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They Predicted the Ukraine War. But Did They Still Get It Wrong?

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It's a curious feature of Western debate since Russia's invasion of Ukraine that a school of thought that predicted some version of this conflict has been depicted as discredited by the partial fulfillment of its prophecies.

From the 1990s to the 2010s, from George Kennan's opposition to NATO expansion to John Mearsheimer's critique of American involvement in Ukraine, thinkers associated with foreign policy realism — the school known for its cold-eyed expectation of great power conflict, its doubts about idealistic visions of world order — argued that the attempt to integrate Russia's borderlands into Western institutions and alliances was poisoning relations with Moscow, making great-power conflict more likely, and exposing nations like Ukraine to disastrous risks.

"The West is leading Ukraine down the primrose path," Mearsheimer averred in 2015, "and the end result is that Ukraine is going to get wrecked."

But now that Ukraine is, in fact, being wrecked by a Russian invasion, there's a widespread view that his realist worldview lies in ruins too — that Mearsheimer has "lost his reputation and credibility" (to quote the Portuguese thinker Bruno Maçães) and that the realist conception of nations as "pieces in a game of Risk" with "eternal interests or permanent geopolitical orientations, fixed motivations or predictable goals" (to quote Anne Applebaum of *The Atlantic*) should be discarded on the evidence of Vladimir Putin's invasion and the Ukrainian response.

The larger critique of realism that Applebaum and Maçães are speaking for goes something like this: Yes, realists like Mearsheimer predicted some kind of conflict over Ukraine. But realism's predictions still did not describe reality, for three reasons. First, the predictions imagined a defensive logic to Russian strategic conduct, oriented around the protection of a sphere of influence, a fear of encirclement by NATO. But the decision to invade seems to have been motivated more by Putin's professed and very personal desire to restore a mystical vision of greater Russia — a grand ideological idea that the mere Western pledge not to admit Ukraine to NATO was unlikely to appease.

Second, the realist predictions underestimated the agency and strength of Ukrainians themselves, treating Russia's near abroad as a landscape where only great-power force projection really mattered, ignoring Ukraine's potential capacity — now demonstrated on the battlefield — to resist Russia and rally global support even without direct military support from the United States or NATO.

Finally, the realist predictions drained the moral dimension out of global politics, effectively legitimizing imperialist appetites and "blaming the victim," as it were, when the moral responsibility for aggression ultimately rests with the aggressor, not with nations merely seeking self-determination or mutual defense.

As someone who considers himself a realist (to the extent that it makes sense for a newspaper columnist to claim such affinities), I think part of this critique has bite. For instance, my sense is that because today's realist thinkers mostly operate within the liberal West and define themselves against its pieties — especially the globalist utopianism that had so much purchase in the post-Cold War era — there is a constant temptation to assume that nonliberal regimes must be more rational actors, more realist in their practices and aims, than the naïve idealists in America or Europe. And thus when a crisis comes, it must be the unrealism of the West that's primarily, even essentially, at fault.

You can see this temptation at work in the interview Mearsheimer gave to Isaac Chotiner of *The New Yorker*, published soon after the Russian invasion began. On the one hand the interview offers a perspicacious realist critique of how idealism led America astray in the George W. Bush era, via a naïve theory of how aggressive war might democratize in the Middle East.

But then when it comes to Putin's aggressive war, Mearsheimer seems to assume that the Russian president thinks like him, the realist, rather than like the utopian politicians of the West. Putin, he says, "understands that he cannot conquer Ukraine and integrate it into a greater Russia or into a reincarnation of the former Soviet Union." And if the United States only worked harder "to create friendly relations" with Moscow, Mearsheimer argues, there could be a tacit American-Russian "balancing coalition" against the rising power of China.

But why should Putin necessarily be immune from the hubris and delusions of Western leaders? Why should we assume that he *doesn't* dream of reintegrating Ukraine and Belarus into a greater Russia? Why should we take for granted that the right diplomatic strategy will bring him into an American coalition against China, when he might instead be committed to a sweeping ideological vision of Eurasian power aligned against the decadent West?

