



WHICH KIND OF REALISM SHOULD DRIVE WESTERN SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE?




SUMMARY

Realist foreign-policy pundits have become synonymous with 'neorealists', who prefer a negotiated end to the Russia-Ukraine war to restore stability to the relationship between great powers in the international system. However, realism cannot be treated as a monolithic theory of international relations. It includes also 'classical realism', which derives state conduct from domestic politics rather than international structure.

This CEPS Explainer highlights several qualitative insights about the war derived from classical realism, which seem more relevant to the conduct of Western foreign policy. These insights make a convincing case for continuing and perhaps increasing the military support to enable Ukraine to liberate further territory.

The first is the acknowledgement that the Western nations have a significant interest in enforcing the principle of non-aggression and restore deterrence to the European security system, which Russia seeks to overthrow. The second insight is into the psychology of the Kremlin's escalation potential, which depends on the Russian people's willingness to sacrifice and on diplomatic pressure exerted by China (and India). The third is that the military investment in Ukraine pays off with very high dividends and with the degradation of Russia's fighting power as an additional benefit to NATO.



It has become unpopular in public debates on both sides of the Atlantic to take a 'realist' stance on the Russia-Ukraine war.

This is because the most vocal realist pundits can be described as 'neorealist', who believe there is an urgent need to halt the war before it spirals out of control. Believing in the need to cut a deal with Russia, they tend to question the wisdom of open-ended arms deliveries to Ukraine.

The unpopularity of neorealist foreign policy pundits is warranted insofar as their exclusive focus on the risk of escalation makes them blind to both Russia's imperial intention and the significant Western interest in defending the long-standing European (and worldwide) principle of non-aggression. These factors give Western countries a convincing case for continuing – and perhaps upscaling – their support for Ukraine.

BREAKING DOWN THE NEOREALIST ARGUMENTS

Several examples of neorealist commentaries deserve mention by way of introduction.

One line of argumentation is that the danger of escalating against a nuclear power that will become increasingly desperate if it were to lose the war [urgently requires](#) a negotiated settlement (or, at least, to [lay the groundwork](#) for the difficult questions to be negotiated in the future). Another is that the provision of assistance [should be manipulated](#) to bring Kyiv to the negotiation table because the US from a global perspective has little interest in border changes inside Ukraine.

A third argument is that finding a settlement is in the interest of [preventing the emergence](#) of a Sino-Russian alliance that actively seeks to challenge Western hegemony. The fourth and perhaps most controversial neorealist voice (John Mearsheimer) blames Russia's aggression on NATO's supposed intent to make Ukraine a member of the alliance and warns that the absence of a willingness to compromise would only [lead down a perilous path](#) of escalation that could lead to nuclear war.

To put the commentaries into perspective, we must clarify what defines 'neorealism' as a paradigm of realist international relations theory. Neorealism arrives at foreign policy explanations predominantly or solely from the [structure of the international system](#), namely the balance of power between states.

According to neorealists, states find themselves in an anarchical system where they cannot trust the intentions of other states. Because states can only rely on themselves for survival, one can expect them to choose war as an option to prevent the emergence of a strong counter-coalition. Russia's behaviour in the face of a competing military alliance encroaching on its border is no exception – since Russia has a vital interest in

keeping Ukraine out of NATO and the Western orbit, it is willing to go to great lengths, and perhaps the ultimate length of nuclear weapons, in pursuit of this interest.

However, because neorealism understands international politics abstractly as balancing behaviour, it inadequately considers the motivations that actually drive Russia's foreign

AS THE WAR EVOLVES, IT SEEMS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO MAKE THE CASE THAT RUSSIA'S AGGRESSION STEMS FROM INSECURITY AND CONCERNS ABOUT NATIONAL SURVIVAL, AS NEOREALISM SUGGESTS.

policy. As the war evolves, it seems increasingly difficult to make the case that Russia's aggression stems from insecurity and concerns about national survival, as neorealism suggests.

Russia has accepted the prospects of Finnish and Swedish NATO membership [with little blustering](#) despite both having to face a new 1 300-kilometer NATO land border and becoming the

only non-NATO country in the Baltic Sea. Russia over many years has voiced many times the alleged threat from NATO but President Putin, in his justification for attacking Ukraine, mostly [lamented](#) the allegedly unjust border decisions made by the former Soviet Union, which deprived Russia a big chunk of territory that it controlled when it was a Tsarist Empire. Russia's landgrabs through sham referendums in south-eastern Ukraine suggest that territorial expansion is its real – or at least its primary – objective.

The mounting empirical evidence requires a rethink of the assumptions that have driven the neorealist punditry thus far. Their recommendations to simply cut a deal with Russia rests on shaky ground without an assessment of the Russian objectives and its logic of power. Therefore, they err on the side of foreign policy restraint.

As the theory of international relations most refined to explain a world characterised by security competition between states, realism in principle should offer the best tools to devise a balanced foreign policy course on questions of conflict and war. Foreign policy prudence should always be a point of departure – Western countries must of course be wary about the risk of escalation against a nuclear power that may become more desperate with setbacks on the battlefield.

