

# Afterword: The Russo-Ukrainian War and Great Power Competition

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## 1 Introduction

The erosion of the liberal international order (LIO) has been greatly debated by academics and practitioners alike for over a decade. The flagship IR journal *International Organization* has even dedicated its 75th anniversary issue to the challenges to the liberal international order.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have forcefully debated if we were, indeed, witnessing or not the end of the liberal international order or even if there ever was such an order in the first place.<sup>2</sup> In the context of these debates, the Russian invasion of Ukraine that began in the early morning of February 24, 2022, a continuation of the lingering conflict started in 2014, looks like a critical juncture. A clear signal that we are, indeed, witnessing a shift in the configuration of power and a recalibration of world politics. It shows that we are living in an increasingly morphing international system, quite different from the one we got used to over the past three decades. A world in which, liberals are afraid, *might makes right*. International norms and institutions, universal morality and public opinion are again seen either as increasingly meaningless or subordinated to competing hegemonic projects.

If the war in Ukraine represents a critical juncture, altering the evolution of world politics, then understanding the implications of the war for the great powers becomes critical. Assessing the reactions to the war in Ukraine could allow us to uncover possible paths available to great powers and, in the aggregate, what we should expect from this period of *interregnum* signaled by the war. If we are entering into a new phase of world politics, a post-LIO international system, then the war in Ukraine may become just one of the many

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1 David Lake, Lisa Martin, and Thomas Risse Eds., "Challenges to the Liberal International Order. Reflections on *International Organization*," *International Organization* 75, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 225–57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000636>.

2 John G. Ikenberry, "The End of Liberal International Order?," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (January 2018): 7–23, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix241>; John Mearsheimer, "Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (Spring 2019): 7–50, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00342](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00342); Charles Glaser, "A Flawed Framework: Why the Liberal International Order Concept Is Misguided," *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 51–87, [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00343](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00343).

such conflicts to come along the junction lines dividing the great powers. The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the global reactions represent the analytical anchor for an investigation into what is to come in the years ahead. Such an investigation, with the current war underway, is rather speculative. Yet educated speculation is sometimes a useful analytical tool to ground-in future studies, as long as we make its inherent limitations transparent and restrain its scope.

In this afterword, I discuss the implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war for great power politics, and how it may affect power-relations in major regions of the world. I begin by discussing the contending theoretical and political claims about the causes of the war and of Russia's revisionist foreign policy. Two main causal narratives have emerged both in academia and in politics to explain Russia's revisionist foreign policy. The most prominent has been the Realist claim about the role of NATO's enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe, promoted by the likes of John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Henry Kissinger, or Patrick Porter.<sup>3</sup> The political implications of this stance are important, as it puts most of the blame for Russia's expansionist foreign policy on NATO and US's shoulders and prescribes giving Russia a free hand to manage geopolitical affairs in Eastern Europe. In turn, liberals of various persuasions have argued that what explains Russia's war in Ukraine is the latter's experiment with democracy and Western-style reform.<sup>4</sup> The emergence of a successful Western-style democracy in Ukraine, liberals argued, would pose an existential threat to the Russian political regime. Seeing a successful and developing democracy next-door, Russians may want to demand the same at home,

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3 John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault. The Liberal Delusions that Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, 1–12, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-18/why-ukraine-crisis-west-s-fault>, last access April 2022; Stephen Walt, "Liberal Illusions Caused the Ukraine Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, January 19, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/19/ukraine-russia-nato-crisis-liberal-illusions/>, last access April 2022; Henry Kissinger, "To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *The Washington Post*, March 5, 2022, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/henry-kissinger-to-settle-the-ukraine-crisis-start-at-the-end/2014/03/05/46dad868-a496-11e3-8466-d34c451760b9_story.html), last access April 2022; Patrick Porter, *The False Promise of Liberal Order: Nostalgia, Delusion, and the Rise of Trump* (New York: Polity, 2020).

4 Anne Applebaum, "The Reason Putin Would Risk War," *The Atlantic*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/02/putin-ukraine-democracy/621465/m>, last access April 2022; Fernando Casal Bértoa and Zsolt Enyedi, "Ukraine, Russia, and the Bear Hug of Authoritarianism," *Foreign Policy*, March 21, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/21/russia-war-ukraine-authoritarianism-domestic-politics/>, last access April 2022; Robert Person and Michael McFaul, "What Putin Fears Most," *Journal of Democracy*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/what-putin-fears-most/>, last access April 2022.

threatening the kleptocratic rule of Russia's elite. The political implications, in this case, are quite different. If liberals are right, then Russia seeks to put an end to a nascent democracy and all the blame is squarely on Vladimir Putin. This discussion sets the ground for a wider review of the effects of the war in Ukraine on great power politics around the world.

