusing on state's actions, behaviour and interests, it offers a definite sphere to examine international relations.

Realism advocates for maintaining balance of power among states. This idea is significant as it prevents dominance by one state and maintains equilibrium and stability by avoiding conflict.

Thus, Realism effectively explains conflict, competition and security dilemmas among states. Realism has also been criticized as it tends to over emphasize on power and dominance and undermines the role of morality in state actions and by prioritizing national interest as the sole aim of the state realism tends to justify actions of the state that can be in conflict with ethical norms and human rights. It primarily focusses on the states and neglects the role of international institutions which play a significant role in global affairs.

Theory of Idealism-

Idealist theory emerged as an important school of thought in response to the devastating consequences of World War I (Carr, 1939). People were shocked to witness the horrific and disastrous consequences of the war and they realized that states should transcend their pursuit of self-interest and work towards building a peaceful and just world order, where international cooperation should supersede conflict and narrow self-interest.

Idealism prioritizes moral principles and ethics. They emphasize that states should act on the basis of what is just and right instead of relying solely on self-interest and power maximization (Doyle, 1948).

Idealism also believed in the inherent goodness of humanity. It believes that human nature is fundamentally good and so by employing methods of diplomacy and negotiation the world can become a better place where conflicts are avoided and issues arising among states can be solved by cooperative efforts of individuals who are inherently capable of reason, empathy and cooperation.

Idealism stresses the importance of international law and institutions that would regulate state behaviour (Keohane, 1984). They are significant in fostering cooperation, encouraging states to engage in diplomacy and negotiation rather than aggression and for promoting peace and stability in the world.

Idealist advocate for collective security where states can agree to mutual defense to prevent aggression by other state. The idea of collective security should be "attack on one is considered as an attack on all"

Idealist reject the realist notion and claim that conflict is inevitable instead they claim that conflict is not inevitable as states can resolve their issues by diplomacy, negotiation and an effective international institution to enforce international law to prevent conflict and maintain peace and stability.

The key proponents of theory of Idealism are- Immanuel Kant, G.W.F Hegel and Woodrow Wilson.

There are two types of Idealism-

1. Classical Idealism-



It emphasizes on application of moral principles in foreign policy. It is rooted in the notion that human nature is fundamentally good and so the states should act according to moral principles rather than just being guided by power or self-interest. It emphasizes that decisions in foreign policy should be guided by ideals like human rights, justice and international law and not only seek and pursue their national interest.

2. Liberal Idealism-

It states that cooperations through international institutions and law can play a significant role in maintaining peace and avoiding conflict. Unlike Realism which considers states as the primary and rational actors, Idealism considers international institutions to be of primary importance along with the states. Idealists believe that international institutions can provide a platform for the states to engage in discussions, dialogue and negotiations that would foster cooperation among them. It is important for the countries to respect these international organizations so they can function effectively and discharge their functions of ensuring peace and prosperity in the region.

Thus, Idealism views international relations from an optimistic view as they believe that diplomacy, negotiations and an effective international organization can maintain a peaceful world order. They stressed on the importance of international organizations as they believed it to be of utmost significance in maintaining stability in the world.

Idealism emphasizes the importance of ethical considerations while considering foreign policy in international relations. It advocates for policies based on justice and human rights which can lead to responsible global order.

DISCUSSION

In this section, the Russia-Ukraine conflict will be presented through the lens of theory of Realism and Idealism.

Realist perspective for Russia-Ukraine Conflict-

Realists like John Mearsheimer believe that the expansion of NATO in the Eastern Europe and the efforts of West to include Ukraine in NATO as its member is responsible for the crisis that unfolded in Ukraine (Mearsheimer,2014). However, this reason is visible from the surface of the conflict but on analyzing the conflict certain other perspectives also explain the reason for the crisis. The reasons for the conflict are as follows-

1. Expansion of NATO-A predictable provocation-

NATO is a military alliance that was formed in 1949, during Cold War, to counter the spread of communism by USSR into the newly independent countries of Europe (Waltz,1949). It was alliance led by US and included its allies that were included in the bloc led by it.

The Cold War emerged after WWII between the US-led Western Bloc and Soviet led Eastern Bloc. It never erupted into a full-scale confrontation but involved proxy wars, arms race and espionage. Both the superpowers challenged each other's dominance they wanted to emerge as the sole superpower. US wanted to spread and propagate the ideology of Capitalism while USSR wanted to spread the ideology of Communism. NATO was formed by US as a military alliance but its major objective was to fund countries militarily and economically to counter Soviet influence in countries that became its member and were included in US bloc.

