

# Constructing a Crisis: Putin, the West and War in Ukraine

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The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a huge event. It is the largest mobilization of troops in Europe since the end of World War II. But why did Russia invade and how will it all end?

The EU describes Russia's invasion as "unprovoked and unjustified military aggression" (European Council, 2022). US President Biden (Biden, 2022) used the same words. For the EU and the United States, Putin's invasion was purely a war of choice. Such an act of aggression undermines what both see as a viable, just, and profitable liberal international order. In such orders, disputes are settled by diplomacy which inevitably reveals common ground on which to build solutions.

From this perspective, the Russian invasion is an incomprehensible, irrational, and highly threatening act. Because it is unnecessary, there is no logical limit to such an action: Does Putin aim to reconstruct the Russian or Soviet empire? But if Putin is irrational and aggressive, why stop there?

In the West, the most prominent challenge to this liberal internationalist view is that of John Mearsheimer, the American international relations (IR) scholar famous for his structural realist views. While his argument is more complex, its essence is that Russia had genuine security concerns with respect to Ukraine. In this telling, the United States provoked the invasion by pushing NATO membership for Ukraine. Driven by the need for security due to the anarchical structure of the international state system, Russia had to respond to such a threat.

Both the structural realist and the liberal internationalist approach are based on the ability of each actor to make rational, cost-benefit calculations. Liberals expect and have an answer to the complaint that actions are not always rational. They acknowledge the role of misperception and misunderstanding and prescribe dialogue and discussion as solutions.

Structural realists have a more difficult time with arational behavior. The systemic approach obscures the difficulty of establishing what constitutes power or what a threat is. Realists argue that states must calculate threat based on the power capacity of the potential enemy rather than its intention. Power, however, is hard to calculate because it in addition to material capability, it must also include the will and ability to mobilize and use military means. Beyond the most strikingly obvious

threat – forces lined up on your border with their engines running – discerning threats is difficult.

And what is it that might be threatened? States defend more than their national integrity; they defend their national identity. National culture accordingly shapes national interests. Structural realism, which sees states as functionally similar units, is not equipped to incorporate a notion that drains the supposed precision from their thinking. Liberals fail to understand that there may be irreconcilable and non-material interests that are not, at the end of the day, rational.

It is difficult to determine the contours of national culture. Attempting to do so is an exercise in construction, that is, of picking out what we think matters most and bringing it into analysis in a disciplined way. Methodological chasms yawn beneath our feet: What are the important bits and why? Precisely whose culture are we talking about? How deeply are such beliefs held? How quickly can they change or be changed? What other values are in play? And critically: How can we reliably know the answer to these questions? Cultural arguments can as easily impede as facilitate understanding. And yet, the return of nationalistic authoritarianism playing on cultural themes suggests that we cannot look away from them.

In this instance, Putin's views are the ones that count, and he has aired his views on many occasions over the years. Mearsheimer selects Putin's expressions of security concerns as genuine but dismisses the mystical pronouncements about the fundamental unity of the Russians, Ukrainian and Belarusian peoples. This misses the significance of the Putin's narrative in constructing Russia's national interest. In this telling, Ukraine is moving away from a Russia with which it once shared "the same historical and spiritual space." While he does state that new nations can emerge and should be treated with respect, Putin makes it clear that the new Ukraine is an inauthentic construction by radicals, neo-Nazis and weak and corrupt authorities and oligarchs, supported by a hostile west (Putin, 2021).

On the liberal internationalist side, many Americans and Europeans, perceiving themselves as peaceful, cannot accept that Putin might genuinely think otherwise. Indeed, they see the incorporation of Ukraine into the Western orbit as an extension of the zone of democracy, peace, and prosperity. In this view, NATO is clearly a defensive alliance. And there is no doubt that Ukraine under its post-2014 leadership was moving towards the West. As the U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership put it, the objective is "full integration of Ukraine into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions" (US Department of State, 2021).

Most European NATO members do not spend the recommended 2% of GDP on defense (NATO, 2022) and before the invasion, US troops stationed in all of Europe numbered roughly 80,000 (Vandiver, 2022). Using Mearsheimer's (2022) logic that the limited ambition of the Russian invasion must be clear from the small number of troops deployed (190 000 troops is not remotely enough to subdue and hold all of Ukraine), there was no immediate military threat to Russia from NATO.

But from Putin's vantage point, the emerging Ukraine does pose a long-term existential spiritual threat. The success of alternative, Western institutions in a country he has argued is so culturally and spiritually akin to Russia would undermine the cultural arguments that Putin has mobilized to support his autocracy. Even if Putin is using these arguments as an excuse, by mobilizing what may be the country's most deeply held cultural themes, he has constructed an existential threat not just to his rule but to Russia. Putin is now the prisoner of his own rhetoric, genuine or not.

It is unlikely that in February 2022 Putin aimed at military expansion beyond areas once dominated by the Russian empire, even if appetite can grow with the eating. While the West can and should be faulted for failure to grasp the seriousness of Putin's security concerns, those concerns are not necessarily more rational or real than are the West's illusions of peace. While Putin may aim at protecting a particular spiritual (and geographical) space, the threat to that space is open-ended and self-defined and can only be resolved by the failure of the larger liberal democratic project. As long as Putin's vision rules, the West will have to accept that success in the Ukraine war and in converting Ukraine to a thriving democratic country will remain inherently threatening. Any compromise over Ukraine can only be a temporary break in an ongoing "war" against Western influence. Finally, if Putin has successfully identified a core Russian cultural fear, the Western threat will long out-live the departure of Putin from the scene.

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