The international reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has been informing about the state of play in global power politics. On the one hand, the developed democracies of the world have shown a high degree of unity and commitment in defense of the rules of the liberal international order. They have imposed unprecedented costs on Russia, rallied support for Ukraine, and enabled Ukraine's story of the war at the expense of Russia's interpretations and worldview.<sup>5</sup>

The resolve showed by the West has surprised many, especially many parts of the foreign policy establishments in the very capitals where these measures were adopted. In contrast, the global powers from the developing world, democracies or not, have been rather ambivalent in their positions. Most have refrained from taking a clear stance and have sought a pragmatic posture that raises questions about the potential for a coordinated and united opposition towards the West. BRICS, the group of emerging powers from the Global South, has been proven to be too politically and economically eclectic for any coordinative action during geopolitical challenges. While they have successfully worked together to create the infrastructure for a new global economic system, BRICS' ability to work together on other issues has been rather limited and the Ukrainian crisis proves this point.

In Asia, while China and Russia aim to build a new multipolar world working together, Beijing has been very careful not to attract too much of the West's attention and has refrained from providing substantial support to Moscow. India, cornered in a complicated relationship between Russia, its main supplier of weapons, and the US, its potential partner against China, seems to fall back to its traditional non-alignment position.<sup>6</sup> This lessens the fears of

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5 Edward Fishman and Chris Miller, "The New Russian Sanctions Playbook: Deterrence Is Out, and Economic Attrition Is In," *Foreign Affairs*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2022-02-28/new-russian-sanctions-playbook>, last access April 2022; Martin Binder and Autumn Lockwood Payton, "Russia's Allies Have Been Pretty Quiet on Ukraine," *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/03/25/russia-brics-silence-on-ukraine/>, last access April 2022.

6 Krzysztof Iwanek, "The Great Debate Over India's Neutrality in the Ukraine War," *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/the-great-debate-over-indias-neutrality-in-the-ukraine-war/>, last access April 2022; Jen Kirby, "Why India Isn't Denouncing Russia's Ukraine War," *Vox*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/22982698/india-russia-ukraine-war-putin-modi>, last access April 2022.

American strategists that would have found it impossible to maintain a strategic position in Asia if India joined a Sino-Russian geopolitical block.

In the Middle East, Israel has tried to play the role of a bridge between Ukraine and Russia, hoping to mediate the conflict between the two countries that still host considerable numbers of Jewish people.<sup>7</sup> However, the government of Naftali Bennett has also shown a commitment to pragmatism and particularly to protecting Israel's relationship with Moscow, with an eye to the Russian involvement in nearby Syria. In the Americas, Brazil has shown a rather uncoordinated response and its foreign policy has become a site of domestic contestation between competing political factions. Brazil's foreign policy position regarding the war and the great power competition will greatly depend on the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled to take place later this year.

Finally, the European Union has shown surprising levels of resilience and a resurgent European Commission. Traditionally an area reserved to inter-governmentalism and dominated by state interests, the Commission has surprisingly jumped in the driver's seat of the EU's foreign and security policy, pushing forward ambitious initiatives in support of Ukraine and in opposition to Russia. It remains to be seen if this signals a change in the configuration of power over who decides the EU's foreign and security policy or just a one-off situation taking place under extraordinary circumstances.

Overall, what we have observed is the unity and resolve of the great powers from the Global North in deep contrast to the ambivalent and restrained stances coming from the Global South. If these remain the defining characteristics of world politics in the years to come, the challenge against the liberal international order may not be as intractable as some may expect. However, much will depend on domestic politics. International Relations scholars often tend to ignore domestic politics, yet this may prove to be the defining variable that shifts the power dynamics at the global level. Both in the Global North and the Global South, domestic politics can disturb geopolitical orientations, security arrangements, and strategic expectations. In Brazil, South Africa, and Israel, domestic politics have made themselves visible in those countries' reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.<sup>8</sup> If power changes hands domestically, it would not be unconceivable to see a re-orientation in the foreign policy

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7 Neri Zilber, "Israel's Premier Acts as Unlikely Mediator in Ukraine's Conflict," *Financial Times*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/3d714d13-7c90-4430-8df2-8670301cdb1b>, last access April 2022.

8 Fernando Brancoli, "War in Ukraine and Elections in Brazil," Wilson Center, March 25, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/war-ukraine-and-elections-brazil>, last access April 2022.

of some BRICS countries, such as Brazil and Israel. The same can be said about the United States or France, where populist movements have a fair chance of gaining power and upending long-standing foreign policy stances. What the international reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has uncovered has been the relative unity and resolve of the powers from the Global North, the ambivalence of the powers from the Global South, but also the key role of domestic politics.

This afterword is organized as follows: in the first section, I discuss the causes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, analyzing the two main explanations put forward by realists and liberals, while claiming that a focus on ideas and identities may be worthwhile to explain Russia's behavior. In the second section, I make an overview of the responses coming from the global powers to the invasion and the main implications of the war for security and political dynamics between these powers. I conclude by emphasizing the key role of domestic politics as an explanatory factor in world affairs.