USSR also formed an alliance named Warsaw Pact but that ended with the disintegration of USSR in 1991. NATO continued to exist, and it continued to include the countries that were interested in joining the alliance (Mearsheimer, 2014). A summit of NATO was held in Bucharest in 2008 where it declared that, “Ukraine will become a member of NATO in future.” Russia has been alarmed since this declaration. The reason for Russia’s problem with Ukraine becoming a part of NATO is that Ukraine shares a 1500-mile border with Russia and the Realists argue that if Ukraine aligned with West and becomes a member of NATO it would lead to deployment of offensive weaponry close to Russia’s borders. According to the theory of Realism, due to the anarchic nature of International System States can never feel secure about other state’s intentions (Waltz, 1979). When a state enhances its security, it will be seen by other state as a threat to its own security as insecurity forms the core of International Relations.

Thus, when Ukraine tried to enhance its security by showing its interest to become a member of NATO as it offers collective security to countries that are member of it as written in ARTICLE 5 of NATO- “An attack on one country will be considered an attack on all.” and then every member country will collectively respond to the aggressor. Ukraine’s interest of enhancing security of its country was seen by Russia as a threat to its own security.

The map below portrays how NATO has expanded its influence since its formation in 1949.



Thus, due to the above reasons expansion of NATO is seen as a threat by Russia and Russia even justifies its action of launching invasion into Ukraine due to the potential membership of Ukraine into NATO.

2. Realist notion of States pursuing spheres of influence or buffer zones to enhance security- Realists believe that states sought to control the security dynamics in adjacent regions by maintaining relations with nearby smaller states that are aligned with their interest.

Ukraine with its important strategic position between Russia and Europe is viewed as critically important region for Russia and it cannot afford to lose a territory which is of such importance and significance to it. Realism believes that states seek to protect themselves by creating or maintaining buffer zones-they are geographical areas that provide strategic depth between themselves and their potential adversaries.



The above map portrays Ukraine to be of important and strategic importance to Russia and Russia cannot afford to lose it.

After the Cold War ended with the disintegration of USSR in 1991, NATO has admitted several European countries like Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Finland and Sweden. Russia saw this move as a counter to decrease its influence in the region and when NATO wanted to include Ukraine as well this was seen by Russia as losing its last protective zone alongside Russia's frontier (Mearsheimer, 2001).

3- Realist perspective of establishing regional hegemony-

Realist theory emphasizes that great powers aim for establishing regional hegemony in order to gain the recognition of a strong and influential nation on the international stage. This notion strengthens the concept of Offensive Realism that explicitly states that states are not only contented with their survival and security but they seek to maximize power and prestige in order to assert their dominance and influence (Morgenthau, 1948).

Russian President Vladimir Putin has explicitly stated in several interviews and his speeches that he wants to build a Russian sphere of influence by including former Soviet Republics like Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Georgia and Ukraine. He has frequently bemoaned their "loss" after the Soviet Union collapsed. He wants to demonstrate to the world and particularly to the West that Russia is and will always be a superpower.

Russia perceived NATO's eastward expansion as a direct threat to its hegemonic position in Eastern Europe and by trying to keep Ukraine under its control it is trying to prevent its rival security bloc on its doorstep.

Thus, by resisting NATO's eastward expansion, Russia is trying to maintain its sphere of influence, safeguard its important regions and assert its position as a leading power in the neighbourhood.

4- Realist rationale of Russia's invasion as an act of revisionism against the US dominated international order that emerged after Cold War-



The Cold War ended in 1991 with the disintegration of a major superpower that challenged US dominance, the USSR (Gaddis, 2005). US then remained as the sole superpower that led the international order by asserting its dominance and influence on other countries that could not challenge its authority after USSR. The world got characterized by unipolarity where a single country dominated every major decision and policy on the international stage. For decades, Russia complained about the expansion of NATO by the West as a threat to its own interests and influence. Realists advance the notion that even after the end of Cold War the NATO continued to expand its influence in the Eastern Europe which threatened Russia's core interests.

Thus, Russia has positioned itself as a dissatisfied great power that intends on reshaping the balance of power in its favour. Its actions reveal an effort to undermine a system which it considers hostile towards itself and wants to establish a multipolar world order where its influence is also respected. It can be said that Russia is challenging the hegemony of US as it even now considers itself as the sole superpower that wants to assert its dominance and superiority over other countries. US considers Russia as an obstacle in its way to achieve its aim as Russia wants to gain the prestige and status it had prior to 1991 and which it lost after the disintegration of USSR.