But prudence must not come at the expense of the West's interest in helping Ukraine and weakening Russia, without a doubt the most defiant competitor to the West itself and the European order it underwrites.



WHAT CLASSICAL REALISM OFFERS

Russia's motivations as they clash with Western interests may be better apprehended from the perspective of classical realism, a paradigm with a different conception of interests and power politics.

Classical realists derive state conduct [from domestic politics](#) rather than the structure of the international system. They highlight the fact that states in most instances are not merely preoccupied with security and national survival and, therefore, understand the national interest in broader terms like [power and glory](#) that motivate state leaders. They acknowledge the [role of moral and ethics](#) in international politics, although they would always confine them to the concrete circumstances of time and place to prevent idealism from resulting in tragedy. Classical realists typically distinguish between [status quo and revisionist states](#), the latter of which may resort to aggression not because of national survival but because they believe they cannot have their interests sufficiently served within the existing international order.

Classical realism seems to offer several relevant insights about the war as it plays out. While Western nations see no vital interest in Ukraine (which would require them to fight for it), they do see an interest that is significant enough in preserving the established principle in Europe that aggression must not be allowed to pay off. The Western nations want to equip Ukraine with the means to withstand Russia, not primarily because this serves the idealistic purpose of saving a foreign nation from submission and conquest but because the alternative might be unleashing a [dangerous precedent](#) of revisionist claims that will undermine the [long-standing European order](#) based on peaceful relations between states.

The West acts from the impulse that they need to help Ukraine resist Russia's revisionist ambitions, a geopolitical rival bent on restoring its former glory to the detriment of an order that has guaranteed peace and prosperity in Europe for several generations now. And naturally, the weakening of Russia's military capability by Ukrainian forces [will also reduce the threat](#) it poses to NATO.

It follows from an emphasis on domestic politics, moreover, that classical realism views conflict not as a bare disagreement over the balance of power but as a [psychological process](#). Foreign policy develops not in a vacuum but in an evolving interaction with both friends and foes.

Ukraine in 2022 was not the Ukraine of 2014, when Crimea was quickly seized by 'green men' but a country with a strong sense of nationhood that is well worth the military investment. As it became clear that Russia was losing on the battlefields around Kyiv, the argument that Ukraine should quickly sue for peace rather than keep fighting [lost momentum](#).



Since then, Western countries only became [more brazen](#) in their supply of weapons to turn the tide of the war, so far resulting in the successful Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kharkiv, into the Donbas, and to Kherson. Nothing seems to indicate a decline in the Ukrainian fighting spirit – [opinion polls show](#) that 70 % of respondents want to continue the war with Russia until they achieve victory, and 91 % said victory means recapturing all Ukrainian territory seized by Russia, including Crimea.

RUSSIA'S LOGIC OF POWER

Understanding the Russian adversary requires paying attention to its domestic politics. With the expansion to a partial mobilisation, Putin is probing the willingness of the Russian people to make the [human](#) and [economic](#) sacrifices for his war, while drafting conscripts predominantly in the poorer and peripheral regions of his country. [Diverting spending](#) from consumption to [defence](#) and demanding the further lives of young men, Putin has raised the stakes in an [increasingly unpopular](#) war that also seems to have affected his own [approval ratings](#), especially against the backdrop of setbacks on the battlefield.

From the outside, it remains hard to judge whether he has truly jeopardised the so-called social contract with the Russian people that has kept him in power for more than two decades. The West does not know Russia's redlines beyond which it could escalate the war further, and Putin may not know this himself before he faces his next major foreign policy dilemma. But the political availability of domestic resources for war cannot be ignored when assessing whether Putin can afford further rounds of mobilisation.

Interpreting the Russian adversary also requires giving attention to its relations with China and India. [China](#) and [India](#) both have growing concerns about the war, which hold important implications about Russia's temptation to use nuclear weapons. This fear increased after Russia's [nuclear blustering](#) and because of the prospect that Ukraine may liberate further territory that Russia has 'annexed'.

Beijing's [strong warnings](#) against the use of nuclear weapons seems to have [played an important role](#) in pressuring the Kremlin to abandon its nuclear threats over Ukraine. Russia seems to be acting from the conviction (for economic or diplomatic reasons) that it cannot afford estrangement with Beijing and New Delhi as it already suffers under Western sanctions and isolation. Russia's loss of prestige after its withdrawal from the newly annexed Kherson does not seem to have brought it closer to nuclear escalation. The West must fear nuclear war but also the diplomatic consequences of prematurely giving into nuclear coercion.

The Kremlin raised the stakes in Ukraine with its bombardments against civilian infrastructure and its partial mobilisation to consolidate its newly annexed landgrabs. On

the other hand, the retreats from Kyiv, Kharkiv and Kherson suggest that Russia is [sensitive to the logic of force](#) and will back down if met by firm resistance.