## 2 The Causes of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine triggered, yet again, the intellectual and political debate over the causes of Russia's revisionist foreign policy. With both theoretical and political stakes, this debate, which emerged initially in the aftermath of the 2014 Russian illegal annexation of Ukraine, has at its core one key question: who is to blame for what is happening in Eastern Europe? Two distinct theoretical and political positions emerged in response. A first theory was put forward by theorists associated with the (neo)realist perspective in International Relations theory. They have claimed that Russia's revisionist foreign policy comes as a natural response to NATO's unwise enlargement in the former sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. This enlargement, it is argued, unsettled Russia, triggering its fear of encirclement by the West. Consequently, NATO and the United States are to blame for Russia's revisionist foreign policy, which simply tries to protect its security.

A second theory was put forward by several liberal academics, who claimed that the cause of Russia's revisionist behavior in Ukraine is to be explained by the former's fear of the latter's potential success in developing a functioning Western-style democracy. A potential success of Western-style democracy in Ukraine, it is argued, would represent a model to be emulated in Russia. This, in turn, would threaten the kleptocratic rule of Russia's elites, if the Russian people would seek to emulate the Ukrainian success.

While both these theories are plausible and persuasive, they do not – as I will show further – stand up to scrutiny. Instead, I suggest that we would be able to offer a better explanation if we trace back the ideological struggles that shaped Russia's strategic thinking and state identity. I argue that the cause of Russia's revisionism can be found in the ideological struggles of the 1990s, when the promoters of a neo-imperial strand of thinking won the day and were able to reshape the worldview of Russian elites. Once dominating the strategic thinking of Russian elites, these ideas enabled – even predicated – the course of policies and strategic actions that ended up with the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, John Mearsheimer became entangled in a controversy about the causes of the war.<sup>9</sup> In academia, the controversy surrounding the scholar has been linked to his refusal to acknowledge that Russia's behavior is anything else than the expected behavior of a great power at bay.<sup>10</sup> This has been particularly puzzling because Mearsheimer's own theoretical scholarship expects great powers to behave exactly as Russia has behaved in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup> This disconnect between the expectations derived from his *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* magnum opus and his later claims about who is responsible for the war in Ukraine has been disconcerting in the eyes of many IR scholars. In politics, the controversy has been particularly damaging because the Russian government adopted Mearsheimer's argument

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- 9 John Mearsheimer, "John Mearsheimer on Why the West Is Principally Responsible for the Ukrainian Crisis," *The Economist*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/11/john-mearsheimer-on-why-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-ukrainian-crisis>, last access April 2022; Isaac Chotiner, "Why John Mearsheimer Blames the U.S. for the Crisis in Ukraine," *The New Yorker*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/why-john-mearsheimer-blames-the-us-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>, last access April 2022; Adam Tooze, "John Mearsheimer and the Dark Origins of Realism," *The New Statesman*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/john-mearsheimer-and-the-dark-origins-of-realism>, last access April 2022.
- 10 Michael McFaul, Steven Sestanovich, John H. Mearsheimer, "Faulty Powers: Who Started the Ukraine Crisis?," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2014, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/eastern-europe-caucasus/2014-10-17/faulty-powers>, last access April 2022; Tim Luecke, "Why John J. Mearsheimer is Wrong on Ukraine," *Duck of Minerva*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.duckofminerva.com/2014/09/why-john-j-mearsheimer-is-wrong-on-ukraine.html>, last access April 2022; Taras Kuzio and Paul D'Anieri, *The Source of Russia's Great Power Politics: Ukraine and the Challenge to the European Order* (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018).
- 11 John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton & Company, Inc, 2002). Another critical point is related to Mearsheimer's habit of conflating description with prescription. It is rather unclear if certain claims that Mearsheimer has been making are about how the world should work or how the world actually works.

to legitimize and justify its behavior in Ukraine and more generally in Eastern Europe.

The realist argument proposed by scholars such as Mearsheimer posits that Russia's core security interests have been threatened by NATO's unwise enlargement into Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>12</sup> This has forced Russia to revise its foreign policy and adopt a revisionist and bellicose stance towards the West, especially when it comes to their influence in the post-Soviet space. It follows that if NATO and the US had decided instead to consider Russia's security concerns and cede to it the power to influence regional politics in Eastern Europe, the war would not have happened. Therefore, the war is NATO's fault, not Russia's. The causal logic of this argument rests on the rather curious premise that great powers are not the power-maximizing, predatory actors that Mearsheimer argues they are in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Instead, they are just concerned with defending their security. By seeking to expand Western influence in Eastern Europe, NATO and the US provoked a natural reaction from Russia, which simply follows the incentives predicated by its security interests. The result is the war in Ukraine as a predictable effect of NATO's mistaken approach, which deviates from the way the world functions.