5. Realist rationale of external conflict to divert public attention from domestic turmoil-

According to this theory leaders often initiate external conflict to divert public attention from domestic turmoil. This method is employed by leaders when they sense a dissatisfaction by people against them due to their policies that affect citizens in a negative manner and they feel their political position or prestige would be threatened if a civil war or protest would erupt, so they often provoke external conflict to reassert their position as a leader who is committed towards his country and people.

In context of Russia, this theory is true to a certain extent as before 2022 (the year Russia-Ukraine conflict started) Russia was facing economic stagnation due to the western sanctions imposed on it after it annexed Crimea in 2014. This led to inflation and declining real wages of the Russian people.

There was growing political dissent and protest as opposition leader Alexei Navalny garnered popularity by exposing corruption at the highest levels in the Government, including Putin's inner circle. He was arrested and later died while he was in prison. Russian people suspected that Vladimir Putin was behind his death as he was considered as, "The Man Vladimir Putin fears the most." and this decreased his status among the Russian citizens. They believed that since Navalny tried to expose Putin and his ministers, Putin was held responsible for his death which was declared "suspicious" by the people.

The invasion was justified through rhetoric of "defending Russian civilization and resisting NATO aggression." These narratives were designed to mobilize nationalism and to mute the dissent and dissatisfaction increasing within Russia.

6. Realist rationale of autocratic insecurity-

The theory of autocratic insecurity suggests that authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin consider their regime to be of utmost importance and if they realize any threat to their regime

by internal dissent or due to growing dissatisfaction among the Russia people regarding his leadership, they often invoke external conflicts to divert public's attention from the problems within the country. The war in this sense can be analyzed as a regime securing strategy as it diverted public attention from the economic stagnation that Russia was facing before 2022 (Greene and Robertson, 2019). It generated a feeling of national unity among Russian citizens and Putin justified his action as a defensive struggle against the Western expansionist policies (Mearsheimer, 2014)

Thus, the Russia-Ukraine conflict can be analyzed within the framework of autocratic insecurity as Vladimir Putin's popularity was declining among the Russian people due to the economic instability Russia was facing, but he initiated a conflict to shape public perception of himself as a committed leader who has the ability to confront the West and challenge their dominance. Russia has a turbulent history with US so the Russian citizens also regard US as a threat to their country and they believe claims of Putin that West due to its expansionist policies was threatening Russia's survival and security.

The poll below shows that Russians' trust in Putin fell sharply since 2022



PERSPECTIVES OF THE IDEALIST THEORY IN THE CONFLICT

The theory of Idealism emphasizes on moral values, cooperations and ethical considerations as guiding principles while deciding the foreign policy the international level (Wilson, 1918). It focusses on the idea that human nature is inherently good and war is not an inevitable outcome as issues arising due to clash of interests among the countries can be resolved through diplomacy and negotiation.

The theory of Idealism had certain role to play in the Russia-Ukraine conflict-

1. Role of International Law and Institutions-

Idealists consider international law and institutions to be of utmost significance as they believe that they are the medium by which countries can engage in diplomacy and negotiations that would maintain peace and stability in this anarchic international system (Keohane, 1984). It believes that principles enshrined in UN Charter should be the guiding principles for the behaviour of a state rather than their hard-headed pursuit of seeking power and interest.

The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was viewed by United Nations as a direct violation of Article 2(4) which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity of any state. The United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine by Russia as violation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine.

2. Collective Security-



Idealists emphasize on collective security as a significant mechanism for ensuring peace and stability in the international system as nations can cooperate to collectively respond to aggression by any state to prevent conflict and maintain peace (Claude,1962).

In the context of Russia-Ukraine conflict, Western countries and international institutions have sought to isolate Russia to assert pressure on it to end the war. They have resorted to imposing sanctions on Russia and providing humanitarian assistance to Ukraine. This reflects the notion that collective action can deter the aggression.

EXAMPLE- An example of sanction can be the oil price cap on Russia that was imposed on it in 2023.

In December 2022, the G7 countries, the European Union and Australia agreed on a price cap on Russian crude oil exports to limit Russia's revenue from energy as they believe that Russia is utilizing this revenue to fund its war in Ukraine. This sanction prohibited insurers and shippers from servicing Russian oil transport unless the oil was sold at or below the cap which is set around \$60-\$70 per barrel.

This shows that even collective actions that are non-military in nature are significant in deterring the aggression by a country.

3.Diplomacy and Peacebuilding-

Diplomacy is the core of idealism that emphasizes that conflicts can be resolved through dialogue and negotiation instead of resorting to war (Kant,1875).