Why should we assume, in other words, that structural and schematic explanations of Putin's war are more important than personal and ideological explanations? After all, as the historian Adam Tooze points out, it appears that very few members of the Russian foreign policy elite — all presumably opponents of NATO expansion, all "devotees to Russia's future as a great power" — actually believed that Putin would invade. And if so many participants in Putin's regime, all good servants of the national interest as realists define it, *wouldn't* have made his fateful choice, then did realist premises actually predict the war itself?

Just as important, did they predict the way the war has played out so far? I myself did not: My assumption was that Ukraine might mount a strong resistance in the western part of its territory, but that Russia would sweep pretty easily to the Dnieper and probably put Volodymyr Zelensky's government to flight. (Some version of this assumption was shared by U.S. intelligence, which was predicting the quick fall of Kyiv two days into the war.) After almost two weeks of stalled-out offensives and mounting Russian casualties, that faulty assumption does look a bit like a Risk-board view of the world, where all that matters is positioning and pieces, not patriotism, morale, leadership and luck.

And there are a lot of ways that this kind of Risk-board mentality can deceive. Flash back a few decades, for instance, to the late Cold War, and a crude realist analysis might have insisted that *Poland* would always be in some kind of deep thrall to Russia — because it had so often been dominated by Moscow, its geography left it so open to invasion from the east, and so on — and that it was strategic folly to imagine otherwise. But Polish leadership and patriotism, Soviet weakness and unexpected historical events all contrived to change that calculus, so that today Poland's strategic independence and Western alignment, while hardly invulnerable, both look relatively secure.

Is it unrealistic for Kyiv to aspire to what Warsaw has gained? Right now I would still say yes. But is it *impossible*, in the way that some realist thinking tends to suggest — as though some law of physics binds Ukraine to Russia? No: I think anyone watching this war so far, watching both the struggles of the Russian military and the solidifying of a Ukrainian national consciousness, would have to give more credit to long-term Ukrainian ambitions, and a little less to the inevitability of Russian regional dominance.

So those are two places where realist theory, or at least certain intellectual temptations associated with realism, has suffered from its contact with the reality of war so far.

But now let me say something in realism's defense. What we have learned this winter is that aggressive Russian power is weaker, and united Western power stronger, than a lot of prewar analysis assumed — meaning that American decline and European decadence are not so far advanced as it has sometimes lately seemed.

But look at the *global* response to the war in Ukraine — the tacit support for Russia from Beijing, the neutrality of India, the cautious, self-interested reactions of the Gulf States — and you still see the landscape whose emergence probably encouraged Putin to make his gamble: a world where American hegemony is fading, where new great powers and “civilization-states” are bent on pursuing their own interests, and where 1990s-era dreams of moral universalism and liberal consensus are giving way to hard realities of cultural difference, moral relativism and post-liberal political competition.

Indeed, even the rallying of Europe against Russia, the talk of rearmament and energy independence, fits this mold, because it represents a dawning recognition of continental interest as much as a stirring of cosmopolitan idealism. Yes, the inspirational example of Zelensky matters, but the fundamental reality is that under conditions of threat and competition, Europe is cutting short its holiday from history and beginning to behave like a great power in its own right — just as realist theory would predict.

And if those threatening and competitive conditions are somewhat more favorable to the West than it appeared three weeks ago, they are still fundamentally hostile to the kind of crusading liberalism that was so powerful in the Clinton and Bush presidencies and lingered in the Obama years. What we have gained so far from Russia's stumbles is the chance at a more favorable balance of power in a multipolar world, and that's a very good thing. But the war is far from over, and the most plausible “good” outcome is still a realist's peace, not an idealist's triumph — one that will still probably leave Putin in power, with Crimea and the Donbas in his hands, and Russia more integrated with (and subordinate to) our rivals in Beijing.

Are we allowed to hope for a better outcome, where Russians rise up, democratic revolution flowers and (in the poetry of the 1990s) “hope and history rhyme”? Certainly: A realism that cannot allow for idealistic possibilities is itself unreal. But in a conflict with a nuclear power, fought on its own borderlands, to seek that ideal outcome as a primary goal — to pursue total victory and regime change rather than provisional stability — is to court disasters worse than the ones that have befallen us in any recent war.

And if realism didn't anticipate everything about the current situation, it still has this fundamental insight to offer: The revolutionary moments in history are also the exceptional ones, and the most important task of statesmen is to prevent moments of great crisis from yielding tragedies too terrible to bear.

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