This is a compelling argument. Yet it has at least two shortcomings that undermine its credibility. First, the realist argument is indeterminate. It allows us to arrive at different conclusions by simply shifting vacuous understandings of security interests. For instance, if we start from the premise that Russia is actually a declining power – the sick man of Europe, not very different from the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century – then a realist logic would prescribe that Russia should give leeway to NATO in Eastern Europe.<sup>13</sup> If “the strong do what they will, the weak do what they must,” then one can easily turn the realist argument on its head and say that it is Russia's fault that it did not consider NATO's security interests in Central and Eastern Europe. This argument obviously conflates description with prescription, but in so doing it just follows in the steps of the realist argument put forward by Mearsheimer.

Second, those proposing the realist argument have a hard time defending its counterfactual. The causal logic of the realist argument is that the NATO enlargement produced a reconsideration of Russia's security on its Western flank, which resulted in its decision to invade Ukraine to stave off NATO's continuous march towards its borders. The implicit counterfactual is that if the

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12 Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault;” and Walt, “Liberal Illusions.”

13 The military setbacks in Ukraine, where Russia failed to achieve most of its key objectives, point to an unexpected precarious military power that would fit the argument that Russia is a declining power.

NATO enlargement had not taken place, then Russia's revisionist foreign policy would not have emerged, thus there would have been no war in Ukraine. However, considering the history of Russia's behavior in Central and Eastern Europe both in the long term, from the early 19th century, and the short term, from the end of the Cold War, that counterfactual does not seem entirely plausible. First, Russia has shown a historical tendency to expand territorially into Eastern Europe, this constituting the primary reason why Central and Eastern European nations sought fast admission into NATO. Second, the foreign policy behavior of the Kremlin before NATO's enlargement does not fit the realist expectations. Russia has constantly sought to undermine the statehood of post-Soviet states, including Ukraine. In Moldova, it supported secessionist movements, the breakaway Transnistrian region, as early as 1991, in a way that was later replicated in Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the historical record seems to falsify the implicit counterfactual derived from the realist argument. Russia's revisionist ambitions seem to precede NATO's enlargement, being rather a cause of the enlargement, as Central and Eastern European countries sought to (externally) balance against the Russian perceived security threat by asking admission into NATO. It is also more plausible to think that as some of Russia's military power recovered, the Kremlin would have sought to exert more control over the countries in Eastern Europe, which was preempted by the NATO enlargement. It is thus apparent that NATO's enlargement should be treated as a mediating factor rather than as the cause of Russia's behavior.

In contrast, the liberal argument posits that the cause of Russia's revisionist behavior is to be found in the democratic ambitions of the Ukrainian society.<sup>15</sup> A successful liberal democracy in Ukraine, it is said, poses an inexorable threat to Russia's kleptocratic regime. Considering the cultural and geographical proximity of Ukraine, a liberal success story there would prompt domestic demands in Russia for emulating its model at home. Holding an "extremely precarious"<sup>16</sup> position domestically, the Russian political regime seeks to preempt Ukraine becoming a liberal democratic symbol. By destabilizing and frightening Ukraine, Russia seeks, liberals argue, to force a failure of the democratic project. Once destabilized, with a destroyed infrastructure, and potentially fragmented into multiple statelets easily controllable by Moscow,

14 Andrei Kazantsev et al., "Russia's Policy in the 'Frozen Conflicts' of the Post-Soviet Space: From Ethno-politics to Geopolitics," *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 2 (2020): 142–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23761199.2020.1728499>; Mark Kramer, "Russian Policy Toward the Commonwealth of Independent States: Recent Trends and Future Prospects," *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 6 (2014): 3–19, <https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216550601>.

15 Applebaum, "The Reason Putin Would Risk War."

16 Applebaum, "The Reason Putin Would Risk War."



liberal democracy would become a far-fetched dream that would not threaten Russia's internal stability.

The liberal argument is cogent, but rather unplausible for several reasons. First, the Ukrainian democracy has been highly dysfunctional and there was no expectation that it will become better in the foreseeable future. President Zelensky's electoral support was at its lowest before the invasion because he had failed in his reformist campaign. He adopted anti-oligarchic policies, indeed, but just to produce other oligarchs. It is rather implausible that the Russian political elite was perceiving the Ukrainian democracy as a potential "symbol" of liberal success that posed the threat of undermining Russia's "managed democracy." Second, Russia has at its borders other highly successful liberal democracies, particularly the Baltic countries, which were part of the Soviet Union. However, the success of liberal democracy in the Baltic countries does not seem to have been socially contagious, prompting mass-support for a similar political model in Russia. It is thus doubtful that the Russian decision-makers considered the far-fetched potential success of a Ukrainian democracy as an existential threat to their rule.