Throughout the Russia-Ukraine conflict, multiple diplomatic negotiations have been held-

- The Turkey brokered Grain Deal in July 2022 which was called the Black Sea Grain Initiative which allowed Ukraine to export millions and tons of grains despite the ongoing hostilities between the two countries (United Nations,2022). This deal aimed to reduce the disruptions in food supply which would have led to global food crisis.

- India shares long-standing relations with Russia and they are considered time tested friends. Despite this friendship, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has maintained a neutral stance in the conflict and he has time and again requested both the countries to solve their differences through diplomacy and negotiation. When he visited Russia, he even told President Putin emphatically that "THIS IS NOT AN ERA OF WAR" and solutions can be achieved through methods like engaging in dialogue and discussion.

- In August 2025, Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin met in Anchorage, Alaska to explore options for a ceasefire in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, the talks failed to achieve its objective and Russia continued to fire missiles and drones into the Ukrainian territory.

These failed negotiations reflect on the realist perspective that diplomacy and negotiations often fail when states prioritize their national interests over humanitarian consequences of the war.

CONCLUSION

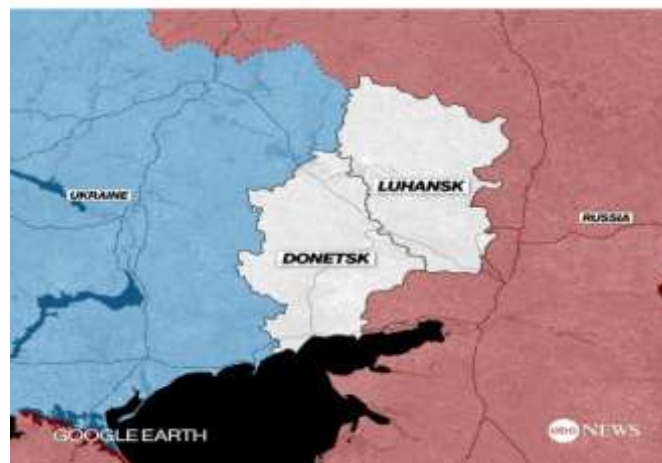
REALISM VERSUS IDEALISM- IDEOLOGY THAT DOMINATES THE CONFLICT

The Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrates the notion that states often overlook values of morality, ethics and cooperation in international relations when their aim is power maximization and achievement of their interests (Morgenthau,1948). Despite several peace

talks, diplomacy and negotiation Russia has maintained its stance that until it eliminates the threat posed to its interests it will not stop the conflict. This demonstrates that he prioritizes the national and strategic interests of his country over ethical and moral values. Several casualties were reported in Ukraine and in Russia which included soldiers and civilians. President Putin has assured Trump that unless his following condition are fulfilled, he will not stop the conflict-

1. Russia will not return the captured territories to Ukraine which includes region like Donbas. The Russia Armed forces control 90% of the Donbas region as of October,2025. Donbas region is composed of two provinces- Donetsk and Luhansk. It lies in the eastern part of Ukraine. Rich coal deposits were discovered here which made it a significant industrial hub. It was part of USSR but after the collapse of USSR in 1991 it became a part of Ukraine. It has vast majority of Russian speaking people and they have close cultural and linguistic ties with Russia. Russia wants to bring Donbas under its influence. Russian Authorities have often accused Ukrainian Government of mistreating people in that region due to their Russian identity. This has made this region a focal point of tensions since 2014 and is the epicentre of the ongoing conflict.

DONBAS REGION IN UKRAINE



The above map portrays the Donbas Region.

2. Ukraine should not accept membership of NATO.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has refused to give the captured territories to Russia and this has become a bone of contention in achieving peace.

This demonstrates when countries are eager to seek their interests that they do not consider the negative consequences of the war (Morgenthau,1948). The conflict reveals that when countries identify existential threat to their security and survival, the states will act primarily in pursuit of their interest and efforts will be made by them to eliminate the threat. In such circumstances, they do not pay heed to ethics, morality and cooperation which is the backbone of the theory of idealism (Carr,1939).

REALIST FRAMEWORK IN RUSSIA UKRAINE CONFLICT



According to Realism, international system is an anarchic system where there is no central authority to enforce rules or orders and to regulate state's behaviour (Waltz,1979). In such a system, states maximize their power and prioritize their national interest and security. Russia's decision to invade reflect this idea as Putin's actions align with defensive realism- aimed at countering NATO'S expansion into the Eastern Europe that would be a threat to his country (Mearsheimer,2014). He even stated in an interview that "our partners (West particularly US) broke the promise as they assured us that NATO will not expand into the East but still, they wanted to include Ukraine as its member." He further stated, "if this happens Ukraine will cease to exist." This shows that Russia prioritizes its security and since it sensed a threat to it resorted to militarily respond.