From the perspective of Western decision-making, moreover, it is important to retain that it is likely Ukraine that will carry the [costs of destruction](#) if Russia decides to escalate further. Russia's [swift reassurance](#) that it had not launched a rocket into Polish territory killing two people in November confirms that it is not interested in a war with NATO. Under this circumstance, Western countries continue to have a good case for supplying Ukraine with the weapons it needs to defend itself and to prevail on the battlefield. This concerns notably [air defences](#) to withstand Russian attacks against critical infrastructure during the cold winter, the [long-range weapon systems](#) that have proven crucial to hit Russian artillery positions and disrupt logistics, and now perhaps the [battle tanks](#) it needs to carry on its counteroffensive operations.

In the final cost-benefit analysis, arming Ukraine comes in at only a fraction of the cost of Western defence spending, at around 6% [in the case of the US](#) and less [for most European countries](#). The military investment pays off with very high dividends, with no boots on the ground and the degradation of Russia's military capability as an additional benefit to NATO's security, as the alliance will in the coming years increase its conventional eastward defence and deterrence.

It is worth comparing to Afghanistan, where the war effort cost [more than USD 2 trillion](#) for the US alone and thousands of coalition casualties over 20 years, ultimately to little or no avail. Western supporters have so far invested only a tiny fraction of that in Ukraine.

NEOREALIST PUNDITS AND ANALYSTS THAT IGNORE THE DOMESTIC DRIVERS AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CONFLICT, AS PRESCRIBED BY CLASSICAL REALISM, ARE LIKELY TO REMAIN DETACHED FROM THE POLICY DEBATES TAKING PLACE ON BOTH SIDES OF THE ATLANTIC.

[Neorealists and like-minded pundits](#) sceptical about the use of military force in foreign policy were right about the misguidedness of the [Middle East interventions](#) after September 11. However, they would commit a fallacy if they applied this conclusion today to Ukraine that has a much stronger form of nationhood and is perfectly able to fight on its own if provided with the necessary arms and equipment.

Neorealist pundits and analysts that ignore the domestic drivers and the psychology of the conflict, as prescribed by classical realism, are likely to remain detached from the policy debates taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. Neorealists are right in warning against the structural maladaptation to the Russia threat, whereby the Europeans do not carry the [equal defence burden](#) or sufficiently contribute militarily to ensuring Ukraine's success. Their warnings about NATO enlargement also seem warranted in light of Ukraine's renewed [membership application](#), which allies remain unlikely to accept (despite the promise given at the 2008



Bucharest Summit) as this would involve them directly in a war with Russia. They are also right in rejecting liberal calls for [regime change in Russia](#), which can perhaps be a tacit hope but not concrete Western policy as such. On the other hand, realists who lock themselves into a position of strict foreign policy restraint by default neglect the West's interest and the nature of the conflict.

POLICY GOING FORWARD

Western policy until now has been wisely designed not to give Putin obvious reasons to escalate the war or to involve NATO directly. It should continue to do so.

Ukraine's [initial insistence](#) that Russia fired the before-mentioned rocket that accidentally hit Poland caused suspicion that Kyiv was trying to drag NATO into the war and serves as a reminder that Ukraine needs to be supported but not completely indulged. Ukraine's vital interests will continue to differ from those of the West, which means a continued willingness to give Ukraine the weapons and finances to survive, but without a willingness to sacrifice Western lives and with adequate monitoring and conditionality attached to reduce the risk of corruption and uncontrolled arms flows.

At the time of writing, Russia's domestic politics and standing with its remaining international partners do not suggest that the Kremlin will escalate to a wider mobilisation or to the use of nuclear weapons. This may of course change – for example if Ukraine tries to retake Crimea – and thus the Western capitals must constantly evaluate the situation as it develops.

Presently, it is premature to predict the course of the war, and one cannot exclude a Russian collapse on the military or on the home front either. The war may end in new (frozen) territorial lines of division and [not necessarily](#) in negotiations between the two warring parties. The war must be conceived as an evolving interaction, whereby the West enables Ukraine's military capability, in turn testing Russia's will and ability to bear the sacrifice for Putin's imperial ambitions.

Ultimately, arming Ukraine is necessary to restore deterrence to the European security system and thus a balance of power between NATO and Russia that is more stable.

Russia's conduct does not suggest that peace can be achieved other than by preparing for war. Now and in the foreseeable future, Russia must be convinced that Ukraine has the capability to repel future attempts to seize its territory to a degree where the Kremlin will deem trying as not worth the effort.

Copyright © is shared between the Partners and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

The authors and publisher have made every effort to obtain permission for and acknowledge the use of copyrighted material. Please refer enquiries to the publisher.

Views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher.

Commercial use of all media published by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of FES. Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce material for their own publications, as long as they are not being sold commercially. As copyright holders, the Partners and FES request due acknowledgment and a copy of the publication.

CEPS
Place du Congrès 1
B-1000 Brussels