The realist and liberal arguments about the causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine are plausible but have important shortcomings. Surprisingly, realists do not fully consider their own theoretical expectations and often conflate between description and prescription. Liberals like to believe that Vladimir Putin cares more about the potential success of democracy in Ukraine than about power, yet the argument they put forward is found lacking. We are left with a puzzling picture, to which realist and liberal accounts can contribute only in a limited way. I argue, instead, that we should pay heed to arguments that look more closely at the power of ideas and identities to fill the missing pieces of the puzzle.

Ideational approaches to the study of international relations, most often associated with constructivism, would argue that we must look at the climate of ideas, at the norms and notions of identity that shape the Russian strategic thinking.<sup>17</sup> Looking at how certain worldviews and strategic ideas have become dominant – determining a particular strategic culture in Russia – may uncover the main drivers of Russia's behavior. Ideas are often dismissed by realists as merely epiphenomenal artifacts derived from the distribution of material

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17 Anne L. Clunan, *The Social Construction of Russia's Resurgence: Aspirations, Identity, and Security Interests* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Andrei Tsygankov, "Assessing Cultural and Regime-Based Explanations of Russia's Foreign Policy. 'Authoritarian at Heart and Expansionist by Habit'?" *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 4 (2012): 695–713, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.671568>.

power. Yet, they often have their own autonomous causal power to shape what people perceive as being possible, desirable, and necessary. While it is not my aim here to put forward a fully developed ideational argument about the causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, probing its potential is worthwhile.

Approaches that focus on the independent causal force of ideas and norms posit that Russia's revisionist foreign policy is the product of the ideas and worldviews that dominate strategic thinking in Moscow. Thus, it becomes paramount to look at how those ideas and worldviews came to dominate the strategic thinking of Russian decision-makers. One such explanation would be that during the 1990s, multiple conceptions of Russia's role in the world and of world politics were competing against each other. Due to historical, economic, and institutional circumstances – such as the deep economic recession and societal chaos that engulfed Russia – in the 1990s, an expansionist worldview acquired dominance with the elevation to power of Vladimir Putin and the so-called *Siloviki*. Their worldview and understanding of Russia's state identity prevailed against those proposing alternative notions, such as the westernization of Russia. Once holding the levers of power, their ideas became institutionally empowered, shaping state preferences and teleologically determining the conduct of Russia's foreign policy. It follows from this that if the liberals that dominated the Russian political system in the early 1990s were successful in managing the economic transition, with more Western assistance, the *Siloviki*s would not have acquired political power, allowing liberal, westernizing ideas to become institutionally empowered and thus changing the course of Russia's foreign policy and world history.

To sum up, in this section I have discussed the potential causes of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by looking at the two most prominent arguments that emerged in the wake of the invasion: the realist and the liberal arguments. I have shown that while they are plausible explanations of the causes of the war, they suffer from significant limitations that limit their explanatory power. Instead, I argue that we should pay more attention to ideational factors and the role of the prevailing worldview and ideas that shape the strategic thinking of decision-makers and planners in Moscow. In the next section, I use this discussion to ground an assessment of the effects of the war in Ukraine on great power politics.

### 3 The International Effects of the Russo-Ukrainian War

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has complex implications that are not only limited to great power politics, but also affect international trade and finance,

energy and food security. These implications have been aggravated by the surprising resolve of the Ukrainian forces and the incredible underpreparedness of the Russian troops, which is prolonging the war to an undefined point.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the apt use of social media and information framing by Ukraine allowed the government in Kyiv to capture the moral high ground and mobilize support, complicating the strategic calculations of several great powers.<sup>19</sup> By capturing the moral high ground, Ukraine and its Western partners have succeeded in framing the conflict in terms of good and evil, de-legitimizing open support for Russia's invasion. This partially tied the hands of many great powers that were forced to either adopt an ambivalent stance towards the conflict or to openly criticize the invasion, despite strong relations with Moscow.

From a geopolitical perspective, the war cleared out the fog that remained about the future dynamics of great power competition. The post-Cold War liberal international order is over, and a new period of *interregnum* has commenced. If at the end of this period, the world will end up with a stable multipolar system or a new hegemonic order remains to be seen and beyond the scope of this overview. What is important, however, is to get a better grasp of what are the immediate implications of the war, and how these visible effects can allow us to uncover some future evolutions. What became rapidly visible at the beginning of the war is that the West is both united and willing to deploy costly tools of economic coercion, while non-Western powers were rather ambivalent and worried about getting entangled in a competition with the West. This, however, is unlikely to remain the case for long. The great powers challenging Western control are bound to improve their partnership and work together. Overall, what the war signals is a shift in the quality of great power competition, along pre-existing lines, making the geopolitical and strategic divisions between great powers more transparent and clear-cut.