Russia's action of invasion of Ukraine can also be analysed from the lens of offensive realism-as Russia wants to reassert its regional hegemony and expand its influence and dominance in the region. Vladimir Putin has stated and emphasized several times that he considers the disintegration of USSR in 1991 as the "greatest catastrophe in the Russian history." He wants to revive the power and prestige that Russia had when it existed as USSR and challenged US efforts to emerge as the sole of superpower. Putin attended an event in Russia where he was testing knowledge of Russian children regarding their country and he asked a child a question about the extent of Russia's borders. The child answered his question but Putin corrected him saying, "Always remember Russia's border never ends!" This remark reflects the mindset of Putin that he wants to expand the Russian influence which is consistent with offensive realist notion that states are not content with survival and security but want to assert dominance and influence. This shows that Russia is eager and keen to revive its lost glory and prestige and it will not stop until it achieves the influence and dominance it desires.

LIBERALISM LIMITATIONS IN THE CONFLICT

Although there are certain elements of idealism which influence the Russia-Ukraine conflict like United Nations condemning the attack by passing a resolution stating that Russia has violated the United Nations Charter by undermining the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine. Multiple rounds of diplomacy and negotiations have also been held.

These liberal elements have failed to contain or stop the Russian aggression. Russia is a permanent member in UN Security Council where Russia wields the veto power. Thus, any decision if passed against Russia in United Nations Russia will veto that decision. This exposes the weakness of a utopian liberal order when confronted with such situation (Mearsheimer,2014).

The countries of European Union have demonstrated the notion of collective security which is the core aspect of idealism, by only condemning Russia's actions and imposing sanctions on it as they are avoiding to engage militarily with Russia. United States has also limited itself to imposing sanctions and negotiating peace talks. It has avoided to engage militarily with Russia as it knows that defense capabilities of Russia are at par with its defense capabilities. Russia is the only country in the world to have the largest nuclear arsenals. Russia has extraordinary missiles which have nuclear like capabilities (Kristensen and



Korda,2023). The Oreshnik Missile of Russia is said to have “nuclear like” destructive potential.

The military capability of US is equally good. Recently, US flexed its B2 bombers when it carried out OPERATION MIDNIGHT HAMMER to destroy the nuclear facilities of Iran at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan. These were underground nuclear facilities and it was difficult to struck them with normal missiles so US utilized its bombers, specialized for the purpose. Recently, President Zelensky requested President Trump to provide with him the Tomahawk Missiles which he would use to strike deep into the Russian territory.

Therefore, US is avoiding to engage in direct military confrontation with Russia as both countries are equally powerful and for such countries to engage in conflict would bring the world to the brink of a nuclear war. This portrays that Idealist notion of collective security has limitations when confronted with a situation when the aggressor has exceptional defense abilities and the countries who want to counter the aggressor have to consider the implications of engaging in a direct conflict as is the case of Russia and US.

REALISM AS THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGY OF THE WAR

Thus, Russia-Ukraine conflict demonstrates the Realism remains the dominant ideology of the war. Although liberal elements like coordinated western sanctions and condemnation by international institution like United Nations persist within the conflict but these mechanisms have proven to be insufficient in constraining power politics.

The war reasserts Thucydides’ timeless insight, “THE STRONG DO WHAT THEY CAN AND THE WEAK MUST SUFFER WHAT THEY MUST.” The ideology of Realism is grounded in power maximization and achievement of national interest and these elements continue to define international system even now in situations when great powers perceive threat to their strategic interests (Morgenthau,1948). The ideology of idealism although present and influences conflict to certain extent has failed to act as a transformative force rather it is a secondary layer of response.

Political scientists like John Mearsheimer have repeatedly claimed that the crisis that Ukraine is facing is entirely the fault of the West (Mearsheimer,2014). He strongly argues that since US knew that its intentions of NATO expansion and integration of Ukraine into NATO will not be accepted by Russia but still, they were firm on their stance to include Ukraine. He further stated that when Russia realized that NATO’S eastward expansion and inclusion of Ukraine into NATO will be an “existential threat” to the security of the country, Vladimir Putin without further ado invaded Ukraine and decided to eliminate the threat by military intervention instead of diplomacy and negotiation. According to the realists, conflict in such situation is “inevitable.”

Thus, while liberalism offers methods like diplomacy and negotiation, its effectiveness is limited when national interests of great powers are threatened.

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