However, what the war has also shown is that domestic politics matters. Especially in democracies but, up to a point, also in authoritarian regimes. Domestic political struggles can have important political implications at the global level, which can alter the configuration of great power competition. Electoral politics in Brazil, France, and the United States, all holding crucial elections in 2022, have shaped these countries' reactions to the war and to the

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18 Gustav Gressel, "Combined Forces: Russia's Early Military Failures in Ukraine," European Council of Foreign Relations, March 15, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/combined-forces-russias-early-military-failures-in-ukraine>, last access April 2022.

19 Megan Specia, "'Like a Weapon': Ukrainians Use Social Media to Stir Resistance," *The New York Times*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/25/world/europe/ukraine-war-social-media.html>, last access April 2022.

changing quality of great power interaction. The ambiguous and restrained posture adopted by China may also be explained not only by the fear of secondary sanctions imposed by the West, but also by the elections for the new Chinese Communist Party Politburo, when President Xi Jinping seeks reelection for an unprecedented third term as Chairman of the party.<sup>20</sup> Considering the intense cultural and political struggles in many Western countries, primarily the U.S. but also France and other members of the European Union, domestic politics may affect the unity of the West.

From an economic and financial perspective, the West still retains the control of much of the world's financial and economic infrastructure, yet the surprising economic impact and range of the Western sanctions will likely produce a fragmentation into competing economic systems.<sup>21</sup> The BRICS countries have already established the foundations of an alternative economic infrastructure for trade, financial, and communication systems that will just expand as the great power competition intensifies.<sup>22</sup> As the great powers adjust to the implications of the wide range of economic tools available to the Western powers, the ability of the latter to deploy them effectively to impose costs will decrease. This creates the context for a great decoupling of global trade and finance, with the associated costs and benefits. Great powers such as the US and China will need to adopt new growth models to adjust to the collapse of trade relations.

From an energy and food security perspective, the crisis in Ukraine has amplified a pre-existing energy crunch in Europe and beyond, increasing inflationary pressures and creating concerns about energy supplies.<sup>23</sup> Russia and Ukraine are some of the largest producers of grains, and the war has the potential to cause a food crisis in the Middle East and some parts of Asia and

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20 Elizabeth Economy, "Xi Jinping's New World Order: Can China Remake the International System," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-12-09/xi-jinpings-new-world-order>, last access April 2022.

21 Michel Duclos, "The War in Ukraine – Scenarios for a 'War Out' of the Crisis," Institut Montaigne, March 22, 2022, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/war-ukraine-scenarios-way-out-crisis>, last access April 2022.

22 Cynthia Roberts, "The BRICS in the Era of Renewed Great Power Competition," *Strategic Analysis* 43, no. 6 (2019): 469–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700161.2019.1672930>; Eric Hellener and Hongying Wang, "Limits to the BRICS' Challenge: Credit Rating Reform and Institutional Innovation in Global Finance," *Review of International Political Economy* 25, no. 5 (2018): 573–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2018.1490330>.

23 Jeff Tollefson, "What the War in Ukraine Means for Energy, Climate and Food," *Nature*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-022-00969-9>, last access April 2022.

Africa, as food prices increase and supplies decrease.<sup>24</sup> This has the potential of provoking mass unrest and geopolitical instability akin to the one caused by the Arab Spring, at the end of the past decade.

In a nutshell, the war in Ukraine has cleared the waters, bringing great power competition out into the open and changing the quality of world politics. The world order defining the first three decades after the end of the Cold War can safely be said to have ended as a new period of *interregnum* commenced. The Western reactions to the invasion have shown a united and committed alliance, but its use of a broad range of monetary and economic sanctions may spell the end of the global, unified and Western-dominated economic and financial system. The non-Western powers will most probably respond by further developing an alternative economic and financial infrastructure rivaling the Western-sponsored institutions. This has the potential of producing an economic and financial decoupling that will divide the world into distinct economic and political blocks. However, what the crisis has also showed is that while the West is rather homogenous economically and ideologically, at least now, non-Western powers are very heterogeneous, with conflicting interests and worldviews. This heterogeneity represents an important limitation for any actor that seeks to build a united front against Western dominance of the international system.

#### *From Europe...*

The most direct implications of the war in Ukraine have been felt in Europe and the North Atlantic region, where the entrenched belief that Europe is beyond the age of inter-state warfare has been cast away. The war produced a remarkable mobilization and unity across an often-fractured European Union, which adopted a comprehensive package of unprecedented sanctions against Russia, in joint coordination with the United States. Often described as “an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm,”<sup>25</sup> the EU showed off its giant economic power, primarily by freezing the financial assets of Russia’s National Bank and its foreign debt. Additionally, the EU adopted joint measures to provide macrofinancial and military aid to Ukraine, an unprecedented move.

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24 Christina Lu, “Russia’s Invasion Unleashes ‘Perfect Storm’ in Global Agriculture,” *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/24/russia-war-ukraine-food-crisis-wheat-fertilizer/>, last access April 2022.

25 Mark Eyskens, as cited in Mark Leonard, “Europe for Itself,” European Council on Foreign Relations, July 24, 2018, [https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_europe\\_for\\_itself/](https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_europe_for_itself/), last access April 2022.

Two important shifts took place in Brussels and Berlin. In Brussels, the European Commission became the driver of the EU's foreign and security policy, an area historically controlled by the Council and defined by intergovernmentalism. This shifted the institutional balance of power towards the Commission, increasing the supranational character of EU's behavior vis-à-vis Ukraine and Russia. Overall, the Union has shown that it can be a significant actor in geopolitical struggles, and it represents more than the sum of its member states. If this can continue remains to be seen, but as the world would be increasingly engaged in economic struggles and affected by a cascade of crises, the international role of the European Union may very well increase to become a veritable geopolitical power.

In Berlin, the war produced a *zeitenwende* – a turning point – in German foreign and security policy. The German government upended a decades-long consensus on the country's Ostpolitik towards Russia and Eastern Europe, announcing a budget of one hundred billion euros for the German military and an immediate increase of the regular defense budget to above 2% of the GDP.<sup>26</sup> This alone represents a historical consequence of the war on European security, which will significantly alter the distribution of power in Europe, the nature of the EU's security and defense policy, and Germany's role in Europe's security architecture.

One of the most important areas where the shift in Germany's defense policy will be felt will be in the European security and defense policy, including the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO). The change of heart in Berlin regarding the importance of defense expenditures and the re-armament of the German military forces will most likely take place under the auspices of the EU's security and defense policy. This means that Germany will probably support French proposals for the enhancement of the EU's defense dimension and the development of some kind of autonomous military forces, beyond joint military acquisitions. If this happens, then we should expect to see a more active PESCO and an increasingly assertive EU in the military sphere, in strong cooperation with NATO.

The war has also proven the continuous relevance of NATO and the increasing importance of the transatlantic relationship.<sup>27</sup> Old divisions and frictions

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26 Marc Saxer, "Decoding the German *Zeitenwende*," *International Politics and Society*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/foreign-and-security-policy/decoding-the-german-zeitenwende-5776/>, last access April 2022.

27 Sara Bjerg Moller, "Three Things to Know About NATO's Role in Responding to the Ukraine Crisis," *Lawfare*, February 24, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/three-things-know-about-natos-role-responding-ukraine-crisis>, last access April 2022.

between the European and North American partners have been temporarily washed away by the security crisis. The European powers and the United States coordinated their responses, while NATO buffed up its presence in Eastern Europe to alleviate the security concerns of its members from the Eastern flank. In times of crisis, the West proved that it could work together to defend common interests. As long as this remains the case, the Europeans and the Americans remain a force to be reckoned with across the world, combining economic, military, and cultural might in an increasingly fragmented world.

...*To Asia.*

In Asia, the war in Ukraine and the Western reaction have changed the strategic calculus defining the competition between China and the United States for regional hegemony. The Western reaction to the Russian invasion has resulted in a strategic alignment between Russia and China, with the latter in the position of the senior partner able to dictate the terms of the partnership. This represents a strategic setback for the United States in Asia, as a partnership between Russia and China represents a threat for American supremacy in Asia. This is for two reasons: first, China no longer needs to prepare for the possibility of facing a two-front war, from the South and the North. Instead, Beijing can rely on Russia for military equipment and a joint action against the United States and its allies in Asia. Some analysis, such as Richard Haass, the president of the Council of Foreign Relations, seem to expect that China will not want to get entangled with a Russia under Western sanctions and with a failed invasion in Ukraine.<sup>28</sup> However, not getting entangled would be more costly for China, as it will lose the possibility of having an asymmetrical partnership with a great power that retains a second-strike capability against the United States. The outcome of the diplomatic visit made by Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign affairs minister, to Beijing, and particularly his declarations about the creation of a multipolar international order, indicate that the two great powers are joining forces.<sup>29</sup>

Second, China no longer needs to worry about its energy and food security in the case of an open geopolitical conflict with the United States. With access at the vast energy and grain resources of Russia, the “Malacca Dilemma”

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28 Richard Haass, “From War of Choice to War of Perseverance,” *Project Syndicate*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/war-of-perseverance-in-ukraine-by-richard-haass-2022-03?barrier=accesspaylog>, last access April 2022.

29 Amber Wang, “Russia’s Top Diplomat Briefs Beijing on Ukraine in First China Visit since Invasion,” *South China Morning Post*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3172462/russias-top-diplomat-briefs-beijing-ukraine-first-china-visit>, last access April 2022.

is no longer insurmountable.<sup>30</sup> Planners in Beijing were worried that its food and energy security will be threatened by an American naval blockade of the Malacca Strait, through which much of the energy and food shipments to Asia from the Middle East, Africa, and Europe arrive in Chinese ports. With secure access to the Russian vast energy and grain resources, the strait no longer plays a critical role for Chinese security.

Beyond this, the reaction of India to the war in Ukraine has been of keen interest both to the US and to China. The initial Indian reaction followed the historical pattern of ambivalence and abstention. At the United Nations, India abstained from voting on resolutions put forward before the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, while Indian leaders expressing criticisms regarding the humanitarian impact of the war. However, India has also adopted an economically pragmatic position, agreeing to buy Russian oil at discounted prices, undermining Western sanctions, and exploring the possibility of a rupee-ruble payment mechanism. India has a decades-long relationship with Russia, which is its primary supplier of weapons, but it is also part of the US-sponsored “Quad” partnership in the Indo-Pacific. However, India has rather hostile relations with China and Pakistan, particularly related to unresolved border disputes. Thus, India finds itself walking on a tightrope, as an alliance between Russia, China, and Pakistan would undermine India’s security interests.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, China and Russia have sought since the beginning of the war to pull India into a geopolitical bloc competing against the West. Following a visit of the Indian foreign affairs minister to Beijing, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, his Chinese counterpart, Wang Yi, stated that “If China and India spoke with one voice, the whole world will listen. If China and India joined hands, the whole world will pay attention.”<sup>32</sup>

A triangle strategic partnership between Russia, China, and India would fundamentally alter the strategic configuration of power in Asia. It would make the American position in the Indo-Pacific unsustainable, militarily threatened

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30 Lucas Myers, “Internal Politics, Instability, and China’s Frustrated Efforts to Escape the ‘Malacca Dilemma,’” *Asia Dispatches*, Wilson Center, July 21, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/internal-politics-instability-and-chinas-frustrated-efforts-escape-malacca-dilemma>, last access April 2022.

31 Teesta Prakash, “China Is Key to Understanding India’s Dilemma over Ukraine,” *The Interpreter*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-key-understanding-india-s-dilemma-over-ukraine>, last access April 2022.

32 Gerry Shih, Niha Masih, and Eva Dou, “China Woos India as Both Face Western Ire over Ukraine,” *The Washington Post*, March 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/25/india-china-russia-war/>, last access April 2022.



from Hormuz to Okinawa.<sup>33</sup> However, that would damage India's relationship with the West and the Indian government signalled at the meeting in Beijing that it seeks to retain its non-aligned position. Joining Russia and China would deprive India of Western financial flows, investments, and technology, while simultaneously increasing its dependence on China. Therefore, India signalled its traditional non-alignment posture, which favors American security interests in the region. To do otherwise would have likely provoked internal disputes, considering the English-speaking heritage and affinities of parts of India's middle classes with the West.

To sum up, the immediate implications of the war in Asia are significant, as it opens the possibility of an asymmetrical but strong partnership between Russia and China against American hegemony. This closes several strategic options for the United States in Asia and improves the overall options available to China. However, India's nonalignment keeps the region strategically competitive for both China and the United States.

#### 4 Conclusions

The Russian invasion of Ukraine produced a shock in the international system, signaling the end of the post-Cold War liberal international order as a period of interregnum began. In this context, two questions are emerging: what the causes of the war in Ukraine are and what its key implications for world politics are.

Regarding the causes of the war, two competing narratives have emerged. A first narrative was proposed by realist scholars and practitioners, who claim that NATO's enlargement bears the responsibility for Russia's revisionist and expansionist foreign policy. NATO's enlargement, it is said, produced security anxieties and fears of encirclement in Moscow, which reacted to these incentives by adopting an assertive and revisionist foreign policy. A second narrative has been put forward by liberal scholars, who identify the causes of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in the potential of a successful liberal democracy in Ukraine, which may represent a model to be emulated in Russia. However, both these narratives have significant issues, both theoretical and empirical. I suggest instead that scholars and analysts should look at the causal importance of ideational factors and the way prevalent worldviews and foreign policy ideas became dominant among Russian foreign policy elites.

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33 Anusar Farooqui, "The Geometry of Fear in Eurasia," *Policy Tensor*, March 28, 2022, <https://policytensor.substack.com/p/the-geometry-of-fear-in-eurasia?s=r>, last access April 2022.

When it comes to the implications of the war for great power competition, these are being felt most acutely in the extended Eurasian continent, particularly the two opposing ends of its landmass: Europe and South-East Asia. In Europe, the war in Ukraine upended the European security architecture and shifted the geopolitical logic from a divisive relation to a confrontation between the European Union, NATO, on the one hand, and Russia on the other. The war has shown that the North Atlantic region is able to cast away, even if temporarily, internal divisions and frictions to present a united front when faced with critical security challenges. In Asia, the situation is starkly different, with China now being able to build an asymmetrical partnership with Russia to challenge the American supremacy in the region. The strategic calculations have shifted in China's favor, which no longer needs to worry about its long-term food and energy security if it engages in a confrontation with the US. However, the non-alignment of India allows the U.S. to exercise power and influence in the region.

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